Knowing Our Way to Freedom: The Epistemology of Racial Hierarchy

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Abstract:

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This dissertation compares the epistemological dimensions of structural racism in the American and French contexts. I engage the works of several prominent public intellectuals in order to explore the epistemological dimensions of structural racism. I use the work of James Baldwin to develop a framework that explores how a person's position with a racial system shapes how one knows and does not know, as well as how one imagines freedom and justice. According to Baldwin, racial privilege comprises several components which function at the epistemological level. Three epistemological features I focus on are an asymmetry of knowledge between the privileged and disadvantaged, the tendency to conceptualize and discuss racial issues in sociological rather than in human terms, and the refusal to take Black subjectivity seriously. I then use this framework to engage with the writings of Albert Camus's *The Stranger* and *The Plague*, as well as Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* and *Wretched of the Earth*. I compare these three authors with the goal of exploring how their very different locations within racial structures inform how they know and choose not to know within their writings.

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INTRODUCTION

Background

In the essay "The Discovery of What It Means to Be an American," James Baldwin reflects on what his time in Paris gave him. Baldwin left his hometown of New York City at 24, in 1948. He had left because he had "doubted [his] ability to survive the fury of the color problem," because he wanted to avoid becoming either "merely a Negro" or just a "Negro writer" (Baldwin 1961, 17). He had also left because he felt isolated from Black and white people alike, which he says is "what happens when a Negro begins, at bottom, to believe what white people say about him" (ibid).

He describes having a kind of mental breakdown, and of being "carried off to the mountains of Switzerland" (ibid). The two Bessie Smith albums he had with him permitted him to reacquaint himself with a Black identity and personal past that he had buried (Baldwin 1961, 18). He found the very different way that class functions in Europe to be liberating. The chance to connect with and get to know people from all walks of life and from all over the city challenged his assumptions about his own country, a process he characterizes as sometimes painful but ultimately helpful.

Yet despite all the ways his time in Europe was healing and illuminating, Baldwin also says that there comes a day, which he describes as "personal" and "terrible" (Baldwin 1961, 21), in which it became unavoidably clear that he is experiencing Europe as an American. The freedom that any American may find in Europe is gradually but inevitably tempered when he or she realizes that Europe is a "different and far less attractive continent" (ibid) when viewed from the perspective of a European. He describes several interactions or moments which can lead to this realization:

> This crucial day may be the day on which an Algerian taxi-driver tells him how it feels to be an Algerian in Paris. It may be the day on which he passes a café terrace and catches a glimpse of the tense, intelligent and troubled face of Albert Camus. (ibid)

These anecdotes, presented as disembodied hypothetical, imply several relationships and give rise to questions that correspond. There are questions to ask about the relationship between the American in question and the taxi driver, for instance. In what ways might Baldwin be similar to this cab driver, and in what ways might he be different? What would these similarities and differences tell us about the world? There are also questions to ask about the relationship between the taxi driver and Albert Camus, a white French citizen who was born in Algeria. What is the relationship between whatever is making Camus feel troubled and tense on the one hand and the feelings that the taxi-driver describes on the other?

There are also questions to ask about the relationship between Camus and Baldwin as he walks past. Over the course of Baldwin's career, through his novels, essays and plays, he expresses principles of justice and racial transformation, derived from his experience as a Black man in America. While Camus's journalism took issue with the economic, social, and political inequality faced by Algerians under colonialism, he also advocated against Algerian independence. Is the way Camus thought Algeria should fit within French empire in line with how Baldwin thinks about racial justice? Related, there is some sympathy and kindness to Baldwin's description of Camus here. What is the nature of that sympathy?

The questions that this passage raises are comparative in nature. James Baldwin is describing the emotional moment he comes to terms with the reality that while Paris functioned

for him as a respite from the weight of everything his skin, identity, and history meant, in reality the city and the empire for which it serves as the metropole have tensions of their own. What these questions speak to are the extent to which occupying positions of privilege and disadvantage in one racial hierarchy overlaps with corresponding positions in another.

Statement of the Problem

This thesis is a comparative study of the epistemological dimensions of privilege and disadvantage within racial systems. This manuscript is an inquiry of political theory that seeks to understand how positions of privilege and disadvantage within such systems shape how people know and do not know, as well as how ways of knowing working to uphold and replicate these systems. I engage in comparison both within racial systems and across racial systems. This study explores how ways of knowing in turn shape the way people within racial systems imagine freedom.

To address these questions, I first produced a close reading of several of James Baldwin's works in order to distill his answers regarding the epistemological dimensions of what it means to occupy various subject positions within a racial hierarchy. I then used these insights to structure two additional close readings. I selected another body of writing emerging from its own racial hierarchy: namely, France during the period before and during the Algerian War for independence. I engaged with two authors who, like Baldwin, were revered as important intellectual and political voices, albeit for positions that were diametrically opposed: Albert Camus and Frantz Fanon. My methodological strategy entailed using insights garnered from James Baldwin regarding epistemologies of privilege and resistance in order to structure close readings of each of these authors. These juxtapositions enabled me to gain traction on the question of how epistemologies arising from one's position compare across contexts.

In this introduction, I first define several of the terms that I use throughout the dissertation, before discussing the three research questions that this dissertation seeks to address. I then describe the texts I engage as well as my reading method. After considering how this project contributes to scholarship on both epistemic violence and comparative politics, before summarizing the chapters in this thesis.

Conceptual Framework

As mentioned, this project focuses on exploring the epistemological mechanisms involved in both the maintenance of and resistance to structural oppression within racial systems. Three terms I use in this analysis are episteme, epistemic, and epistemological. An episteme is a landscape of cognitive, narrative, and symbolic resources, and epistemological refers to processes or phenomena related to epistemes, as well as the study of these kinds of processes. The distinction between episteme and epistemology is similar to the distinction between biome and biological.

In this project, I focus on not only knowledge, which one could think of as the output of epistemological processes, but also on the epistemological processes themselves. More concretely, I focus on exploring the processes individuals use to reach conclusions about themselves and the world around them. I explores the stories, symbols, and logics that shape which information people include and exclude as they make sense of their social context. I explore how structural racism affects these processes and how one's access to privilege and disadvantage shapes the nature of that impact.

Epistemic as a modifier refers to knowledge systems; for instance, epistemic violence refers to violence that arises within and because of an episteme. Dotson (2011) defines epistemic violence in the context of testimony. Dotson's definition builds off of Hornsby (1995), who

argues that we can consider a communicative act between a speaker and an audience to have been reciprocal if its audience interprets the words a speaker utters in the way the speaker intends. Dotson argues that epistemic violence occurs when an audience refuses "to communicatively reciprocate a linguistic exchange owing to pernicious ignorance" (Dotson 2011, 242). For Dotson, epistemic violence occurs when an audience cannot take a speaker at her word because of a lack of knowledge on their part. Dotson further identifies two violent experiences that people who occupy oppressed social positions experience: 1) testimonial quieting, in which a speaker's audience "fails to identify a speaker as a knower" (Dotson 2011, 242) and testimonial smothering, in which a speaker truncates her own testimony by limiting it only to the content that she knows her audience will understand, so that they can take her at her word and therefore act reciprocally (Dotson 2011, 244; Fricker 2007; Medina 2013a).

This project is interested in how epistemological processes function in the realm of structural racism. I focus on structural racism as distinguished from, for instance, personal racism. Whereas personal racism might comprise holding and expressing explicit and overt hostility toward people of a different race, structural racism occurs when systems produce outcomes that harm people of particular races disproportionately (Bonilla-Silva 1997). Even when individuals within that system contend with and root out their own implicit biases, the sum of all of their actions still results in worse outcomes for minoritized communities. I center this kind of racism in this project because I am interested in what is occurring epistemologically for people who possess racial privilege and yet also disavow any explicit commitment to racial hierarchy. The notion of an epistemology of privilege is especially helpful in making sense of thoughts and behaviors that occur over and against people's intentions and stated values. One reason Baldwin's writing is so searing is that he names the ways in which white people position

themselves as innocent (Balfour 2001; Murakawa 2019; Taylor 2015; Turner 2012). This project aims to examine whether similar maneuvers toward innocence play a role in racial systems other than the United States.

This project places racism as structural oppression at the center of the analysis but also touches on several other kinds of structural oppression, such as patriarchy and classism. It considers how these different forms of structural oppression converge to produce hierarchies within racial communities that pose challenges toward seeking liberation. I have gravitated toward the notion of an epistemology of privilege rather than an epistemology of whiteness for this reason. People who are within the Black community and have social and economic privilege relative to more disadvantaged or disenfranchised pockets of the Black community sometimes also refuse to see the necessity of dismantling oppressive structures.

Research Questions

My project mobilizes the concepts described in the previous section, in order to make sense of the following questions:

1. What is the relationship between racial system and epistemology?
2. How are epistemologies of privilege and resistance similar across different racial systems?
3. How does one's epistemology shape the way one pictures freedom and justice?

Importantly, my project does not contend that the framework gleaned from James Baldwin's work provides the answer to these questions, or even that a complete, universal, objective answer to these questions is possible. Rather, these questions provide a structure that facilitates comparison and focuses the attention across the texts I explore in this project.

Research Question 1: What is the relationship between racial system and epistemology?

This dissertation investigates how structures and systems that arrange economic, psychological, and social resources relate to ways of knowing. I seek to understand how racialized, structural arrangements of power give rise to particular ways of knowing, as well as how these ways of knowing underwrite, make possible, and legitimize these racialized structural arrangements. My goal is to understand how the racial system shapes how we make sense of the world. To complicate the causal story, this project also investigates the extent to which the stories and epistemological strategies that operate for individuals within these hierarchies work to prop up how power is arranged. The dissertation explores how arrangements of power depend on these stories and strategies operating behind our eyes, guiding what we do and do not observe, what does and does not surprises us, what we expect.

Research Question 2: Is the relationship we observe between system and epistemology determined by the historical and cultural specifics of racial systems?

This question introduces the element of comparison to the investigation. In addition to identifying the epistemological dimensions of James Baldwin's argumentation, my goal is also to investigate the extent to which the phenomena Baldwin observes are specific to the United States. This line of inquiry is about whether the epistemologies of privilege that Baldwin identifies are reducible to the particular history of racial injustice, legacy of slavery, and the continued systems of racial capitalism and mass incarceration at work within the United States. While situating Baldwin's incisive critique within its proper context is important, attributing how power and epistemology relate to each other in the United States entirely to its history may

foreclose certain ways of imagining alternatives. Rather than conceptualizing how power is arranged in this country and how epistemology supports that arrangement as a function of history, investigating whether these dynamics are a function of structure suggests interesting avenues for creating change. One way of investigating that possibility is to examine whether similar patterns in how people think emerge within other racial systems.

Research Question 3: How does one's epistemology shape the way one pictures freedom and justice?

Lastly, my project investigates how epistemologies produced by racial structures shape how people within those structures conceptualize freedom and justice. What this means is that the ways of knowing associated with particular positions within a racial hierarchy may impact whether someone sees the problem, how she defines that problem, and what she attributes that problem to. Further, I explore how all of these factors have an effect on conceptions of what the best response to that problem should be, and on one's understanding of what needs to change. If an epistemology of privilege involves strategically and intentionally unknowing, this suggests that people who experience relative privilege may also bring constraints to the way they picture a better and more just world.

In this dissertation, I also examine the opposite side of this question. In particular, I investigate the question of how people who have occupied disadvantaged positions within a racial hierarchy have survived the onslaught of misinformation this world provides about who they are. Through studying the works of James Baldwin and Frantz Fanon, this project considers what epistemological tools racialized people bring to know differently than what white supremacy would have had them believe. This project studies how minoritized people have

accessed alternative understandings of who they are and who their communities are. This dissertation explores and compares how these authors' answers to these questions shape their sense what the future should hold for Black people as well as how to get to that future.

Methodology

A. Textual Evidence

The framework that structures this analysis comes from the work of James Baldwin. I focused on a select number of texts that provide the lens that guides the rest of the project: "Many Thousands Gone," and "My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew." I then apply this theoretical lens drawn from Baldwin to the works of Albert Camus and Frantz Fanon. For Camus, the texts I examined were the essay "The Myth of Sisyphus" and the novels *The Stranger* and *The Plague*. My close reading of Frantz Fanon's thought involved analyzing the books *Black Skin, White Masks* and *Wretched of the Earth*.

Looking at the texts of these authors who had such a profound impact on crucial political and ethical questions of their times provides a useful way of developing a sense of epistemology. As they develop their argumentation about the nature of the problems they seek to address, they provide clear articulations of questions at the core of an epistemological study.

Also, this analysis involves a very specific moment and situation in history, but we have very different voices responding to the same political question of what the relationship should be between France and Algeria. Studying such prominent voices within this debate gives us a clear way of entering this conversation about what was available epistemologically within la Francophonie.

Because my research questions pertain to epistemology, answering them requires evidence related to epistemology. Given the nature of epistemology, which functions as a set of background processes derived from our social and material milieux, literature proved an interesting space from which to draw evidence. Looking at prominent thinkers who were responding to critical questions of their time proved a productive way of getting traction on these questions. My rationale comes from characterizations in the epistemic violence literature of the relationship between speaker and audience. The sheer prominence of these voices within their discursive contexts offers validity to the notion that the arguments they made connected to the values, norms, and epistemological processes of their times. Though these thinkers' prominence within their time arises from how innovative their ideas were relative to their context, paying attention to how they seek to intervene can tell us about the parameters of the ecosystem of beliefs in which they are located.

In making original arguments that intervene in the conversations that mattered to them, they do a lot of work to set the stage and describe which people, issues, and dynamics were relevant. These choices they make regarding what to include and emphasize, what to exclude or minimize, bear directly on the processes of knowing and not knowing that comprise epistemology.

One additional methodological note is that, while reading the secondary literature is of course always an important part of the research process, for this project engaging with the secondary literature also served the purpose of mitigating the tendency toward confirmation bias that might have emerged. This was especially important given the structure of this project, in which I derive a framework from the perspective and writing of a Black man from the United States as a conceptual lens that I then apply to writing produced within an entirely different

sociopolitical context. A natural risk would be that in reading Camus and Fanon, I might craft a representation of these figures' thinking that could have been inaccurate or unfair in the service of my argument. Comparing my reading of these authors' texts with prevalent interpretations in the secondary literature helped ensure that I respected these works in their own right.

A related risk could have emerged in the texts that I selected. Because examining epistemology requires paying close attention to an author's linguistic choices, my process involved becoming familiar with the canon for each of these authors and then selecting texts with passages that seemed relevant to this project's questions, rather than making claims about these authors' bodies of work overall. There was consequently a risk that I could have selected texts in order to construct a version of these figures' thinking, and that maybe the way I represented these thinkers' beliefs would have been entirely different had I selected a different combination of essays. In all three cases, however, getting a sense of the scholarly consensus regarding what these authors wrote and believed mitigated this pitfall.

B. Method

In this section, I discuss how my reading practices provide a means of addressing and providing insight regarding each of the research questions described above. Two concepts that I use to explore what is occurring in these texts are subjectivity as opposed to objectification. By subjectivity, I refer not only to a person or group's perspective as depicted within a text, but equally crucial, I refer to whether or not the author imbues a person they discuss with the right and capacity to have a perspective. I pay considerable attention to the people that these authors bequeath and deny an interior life, a personal mental space from which to view, think about, react to and care about the world. Subjectivity also involves access to a history, a community, a sense of humor, the capacity to feel pain and grieve.

I also pay close attention to the people and groups that these authors objectify. Objectification comprises being denied subjectivity. A text objectifies someone when it treats them as a body moving through space, someone who does not have much of an interior life that is of any interest or relevance to the author's audience. One telltale sign of objectification is when their presence in the text is only literal movement or description of their physical appearance. Another indication that an author is objectifying a person or group is when the author characterizes their choices as incomprehensible, severed from any personal experience or material reality that might make their decision more legible.

Research question 1: What is the relationship between racial system and epistemology?

In order to answer the question about the relationship between system and epistemology, my process is two-fold. First, I seek to understand and analyze how James Baldwin conceptualizes these questions. I do this by engaging several of key works within his oeuvre that engage these issues. In reading these texts, I focus specifically on the insights and observations that he makes about how knowledge works and how it is arranged within the United States as a racial system. This analysis provides the beginnings of an answer to my first research question. I focus on making sense of how occupying a position of privilege within a racial structure lends itself to these ways of thinking, and how occupying a position of disadvantage within a racial structure lends itself to these other ways of thinking.

Research Question 2: Is the relationship we observe between system and epistemology determined by the historical and cultural specifics of racial systems?

In order to get at the inherently comparative nature of this question, I engage the work of Albert Camus. I analyze his work through the lens of the ideas drawn from James Baldwin regarding the epistemology of racial privilege. This juxtaposition foregrounds how similar

epistemologies are at work across these different contexts. Despite the very different imperial legacies and experiences, the very different philosophies regarding what the political community should be and what the role of the state should be, it is the case that privilege within racial hierarchy makes it possible to know in ways that protect one's own ego and interests.

Research Question 3: How does one's epistemology shape the way one pictures freedom and justice?

I explore this question in all three of the close readings within this dissertation. Engaging this question entails first understanding on the one hand how they understand problems of racism, justice and politics, exploring what alternative these authors identify, and also analyzing how they understand the path toward this alternative. Engaging with this question also involves exploring how these imagined alternatives are either confined or expanded because of the epistemological process that affect what materials they have at hand in order to craft alternatives.

Contributions

A. Epistemic Violence

One way that this dissertation contributes to this scholarship comes from the fact that it centers how epistemologies of privilege and resistance are intertwined. Much of the existing scholarship in analytic philosophy that explores the epistemological elements of racism certainly emphasizes relationship (Anderson 2012; Dotson 2011; 2012; 2014; Fricker 2007; Medina 2013b; 2012; 2016). The relationship most commonly depicted is that between the person experiencing harm and the person, group, or sector of society causing harm. While centering the experience of people who experience harm is both helpful intellectually and admirable ethically, these arguments do not attend as much to how these positions of speaker and audience, or person

harmed and person causing harm, are not static and discrete. The scholarship conceptualizes how these entities affect each other as being unidirectional, where the main impact that occurs goes from audience to speaker. One advantage of introducing Baldwin's framework is that his writing makes clear the extent to which the speaker and audience are defined by each other.

Similarly, this research also contributes to work on epistemic violence by introducing and exploring the effect of time on these phenomena. In Dotson's argument about epistemic violence in the context of testimony, she discusses testimonial quieting and testimonial smothering. As discussed previously, the former term occurs when an audience refuses to recognize a speaker as a knower, and the latter occurs when a speaker limits her testimony to that which her audience understands in order for her words so that she can avoid being misunderstood. By synthesizing these powerful concepts with insights from James Baldwin, my research brings into view the effect that experiencing these kinds of violence repeatedly has on a person and how she moves through the world. It expands our view of testimonial quieting and smothering from the individual interaction to the individual over the course of a lifetime. It also expands our view of these types of violence from being phenomena experienced by individuals into phenomena experienced by groups over time. In my chapter on Baldwin, my analysis of the letter he writes to his nephew points to strategies by which a community can cope and rely on each other, and try to account for, contend with, or heal the effects of these forms of violence.

Last, the comparative approach pursued in this dissertation complements the scholarship on epistemic violence in several ways. Engaging with texts that were not written with the specific purpose of answering questions about epistemology subtly reorients the conversation and highlights trends in the literature. One example of this reorientation relates to how scholars of epistemic violence conceptualize the political ideal to which they aspire. For example, Medina

(2013), building off of Anderson's (2011) *The Imperative of Integration*, is primarily interested in how to achieve a robust democracy that manages difference well. He characterizes epistemic resistance as the capacity to marshal one's epistemic resources in order to counter prevailing and oppressive narratives, and he regards it as being a critical part of what he calls the "Imperative of Epistemic Interaction" inherent to the work of being in a democracy. While promoting a democracy that contends well with difference is laudable, comparing Fanon and Baldwin highlights that people who practice epistemic resistance have conceptualized freedom and justice in highly varying ways, and incorporates that element of invention, creativity and resistance into the field of view.

B. Comparative Politics

This thesis also intervenes within the subfield of comparative politics in several ways. One such way is that it challenges the norm of single-country studies on race, and the logic of exceptionalism upon which they depend. By engaging literature across two different empires, it becomes possible to explore how each context is less unique and independent of each other. In their review article reflecting on the odd way that comparative politics sidesteps comparative analyses of race, Hanchard and Chung (2004) note that scholars often conceptualize race as being inseparable from national state sovereignty. Many studies consequently characterize racial politics as irreducibly specific and therefore not comparable across place. This approach results in analyses which characterize racial politics as only being because of factors within the country, thereby obscuring the parts of the story that transcend that country's borders. The research in this project addresses this tendency in the literature by orienting the inquiry around the possibility that systems of racial domination may be less unique than they at first seem. By shifting the

analysis in this way, it becomes possible to focus on and investigate how white supremacy functions as a transnational phenomenon.

Another way that this research contributes to comparative politics is that it counters the tendency within ethnic politics scholarship to treat different ethnic groups as being structurally identical. As Hanchard and Hung (2004) note, the term race often calls to mind the role of hierarchy in ways that the term "ethnicity" does not (333). Scholarship on ethnic politics often tacitly assumes that all ethnic identity is made up of essentially the same cultural fabric, pointing to elements like language, religion, nation, and sometimes physical appearance. This scholarship conceptualizes all ethnic groups as having their own specific variations and combinations of these qualities, but being qualitatively the same. This project differs from scholarship that takes that approach because it benefits from the analytical leverage offered by race as a concept, rather than ethnicity. Rather than characterizing white and Black as structurally identical categories that differ only in the details, this project instead begins with the assumption that the salience of these categories has been politically produced and institutionally enshrined. This is helpful because treating the distinction between white and Black as simply a matter of different skin color and cultural practices obscures how centuries of hierarchy have impacted the content and fundamental nature of the categories themselves. Namely, it obscures how whiteness in the United States originated as a political and legal category that carried with it both the right to own property and the freedom from ever being owned as property (Harris 1993).

Organization of the Study

The dissertation proceeds as follows. In the first chapter, I lay out the theoretical framework that structures the overall project. I analyze three essays by James Baldwin in order to explicate his conception of both epistemologies of privilege and epistemologies of resistance.

For Baldwin, an epistemology of racial privilege comprises placing a set of beliefs between yourself and reality. White people explain their safety and privilege relative to Black people as being because of their own superiority and innocence, rather than because of white supremacy as an economic, historical, and political reality. He also notes the asymmetry of knowledge as being a defining feature of the racial system. I then discuss how Baldwin characterizes a particular epistemology of resistance, that he regards as being crucial to Black survival and success.

In the second chapter, I analyze Albert Camus's philosophy of absurdism through the lens of Baldwin's framework regarding the epistemology of racial privilege. My analysis will show that the way Camus conceptualizes what the fundamental problem of being a person in the world is as well as his proposed solution to that fundamental problem reveals much about the relationship between structure and epistemology. This chapter is helpful for the first and third research questions, about the relationships between structure and epistemology and the relationship between epistemology and how one imagines freedom. My analysis of Camus's fictions shows concretely what it looks like to unknown one's way out of a problem by rendering Black people as plot devices.

In the third chapter, I analyze the works of Frantz Fanon. In this analysis, I pay specific attention to Fanon's epistemology of resistance, which is related to and complements Baldwin's, and yet in some ways is even more powerful. Fanon provides a way of thinking about it that focuses not just on the binary between white and Black, but on the internal politics of Black community and Black solidarity. Because what he shows is that within the Black community, proximity to capital, access to economic opportunity, and integration with metropolitan frameworks leads to a distorted sense of what is and is not possible regarding both formal and substantive independence from France. He argues that privileged Black nationalists will be

successful only to the extent that they can place their resources, intellectual and material, at the service of the working-class, agrarian Algerians. Taken in combination with Baldwin's framework, we wind up seeing what amounts to an epistemology of privilege, rather than an epistemology of whiteness per se. This becomes clear in the latter half of the chapter, in which I explore how privilege regarding gender prompts Fanon to engage in the objectification of Black women.

In the conclusion, I synthesize how these close readings relate to the questions guiding this dissertation. After placing my close readings in conversation with each other, I discuss methodological insights gained from this study; I reflect on what this project reveals about the study of epistemology through literature, I also consider how studying epistemologies of privilege differs from studying epistemologies of resistance as well as consider possible explanations for differences between the epistemologies of resistance my chapters explore. I finish by offering recommendations for future research based on these findings.

CHAPTER 1. The Ways We Know: James Baldwin and the Epistemology of Racial Hierarchy.

Introduction

The material for this chapter comes from three essays from Baldwin: "My Dungeon Shook," and "Down at the Cross," which are both from *The Fire Next Time*; and "Many Thousands Gone," which is from *Notes of a Native Son*. My close reading of these three essays will explore how Baldwin theorizes the epistemological dimensions of racial identity, both for white and Black identities.

This chapter proceeds in four sections. In the first section, I reflect on what using the work of an author like James Baldwin to inform a project in comparative politics entails. In the second section, I discuss how this argument interacts with existing scholarship on James Baldwin. In the third section, I explore the argument Baldwin develops about the epistemology of whiteness in these three texts. I focus on Baldwin's treatment of how white people are engaged in both knowing and choosing not to know, why they deploy and are so attached to these processes, what these processes consist of, and what the consequences are for white conceptions of the self. In the fourth section, I turn to Baldwin's discussion of a Black epistemology of resistance at both the individual and community levels in response to living within a racist structure.

Bringing Baldwin into Comparative Politics

My project parallels the task that Lawrie Balfour takes up in the article "Finding the Words," in which she examines how James Baldwin conceptualizes freedom and equality in *The Fire Next Time*. She claims that while Baldwin did not couch his arguments within the terms of the conversations of political theory, his work undeniably touches on issues that are paramount

to political theorists. The decision to use Baldwin's arguments in order to inform a comparative project arises from a similar logic. In addition to not being a theorist in the traditional sense, Baldwin was not a social scientist; indeed, my discussion of "Many Thousands Gone" below will show that he had considerable skepticism about social science's capacity to solve the kinds of problems that mattered to him. Even if one were to adopt a more inclusive definition of what it means to be a social scientist, his substantive interests would not fit within the field of comparative politics. Although several of his essays discuss how African-Americans compare to Black people elsewhere and engage questions of the Black diaspora, most of his work focuses on the racial politics of the United States.

Yet despite not being a social scientist or a comparativist, his ideas and arguments about the nature and underlying causes of racial hierarchy in the United States may provide new tools for examining racial and ethnic politics in other contexts. In particular, this project makes use of his analysis of how a person's position within a racial hierarchy both shapes and is shaped by how he interprets his own identity, other members of his racial group, and his history, as well as the other racial groups that make up his social context. In the course of my close reading of these three essays, I will argue that Baldwin develops a framework for the epistemological elements of racial difference. He exposes how processes of both knowing and not knowing function for people in the dominant group and for people who historically have been minoritized.

Such insights can serve as a corrective to the flat ways that comparative politics conceptualizes ethnic difference. While ethnic politics scholarship in comparative politics attends carefully to how ethnic identities are socially constructed, the subfield rarely takes seriously enough how these identities affect the epistemologies of the people who belong to these groups and whose families and communities have been under the pressure of these structures for

generations. One benefit of using the work of an author who is so deeply embedded in and committed to his own racial group is that he clarifies how systems of racial hierarchy do not produce mirror image epistemologies; rather, occupying different positions within a racial hierarchy has consequences that are specific to that location.

Despite the potential benefit of exploring what Baldwin's framework can clarify in contexts other than the United States, there are several potential risks inherent to using a theory developed in response to one context to explain the politics of an entirely different context, and so it behooves me to clarify what I am and am not doing. The task I'm taking up here is not to use James Baldwin's work to derive a generalizable, abstract theory of how all states work, and then use evidence from two Francophone authors in order to confirm, disconfirm or adapt that theory. Taking categories from the United States and superimposing them onto France would run the related risks of seeing dynamics that are not present as well as missing important qualities of France's particular context.

A different set of questions motivates my approach. When we put the observations Baldwin makes about racial privilege and epistemology in the United States next to the experiences of white and nonwhite Francophone people, what similarities and points of overlap emerge? What dynamics do not seem to apply? What aspects of the French context go completely unexplained in light of Baldwin's observations? Whereas seeing whether the French context confirms or challenges Baldwin's argument implies that evaluating the truth or usefulness of Baldwin's argument is the primary aim, my questions are more simply about what we learn in the course of this juxtaposition.

Given the risks of erasure or misapplication that may occur in the course of these comparisons, the obvious question is whether this endeavor is worthwhile. Why not take each of

these contexts seriously in its own right? This kind of comparative scholarship has several significant advantages. Engaging in comparative analysis can help us develop a theoretical understanding of the underlying dynamics that produce privileged racial identities, as well as a comparative analysis of struggles against racial domination. Developing this line of inquiry is crucial for ethical and political reasons related to emancipatory struggle, insofar as it can enable solidarity among the communities who have been contending against similar forces.

Additionally, studying race comparatively can mitigate the tendency toward essentialist notions of identity for groups that have been both dominant and oppressed. Comparative scholarship on race can clarify how similarly arranged racial hierarchies in different contexts produce similar epistemologies. Gaining a clearer sense of which aspects of a context are specific to that historical experience and which are common to many racial systems more generally means that we can treat these epistemologies as endogenous to certain kinds of hierarchical arrangements, rather than characterizing one way of thinking as an inherent, immovable feature of what it means to be a white or Black American, or what it means to be a white or Black person within Francophonie. Indeed, I would argue that comparative work can sometimes be a uniquely effective way to problematize and denaturalize the myths surrounding hierarchy.

Last, comparative work of this kind is important because it underscores the value in including voices like James Baldwin in our theories about comparative and international politics. We include the theories and arguments of thinkers like Adam Smith, Karl Marx and Max Weber in our analyses of politics, even though they are very much embedded in particular histories and social contexts. Assuming that these authors can productively inform how we study politics across many contexts but that Baldwin's work is too particular to function similarly seems

symptomatic of the overall notion of whiteness as an unmarked norm. Comparative politics can develop more robust theories of ethnic politics by including and taking seriously the wisdom of writers who are from groups who typically have not been participants in scholarly discussions but who have thought carefully about community and survival within a racial hierarchy.

Existing Scholarship on Baldwin

In this chapter, I develop an argument uncovering how Baldwin conceptualizes epistemologies of racial privilege and racial oppression. This argument complements and builds upon existing scholarship on Baldwin in several ways. One can understand this analysis as an expansion on what Balfour (2001) calls "race consciousness," or "the underlying complex of associations that shape Americans' sense of identity, influence everyday encounters, and frame responses to questions about racial injustice" (2001, 6-7). This chapter explores the background assumptions and attachments that shape what people who occupy different positions within a racial hierarchy notice, as well as how they interpret what they notice. The purpose of this chapter is to understand in more detail both the content and the mechanisms of race consciousness in the descriptive sense. My analysis also builds on Shulman's (2017) analysis of how Baldwin uses the concept of ignorance about racial issues in his writing. Shulman claims that when Baldwin focuses on how white people are ignorant of racial injustice, he does not aim to address that ignorance by providing information, but instead seeks to call attention to the ways that white people do in fact know about the pervasiveness of racial injustice but choose continually to disavow that knowledge, which he characterizes as a "motivated blindness about the reality of others that it is culpable because it can be overcome" (163). This chapter understands the nature of white ignorance in precisely these terms and seeks to lay bare how Baldwin understands the fears and needs that motivate this blindness.

Moreover, like Drabinsky (2015), this analysis explores traditions of creativity and resilience within the Black experience. Drabinsky examines Baldwin's depiction of Black vernacular as more than a response to oppression but also as a testimony to resisting, flourishing, and creating despite this oppression. Black vernacular encapsulates these experiences because of how it interrupts the logic of past as distinct from present; like Black spirituals, the musicality of Black vernacular carries echoes of sorrow and survival. Baldwin celebrates this vernacular in order to make clear that Black people's history is not merely one of surviving violence but also one of world-making. The argument I make in the section on a Black epistemology of resistance similarly examines how Black ways of knowing and being challenge linear notions of time. While Drabinsky explores how Black vernacular troubles the line between past and present, I will explore how troubling the boundary between the grim present and an unknown future is a cornerstone of one strand of Black epistemology that Baldwin examines.

In my analysis of these epistemologies of privilege and resistance, I explore how ways of knowing can reflect, replicate, and challenge racial inequity as a lived experience and material fact. One theme throughout this chapter will be that for Baldwin, economic interactions are revelatory sites where one can track these epistemological processes. This approach also complements that of Turner (2012), who argues that reconstituting democracy in how Baldwin's work calls for would require engaging on two levels: both at the level of what we allow ourselves to know, in the sense that white people would have to ready themselves for "the event of Black citizens revealing white citizens to themselves" (104); and on the material level, in the sense that white people will have to divest themselves of the material benefits of whiteness. The argument this chapter advances also complements that of McWilliams (2017), who explores why Baldwin's fiction often features characters who experience profound disconnection. She argues

that Baldwin conceptualizes feelings of disconnection and alienation as fundamental to American identity in ways that make it unique relative to other national identities. She argues that this sense of lacking an identity has prompted Americans to cling to status indicators. Furthermore, Black people's position at the bottom of a racial hierarchy serves capitalism, because it reflects how American's notion of freedom plays a role in maintaining white supremacy (2017, 111).

While this argument takes up and extends several themes addressed by existing scholarship about Baldwin, my reading of him in these three essays also challenges this scholarship in a few ways. Many of these shortcomings can actually be addressed by the literature on epistemic injustice, a body of scholarship in philosophy. For the remainder of this section, I will discuss several forms of epistemic injustice that this scholarship identifies, how they address concerns in the James Baldwin literature, and how the analysis in this chapter interacts with and expands upon these ideas.

Fricker (2007) argues that we can characterize an injustice as distinctively epistemic when it involves "a wrong done to someone in their capacity as a knower" (1). She discusses two categories of such injustice: testimonial injustice, which is when an audience experiences a person as less credible when they give testimony because of prejudices the hearer has against them, and hermeneutical injustice, wherein a person is less able to make sense of and communicate their social experiences because of a "gap in collective interpretive resources" (1). The example she gives is the injustice experienced before women could take up the term "sexual harassment" to describe their experiences. This line of thought corresponds to ideas in sociolegal scholarship about the importance of "naming" in legal contestation (Felstiner 1980). Dotson (2012) identifies a third kind of epistemic injustice called contributory injustice, which occurs

when there are hermeneutical resources that would make a marginalized person's testimony intelligible, but the perceiver willfully refuses to acknowledge and acquire those resources (31).

Dotson (2011) argues that we can learn about epistemic violence by paying attention to situations in which a speaker is silenced. The first form of epistemic oppression she identifies in this manner is testimonial quieting, in which an audience does not identify a speaker as a knower (Dotson 2011, 242). The second form is testimonial smothering. This occurs when an audience has showed that it cannot understand the content of what a person testifies to, and when they do not know enough to judge accurately how much or how little they understand. The speaker is aware that parts of her testimony will be unintelligible to the audience and limits her account to the parts of her testimony that her audience will understand.

Some forms of epistemic injustice are reducible to the social, historical and economic forces that produce other kinds of injustice, while others are irreducibly epistemic (Dotson 2014). Drawing from theories about organizational change, Dotson (2014) examines this by exploring three "orders" of change in response to epistemic exclusion. First-order change involves solving problems that are easily recognizable as problems given the schemata that are already available. An example of a first-order epistemic exclusion would be when prejudice against a person's identity damages their credibility so severely that when they articulate problems which are perfectly legible within a schema, their account is not trusted. The corresponding first-order change does not require changing how one conceptualizes the problem; instead, it requires allocating credibility differently. Second-order change involves adapting or changing the schema itself. An example of a second-order epistemic exclusion is when a person must communicate about their experience within terms that conform to dominant assumptions and attitudes. Addressing this form of oppression means expanding the terms in which one can

speak about problems so that the marginalized person does not need to truncate their experience in these ways.

Third-order change involves seeking to recognize and change the social imaginaries from which we draw schema in the first place. An example of a third-order epistemic exclusion is when what a person is saying is impossible or nonsensical in light of the dominant schema. Addressing this form of oppression requires interrogating the assumptions and attitudes that the schema comprises. This form of oppression is especially challenging, because the resilience of the epistemological system may make it challenging to realize that system's limitations. In order to address epistemic oppressions at this level, people who are more privileged will need to "extend extraordinary amounts of credibility" to the person who is testifying, "be open to radical conceptual revolutions in the face of, quite possibly, profoundly insufficient shared epistemic resources," and they must "grasp what portions of their overall epistemic life ways are thwarting robust uptake of the testimony of" the person who testifies (132).

Medina (2013) provides a way of thinking about why this latter task is so difficult in his analysis of meta-ignorance. He argues that epistemic failure can happen at two levels. First-order or object-level racial ignorance occurs when a person does not know how racialized individuals understand themselves, how society understands them, the current positionality of racialized individuals within the existing hierarchy, and the social relations which made it possible for them to be ignorant about racialized individuals in the first place. Second-order or meta-level racial ignorance is when a person is unaware that they are unaware of race's social relevance. He uses the term meta-blindness to refer to the incapacity to recognize one's limitations (Medina 2013, 46). Medina also emphasizes that these processes have not just cognitive but affective

dimensions; they impose limits on whom we can extend empathize with and show compassion toward (2013, 49).

Incorporating these concepts into our analysis of Baldwin can enrich our understanding of what his arguments mean for racial justice in two ways. First, keeping these concepts in mind can help safeguard against applying concepts in Baldwin's work in ways that are not sufficiently attentive to how those concepts must vary according to people's positionality and privilege. The most common example of this is in how scholars engage with Baldwin's conception of love. In his work on Baldwin and love, Freeburg (2015) focuses on love as a state of being in which people can face each other authentically, with vulnerability and openness, unencumbered by artificial and harmful social constructs like race and sexual orientation. Discussing this as the ideal space to which Baldwin would have us strive without paying close attention to the vastly different challenges that white and Black people will face in order to enter and be in that space together does a disservice to Baldwin's argument.

Similarly, Farred's (2015) argument about Baldwin and love is too undifferentiated. Farred argues that although Baldwin ultimately had to leave the Black church, his conception of love comes from Christian understandings of the love between God and the individual, which is extremely asymmetrical. God loves the individual more than she could ever possibly love God, and Baldwin calls people to love that way as well - to love deeply, even when that love cannot be reciprocated. Farred claims that Baldwin's belief that Black people must love white people in the same way is one of the principal reasons Baldwin could not associate with the Black church or with the Nation of Islam, despite loving people in both institutions. Neither of these arguments contends with the fact that in order for Black people to enter love as a space of authenticity and freedom from harmful social constructions, they have to navigate several epistemic risks. These

conceptions of love as spaces where individuals can encounter each other as equals unencumbered by racial identities ignores how Black people would have difficulty engaging in meaningful or authentic exchanges, because doing so involves talking to people who both know nothing about the content of Black experiences and also have no sense of how little they know.

Another way that taking the epistemic injustice literature into account can enrich our understanding of Baldwin pertains to the role that dialogue or conversation plays in some of the scholarship about his work. Many who mention dialogue do so in a nuanced way, noting its immense difficulty given the disingenuousness with which white people typically engage issues of race while also emphasizing its necessity in the broader project of racial justice. Balfour (2001) expresses skepticism about the state of conversations about race but argues that public dialogue about race is essential because it provides a means of "rooting out" situations in which ascriptive identity condition people's access to American citizenship (3). Similarly, Turner (2017) argues that Baldwin's vision for how to reconstitute democratic politics requires that white citizens "sit face to face with Black citizens and listen to Black citizens tell their stories of America" (316). He says that white people must listen critically, because "Black citizens, like white citizens, are susceptible to error," but also "self-critically, because it is a long engrained-habit of white Americans" not to take Black people seriously (Turner 2017, 316). Love is what makes it possible for Black people to take the "leap of faith" and believe that if they are honest with white people, their testimony will be heard (Turner 2017, 317). This will only work if white citizens "acknowledge that they need Black help"; such an acknowledgement would be "predicated on even deeper acknowledgements of Blacks' complex and equal humanity and whites existential incompletion" (ibid).

What the epistemic injustice literature helps clarify is what would be necessary in order to thread the needle these authors identify. In particular, Dotson's work clarifies that white people might need to guarantee more than these acknowledgements in order for Black people to take that leap of faith. Dotson frames it this way: "To begin a successful 'dialogue' or testimonial exchange on unsafe, potentially damaging testimonial content, speakers may have added demands, and audiences need to meet those demands" (2011, 251). One demand she proposes is that when a marginalized person considers speaking to an audience, the audience needs to "indicate testimonial competence to a would-be speaker" (ibid). Whereas Balfour and Turner both characterize dialogue itself as the means to address ignorance and achieve self-understanding, Dotson's argument suggests that having addressed that ignorance and gained that self-understanding, at least in some measure, may actually be necessary preconditions for such a dialogue to occur successfully in the first place. Indeed, going into those conversations unequipped but ready to be transformed and enlightened by one's Black interlocutor hearkens slightly to Dotson's concept of contributory injustice, which occurs when there are hermeneutical resources that would make a marginalized person's testimony intelligible but that the perceiver willfully refuses to acknowledge and acquire. While conversation is one way to acquire knowledge and self-knowledge, it is not the only way that white people can have access to information about their own whiteness. One could, for instance, read James Baldwin's work. To be clear, this is not to dismiss dialogue as a mode of practicing the love that Baldwin describes, in which people can be vulnerable and authentic with each other. Rather, it is to suggest that in order to experience and practice the love that Baldwin identifies as transformative, white people may need to come having done some of that work beforehand.

What I seek to do in this chapter is to use Baldwin's work to explore some of the background conditions that make dialogue so challenging, by exploring the epistemological processes that people with racial privilege must overcome and subvert in order to engage in these conversations in ways that are mutually and reciprocally beneficial. I also seek to explore Baldwin's depiction of an epistemology of resistance within the Black experience. This tradition is an example of what Medina (2013) calls "radical imagination" within the Black experience.

Epistemology and Power: Baldwin on Whiteness

As mentioned above, one of the benefits of engaging Baldwin's work is that it provides tools for examining how occupying a dominant position in a racial hierarchy can impact a person's or group's epistemology. Baldwin's work enables studying the ways that being in such a position shapes what one knows and, perhaps most importantly for Baldwin, what one chooses to avoid knowing. In this section, I explore the argument Baldwin develops about the epistemology of whiteness in each of these essays. I focus on four components of his framework that span these texts: how whiteness functions as an epistemology, or way of knowing and not knowing; why white people choose to avoid knowing what Black people are really like; the processes they use to avoid knowing Black people; and what the consequences of these processes are.

Baldwin describes how white identity includes elements that function at the epistemological level in "My Dungeon Shook," an essay in *The Fire Next Time* written in the form of a letter to his nephew. As he discusses the meaningful and longstanding familial connections that make up the context in which he is writing this letter to his nephew, Baldwin characterizes the immense emotional and psychological pain that has shaped his brother's personality to the "crime" that he believes this country is guilty of, which he describes as "destroying hundreds of thousands of lives" ("Dungeon," 7). Further, he says that his

countrymen are not only guilty of destroying all these lives but that they both "do not know it and do not want to know it" (ibid). He specifies what he means when he identifies this destruction of life by connecting it to the material conditions of his nephew's experience, by saying that the "details and symbols of [his] life have been deliberately constructed" in order to make his nephew believe "what white people say about [him]" ("Dungeon," 7-8). While the focus here is not on attributing blame to a particular actor or group of actors, he takes pains to emphasize that these acts of construction shaping his nephew's life did not occur accidentally. The ongoing destruction of life which he regards as criminal is not unintentional but is the product of human actions which are having exactly the result they were designed to produce. He goes on to explain to his nephew that white people are "still trapped" in a history that they do not understand, because they "have had to believe" in Black inferiority because of their fervent wish not to know their crime (9). For him, white people don't understand and are consequently trapped within their own history because they read that history through the lens of conceptions about Black inferiority that they "have had to believe."

He says that they read their history through the lens of beliefs about Black inferiority even though many of them know better because they believe that letting go of that belief will entail "the loss of their identity" (9). By "identity," Baldwin references a level more specific than that of racial identity; rather, the word "identity" is a way of pointing to the highly personal level at which these risks are felt. Beliefs about who Black people are and where they fit in the social system operate for white people as a "fixed star, as an immovable pillar" ("Dungeon," 9). Finding those beliefs to be untrue would be as disturbing as waking up and finding the "stars aflame" in the sky (ibid). These expectations are so central to white people's view of how the world works that they would find deviations from these expectations "terrifying," because such

deviations would “attack” white people’s “sense of reality” (ibid). The belief in Black inferiority functions at such a fundamental level that they experience challenges to it not just as a disturbance or challenge but as an “attack” (9), a violent affront to how white people stand in relation to reality. For Baldwin, challenging that belief is terrifying and comparable to an attack, not just because of how it contradicts the content of their experiences but because it destabilizes their confidence in their ability to process their own experiences.

This seemingly contradictory combination, of engaging in destructive behaviors intentionally while also refusing to know that one has done so, is where we begin to see Baldwin’s way of thinking about the epistemological elements of whiteness–and more specifically, the epistemological elements of possessing racial privilege. In particular, he establishes two concepts that will be key to the rest of his discussion of this epistemology. First, this work highlights the issues and tensions our analysis should center in exploring and understanding the content of these racialized epistemologies. His analysis raises the question of what it would mean not to want to know about certain aspects of reality, what would motivate this instinct not to know, and how would one go about not knowing. The tension his writing identifies hinges around whether the very fact of not wanting to know about a phenomenon necessarily contains an implicit acknowledgement of that very phenomenon. In other words, perhaps the strongest proof that white people are aware of the deeply unjust and violent racial system that they benefit from is actually the great lengths they go to in order to avoid knowing about that system. In addition to exposing elements of the content of this epistemology, this discussion reveals much about the relationship between epistemology and power. Namely, the capacity to protect oneself from the aspects of one’s social reality that one wishes were not true is a luxury that not everyone has access to or can afford. His analysis prompts us to engage with

what it means for a privileged group of people to be able to protect themselves from objective facts about the world around them in ways that less privileged groups cannot.

To summarize, "My Dungeon Shook" does the work of clarifying the epistemological process that whiteness consists of. In particular, Baldwin articulates how whiteness involves this paradox of knowing and not knowing. The argument Baldwin makes in "Many Thousands Gone," his review essay of Richard Wright's *Native Son*, goes a long way toward explaining the conflicting impulses and needs that give rise to what he calls this "ferocious paradox" ("Many," 20). In this essay, he begins by discussing these conflicting needs and how they shape racial relationships, and then uses this framework to explain why he believes that *Native Son* is so ineffective at truly challenging the assumptions upon which racism relies. My engagement with this essay will focus on his explanation of how the character and fate of Bigger Thomas relates to the way that racism functions more broadly.

As mentioned, he begins the essay by developing an argument about the nature of racial tension as well as the sources of that tension. He distinguishes between different ways of thinking about the Black man as a figure and argues that white people conceptualize the Black man as a "social" problem as opposed to a "personal or human problem" ("Many," 19). When we discuss the Black man as a social problem, the terms of the discussion are in "statistics, slums, rapes, injustices, remote violence" ("Many," 19). At the center of these sociologically oriented ways of talking about the problem of race in America is what Baldwin calls the "image" of the Black man.[1] Baldwin argues that Bigger Thomas, the novel's protagonist, typifies this image that haunts American discourse about race, and Baldwin's critique of *Native Son* is that it takes this image seriously rather than problematizing it. Rather than being a character with his

[1] Balfour (2001) also deals with how images function in Baldwin's argument in chapter 5.

own subjectivity, perspective, and relationship with himself and his context, Bigger Thomas is the "incarnation of a myth" ("Many," 27), identical to the caricature that white people center in their hand-wringing discussions of what they should do about the race problem.

The consequences of leaving this caricature unproblematized become especially visible in the novel's conclusion. The murders that Bigger Thomas commits and that he stands trial for are the inexorable consequence of his monstrosity, which America is responsible for; this monstrosity makes his death sentence unfortunate, an eventuality that the trial's fictional white spectators feel terrible about, but absolutely inevitable. The spectators of the trial accede, with both guilt and a morbid "fullness of pride" ("Many," 33), that Bigger is the product of their own guilt, the "monster created by the American republic" ("Many," 27). Indeed, Bigger himself accepts the death sentence as his only possible fate, "wants to die because he glories in his hatred and prefers, like Lucifer, rather to rule in hell, than serve in heaven" (ibid). He is a self-acknowledged monster, his humanity "unrecoverable" (ibid). The white spectators of the trial "have no wish to forgive him, and he has no wish to be forgiven" ("Many," 33), because forgiving a monster with no subjectivity would almost be a category error; there is no intention, no need, and above all no moral obligation to relate to Bigger Thomas or create the kind of shared field of meaning that would make an act like forgiveness coherent.

This image has several distinct relationships with white people's fear. First, insofar as the image is that of a Black monster, it engenders considerable fear. Rather than being a subject who uses his own capacities to negotiate and interpret the unjust and infuriating forces that shape his context, Bigger Thomas is simply an object of those forces. This lack of subjectivity is what makes him monstrous rather than simply dangerous; he is full of a rage that is not only violent but impossible to reason with. It is this quality of being unable to reason with Bigger Thomas, of

that entire endeavor being futile, that places him permanently outside the shared meanings that bind members of a democratic political community to each other. What makes him even more dangerous is that his rage is not limited to his own experience but bleeds outward to pose considerable threat to the world around him; his "isolation" and "impatient scorn" create the novel's "climate of anarchy and unmotivated and unapprehended disaster" ("Many," 27). It is this same image of the dangerous Black man, the violently furious, impossible-to-reason-with thug, this sociological rather than human figure, that plays the starring role in our political discussions of race.

Yet while dangerousness is and must be one of the defining features of Bigger Thomas, it is his very dangerousness that makes him a device which enables white safety in conversations about race. Bigger's "appearance among [white people] makes [their] victory certain" ("Many," 28) meaning that as long as the conversation revolves around how to solve the problem of this doomed Black monster named Bigger, the conversation occupies a sphere that will never truly be challenging, and therefore a sphere where it is always possible to preserve and replicate the basic order and logic of racial politics. Bigger's enormous and uncontainable rage is inherently frightening, and yet the appropriate response to it – Bigger's execution – is reassuringly, intoxicatingly obvious.

Far more threatening than the image of the Black person typified by Bigger Thomas are the ordinary Black people "who smile, who go to church, who give no cause for complaint" ("Many," 28). These folks contrast sharply with the image of the Black man in important ways. Whereas violent rage is the principle governing Bigger Thomas's every movement in unavoidably obvious ways, the analogous emotion experienced by these mundane Black people is far more subtle, only ever on the cusp of visibility. Whereas white people see and experience

Bigger Thomas's rage obviously, they only ever "sometimes surprise the merest arrogant hint of hatred, the faintest, withdrawn, speculative shadow of contempt" ("Many," 29) in the faces of the ordinary Black people for whom Bigger Thomas is a convenient stand-in.

Baldwin establishes the contours of an irony that he makes considerable use of, consisting of this concocted, almost supernatural image of the Black monster as juxtaposed with ordinary Black people. His use of the term "monster" is evocative of the supernatural, fantastic, gruesome, and frightening, and he makes use of those connotations at two levels. In addition to conveying the deeply frightening the content of this image, the supernatural connotations of the word "monster" suggest the image's unreal, haunting quality. This image functions in Baldwin's writing as a specter that dogs the steps of white people, a personification of the immense tension and guilt they carry with them around the issue of race. Baldwin characterizes the image almost as a vengeful otherworldly presence that hovers right on the edge of visibility at all manner of mundane and very much of-this-world interactions. The image is present at interracial cocktail parties, giving them their "rattling, genteel, nervously smiling air" ("Many," 22), is present in white people's minds when they give their maids their wages ("Many," 28), is present when white people shake the hand of the "current 'intelligent' Negro," (ibid), and it "fills [their] mouths with salt as the monument is unveiled in honor of the latest Negro leader" ("Many," 29).

White people sense that they know disturbingly little about the dimensions and degree of these feelings of "contempt" and "indifference" that they only see in flashes ("Many," 22). More uncomfortable still, while white people perceive how little they know about these elements of Black people's emotional lives, they also perceive that the reverse is not necessarily true – that Black people know comparatively far more about them. Black people are present for some of the most intimate and personal moments that mark white people's lives, having "prepared [their]

feast tables and [their] burial clothes" ("Many," 22), yet the constant proximity that characterizes these relationships exists uncomfortably alongside a pronounced asymmetry in how much these communities know about each other. If the biggest aspect of *Native Son* that Baldwin takes issue with is the way in which the novel leaves this image of the Black man unproblematized, he also says that one of the reasons it is possible to take this monstrous image seriously is by overlooking the ways in which actual Black people are embedded in a rich Black social context. He argues that *Native Son* and other protest novels give the impression that "there exists no tradition, no field of manners, no possibility of ritual or intercourse" among Black people ("Many," 27). The reason that white audiences can take *Native Son* seriously despite the implausibly oversimplified nature of Bigger Thomas's social life is that very often, Black life remains hidden and mysterious to white people: "Bigger's monstrosity can be presented without fear of contradiction, since no [white] American has the knowledge or authority to contest it and no Negro has the voice" ("Many," 32).

Baldwin argues that this image of the Black man centered in *Native Son* serves a very important purpose in American discourse around race. Baldwin argues that framing race as a "social and not a personal or a human problem" ("Many," 19) has the effect of freezing the problem into a form that is permanently unresolved – a disease "which must be checked, even though it cannot be cured" (ibid). These characterizations of the figure of the Black man as a social and not a human problem make it possible to have conversations about race that occur on a plane far removed from the white interlocutors who take up the topic. The many attempted solutions, the "losses, gains, skirmishes" ("Many," 19) that these conversations lend themselves to, are correspondingly removed from the white people who discuss the problem of race. They

function as proxy wars, a place where it is possible to talk about the potentially threatening issue of race without ever actually exposing oneself to much risk.

Baldwin also asserts that these discursive maneuvers that place conversations on this removed plane are not innocent, not accidental. Rather than making assertions directly about this intentionality, as he did in "My Dungeon Shook," in "Many thousands Gone" he reveals the way that white people are invested in keeping the conversation at this removed plane by describing how white people react when their efforts to keep their sociological caricature of the Black man are challenged or disrupted. He says that when white people must confront Black people who challenge this sociological image that they have of the figure of the Black monster, they are "panic-stricken" and feel "betrayed" ("Many," 20). Furthermore, Black people can endanger themselves if they challenge this sociological image of the Black man, particularly since it confirms an uncomfortable suspicion white people have that Black people are very often "playing a part for" their benefit ("Many," 20).

For Baldwin, the reason why white people have these reactions has a lot to do with the instincts and processes that give rise to this image in the first place. When they encounter Black people, they often engage in projections that are in tension with each other and give rise to imperatives that are in direct opposition to each other. White people operate under the assumption that the secret to their freedom from this history lies in successfully excising history from the "Black face." They imagine that when they have successfully made the Black face "blank," when the past has been "thoroughly washed" from it, their guilt will no longer be "visible," which they imagine as being equivalent to ridding themselves of the history itself ("Many," 20). Yet they are never actually able to realize this goal of being able to look at Black people without remembering that history. In the course of their frantic attempts to make the past

disappear, they are constantly foiled by the weight of their own guilt, unable to stop themselves from superimposing their discomfort about that history and what it means now. These feelings of culpability prompt them to "reinvest the Black face with [their] guilt" ("Many," 20), and they do this "helplessly, passionately, out of an unrealized need to suffer absolution" ("Many," 20). He calls this process of constantly being beset by a guilt and a past they cannot outrun "ferocious" ("Many," 20). These conflicting needs and their imperatives function as an engine, responsible for producing much of the tension that characterizes conversations about race.

In "Down at the Cross," the second and longer essay in *The Fire Next Time,* Baldwin frames these conflicting desires in different but related terms. As in "Many Thousands Gone," he identifies the way that these conflicting desires push and pull against each other as a productive force. The contradictory instincts he identifies within white people's needs and desires with respect to Black people produces the "vast amount of energy that goes into what we call the Negro problem" ("Down," 94). In "Down at the Cross," the two driving emotional forces he identifies as being in conflict are on one the hand a deep fear and wish to avoid being judged by Black people and on the other hand an "anguish" that comes from an "equally profound need to be seen as he is, to be released from the tyranny of his mirror" ("Down," 94). In other words, whereas in "Many Thousands Gone" the two conflicting feelings are the instinct to erase history and the need to be forgiven for that history, in "Down at the Cross," the two conflicting instincts are the desire not to be judged by Black people and the need to be authentically seen. This is also why, in "Many Thousands Gone," Baldwin claims that white people react the ways that Black people seem to know them far better than the reverse with "both relief and hostility" as well as "bottomless confusion" ("Many," 29). This feeling that Black people know white people quite well on the one hand causes relief because of this craving to be known and understood, and the

feeling that being understood will lead to grace and forgiveness. But they also feel hostility in response to this phenomenon because they worry that if Black people know the full depth of white people's guilt and shame, there must also be a corresponding and seething hatred.

These conflicting needs and desires and the deep discomfort and fear they produce are what prompt white people to construct and become so attached to this image of the Black person. The image allows them to speak of the race problem in extremely removed and sociological terms, and thereby sidestep having conversations in which they actually face and contend with these underlying realities and fears that they are so invested in avoiding. But the tragic irony of this maneuver is that the very aspects of it that they find attractive are also what make it doomed to fail. Any conversation about solving the race problem that takes place within the terms of this sociological image will always be fruitless, no matter how much earnest handwringing they feature; white people expect their "good will" to "transform [them]," but that good will is as "thin and passionless" as it is strident ("Many," 34). While this image is very effective at placing conversations about race at a level that white people find far less personally threatening, keeping the conversation at that level also makes it impossible for white people to face the history that tortures them, or experience being seen in the ways that they crave; it forecloses the kind of authentic and risky exchange that would make the absolution they desire possible.

To synthesize the arguments presented in "Many Thousands Gone" with those presented in "My Dungeon Shook," Baldwin's framework identifies the ways that white people place a set of false beliefs about racial hierarchy between themselves and reality, as a way of avoiding the truths of their past and the crimes of their present. One of the key schemas that they interpose between themselves and reality is the image of Black monstrosity. They use devices like Black monstrosity in order to keep themselves safe, yet these devices necessarily limit the extent to

which any conversations about race can really address the problem at the root, insofar as the conversations are always inauthentic and superficial.

In "Down at the Cross," the second essay in *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin clarifies that these strategies that white people use to avoid their true feelings around race have more far-reaching effects than simply being unable to be free from the race problem, but that they affect the ways that white people experience life more broadly. He argues that white Americans are "terrified of" and "do not any longer understand" sensuality ("Down," 42). His understanding of sensuality goes beyond that which is carnal or sexual, but instead refers to the ability to "respect and rejoice in the force of life" and "to be present in all that one does" ("Down," 42). The two examples he gives are grounded and unglamorous: "the effort of loving" and the simple act of "the breaking of bread" ("Down," 42). They only experience their identity through a filter of beliefs about their racial superiority, and it makes white people "distrust their own reactions," rendering them "joyless" and unable to "renew themselves at the fountain of their own lives" ("Down," 43). Because they do so much work to avoid their own feelings, fears and instincts when it comes to race, they become profoundly alienated from themselves in ways that divest them of their "touchstone for reality" ("Down," 43). White people engage in all of these epistemological processes that allow them to distance themselves from the feelings and instincts that frighten them around the issue of race, but in the process, they also distance themselves from the feelings and instincts that constitute their humanity.

This need to evade reality stems from an unwillingness to contend with their own mortality: "White Americans do not believe in death," writes Baldwin, "and that is why the darkness of my skin so intimidates them" ("Down," 91). Understanding and facing the finite and often tragic nature of life is what makes it possible to ground oneself in what is constant and

meaningful, and the great error that forms the central cog of whiteness as an epistemology is the idea that clinging to inconstant "chimera" like safety, money, and power can afford a means of evading death ("Down," 92).

Because clinging onto these impermanent illusions lends itself to such a mediated, vitiated way of experiencing life, white people preserve their racial privilege at a high price. This gives rise to yet another paradox that Baldwin highlights. White people denigrate Black identity and Black culture, constantly seeking to prove that Black culture is inferior and that the solution to the race problem entails Black people adopting whiteness, yet they also display considerable jealousy of that culture and a wish to consume and embody it. In "Down at the Cross," he describes the Black social world as "that suffering and dancing country that [the white man] now watches wistfully from the heights of his lonely power and, armed with spiritual traveler's checks, visits surreptitiously after dark" ("Down," 95). Roediger (1995) tracks precisely this dynamic in his study of the history of minstrel shows. He argues that Blackface is an instantiation of both a hatred toward and an envy of Black joy and sensuality, simultaneously an affirmation of white superiority paired with a wish to escape the passionless, selfish, and atomistic nature of white social life.

In short, Baldwin explicates an epistemology of power – a system of knowing and choosing not to know about the past, about the nature and cause of inequality today, and about one's own responsibility. This epistemology consists of white people placing between themselves and reality an array of attitudes about their own superiority as well as their own innocence. They cling to, perpetuate, and commit to creating a world which affirms these attitudes because they believe their racial privilege can act as a bulwark against the shame and guilt that eats away at them, and because they believe clinging to racial privilege can offer some

protection against what they fear. However, paradoxically, these processes work to ensure that they will never deal with the problem of race as it actually is, not as a function of the Black monster without but as a product of the guilt and responsibility within. Put another way, they would rather deal with race as the unsolvable problem of the Black monster than deal with the ways in which they are addicted to the spoils of white privilege and the systems that reproduce those spoils. While white people deploy this epistemology because they believe it will protect them, it has the effect of making it impossible for white people to be present in reality as it actually is, making access to solutions around race as well as access to their own humanity an impossibility. Baldwin ultimately argues that the key to becoming reacquainted with their own humanity must involve acknowledging the humanity of Black people – that the two tasks are indivisible from each other ("Many," 20). Laying down and dismantling racial privilege is essential because white people owe it to themselves to experience the peace that comes from being present in the world as it is, from being able to respect themselves, and from being free of shame.

Baldwin's argument over the course of these three essays contends with these issues. White people can protect themselves from the truth – they have the cultural, material, and economic resources to do so, and the institutions of our country are arranged in such a way that doing so is always possible. But while it is possible to avoid the truth in these ways, he argues that putting down the privilege of being able not to know is necessary on several levels. He argues that putting down this privilege is essential very simply because these machinations enable what he characterizes as crimes on a massive scale; white people should not continue to engage in these behaviors because they are wrong morally. But his argument is that laying down one's privilege is essential not simply because it harms Black people, but also because it harms

white people. These harms come from the fact that despite the manifold, elaborate efforts to avoid seeing themselves and the situation clearly, white people ultimately cannot escape the knowledge that what they are doing is immoral, and the shame they feel in response tortures them and robs them of joy.

Epistemology and Resistance: Baldwin on how Black Folks Respond

In his description of white folks, the processes Baldwin describes are overtly epistemological in nature; he is writing in detail about the specific strategies and mechanisms that white people use in order to both know and not know about race. My analysis of his treatment of the Black community in each of these three essays will reveal that the work of uncovering Baldwin's conception of Black epistemology is more complex. Rather than explicitly elaborating Black processes of knowing, he describes struggles and practices that are suggestive of a Black way of knowing. Distilling the epistemology from what he describes requires more inference and interpretation than that same task required when engaging his writing about white people.

What are these Black ways of knowing and doing that Baldwin describes? He argues that every Black person has to manage the rage and despair in response to the ongoing crimes of the country, and that the strategy he recommends for navigating these feelings is that of acceptance. He does not conceptualize acceptance as passive or defeatist, but rather as the personal resolution to be present – to be in the world exactly as it is. Whereas the epistemology of whiteness involves so much avoidance, here he describes a perspective that requires facing and grounding oneself in reality. He argues that it is this commitment to the unglamorous, mundane work of loving even against the backdrop of these realities that gives Black community its resilience and strength. He further argues that out of these rich and deep relationships has arisen a Black

tradition of not just resilience but of the capacity of continuing to move toward possibilities that should be unfathomable. In this section, I discuss how Baldwin conceptualizes acceptance, discusses the practices that have emerged around this work of acceptance, and then makes an argument about the vision of Black epistemology that underpins these practices for Baldwin.

The inherent tensions of acceptance are well illustrated in Baldwin's description of how Black people relate with the image of Black monstrosity embodied by Bigger Thomas. For Baldwin, Bigger Thomas is not a realistic representation of any actual Black person, but Baldwin complicates that critique by claiming that every Black person in the United States has an intimate familiarity with the fury that Bigger Thomas personifies. There is enormous variation in how Black people experience that rage. It varies in duration, in sharpness, in degree and in effect ("Many," 29) – but Baldwin claims that "no American Negro exists who does not have his private Bigger Thomas living in the skull" ("Many," 32). He further argues that the failure of Bigger Thomas as a depiction of a Black person is that he gives no sense of "the paradoxical adjustment" that living with this rage requires, the ongoing struggle of learning how to "accept the fact that this dark and dangerous and unloved stranger is part of himself forever" ("Many," 32). If the rage itself is a defining characteristic of what it means to be Black in America, the need to manage and cope with that rage is equally defining, and an element of the Black experience about which Bigger Thomas offers little insight.

The principle that Baldwin thinks offers a valid way to make sense of this rage is acceptance, and he develops his understanding of what this entails in all three of the essays explored in this chapter. In "Many Thousands Gone," acceptance entails making peace with the fact that this profound, dangerous rage which at times seems uncontainable is a part of the mental landscape and always will be. Reconciling oneself to this fact is for Baldwin the only

choice that can have a positive outcome: "Only this recognition sets him in any wise free" ("Many," 30). For Baldwin, the best way to respond to this seething rage that defines the Black experience is in accepting and recognizing that rage's presence in one's life. This is perhaps why he calls the adjustments that Black people must make in response to this rage "paradoxical." The only way to achieve freedom in light of this rage is not to indulge the rage, not banish it or placate it, not try to transform it into a more peaceful feeling, but instead, to let it be exactly what it is, to understand it as a knot that cannot be untangled for as long as one is alive and Black in this world. Indeed, he argues that this is the only means by which Black people are able not only to "contain" but "even, in the most honorable sense of the word, to *exploit*" the Bigger Thomas in their heads and hearts ("Many," 33, emphasis his). It is exactly this capacity to recognize and then honorably "exploit the 'nigger'" that generates much of the "high element of the ironic" in "Negro life" ("Many," 33). He does not explain what he means, yet so much of the best Black art even today – the horror films of Jordan Peele, the albums of rappers like Kendrick Lamar and Jay Z – rely on and revel in precisely the sort of exploitation, this choice to take up, inhabit, and play with the image of Black monstrosity, that Baldwin identifies.

In "Many Thousands Gone," he describes accepting the presence and the permanence of this rage as the path to freedom, and in "My Dungeon Shook," the letter to his nephew, he expands on what acceptance entails. He tells his nephew that contrary to what white people claim, there is no reason to believe that what's necessary is for the nephew (or Black people) to become like white people in order for white people to accept him. The situation is actually the reverse, that "the really terrible thing, old buddy, is that *you* must accept *them*" ("Dungeon," 8, emphasis his). Interestingly, it is within this context that Baldwin goes on to explain what white people believe about Black people, and how vociferously white people cling to those beliefs;

soon after he tells his nephew that he must accept white people is when he makes the claim that notions of Black inferiority have "functioned in the white man's world as a fixed star" ("Dungeon," 9). The structure of this argument suggests that acceptance entails seeing these people who must create a world that confirms their belief in their own deservingness and innocence and coming to understand the fears and desires that drive the way white people exercise their power. Acceptance is connected with understanding, demystifying, stripping away the protective pretenses. It involves noting the myths that white people cling to, but not in the service of spite; it involves coming to terms with these myths and the instincts they arise from, but not from a place of defeat. The importance of this process becomes even more clear when viewed in conjunction with one of the central aims of the letter, which is to help his nephew cultivate a path forward despite the ways in which "the details and symbols of [his] life have been deliberately constructed to make [him believe what white people say about [him]" ("Dungeon," 8). The claim that his nephew needs to accept white people, followed by a detailed description of the nature of the people his nephew needs to accept, suggests that accepting through understanding are crucial means by which Baldwin's nephew can avoid succumbing to the self-loathing that white people's schema tries to inculcate.

When Baldwin tells his nephew that it is important for him to "accept" white people, he is not saying that his nephew should accept what white people say about him, or accept more generally the myths that white people produce and are invested in. Rather, the acceptance Baldwin is advocating both here and in "Many Thousands Gone" bears a close relationship with the sensuality he describes in "Down at the Cross." He defines being sensual as being "present in all that one does, from the effort of loving to the breaking of bread" ("Down," 42). He is advocating a way of life that is the direct opposite of what he regards as the source of white

joylessness, in which the individual "interposes between himself and reality nothing less than a labyrinth of attitudes" ("Down," 43). This interposition causes them to "distrust their own reactions," creating an "inability to renew themselves at the fountain of their own lives," and costing them the ability to rely on their instincts and experiences as a "touchstone for reality" ("Down," 43). We can think of being "present in all that one does, from the effort of loving to the breaking of bread" as the opposite of avoiding uncomfortable truths by placing unexamined attitudes between oneself and reality. Thus when Baldwin advocates accepting and recognizing the rage as a lifelong companion in "Many Thousands Gone," and when he advocates first understanding and then accepting white people in "My Dungeon Shook," what he is advocating is the choice to be present with and mindful of both oneself and of white people exactly as they are.

In "Down at the Cross," he shows that choosing to be present with life as it is has shaped the experience and character of the Black community more broadly, arguing that this ability and choice to be present with life on its terms is also the foundation that grounds a Black tradition of resilience. He identifies the grisly realities that Black people have had to face into several categories: the fact of violence, the fear of that violence, the grief of not being able to protect loved ones from that violence, and "hatred" toward white people "so deep that it often turned against [them] and [their] own, and made all love, all trust, all joy impossible" (98). His inclusion of this entire litany within one sentence serves to convey the overwhelming nature of these grisly realities against which Black people have had to make meaning.

Baldwin highlights these numerous grave challenges in order to excavate the miraculous, often-overlooked beauty that was able to grow despite these hostile conditions. He explicates a process by which a person acquires a wisdom that is unique, precious, and importantly, cannot be

taken away. He argues that when people must constantly survive the worst that life can offer, they are no longer subject to the "tyranny" of fearing what will come next, instead being resolute in their need to bear whatever life throws at them ("Down," 99). Similarly, when a group has to struggle endlessly "to achieve and reveal and confirm a human identity" ("Down," 98), while in a context designed to negate the existence of those things, they attain "[their] own authority," which he describes as being "unshakable" ("Down," 99).

This sense of authority and identity is the very opposite of how Baldwin describes whiteness, in which white people lose access to their own instincts and feelings as a "touchstone for reality" ("Down," 43). Whereas an epistemology of racial privilege prompts people to place beliefs between themselves and reality in the hope that doing so will protect them from the worst and most frightening phenomena of life, occupying the lowest position within a racial hierarchy can necessitate constantly facing those very phenomena, and doing so can yield a sense of self and a courage that are precious and meaningful. What's more, this need to contend with the worst life can offer can also lend itself to kinds of community and connection that an epistemology of racial privilege forecloses. Baldwin depicts whiteness as being characterized by isolation, not only from oneself and one's own instincts but also from others. It robs people of the joy of the "breaking of bread," for instance, and places a person in the position of watching these rich forms of Black community from "the heights of his lonely power" ("Down," 95). Blackness, by contrast, can sometimes be characterized by profound connection. He argues in "Many Thousands Gone" that one of the key deficiencies of *Native Son* is the way it remains silent on "the relationship that Negroes bear to one another, that depth of involvement and unspoken recognition of shared experience which creates a way of life" ("Many," 27).

He shows this dimension of Black life in intimate detail in the letter to his nephew. He describes the way he cared for his own brother as he was growing up. This care consisted of attending to the daily exigencies of meeting his brother's needs when he was a little boy, soothing him, watching this child become a person. All of this love means that today Baldwin sees the continuities and discontinuities within his brother's face, remembers every antecedent to the present-day smile. This description gives us a view of love as a long, slow, dogged, unglamorous, mundane caring.[2] What's more, Baldwin's writing about what the birth of his nephew meant within his family shows that these acts of care, which undoubtedly characterize the birth of any child to a family, take on a different valence when contextualized by the ways that Black people must be present with the worst that life has to offer. Baldwin writes to his nephew that when he was born, Baldwin, his brother, his sister-in-law, and his mother all looked around at the world that this baby was entering, and they had "every reason to be heavyhearted, yet they were not" ("Dungeon," 5). Here, we see how love functions as an imperative that prompts Black people to see past the misfortunes of the present day. He tells his nephew he was born and in response these folks engaged in a radical act, an imaginative act, a time-honored Black tradition – which is that despite having every reason not to, they hoped. They turned their eyes from what was around and toward futures they could not see and had no reason to believe could ever exist.

In "Down at the Cross," Baldwin further shows how this dynamic that was visible at the level of his own family has functioned within the Black community more broadly and across time. He shows that this orientation toward a future far better than the one indicated by the facts

[2] In a similar passage in "Notes of a Native Son," Baldwin describes the long, slow work of caring for his youngest sister, and says that love nestled itself in him, almost snuck up on him when he was not looking, in the course of this long work of love; he characterizes it almost as an inevitable residue of this kind of sustained care

of the present constitutes a throughline within Black history. He argues that the "Negro boys and girls facing mobs" are the present-day heirs of a legacy stretching a long way back, the latest to "come out of a long line of improbable aristocrats – the only genuine aristocrats this country has produced" ("Down," 98). He argues that of all the classes of people that this country has produced, this group of people is the only that possess or embodies a nature that is truly superior – and indeed, his designation of them as "the only genuine aristocrats" differentiates this group from those whose claims toward aristocracy are based on false premises.[3] He clarifies that he is speaking specifically of "that unsung army of Black men and women who trudged down back lanes and entered back doors, saying 'Yes, sir' and 'No, Ma'am' in order to acquire a new roof for the school house, new books, a new chemistry lab, more beds for the dormitories, more dormitories" (98). He refers to the Black people who suffered the myriad indignities as they offered up the signifiers and honorifics that were meant to indicate that they both knew their inferior status within the racial hierarchy and accepted that status. They bore these instances of disrespect in the service of getting access to things that are all "new" and are all material. They took actions in the present toward putting brick and mortar around dreams that were yet unseen and had never existed before but that they viewed as necessary. This process echoes this same hope, this same eye toward unlikely futures, that his own family illustrated in "My Dungeon Shook."

This tradition of resilience and hope that he regards as fundamental to Black people and their history in this country points to an underlying epistemology that has an entirely different

[3] Later in the essay, he takes pains to clarify that this superiority does not arise out of Blackness per se, but rather out of the strength and courage that this group has shown, because he wishes to avoid the essentialism that white supremacy relies on. Yet in labeling Black people "the only genuine aristocrats that this country has produced," we are left to wonder whether, for instance, immigrant communities who have crafted futures against the long odds of white supremacy fall within this framework of improbable aristocracy. It is also not clear where indigenous communities might fit within this framework.

orientation toward the unknown than the epistemology of white privilege. Whereas whiteness involves putting considerable effort into making aspects of the present unknown, this Black epistemology is grounded in building meaningful connections within that present. But the unknown also plays an important role within this latter epistemology, insofar as one of its foremost concerns is moving toward possibilities that are both unknown and unlikely, given the evidence of the present. For Baldwin, the challenge of loving within the ugly truth of an inhospitable present necessitates living with one foot in that present and one foot in future possibilities.

Baldwin's love letter to Black resilience spotlights the seemingly humble but secretly noble people who quietly built possibilities for themselves and their communities, but he does not oversimplify Black people by claiming that this noble response to white supremacy is the only one. While Baldwin is identifying a tradition which points to a Black epistemology, he is careful not to claim that this is *the* Black epistemology. Throughout these essays, he also makes clear that this is but one path, and he alludes to other ways of responding that have less favorable results. In "My Dungeon Shook," for instance, the fact that his nephew very much has a choice in how he interprets and responds to the world of white supremacy around him is suggested in the tone of urgency throughout the letter. A feeling of defeat and self-loathing would make perfect sense, given that all the "details and symbols" of the world around him were "constructed" in order to inculcate precisely those feelings ("Dungeon," 7). While his nephew has this choice, it is in some ways the far more difficult one, in that it requires constantly believing the opposite of everything the world would have him internalize. Moreover, Baldwin's description of his father underscores that winning this personal battle is by no means guaranteed, and that losing it can lead to intense isolation, rendering impossible the connections that Baldwin

finds so beautiful and generative. Baldwin writes that his father "had a terrible life" because "at the bottom of his heart, he really believed what white people said about him" ("Dungeon," 3). Indeed, in "Down at the Cross," his list of the threats with which Black people contend includes, in addition to all the physical violence around them, "hatred for white men so deep that it turned against him and his own, and made all love, all trust, all joy impossible" ("Down," 98).

To summarize, whereas Baldwin's writing on whiteness in these three essays uncovers an epistemology of racial privilege, his depiction and analysis of the Black community in these essays does not necessarily clarify a single Black epistemology. One feature that is common to all Black people and that functions at the epistemological level is the need to cope with rage in response to white supremacy, but he also is clear that there is considerable variation in what that rage looks like and in how Black people respond to it. He argues that the best strategy to respond to this is to be present, both with the rage that white supremacy evokes and with the fears and instincts that undergird white people's behavior. The capacity of Black people to be present with these grisly realities but to love and hope and work toward unlikely futures anyway is the foundation of Black resilience and survival.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have analyzed "Many Thousands Gone" as well as the two essays of *The Fire Next Time* in order to explore how Baldwin understands the epistemologies that result from occupying different positions within a racial hierarchy. The larger dissertation project will focus on exploring the extent to which these epistemological processes are a particularity of American culture and history or a feature of racialized systems. I conclude by briefly considering how this framework will shape a comparative exploration of racial politics. Specifically, I identify the

factors and components that Baldwin's framework tells us would be especially important to pay attention to in the course of such an exploration.

In the context of the epistemology of racial privilege, Baldwin's discussion of American whiteness suggests a variety of dynamics to watch out for. This project would focus particularly on the construction of a racialized image that serves the essential purpose of allowing conversations about racial politics that never actually implicate white people or prompt them to take responsibility. In the American context, the racialized image at work is that of the Black monster, a figure who does not have a subjectivity and who cannot be reasoned with. A comparative project would explore whether monstrosity is always the device that makes these displacements possible. Moreover, Baldwin consistently describes the movements of this imagined figure using male pronouns. Studying a different context could provide a way of studying whether racialized images in other contexts are not only raced in different ways but also whether they are gendered in different ways.[4]

Baldwin's discussion of Black people also suggests an array of issues that one would need to focus on when exploring other racial systems. One question, for instance, has to do with whether folks who occupy disadvantaged positions in other racial hierarchies have to manage a rage that is similar to what Baldwin identifies, and if so, what paths and strategies that people within these communities have identified as responses to that rage. Baldwin characterizes reconciling oneself to this rage as the only response to white supremacy that allows Black people to achieve a sense of self, but a comparative examination might make it possible to explore

[4] Balfour 2017 makes this point as well: "Baldwin's earliest essays do generalize about racial oppression from the emasculation of Black men. (He never considers what it might mean, for a woman, to have a 'private Bigger Thomas living in the skull.' But his later writing goes further," which "reduces interracial struggles to the conflicts between white and Black men." (36)

whether there are other pathways toward this sense of self, or other ways of understanding the nature of the challenge.

Last, using Baldwin's framework to inform a comparative study may helpfully contribute to the scholarship on racial capitalism for three reasons. First, his analysis foregrounds the importance of economic relationships as crucial sites where the epistemology of racial hierarchies makes themselves known. His description of how the image of the Black monster hovers over all manner of mundane economic interactions between white people and their Black employees in "Many Thousands Gone" makes this especially evident. Second, Baldwin's portrayal of the profound alienation that whiteness involves also complements scholarship on the ways in which capitalism needs the atomistic individuality and selfishness, the alienation from one's feelings and instincts as well as alienation from community that whiteness produces. Third, Baldwin's depiction of how love operates within the Black community, as a long, slow, dogged caring, a constant and ongoing investment, runs counter to the value of efficiency and to the time pressures more generally that racial capitalism imposes. This suggests that the ways in which Black community have loved can be conceptualized as an anti-capitalist activity, insofar as it disrupts and challenges the premiums on rapidity and efficiency that racial capitalism demands.

CHAPTER 2. Revealing Absences: Applying Baldwin's Framework to Camus

Introduction

In "Letter to My Nephew," Baldwin alludes to the reciprocal relationship between beliefs that white people place between themselves and reality and the material details of the world into which Baldwin's nephew was born: "The details and symbols of your life have been deliberately constructed to make you believe what white people say about you" (*Fire*, 8). This insight regarding how epistemologies relate to the material facts of structural oppression sets the stage for the questions that I will investigate in this chapter. To what extent are the epistemological mechanisms Baldwin identifies specific to white Americans, and to what extent are these mechanisms attributable to systemic racial oppression? How are the processes that Baldwin identifies within American whiteness similar to and different from the mechanisms by which groups with racial privilege know and choose not to know within other racial systems? How can investigating other racial systems add to or complicate Baldwin's insights regarding the epistemological nature of racial privilege?

In the following two chapters, I gain traction on these research questions by engaging in a comparative study of the epistemologies of race. I do this by exploring and comparing the philosophical and political writings of two prominent political and moral voices. The context I explore is colonial Algeria during the period immediately before the country's war for independence, and the two writers I engage with are Albert Camus and Frantz Fanon. I analyze these writers' thinking using the tools provided by Baldwin regarding the epistemological elements of racial systems.

Camus's exploration of these themes, especially within his fiction, provides a site that is particularly well-suited for exploring the questions at the center of this dissertation regarding

how one's position within a racial hierarchy both shapes and is shaped by one's epistemology. Several aspects of Camus's life and work lend themselves well to this epistemological analysis through Baldwin's lens. Because Camus possesses white privilege but also belongs to a different imperial legacy than the one with which Baldwin was most familiar, Camus's work provides an opportunity to explore the epistemology of racial privilege in a comparative way. Second, while Camus possesses white privilege, he exists along the margins of French whiteness in some ways. As someone who was born to a working-class pied-noir family in Algeria, his story speaks to the need to attend to the diversity within whiteness as a category, and to investigate how other factors such as class influence the relationship between epistemology and racial privilege (see Guerin 2007). Yet, equally, exploration of Camus's work also shows how white people who are at the margin of whiteness can sometimes use that as a reason not to contend with their own privilege.

Additionally, Camus is a useful figure to study because of how his commitment to equity and even to fighting racial injustice stood in tension with his commitment to French imperialism and to safeguarding his own privilege. As a journalist in Algeria, Camus did not shy away from identifying the rampant socioeconomic injustice that Arabs faced. In some ways, Camus specifically and publicly chose to see and know the deep social injustices that his compatriots chose not to see and know. These choices resulted in considerable personal cost to him, particularly in terms of access to community; his insistence that Algerians deserved social, economic and political equality alienated him from other pied-noir activists. The provocative editorials that he wrote during his time as a journalist resulted in him having to flee Algeria to live in Paris. During World War II, he served as an editor for *Combat*, a resistance newspaper published in France and a hub of leftist thought. These efforts in combination with his literary

achievements gave him international renown as a moral authority because of his willingness not only to critique authoritarianism but also to take part in seeking its demise.

Yet despite a career defined by a commitment to resisting oppression, ultimately Camus was unable or unwilling to contend the with ways in which his critique of Germany's occupation of France might apply to the circumstances of colonial Algeria (O'Brien). He dismissed the FLN as terrorists and dismissed pro-independence sentiment among Arabs as mere emotionality, claiming that the Arab claim on Algerian land had no more historical basis than French settlers, characterizing Algeria as these pieds-noirs' "natural home" (M. H. Davis 2011).

This chapter comprises applying Baldwin's framework to the fiction of Albert Camus. This analysis explores how Camus's novels *The Stranger* and *The Plague* exhibit evidence of the epistemological mechanisms of racial privilege to the ones Baldwin identifies. The chapter proceeds as follows. In the first section, I discuss the scholarship surrounding Camus, paying particular attention to how scholars make sense of his philosophy regarding the imperative of resisting oppression with his position against Algerian independence. In the second section, I draw on the essay "The Myth of Sisyphus" and the novels *The Stranger* and *The Plague* to provide a brief interview of the absurd and revolt.

In the third section, I apply the concepts from the theoretical framework derived from Baldwin's work to *The Stranger* and *The Plague*. I argue that there are two epistemological mechanisms from Baldwin's analysis that we see in these novels in full force. First, we see evidence of the willful asymmetry of knowledge within racial systems, wherein white people know much less about racial others than vice versa. This ignorance is the inevitable consequence of this strict segregation of the colonial world, yet the lack of Black figures within Camus's account of what it means to resist oppression bravely shows that this strict segregation happens

at the level of imagination as well. Second, we see the strategy in which people discuss racial issues in abstract and sociological terms that obscure how they themselves benefit from the racial system.

This analysis will clarify that while excluding people of color from the settings where he explores being in and grappling with an unknowable universe, Camus engages in what Fricker (2007) calls epistemic injustice, which she defines as a wrong done to someone in their capacity as a knower. When Camus fails to admit the existence of people of color, let alone recognize their subjectivity, he is engaging in a kind of epistemic violence. Insofar as this epistemic violence is a background condition for the rest of his argument, his solutions will always be impossible, because they will always be complicit in propping up a system intent on erasing Black people as subjects.

Literature Review

The scholarship on Camus contains a multitude of perspectives and aims. One particularly relevant distinction pertains to whether scholars aim to explore or elucidate elements and dynamics of the internal philosophical and ethical logic within his work or whether they are instead more interested in understanding how his politics functioned within his own historical context. One aspect of the historical context that has long fascinated scholars of Camus relates to the very public falling out he had with Jean-Paul Sartre (Forsdick 2007; Van Den Hoven and Sprintzen 2004; Aronson 2006). During World War II, Camus and Sartre furnished national conversations with ways of thinking about freedom, justice and resistance against authoritarianism, Nazism, and foreign occupation. After the conclusion of World War II, their voices also provided key conceptual tools for engaging with some of the most pressing political questions of the day. They wrestled with the question of what it means to take up a leftist critical

stance in the wake of the war, and both had a hand in shaping the available options. Their falling out pertained to different approaches regarding, for instance, what the proper relationship should be between the French political left, Marxism, and the Soviet Union, as well as the question of whether Algeria should remain a French colony, a question which was in the process of becoming increasingly fraught just as Camus died in 1957, at the age of 40.

Camus came out of the conflict with Sartre more intellectually isolated, with Sartre having far more cultural cache on the important political questions that France faced. This change in their relative statuses was particularly stark with respect to the question of Algerian independence, because of the almost universal unpopularity of Camus's position on Algeria (Forsdick 2007). Camus on the one hand disagreed with the pro-independence leftists like Sartre, who advocated for full independence as soon as possible. However, he also strongly opposed the FLN, taking issue with the organization's willingness to kill civilians. He also strongly disagreed with the notion that simply expelling all white French settlers from the area could ever constitute a solution, arguing that Algeria was home to them too; indeed, some of them had been for their generations, and understood themselves to be indigenous to the country. Camus also advocated for a pan-Mediterranean identity that took into account the long historical contact between France and Algeria (Dunwoodie 1998). Yet while Camus did not agree with French leftists, his views also did not align with the pieds-noirs or French conservatives who staunchly defended the Algeria's colonial relationship with France, who often couched their arguments in explicitly racist terms. He was distinct from many who were against independence in that he genuinely cared about equality for Arab Algerians. The position for which he advocated was that Algeria should be included in France as its own department, and that Arab Algerians should receive

equal rights and full citizenship on par with all other French citizens, was a middle ground on which he stood alone.

Examinations of this debate engage with the disagreements between these two thinkers in ways that are clearly inflected by questions that are highly relevant today (C. Davis 2007; Krapp 1999). This disagreement becomes a site where scholars have engaged with questions that include moderation versus radicalism, what role violence should play in resistance, and the best relationship between Marxism and radical leftist politics (Aronson 2006). Often times, in the service of having this other conversation about what's justified in the pursuit of freedom or when it comes to standing up to oppression, people resort to caricatures of both authors. These depictions overlook the fact that Camus actually did not completely reject Marxist thought, and indeed embraced the necessity of considering politics through the lens of class and materialism. Rather, he took serious issue with the specific strain of Marxist existentialism espoused by Alexandre Kojève and later by Sartre (Foley 2014; Aronson 2004). These characterizations also similarly tend to characterize Sartre as having an unquestioning loyalty to Marxism that prompted him to look past the large-scale violence perpetrated by the Soviet Union, when in reality Sartre often criticized the Soviet Union harshly and publicly (Forsdick 2007).

Some Camus scholars move beyond the debate between Sartre and Camus as a point of departure by seeking to push back against the prejudices against Camus's work that this debate produced (Carroll 2007; Aronson 2004; Hayden 2013). Krapp (1999), for instance, intervenes by challenging the critics of *The Plague* who dismiss the novel as being abstract to the point of being divorced from any particular historical struggle. Applying more recent literary scholarship regarding how to understand allegory as a political genre, Krapp argues that the novel's main characters represent different ways of orienting oneself toward two key questions: first, how

willing one is to abandon routine in the name of fighting against the illness, and second, the extent to which characters can acknowledge and surpass the politics of language. According to Krapp's reading, Dr. Rieux, the novel's protagonist, represents the position Camus ultimately finds most ethical. Focusing specifically on the passage in which Rieux refuses to play language games regarding whether or not an epidemic is really unfolding within the town, Krapp argues that Rieux represents the willingness to acknowledge the truth of the plague over and against what others are willing to say about its devastation. Similarly, Aronson (2006) seeks to challenge conventional views of Camus as an avowed atheist.

Several works of scholarship that explore Camus in order to garner new insights about absurdism offer a defense of Camus, specifically with reference to his position on colonialism. It seems clear that scholars defend Camus on this front in order to justify listening to him on other key questions of interest to them. Scholars of Camus present his opposition to Algerian independence as morally defensible by underscoring that Camus opposed FLN's willingness to use violence and kill innocent civilians to be unjustifiable and unsupportable (Le Sueur 2014; Foley 2014). These scholars also push back against the idea that Camus justified his stance against Algerian independence through the use of patronizing and racist view of Algerians. To challenge this view, they point to Camus's time as a journalist in Algeria, during which he wrote many stories covering socioeconomic inequality that Arabs faced and advocating that the exclusion and poverty they faced was unacceptable and incompatible with French republican values (Foley 2014; Aronson 2006; Le Sueur 2014). M. H. Davis (2011) attributes this renewed interest in defending Camus's thinking, both in general and with respect to Algerian independence, to the ways in which his philosophy of absurdism is compatible with neoliberal

values. Both absurdism and neoliberalism are racially color-blind, and both valorize the atomized individual in ways that invalidate historically-formed collectivities (M. H. Davis 2011, 228).

In addition to scholarship exploring the merits of Camus's work and the philosophy of absurdism, there is also a wide array of scholarship criticizing Camus. This scholarship can be divided into two camps, although the boundary between them is not well defined: those who criticize Camus because they view his argument to be internally inconsistent, and those who criticize Camus because they view him as an advocate of colonialism. (Capstick 2003) belongs in the former category. Her article explores the limitations of Camus's arguments in *The Silent Ones*, a novel that describes the dissolution of respect and kindness in the relationship between a manager and his workers in a factory. According to Capstick, *The Silent Ones* Camus attempts to advance the claim that in any organized political resistance that seeks to dismantle oppression, those who were oppressed must always behave in ways that honor the dignity of those engaged in oppression. Capstick argues that despite Camus's investment in making this argument, the actions of the protagonist Yvars, who becomes a leader of the workers in this factory, actually underscore the limitations in his framework. While the novel avows the importance of always honoring the dignity of all involved, Yvars chooses to behave in ways that are seemingly neutral toward both the workers and the manager, but amount to remaining silent in the face of injustices enacted against the manager. These failings on the part of Camus's protagonist show that his politics of revolt is less informative than one would hope when exploring the choices one has to make in moments of contention and politics. Engaging the work of Simone de Beauvoir, Capstick argues that while Camus's philosophy articulates a principle for revolt, he does not account for the ways in which it is sometimes either very unclear or outright impossible to embody that ideal consistently. In other words, he provides few tools for grappling with "moral

failings," a concept developed by de Beauvoir's to describe the inevitability of falling short of one's ideals within struggles for justice.

Finally, there are the scholars who are explicitly critical of Camus (Haddour 2000; Lazreg 2008; Chaulet-Achour 1998; Said 1994; M. H. Davis 2011; O'Brien 1970). O'Brien (1970) argues that while Camus's position on Algerian liberation is incoherent and incompatible with the values he espoused elsewhere, he does wrestle with his own confused relationship with the Algerian land in several of his different novels and short stories. In the short story collection *L'Exil et le Royaume*, the way that Camus contends with his own identity as a white settler in Algeria is poetic and compelling, and he shows a kind of courage in that context that he does not show when it comes to his political and nonfiction work. Edward Said (1994) takes up the thrust of O'Brien's argument and extends it, asserting that O'Brien is too generous to Camus. Said denounces Camus as what Albert Memmi calls "colon de bonne volonté," a colonist of good will, positioning himself as a hero of resisting oppression while in reality cleaving to his own privilege, and excising Algerians from his fictional landscapes in the process. Said in particular highlights the many problematic statements that Camus made about the Algerian struggle for independence up to the beginning years of the war.

In this chapter, I take up the questions that O'Brien and Said lay out. O'Brien reads the tensions and contradictions within Camus's philosophy and his political position regarding Algeria as being both profoundly hypocritical and also worthy of sympathy, and it is precisely in the discomfort of having both of those ideas be true that Baldwin is so useful. Like O'Brien, I am keenly conscious of the tragic choices that Algerian independence forced Camus to face, between his principles and his material interests and home. He deserves the same sympathy that anyone who is trapped within this prison of privilege deserves. The framework I apply, drawn

from Baldwin's work, is useful because it foregrounds the ways in which this conundrum is far from being specific to Camus; rather, his discomfort and the epistemological mechanisms by which he hid from himself are found throughout racialized systems. Baldwin's characterization of the epistemological elements of whiteness highlights the specific mechanisms people with privilege adopt in order to protect themselves from the losses that Camus so feared.

The work in this chapter also very much builds off of the insights provided by Davis (2011). She analyzes the ways in which Camus's absurdism is compatible with neoliberalism as a pervasive global economic and cultural system. My project is partially about how the seemingly benign liberalism that Camus espouses is subtly intertwined with a commitment to white supremacy, in ways that are particularly insidious because of their seeming palatability. I seek to notice the ways in which Camus's liberalism upholds a politics that can lead to racial justice.

When we look really closely at where Camus's argument falls apart insofar as it just advances white supremacy and protects his white privilege and his white feelings, in the process of doing that exploration we actually begin to see an alternative. My project helps to clarify possible alternatives because it consists of noticing the epistemological processes that Camus uses to keep himself safe from any feeling of culpability or any loss. I explore how these epistemological processes weaken his argument regarding what resistance to oppression should consist of. My hope is that doing this work sheds light on a different path toward justice.

The Philosophy of the Absurd

Crucial to the philosophy that Camus espouses over the course of his work is the notion of the "absurd," a concept that he explicates in the essay "The Myth of Sisyphus." For Camus, the problem of the absurd produces a discomfort at the core of human existence. He uses the

concept of absurdity because it evokes the notion of contradiction: We deem phenomena to be absurd when they entail two terms which are necessarily in contradiction with each other. Much of Camus's work deals with what he views to be the absurdity par excellence: the contradiction between the human desire to reason with the universe, on the one hand, and the fact that the universe is unreasonable on the other. Reasoning, he argues, is always an act of relating. The act of reasoning with or understanding is always an act of "unifying" (6); when we render something comprehensible, we are making it coherent to us, translating it into terms that allow us to locate it within our minds and senses, our values and beliefs. Camus argues humans long for a way to understand the universe but are constantly confronted with the fact that the universe stands separate from us, incomprehensible and unreconciled to us.

Camus argues that sensing the absurd is a fundamental and universal element of the human experience. As proof of its universality, he offers little vignettes that shed light on how people encounter and become conscious of the absurd in their day-to-day lives. For instance, people can become acutely conscious of the absurd when they are in nature; one can sense precisely how apathetic your surroundings are to you, the extent to which nature is beyond any negotiation or pleading, and one is experiencing the absurd in that deep feeling of disconnection. People also become vividly conscious of the absurd when they "zone out"—when, for a moment, they are pulled out of the sequence of actions that they complete every day, dragged out of the automaticity of their daily routines. A deep "weariness" sets in as they consider the meaninglessness of all these tasks. People can experience not only when they themselves are going through the motions, but when they see others doing so—and in that moment, others seem absolutely foreign to and separate from them, unknowable to them. People can experience this feeling of separateness and alienation when they catch their own reflections in the mirror, or

when looking at an old picture of themselves; in those moments, people can meet their own eyes and encounter a stranger. This feeling of loneliness, of being surrounded by a world consisting entirely of inscrutability, that Camus refers to as the absurd. He argues people experience these feelings of disconnection, but desperately wish that they could overcome those feelings. The longing for an elegant, comprehensive explanation of the universe is what drives people: "That nostalgia for unity, that appetite for the absolute, illustrates the essential impulse of the human drama" (6).

Sating this appetite, soothing this false "nostalgia" for a unity and reconciliation that has never existed and never can, animates efforts within both science and art. It prompts people to create a replica of the universe in their own minds, using their own concepts and words, with the hope that if that replica can be accurate enough, the universe itself will not be so foreign, so irreducibly inhuman. In "Myth of Sisyphus," Camus reads the work of several prominent moral thinkers as attempts to resolve this fundamental tension. Soren Kierkegaard tries to resolve this tension by characterizing this craving for understanding or unity as a sin that can be overcome, while Karl Husserl resolves the tension by dissolving the other term of contradiction, arguing that human intellect is up to the task of reasoning with and reconciling itself to the universe. But ultimately, seeking to make either term of the contradiction less poignantly disorienting and unsettling inevitably fails because it requires us to distance ourselves from the real tension, yearning and dread that we have observed in our bodies and through our senses.

He grounds his characterization of the absurd in these real-life vignettes in "The Myth of Sisyphus," and he further develops and explores these themes and feelings in his book *The Stranger*. Camus's accomplishment lies in engaging his audience to follow a protagonist whose actions and choices wholly defy explanation. From the very first scene, in which Meursault has

just arrived in order to bury his mother, the reader witnesses the actions and choices of a protagonist while continually experiencing this protagonist as foreign and removed. The opening scene of the novel immediately creates feelings of isolation, foreignness, alienation. The poetic, evocative language used to describe the landscape contrasts dramatically with the protagonist's inner world. Camus gives the reader no information about what Meursault feels in response to this event. This lack of access to the Meursault's inner world characterizes every one of his choices. He flirts with and seduces an acquaintance named Marie, and although the reader receives no access to Meursault's attraction or connection to her. Meursault befriends Raymond Sintès, a neighbor who both the audience and Meursault know is a domestic abuser, and again, Camus gives no hint as why the protagonist connects with him and pursues a friendship, or what draws Meursault to him.

This lack of relatability reaches its height when Meursault kills a man for no discernible reason. Mirroring the effect of the opening scene in which Meursault is burying his mother, gorgeous and vivid language about the sea and the sun pair unsettlingly with a total internal silence and apathy of Meursault as he shoots an Arab man. As Camus depicts the actions that precede this choice, the audience knows well that the murder did not arise out of self-defense. Meursault calmly leaves his beach house to murder these men he had seen earlier on the beach. While they had previously been in conflict with his friend Raymond Sintès, even the notion that Meursault committed this act to defend his friend feels implausible, because the basis and depth of that friendship is also entirely unclear.

The second part of the novel follows the fallout of this crime. Finally, Camus relieves some of the tension, cognitive dissonance, and disbelief that he has created within his audience; finally, people in the novel react to Meursault's actions and demeanor with the puzzled horror

that is merited. Meursault is characterized as unstable, for instance, because his demeanor during the burial of his mother struck people as suspicious and odd. Likewise, the lawyer representing Meursault listens to his explanation with a disgust and confusion that he represses out of professional obligation. While incarcerated, Meursault is also asked to speak with a priest. With real pathos, the priest asks Meursault whether he believes in God, sees why his actions are immoral, and feels remorse. In the first display of emotion that Meursault reveals in the entire novel, he rejects the priest. He disavows any notion of God, and the speech he makes in this section is a more dramatized version of ideas Camus expresses in "Myth of Sisyphus" about why the question of God's existence is ultimately irrelevant. It is in the novel's conclusion, as Meursault is sentenced to death and awaiting his punishment, that he displays an internal emotional life that is relatable; he goes through a series of emotions that are grounded in what it means to be on the verge of death, such as sadness, terror, fear, and ultimately a kind of resigned peace, and perhaps even the joy of finally being free and present — the paradoxical, profound emotional experience that Camus ascribes to the figure of Sisyphus.

If, as Camus says in "Myth of Sisyphus," one of the most poignant experiences of the absurd occurs in that moment when one watches another and feels entirely separated from them, then the brilliance of *The Stranger* is that it directly involves the reader in precisely that experience. Using first person places the reader inside Meursault's head, yet the reader is also kept at an uncomfortable arms' length, watching with confusion as the protagonist makes choices that evade comprehension. At the beginning of the novel, we are told that Meursault's mother has died, and we strain to find evidence of grief, or anger, or dissociation—and indeed, we may even desperately read those feelings into the strange, inhuman way that Meursault moves through the moment. When Meursault chooses to leave the beach house and seek one of the

shadowy figures who had threatened his friend, Camus provides no insight regarding Meursault's rationale or motive. Camus renders Meursault's foreignness even more explicit during this interaction with the priest. Neither the content of the priest's beliefs nor the eloquence and sincerity which he presents them are compelling at all to the Meursault. He refuses to be understood by the priest, or by the novel's audience; he refuses to be integrated, rendered less foreign, refuses to translate himself into the terms of the narrative. He retains his foreignness defiantly. This scene between Meursault and the priest illustrates the argument that Camus makes in "Myth of Sisyphus." While religious commitments often claim to solve the problem of absurdity by neutralizing the craving to know and be known by an unknowable universe, for Camus resolving the puzzle of the absurd cannot consist of abstracting away from its tensions.

Resolving this puzzle consists, rather, in coming to terms with the reality that these tensions are impossible to resolve. It consists of resigning oneself to the fact that you crave knowing and yet you will never know. This commitment to face the tension, accept the discomfort, is what Camus refers to as revolt, a theme he explores in his first cycle and expands upon in his second cycle. As the word "revolt" suggests, choosing to hold the discomfort rather than seeking ways of easing it does not lead to inner peace, nor should it. For Camus, revolt means contending with the heartbreak of this unmet craving. It means never pretending that this unmet craving has lost its sting.

Camus dubs Sisyphus "the absurd hero." As punishment for disobedience, his sentence is that he must push a heavy boulder up a hill, only for it to roll down, for the rest of time. Camus is particularly interested in that moment in which Sisyphus walks down the hill, back to his boulder. Contending with the absurd involves returning over and over again to a task that is both overwhelmingly difficult and also impossible to complete successfully.

The rock itself is the grief associated with wishing for wholeness with a universe that is unreasonable, and Sisyphus is the absurd hero because he carries that weight, holds that grief, faces it every day and keeps facing it. To revolt means to keep pushing the boulder up the hill, even though reprieve from the heaviness is not possible. To revolt means not lying about how heavy the boulder is, or pretending as though there will ever be a day in which it is comfortably heavy. Consciousness makes Sisyphus's task a punishment; if there were an illusion that he could be successful in getting and keeping the rock at the top of the hill, then the myth would not be tragic. Yet paradoxically, Camus argues it is actually that very consciousness that gives Sisyphus access to virtues that Camus regards as the most meaningful: "The lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory" ("Myth," 23). Facing the absurd and struggling with it requires a discipline, a miracle of will, that brings about a certain "majesty" (ibid) There is nothing "finer" than the person whose mind contends with a "reality" that can crush it every time, a situation more enormous than the mind can ever hope to hold (ibid).

Besides depicting how the town overall is experiencing the plague, the novel focuses on Dr. Rieux, one of the town's physicians, as well as several of his friends and colleagues. Dr. Rieux embodies the notion of revolt as Camus conceives it. His position as a doctor of a community ravaged by illness provides a more specific and literal illustration of what it means to be involved in the Sisyphean endeavor of revolt. By the time the plague has reached epidemic proportions, the pandemic empties Rieux's vocation of everything he used to enjoy. Before the plague, he derived meaning and hope from his capacity to treat and cure people often, and enjoyed the respect and gratitude of the people he was treating; the plague reduces his work mainly to monitoring death, and the social dimension of his job mainly comprises steeling himself against the shock, frustration, and bargaining of loved ones.

Camus illustrates this notion poignantly in an interaction between Rieux and Raymond Rambert. Rambert had traveled from Paris to Oran on assignment, tasked with writing about the plight of Muslim Algerians in the town. Once the plague descends and the town seals off all exit and entry, he finds himself trapped, with no genuine connections there. He especially misses his wife, and he scrambles to be reunited with her in Paris by any means necessary. After begging the city officials to appreciate his extenuating circumstances and allow him to leave, he approaches the doctor, whom he had met while completing his assignment. Because Rieux is so well-connected with public officials, Rambert hopes he can help Rambert be designated as an exception and find a way out of Oran. The doctor balances sympathy for Rambert's need to escape and wishes him success with an absolute unwillingness to assist him in leaving. While it makes sense to Rieux that the journalist would try every potential avenue to get back to his wife, ultimately, upholding the shutdown rules is his responsibility. Rambert responds by telling Rieux that he is too committed to abstract notions of morality over more human realities.

When Rambert connects successfully with a smuggler, he comes back to say goodbye to Rieux. Even here, as they say their goodbyes, the doctor is not judgmental and wishes Rambert success. As Rambert leaves the doctor's house, he runs into Tarrou, another of the doctor's friends, who tells Rambert: "I suppose you don't know that Rieux's wife is in a sanatorium, a hundred miles or so away" (The Plague, 163). She had fallen ill at the beginning of the novel, and Rieux had sent her to a hospital just before the epidemic began. It turns out that Rieux, like Rambert, is far away from the person he loves most. This revelation has an enormous impact on Rambert. Rieux is not toiling within the walls of this town because his whole life is here, or because there is nothing beyond it that pulls him outward. On the contrary, one of the relationships most important to him would give him every reason to use his connections to leave.

Administering to this town under plague is emotionally and physically grueling work, and he has reasons to leave that are entirely justifiable, and yet he chooses to do this work anyway. Rambert is so moved by this revelation that despite having successfully made contact with someone who can help him leave, he decides to stay in Oran and serve with the small brigade of volunteers made up of the doctor's friends and neighbors.

The experiences of Dr. Rieux within this exchange aptly show the different ways Camus's conceives of revolt. In the same way that Sisyphus's task is physically taxing, Camus depicts the work of revolt in *The Plague* as being wearing, requiring long hours of labor with very little time to recuperate. Dr. Rieux's experience also demonstrates the emotionally taxing nature of revolt; doing this work requires being apart from the personal relationships that might have provided support and joy, and it also has a way of almost systematically stripping away all the elements of work that previously felt joyful and purposeful. Finally, the work of revolt is also mentally taxing, because of how repetitive it is. As for Sisyphus, this repetitiveness has an existential sting, because it speaks to the apathetic, non-negotiable nature of death. Revolt for Camus comprises constantly facing one's own futility in the face of the apathetic, non-negotiable nature of death. The futility is exhausting, as is the fact that there is no real respite from facing it, no place outside of it. Additionally, Dr. Rieux's experience speaks to the idea that revolt is about doing this long, slow, challenging work even though there are valid reasons to choose not to, reasons that genuinely deserve sympathy. For Camus, revolt is making that choice. Lastly, Dr. Rieux's experience speaks to the idea that doing this work, facing such an enormous and endless task, brings out the best in people.

Revealing Absences: Applying Baldwin's Framework to Camus

In the previous section, I discussed some of the core elements of the Camus's philosophy of the absurd. Camus argues that the discomfort of the human experience emerges from what he calls the absurd, which is the tension that results from man's craving for unity with a universe with which there is no reconciliation to be found. He argues that the best response to this conundrum is what he calls revolt, by which he means choosing to face this absurdity rather than turn away from it.

His contemporaries and the scholars who have studied his work have offered various explanations of the ways in which Camus was courageous in his willingness to confront authoritarianism when it curtailed his own right to self-determination, but unwilling to contend with his own participation in a system that curtailed the self-determination of others. Some resolve this tension by simply categorizing Camus's behavior as at best not very self-aware and at worst hypocritical. Sartre, de Beauvoir, and other prominent leftist voices in France during this period drew this conclusion, and so have many scholars who have analyzed his writing after his death, such as O'Brien and Said. While they acknowledge he objected to the ways to the unequal treatment of Arab Algerians, they regard his opposition to Algerian independence as being more fundamental to his worldview. Any interest in Arab Algerians' well-being that can also accommodate French colonial rule over Algeria is superficial and patronizing.

While Said and O'Brien characterize these positions as being in tension, other scholars do not regard the relationship between Camus's commitment to resisting oppression and his opposition to Algerian independence as being in any tension. They respond to scholars who characterize some of Camus's statements as racist by pointing to the very real ways in which Camus put his career, safety, and access to community on the line in the name of equality for

Arabs in Algeria. Foley (2014) says that his main issue with Algerian independence came from the fact that the FLN engaged in terrorism and killed civilians. For these scholars, Camus's refusal to support the FLN was entirely consistent with ideas he expresses in *The Rebel* about how any pursuit of freedom must take human life and dignity as inviolable.

Le Sueur (2014) similarly takes issue with the notion that prejudice or attachment to white privilege motivates Camus's opposition to Algerian independence. Le Sueur responds to such arguments by pointing out three ways such depictions of Camus rely on unfair and inaccurate assumptions about Camus's values. First, scholars read Camus in ways that are inflected with the bias of hindsight. Because the Algerian war for independence ended after Camus's death, and its outcome was contrary to what he predicted and hoped for the country, his critics place him on the wrong side of history in ways that suggest the conflict's outcome was more overdetermined than it actually was. Indeed, Le Sueur notes that figures such as Claude Levi-Strauss, Pierre Bourdieux, and Jacques Vergès, who were unreservedly supportive of the FLN now admit that they wished they had been more sensitive to the complexities of evaluating the morality of figures who were both for and against independence.

Second, Le Sueur argues that the history of Algeria post-independence has borne out Camus's worst fears, and that the expulsion of the French really precipitated the country's descent into authoritarianism. Third, he argues that there is an unfair double standard at play when scholars consider the Algerian war for independence compared to other racist and colonial regimes that were in transition. When examining apartheid South Africa, for instance, many white South Africans insisted that any new political arrangement absolutely needed to have a policy toward white people that was kinder and less violent than simple expulsion. No one decries the people who argued this position as racist, or impugns their commitments to freedom

and equality. Yet Camus's critics characterize his position that the safety and rights of white people are inviolable as being necessarily at odds Algerian political and social equality.

Although Le Sueur's reminder regarding the challenges of engaging past debates is valid, the claim that Camus was correct in his prediction about Algeria's descent into authoritarianism is less convincing. Indeed, it points to the ways in which Le Sueur himself is taking part in exactly the kinds of convenient obfuscation that this chapter examines: Epistemologies of racial privilege entail convenient reversals of cause and effect of precisely this kind. Claiming that Algeria would descend into authoritarianism if France were to leave ignores the fact that Algeria under French colonial rule is deeply authoritarian. Indeed, not only is being under colonial rule authoritarian, but it also sows the seeds for future authoritarianism. Colonial rule includes none of the elements that political scientists have long known to be helpful in creating and maintaining a vibrant democracy, such as liberal rights, an educated populace, lack of discrimination, and a fair legal system. Using the absence of these factors as a reason to advocate the authoritarian state that created the very conditions so hostile to democracy is contradictory to the point of being nonsensical. Anyone who is interested in promoting democracy should consider it a responsibility to provide material support Algeria in ways that would enable investment in these hallmarks of democracy, ideally by accounting for the centuries of exploitation and theft that produced the conditions that make authoritarianism all the more likely. Fanon makes precisely this point in *Wretched of the Earth*, as my analysis in the next chapter will show.

Le Sueur's third argument, in which he claims that Camus is being held to a standard to which figures in other postcolonial contexts are not, is similarly unpersuasive. While concern and commitment to making sure that white settlers can be safe and protected makes absolute sense, rejecting the need for Algerian independence does not actually follow from any such

commitment. Strongly objecting to the FLN's violence against white civilians also does not require rejecting the justice of the Algerian right to independence. It is entirely possible to maintain that violence against white civilians should and must be avoided without losing sight of the uncountable ways in which French colonial rule was violently authoritarian and incompatible with the self-determination that gives democracy its meaning. Rejecting Algerian independence supposedly based on valuing human life is an intellectual sleight of hand.

It is at this juncture, when seemingly well-intentioned white liberal sleight of hand makes its appearance, that Baldwin's framework is at its most useful. The epistemological mechanisms Baldwin identifies provide a method for investigating and understanding precisely these kinds of maneuvers. Indeed, analyzing both Camus and his defenders through this lens differentiates my analysis from that of the postcolonial scholars I have cited so far. Their arguments posit that Camus's supposed ideals overlay his more authentic commitment to colonial logic, whereas within my analysis, it is actually the very disingenuousness of these ideals and the colonial logics that they operate alongside that is the object of my analysis. This chapter homes in on the epistemological mechanisms people with racial privilege employ to obscure their own motives, within the sphere of public discourse but also to themselves. Whereas Said and O'Brien are interested in uncovering the hypocrisy in order to expose an authentic set of interests that lay underneath, I want to shift our perspective so that the contradiction itself is the object of analysis.

Baldwin identifies an array of epistemological mechanisms that white people use in order to achieve these goals; there are two in particular that will structure my analysis of these novels. The first epistemological mechanism I explore is the steep *asymmetry of knowledge* that a racialized system produces between the privileged and disadvantaged, wherein the disadvantaged have no choice but to know everything about the dominant culture, whereas the privileged know

very little about the culture, experience and history of the disadvantaged. The second epistemological mechanism I explore is the displacement to the sociological. This mechanism is in operation whenever people with racial privilege acknowledge the racial other in ways that are abstracted, or, to use Baldwin's words, "sociological" rather than "human." This epistemological mechanism entails characterizing racial issues as a social problem that evokes an antiseptic, well-intentioned sympathy but does not demand any change, let alone sacrifice, by any particular white person.

In "Many Thousands Gone," Baldwin introduces the concept of an asymmetry of knowledge by discussing the manifold ways Black people are an ever-present fixture within white people's lives. Black people are there when white people are brought home from the hospital for the first time as babies, and they are also there as when white people are laid to rest, and for much in between. Because they are present in these ways, Black people know about white people's lives in intimate and comprehensive detail. The opposite, however, is not true at all: white people know very little about the details of Black people's lives, their relationships, their internal worlds. Baldwin puts this asymmetry in the knowledge that these two groups have about each other in stark terms, saying that Black people know white people better than they know themselves: "Ask any Negro what he knows about the white people with whom he works. And then ask the white people with whom he works what they know about *him*" (TFNT, 102, emphasis original).

These profound asymmetries in knowledge are one of the defining features of a hierarchized racial order. People who are in relative disadvantage know far more about the lives of the people who are in relative privilege than vice versa, and people with more privilege are conscious of this asymmetry. Their consciousness of it often causes considerable discomfort and

fear. White people don't have to know what people have color experience, and they do not wish to know what people of color experience. Moreover, what interests Baldwin is not just the lack of knowledge, but also the lack of interest. For Baldwin, white people have an image of Black people that bears little resemblance to reality, and they can sometimes actually become hostile when presented with information that challenges this image. They are so protective of this image because their own sense of deservingness hinges on its continuity.

Evidence from *The Plague* and *The Stranger* will show that this knowledge dynamic happens within the French racial arrangement, too. Both novels look past people of color and speak to an asymmetry of knowledge similar to what Baldwin identifies in the United States. Just as in the United States, it should prompt readers not only to interrogate these invisibilizing forces, but indeed to wonder at the kinds of structural violence required to make a white person able to see past and imagine out of existence a group of people who make up the vast majority of the country where these novels are set.

In these fictional universes that Camus designed in order to illustrate his philosophy about how to survive and make meaning within an unfeeling and unreasonable universe, there is no place for people of color as anything other than background, often with no more subjectivity than the literal objects that make up the novel's context. In *L'Etranger*, Camus mentions a person of color for the first time when Meursault enters the room with his mother's casket. Meursault enters a "bright, whitewashed room"; "the furniture consisted of some chairs, some cross-shaped sawhorses" holding up the casket, and then "near the casket was an Arab nurse in a white smock, with a brightly colored scarf on her head" (*The Stranger*, 5-6). Here, Camus describes an Arab woman literally alongside the furniture, to add color and texture to the scene. He uses Arabs in a similar fashion at the end of the novel, when Meursault is in prison and

awaiting his death sentence. Meursault describes the conversations of the Arab prisoners around him, again wordless and vacant, constitutes a part of the moment's ambience: "their subdued murmuring, coming from lower down, formed a kind of bass accompaniment to the conversations crossing above their heads" (73).

The asymmetry of knowledge between the privileged and disadvantaged is also evident in *The Stranger*. One of the more salient examples of this racial dynamic out occurs in the scene where Raymond, Meursault's unsavory neighbor, assaults his girlfriend. The woman that Raymond assaults does not get a name. Curiously, the only information that the reader gets about her name is that when Meursault reads the letter that Raymond is thinking about writing her, Meursault notices that her name is "Moorish" (Stranger, 32). Even though this moment catalyzes the events that ultimately culminate in the novel's climax, the woman herself gets neither a name nor a perspective that she testifies to directly; her backstory is mediated through Raymond. Indeed, aside from when she tells the police officer who arrives on the scene about Raymond's attack against her, she also does not have any speech. There is the suggestion of an identity from the fact that she has a family and a community, inasmuch as it is her brother, also nameless, who seeks revenge against Raymond. Her identity is entirely defined by her relationships to men, both romantic and familial.

Given that Camus's aim in writing this novel was to produce in his readers the feeling of alienation that he ascribes to the absurd, this moment in the novel is certainly one in which he achieves this effect with absolute success: The audience is struck and revolted by how Meursault unquestioningly seems to believe Raymond and work to assist him. Arguably, the way that Meursault connects with and defends Raymond rather than the unnamed woman Raymond assaults could be part of Meursault's characterization, rather than indicating Camus's lack of

knowledge or interest in non-white figures. A major theme of the novel, after all, is that Meursault himself is inexplicable, impossible to relate to, and Camus's success in creating such a character is part of the novel's effectiveness in capturing the alienation and isolation of the absurd.

Harder to explain, however, is how none of the characters in the second part of the novel in which Meursault is convicted of murder relate to or care about the Arab figures. When they express outrage and horror at Meursault's actions, it is always Meursault who is the referent of that outrage. They are horrified that Meursault could have committed the act of murder for no reason. The judge, Meursault's lawyer, and the priest all express horror and disgust with Meursault as a person, but they express no interest whatsoever in the person who died, why ending his life mattered, or what effect his death had on the community that he left behind. Indeed, although it is implied that this group of Arabs who follows Meursault and Raymond to the beach has some connection to this initial crime of domestic violence, the brother as an individual dissolves into this vaguely defined group of Arabs who follow them around menacingly during the middle section of the novel.

The way that Camus denies this Arab character that Meursault kills a name and an interior life very much resembles the argument by Baldwin in "Many Thousands Gone," regarding the novel *Native Son* and the notion of Black monstrosity. In "Many Thousands Gone," Baldwin argues that the character of Bigger Thomas is a cliché, and a monster, a figure with no subjectivity. The concept of Black monstrosity that Bigger Thomas typifies that he typifies plays an important role in how white people interact with black people. The specter of the Black monster tacitly hovers over many economic and social interactions that white people have with Black people.

Similarly, in The Plague, Camus writes people of color out of existence. He references them as a group twice and never places them in the narrative. If the plague affects and kills them, Camus never mentions it. There is no discussion of how the French colonial administration functions in relation to this community of people of color, what kind of medical care they receive, or how the shutdown of economic activity affects them.

Near the novel's beginning, before the onset of the plague, Dr. Rieux meets Rambert, the journalist who is passing through the town. As mentioned previously, Rambert originally approaches Rieux in order to write a news story about the "living conditions among the Arab population, and especially on the sanitary conditions" (11). During this exchange, Rieux asks the journalist whether "he would be allowed to tell the truth," by which he means whether an "unqualified condemnation of the present state of things" would ever be allowed to be printed or whether it would be censored. Rambert replies that his paper could not print an unqualified condemnation, but he also finds the suggestion that such a condemnation would be necessarily surprising. Rieux agrees that conditions are not in fact that bad and says that he actually only asked in order to find out more about what Rambert is allowed to discuss in his reporting. Rieux then declines to participate in the interview, now having learned that Rambert does not have permission to report the unvarnished truth, because he has "no use for statements in which something is kept back" (11). Rambert expresses some impatience with this position, and even mocks the doctor slightly, but ultimately says politely that he understands the doctor's perspective.

Camus mentions the Arab population only one other time in The Plague, and it again occurs during an interaction between Rieux and Rambert. It happens when Rambert approaches Rieux about whether the doctor can help him at all in his effort to leave Oran and return to his

partner in Paris. Here, the Arab population only appears as an absence. As they walk along and discuss the issue, they walk through the "narrow streets of the Negro district" (83). They are walking at dusk, and the narrator notes that what was noticeable was how quiet the part of town is: "the once, once so noisy at this hour, was strangely still" (84).

This is a prime example of discussing people of color in an abstract, sociological way, a phenomenon that Baldwin identified. The audience is not privy to any conversations that Rambert has with Arabs about these questions. If such conversations occur, they are not within the parameters of the novel. This novel focuses instead on what the Arabs' living conditions mean to these two people, and what a discussion of those living conditions reveals about each character's orientation toward truth and compromise. Camus depicts the vacant neighborhoods of people of color, but only to prove how moral Rieux is.

These kind and socially conscious white people in Camus's novel treat people of color and racial justice as a segmented-off object of discussion, rather than as a set of dynamics and phenomena that underpin every single area of study. This is the same asymmetry of knowledge Baldwin identifies taken to a solipsistic extreme. Here, people of color seem to exist very narrowly as a social and political problem. Camus writes about the issues Algerians face in his journalism, but because the epidemic is not specifically a "race issue," people of color do not arise as a topic very much. When they do, when the flood light of white attention does land on them, they are instrumentalized to make a point about the moral fiber of these particular white people.

The only time that people of color show up physically in the novel, not as a group referenced in a conversation between white people but as independent actors, happens in reference to a macabre change to the way that Oran handles the dead as the fatalities from the

plague rise. The novel mentions that the death toll rose so quickly that the Prefect of the town had to suggest a system for burying the dead in mass graves and then reusing the caskets: "he even told Rieux that it was really a great improvement on the deathcarts driven by Negroes of which one reads in accounts of former visitations of this sort" (174-175). Here, again, people of color only appear in the novel as objects within a discussion between white people. Camus does not discuss them as people who themselves die; they show up here only as a way of conveying how unfathomable the death toll among white people had become. Indeed, Camus even dislocates them from the novel's present tense; in this case, the Prefect is vaguely referencing previous times in which the plague had caused high death tolls.

Baldwin specifically points out that the way that economic interactions are often the site where the fraught relationships he is interested in occur. In *The Plague*, the only way that physical Black people show up is in doing some of the most gruesome labor associated with the epidemic. They are not casualties of the plague because they are not even truly present, having been excised from the town. In this world Camus creates to unpack what it means to face and revolt against the absurdity of meaningless death in an unfeeling universe, when he characterizes death, Black people have no place in the story—certainly not as heroes, and not even as a relevant part o the background.

In both novels, Camus's treatment of people of color speaks to how an asymmetry of knowledge is an ineluctable result of colonialism. This ignorance regarding the lives of people of color points to how a racial order organizes material realities and renders certain kinds of relationships very unidirectional, if not impossible. For Baldwin, the primary way that people with racial privilege interact with people who are oppressed within a racial structure is in the

context of their roles as service workers; Camus takes it a step further by erasing them almost entirely, sparing his white protagonists of even these unequal interactions.

These exclusions are also evidence of what Fanon tells us about the colonized world, an issue I will discuss in the next chapter. The rigidly maintained separateness of the colonized world unavoidably creates this erasure, and what these novels show is that this separateness causes invisibility at the register of imagination. What Camus skirts is the incredible violence represented by even the possibility that he could tell a story set in Algeria that does not name, let alone feature, anyone who is not a white French citizen. Several peoples lived in and continue to live in this space, and yet they do not show up in these stories, do not register on his consciousness.

Conclusion

In the previous section, I analyzed *The Stranger* and *The Plague* through the lens of two epistemological processes identified within the work of James Baldwin: the asymmetry of knowledge produced and reproduced by racial systems, and the tendency to displace racial problems into sociological terms in order to avoid taking them personally. I will now conclude this chapter by considering what this analysis means for the extent to which Camus's conception of the absurd in revolt can really constitute a viable means by which we can pursue freedom. Furthermore, I will clarify how this analysis sheds light on the research questions posed by this dissertation project.

Camus has a liberal and universalist way of thinking about what people are like and how they can relate to each other personally and politically. His argument takes as a given the fundamental relatedness and the ontologically identical nature of individuals to each other. His ethic of revolt relies on the principle of: What I would want for myself I, I must want for the

other. Yet what becomes clear in this analysis is that this erasure of difference is less equity-oriented than it might initially seem. In particular, this framework does not account for how our burdens and obligations toward each other must be shaped by the positions that we occupy within our racial order. Contending with these issues requires tools for recognizing and witnessing those who have less privilege than we have, and his solution offers little insight about that, instead seeking to speak the issue out of existence altogether.

CHAPTER 3. Making and Unmaking Each Other: Epistemology and Solidarity Politics in the Work of Frantz Fanon

Introduction

In the first chapter of this project, I explored the epistemological elements of the ways in which James Baldwin characterizes race relations - in particular, I explored Baldwin's depiction of the way that one's position in a racial hierarchy shapes the ways that one knows and does not know, as well as one's relationship with the unknown more generally. He elaborates an epistemology of racial privilege wherein white Americans place the notion of black inferiority at the center of their worldview, enabling them very strategically not to know. They go to considerable lengths to ensure that the nature and source of their own privilege remains unknown to them. He also argues that one epistemology of resistance that can lead to personal freedom and peace for black people involves first not looking away from the grim realities of racial inequity, not be eaten alive with rage in response to those realities, and build toward futures they have never personally seen or known.

What this discussion of Baldwin reveals is that the arguments black authors make about how race shapes the ways that one knows and does not know can inform the way that they characterize the nature of domination and resistance. What is the relationship between how black theorists understand racial epistemology and the way that they understand freedom? How do these issues inform each other? Moreover, while Baldwin focuses in on a comparison between black and white epistemologies in the United States, to what extent are his observations fundamental to the nature of privilege and disadvantage within racialized systems? Are there reliable aspects of epistemology associated with occupying privilege in general, or do particular kinds of privilege have their own associated epistemologies that are context-specific? How does

one's location in the diaspora prompt different ways of thinking about white and black ways of knowing?

I address these questions by exploring the epistemological approach described by Frantz Fanon. I begin by elaborating Fanon's model for doing solidarity politics across difference as developed in *Wretched of the Earth* (1963), paying particular attention to the epistemological arrangements that this model relies on. Fanon shows how a community bound by its race but characterized by its own hierarchies can work toward the common end of decolonization. For Fanon, the only way that this diverse community can successfully expel a colonial power is by entirely reconfiguring conventional hierarchies regarding who has valuable knowledge. The community succeeds or fails in realizing a decolonized future only when it centers the knowledge of the least privileged, when those with more privilege place their knowledge and resources at the service of the least privileged. Both in the run-up to a struggle for independence and in its aftermath, the class of political elites must work against the ways in which capitalism separates them from the rural masses and be intentional about creating and maintaining genuine, dynamic, ongoing relationships with the rural masses. Fanon argues that his method for managing difference and hierarchy within the Black community is both the surest and the most ethical path toward crafting a meaningful freedom.

Fanon's solidarity politics model provides answers on how a community can fight against a common cause like colonialism without simply ignoring the other sources of hierarchy and oppression that function within the group. After I lay out Fanon's solidarity politics model, and the principles that make up that framework, I reevaluate several parts of his argument through the lens of those principles. Specifically, I use that framework to explore how he conceptualizes

the content of Black identity in both *Black Skin, White Masks*, and how he writes about race and gender under colonialism in *Black Skin, White Masks*.

One possible objection to this approach is that this chapter focuses on the early parts of Fanon's career in ways that are unfair, particularly with regard to gender. Indeed, in the scholarly debate about Fanon and gender, those who defend Fanon argue, among other things, that he redeems himself in his later work, particularly in "Algeria Unveiled" and "The Algerian Family," from his book *A Dying Colonialism* (1959). I engage with this scholarship in more detail in the third section of this chapter, but it is worth clarifying at the offset that the purpose of applying Fanon's solidarity politics model to the more controversial parts of his work is not to make the argument that Fanon fails to meet his own standards. Rather, the purpose is to illustrate the incredibly productive nature of Fanon's model – its capacity to suggest new solutions to more kinds of hierarchy than even he acknowledged and analyzed.

This represents a slightly different way of going about reading and making use of Fanon. In the first section of the chapter, I place the reading methodology I employ in context by discussing how others have answered the question of what it means to decide how Fanon can inform what we know about politics and justice. I end this section by discussing in more detail what my strategy is and its advantages. The second section is a close reading of *Wretched of the Earth*, in which I make clear what exactly the solidarity politics model consists of, the principles that it depends on, and why these principles are so radical and so effective at identifying a path toward a postcolonial independence worthy of its name, meaningful and sustainable. In the third section, I use the principles of the solidarity politics model to explore elements of how he conceptualizes the content of Blackness as well as how he treats women of color and the politics of gender, in both *Wretched of the Earth* and *Black Skin, White Masks*.

Reading as Praxis: Methodological Approaches to Fanon

In Fanon's brief life, his writing was enormously wide ranging. He wrote about Martinique, a context still under colonialism, about casting off colonial rule in Algeria, as well as the uncertainty, possibility and hope of post-independence Africa. He inhabited multiple identities and contributed to a variety of conversations, availing himself of rhetorical tools not usually deployed within the same text in ways that make him difficult to classify. It is perhaps because of the multivalent nature of his impact that within academia, scholars take up his work in a variety of ways. This variation arises from different assumptions about what it means to find Fanon helpful, particularly considering the enormity of his legacy. In this section, I will discuss three clusters of scholarship on Fanon: those who apply Fanon, those who explicate Fanon, and those who critique Fanon – before discussing how this chapter orients itself regarding these questions.

One strategy that scholars use to read Fanon comprises seeing how Fanon's work bears on questions that substantively interest their discipline, using the tools favored by that discipline. For these scholars, the best way to make use of Fanon is to take up the arguments he made in combination with the tools of their discipline to see how Fanon can complement or enrich existing ways of engaging with questions and issues salient to the field. Schmitt (1996), a philosopher, takes one of Fanon's claims – that racism is always objectification – and considers whether it is possible to reconcile this claim with how racism takes so many forms. Schmitt argues that there is an advantage to conceptualizing racism writ large as a means toward the end of objectification. His project is not to analyze the text, but to take an idea from the text and explore what else has to be true in order for that idea to make sense, and what the implications of adopting this conception of racism are for conversations about objectification within philosophy.

For Adam (1993), the strategy is similar, though the discipline is very different. Adam is interested in looking at what Fanon has to say about several questions of interest to comparative politics – namely, democratization in Africa, economic development, and ethnic politics. Adam takes seriously the causal arguments Fanon makes about what structural components lead to various political outcomes. He considers the predictions that Fanon makes about the conditions under which newly independent countries will slip toward authoritarianism and replicate the same dynamic of economic dependence that prevailed under colonialism. Adam also explores Fanon's reflections on national identity versus ethnic and tribal identity. He argues that Fanon's reflections bear directly on conversations about consociational political arrangements in ethnically divided countries. Further, Fanon's work should prompt comparativists to consider the cultivation of what Fanon calls a "political consciousness" as a crucial variable in determining whether countries that were formerly under colonial rule will sustain national cohesion and reduce ethnic conflict.

Whereas Adam focuses on the empirical elements of Fanon's work, other scholars explore how Fanon applies and contests the theorists with whom he engages. Their aim is slightly different: whereas the previous scholars largely treat what Fanon said as a Black box and then apply it to questions of interest to the field, these scholars problematize Fanon's argumentation itself. Debates in this camp consist of adjudicating between different interpretations of what Fanon said as well as whether what he said is valid. Bhabha (1986, 2005), for example, explores how Fanon engages with Jacques Lacan's framework regarding how the ego forms in the encounter between Self and Other. Whereas Lacan talks about this process of ego formation as being unraced and focuses on how these processes originate from familial dynamics, Fanon shows how beliefs about race shape these processes of identity formation for

Black people in the course of their interactions with white people. Whereas Lacan's formulation is well-suited for highlighting the highly fluid and interactive nature of ego formation, ensuring that we not treat as stable a process which is highly dynamic and social, Fanon's formulation functions as a helpful corrective, prompting us to attend to the claustrophobically fixed nature of the racial beliefs that constrain ego formation. Yet for Bhabha, the way that Fanon alters Lacan's framework may be an overcorrection; by emphasizing the fixity of racial hierarchy, Fanon obscures how racial domination changes in form over time. Both he and Hall (1994) emphasize that it is indeed in holding these two ideas in tension – by considering both the dynamic, fluid nature of identity formation and the fixity of racial narratives and hierarchy – that we approach something of the truth.

Gates (1991) argues that Bhabha's reading of Fanon relies on superimposing postsructural arguments about hybridity; he claims that Bhabha's version of Fanon is, in the words of Benita Parry, "a premature poststructuralist" (quoted on 460). His review of scholarship on Fanon gives the impression that the polyvocal, genre-crossing nature of Fanon's writing makes him well-suited to function as a kind of Rorschach test, where scholars can engage parts of his writing in order to craft a version of Fanon who complements their own theoretical dispositions. Fanon provides a site where Parry, a South African scholar-activist, can debate with the postcolonial scholars Spivak and Bhabha about whether and how resistance can exist within the binaries that colonial discourses produce and impose. For Gates, these conversations become self-referential to the point of narcissism: "The course we've been plotting leads us, then, to what is, in part, Spivak's critique of Parry's critique of Jan Mohamed's critique of Bhabha's critique of Said's critique of colonial discourse" (Gates 1991, 465).

For Robinson (1993), regardless of how elegant or productive these competing constructions of Fanon are, something important is lost when scholars treat the substance of Fanon's work as infinitely accommodating of their perspectives. He argues Fanon can only function as a Rorschach test if one fails to understand the trajectory that his thought follows. Robinson differentiates between the "immature" Fanon of *Black Skin, White Masks* and the "mature" Fanon who wrote *Wretched of the Earth*, *Toward the African Revolution*, and *A Dying Colonialism*: "The mature Fanon turned away from psychoanalysis and its preoccupation with sexuality as the explanatory paradigm for the 'Black problem'" (1993, 86). Because Fanon's later work affirms him as a Marxist and an activist, Robinson claims that any reading of Fanon that implies that resistance is impossible amounts to an appropriation. This way of treating the text of Fanon, as characterized by an identifiable trajectory culminating in a coherent political ideology, differs considerably from that of Stuart Hall, who argues that Fanon must be read as "radically incomplete" and "bound to unsettle us from whichever direction we read him" (1996, 35).

To summarize so far, Schmitt and Adam apply those insights to questions of interest to their respective fields, whereas the latter debate concerns what those insights point to. Despite these differences, all these authors show an interest in what Hall calls "reading *with* Fanon," in the sense that there is an interest in being attentive to how the claims he made shed light on race and colonialism in both his context and the present one.

Another group of scholars approaches the question of how to make use of Fanon differently. The emphasis is less on developing and defending a version of Fanon that answers questions about what colonialism is and how to resist it, and is instead on identifying the aspects of his argument that they wish to challenge. Where for the previous scholars, the emphasis is on

explicating Fanon, for these scholars, the emphasis is on problematizing Fanon. It is worth noting, though, that a harsh distinction between the way these scholars engage in these activities would be unfair. It is not the case that the scholars who prioritize theorizing Fanon put him on such a pedestal that they are silent about the ways they disagree with him; similarly, it would be an oversimplification to the point of caricature to say that the only purpose of feminist scholarship on Fanon is critique, particularly because scholars have used feminist frameworks to take the full spectrum of positions regarding whether Fanon's work supports women's liberation. The difference is that whereas for the previous two groups of scholars, the substance of Fanon's argument does the operative work of providing insight on the politics of colonialism, for this last group of scholars it is instead the critique of Fanon's argument that does the operative work. I will discuss how my argument interacts substantively with several feminist arguments later in the chapter, but for the purposes of positioning myself methodologically, two scholars whose work is especially helpful in illustrating different feminist approaches to reading Fanon are Chow (1999) and hooks (1995).

Chow (1999) argues that analyses of race focus on the politics of identification but pay insufficient attention to the issue of community formation. She analyzes Fanon's portrayal of men and women of color in relationships with white people to explore the role that race and female sexuality play in forming community. She argues that in Fanon's harsh treatment of women of color in *Black Skin, White Masks, we see* evidence of the idea that women who exercise sexual agency threaten the cohesion of an ethnic community – particularly when they exercise that agency to choose white partners. While *Black Skin, White Masks* is the context in which Chow explores these questions, the purpose of the analysis is not, as she says, "to belittle the epochal messages of a seminal political thinker" (Chow 1999, 42). Rather, her critique of

Fanon serves to shed light on the role of race and sex in how we conceptualize community formation.

For Chow, the engine driving the argument forward, the mode by which she makes Fanon useful, is critique. Critique is similarly central to hooks (1999) approach, although she deploys it in combination with a few other tools. In her book chapter, hooks makes interventions on the substance of his argument, but also in her response to the question of how to read him. As with Chow, I will engage more with hooks' contributions regarding the substance of *Black Skin, White Masks* later in my chapter, focusing for now on the way she answers the question of how to read him. She discusses three stages through which her relationship with him as a thinker progressed: admiration, then distance, then return. When she first encountered his work, he played a significant role in forming her radical consciousness, alongside the work of figures like Malcolm X, Memmi, Freire, and Cabral. While reading him, his "patriarchal standpoint" did not register for her, let alone distract her; at that point, internally adopting the masculine perspective was part and parcel of her education: "In my girlhood, it had not been possible to imagine oneself as thinker, writer, interrogator without projecting oneself into the phallic imaginary; in the body of the father" (hooks 1999, 80). She says that this way of reading originally came from how she listened to her father and what he had to tell her, adhering closely to anything that brought her closer to freedom while disregarding whatever "was destined to limit and confine" (hooks 1999, 81). The second stage of her trajectory, in which she distanced herself from Fanon, occurred as she came into contact with the feminist movement. Her attention is on how Fanon conceives of the kinds of relationships that enable a person to know freedom and achieve personhood – relationships that do not involve women and also require disavowing the past. The third stage of the trajectory she describes is an attempt "to find again that moment of innocence

and unknowing wherein his words touched the longing for freedom within my female body, and called me into that continuous state of mental revolution" (hooks 1999, 81). She concludes the chapter by observing that Fanon gave her a "model for insurgent Black intellectual life" that had an impact on her work (hooks 1999, 85). She says that feminist thinking reshaped the way she understood his work, which she describes as a "return to love." She says that she now sees a yearning for that same return in *Wretched of the Earth*.

These authors have different answers to the question of how to make use of Fanon. The purpose is not solely to apply Fanon's thought to questions relevant to their field, nor is it to clarify what he thought, with the assumption that a clear interpretation of what he has to say will necessarily enhance our understanding of colonialism and resistance. For Chow, it is the critique of Fanon's work that provides insight on questions relevant to her field. For hooks, returning to Fanon despite his work's shortcomings introduces the tension of maintaining a clear-eyed view of the problems with how he envisions freedom while honoring what Fanon awakened and sharpened in her.

The methodology used in this chapter represents an attempt to navigate the same tension hooks identifies in the context of the objectives of the dissertation project more generally. The project investigates how several Black authors conceptualize Black epistemology: how Black authors conceive of Black processes of knowing and how Black people evaluate what is true about themselves, white people, the nature of white supremacy and racism, and the nature of freedom. To address that research question, making use of Fanon consists of two tasks. The first task that I take up is to explore Fanon's conception of Black epistemology. My analysis will reveal that much of Fanon's vision for freedom is predicated on assumptions about how Black knowledge is arranged in the status quo and must be arranged in order to secure freedom. For

Fanon, proximity to power has a direct impact on how one knows and does not know, for Black and white people alike. Proximity to power shapes how people conceptualize the nature of colonialism, whether it is a problem, and how it can be resolved. It also shapes how people make moral calculations and what they view to be acceptable; as one gets closer to capital, one increasingly evaluates the morality of colonialism in ways that involve erasing histories of oppression for one's own purposes. Fanon explores these effects not only by comparing white people with Black people but also, crucially, through internal comparisons within Black people along different levels of class privilege. His assessment of the relationship between power and epistemology sets the stage for his conception of how to pursue freedom. Because being closer to the spoils of colonialism corrupts the way one understands what colonialism is and what a just resolution to colonialism entails, the fight for independence requires inverting the hierarchies that colonialism produces. The success of the independence movements depends on centering the people who have been furthest from the material and emotional spoils of colonialism. In the Algerian case, this group is the agrarian workers in the country's interior. Meaningful freedom requires that the Black people who have had most access to education put their knowledge and resources at the service of the most marginalized.

The model that Fanon provides for how to do politics across class difference in the pursuit of independence exposes a particular ethic. This ethic involves inverting the hierarchies that colonialism produces and centering the knowledge of those that colonialism has made most vulnerable and devalued under colonialism. He thus provides not only a model for how to move forward and achieve freedom, but he also provides criteria. He provides a way of evaluating whether one's practice is truly emancipatory. We can understand a mode of doing politics to be

emancipatory insofar as it enacts the ethic that he describes of putting the most vulnerable and devalued first, and putting the resources of the most privileged at their service.

The second task that I take up involves testing the model that he provides. I take the model that he outlines in *Wretched of the Earth* and apply it to two areas: first, his representation of Black identity, and second, the way he conceptualizes the politics of gender. Applying this ethic to how he treats these issues will reveal instances where Fanon himself reinforces hierarchies in ways that run directly counter to the ethic for which he makes such a compelling case. What also becomes clear through this analysis, though, is precisely how strong, illuminating, and valuable the ethic he identifies is. We come to a particular way of understanding why Fanon's work is so valuable: He lays out a standard with so much integrity that it is possible to hold even Fanon accountable to it in ways that illuminate how to do politics in community.

While the approach I use in this chapter differs from that of the scholars discussed previously, the objectives of this approach are very similar to several of them. This approach is very much inspired by the insight of Cedric Robinson's response to Henry Louis Gates. Like Robinson, this response reflects an interest in taking Fanon seriously, at his own word and according to his own terms. Rather than treating Fanon as a Rorschach test, or reading him in ways that make him perfectly compatible with a contemporary radical consensus of fighting colonialism, racism and justice, this approach asks whether Fanon meets the standards that he himself identifies as being emancipatory.

This approach is also inspired by the postcolonial scholars such as Homi Bhabha and Stuart Hall. While Robinson's critique calls scholars to take Fanon's argumentation seriously, Robinson somewhat overstates the coherence of that argumentation. Like Bhabha and Hall, in

this chapter I focus on the incoherencies as well as the continuities his work includes. This approach treats these incoherencies as potentially productive sites for applying the ethic of resistance that makes his work so powerful. It also makes it possible to pay attention to the psychiatric approach that Fanon never renounced as decisively as Robinson claims.

Another advantage of this approach is that it is an instantiation of the praxis that Fanon identifies. His analysis of the Black nationalist bourgeoisie is harshly critical, yet he never essentializes them or writes them off as a lost cause. Rather, his critique pays careful attention to the processes, incentives, and structures that lead this class to make flawed choices. He argues that if they can restructure their politics and maintain radical relationships with the marginalized, they can correct course and realize meaningful independence. It is this ability of his both to engage in rigorous critique while also refusing to essentialize that I seek to emulate in this chapter. This chapter critiques Fanon without labeling him as sexist or insufficiently anti-racist and tossing him aside. Instead, this chapter represents respecting Fanon too much not to hold him to the standards he says are best. Applying those standards further involves reading Fanon with the generosity and attentiveness that he sometimes refuses to give.

Inverting Hierarchies

The model of radical politics that anchors this chapter emerges from Fanon's discussion of relationships between the Black nationalist bourgeoisie and the Black rural masses in Algeria, before, during and after the war for independence. The radical politics Fanon envisions relies on the inversion of the ways in which colonialism typically values identities and the knowledge that comes with them. Under colonialism, there are certain markers that indicate value within the colonial system. Some of these markers are material, such as economic security or a position within the political and administrative institutions charged with administering colonial rule;

others are social, such as being well-versed in the philosophical and political traditions of Western civilization, or being higher up within the nationalist party. For Fanon, radical politics that will lead to Black liberation require entirely inverting the hierarchies that colonialism produces. Those who seem to be the most backwards, the least fortunate – in the Algerian context, the rural masses – are the ones who have the knowledge that can dismantle colonialism.

Fanon first shows this inversion in the way that he describes these two groups before the war for independence. He begins by analyzing the urban, nationalist bourgeoisie. In the colonial context, the workers who keep the city functioning have the most access to education, opportunities for wealth, and interaction with the European minority; they function like a bourgeois class, in that they have the most to lose relative to the rest of the colonized population. The elites in nationalist parties in the colonized class almost always both come from this class and primarily try to appeal to this class in their mobilization efforts, despite the fact that they only make up "one percent" of the population (Fanon 1963, 64).

Nationalist parties view the rural masses as invested in backwards forms of politics and identity, "regimented by marabouts, witch doctors and traditional chiefs" in ways that are "overbearingly medieval" and supported by the colonial power (WOTE, 65). Early efforts to incorporate the rural masses into the nationalist party and agenda fail, because party officials neither understand nor respect the worldview that these people possess. Party officials instead try to impose their own understandings of how politics should work without trying to reconcile their views with those of the people they are trying to organize. When they are unsuccessful, they write the rural masses off and focus their attention on activating the urban bourgeoisie.

In addition to having a problematically narrow constituency, nationalist parties are motivated by contradictory goals: they claim that they seek to "smash colonialism," yet they also

prioritize staying in good standing with colonial authorities (Fanon 1963, 76). Armed struggle has no place in their platforms or propaganda. When rebellions do take place in the country's interior, nationalist parties view these skirmishes as highly convenient acts of god; they have no idea what drives the way they ebb and flow, but they are convenient insofar as they prompt the colonial power to take the nationalist party's call for reform more seriously. Despite the usefulness of these uprisings, nationalist parties make no effort to incorporate the countryside into their independence efforts: "They stubbornly maintain their criminal position of distrust with regard to the interior" (Fanon 1963, 71).

Whereas people in the city are preoccupied with the practicality of confronting a colonial power and concern themselves with how to reform the relationship between the colony and the metropole, in the country's interior there is no such wish for greater integration. Instead, there is a strong memory and an emotional connection to the figures who resisted before. This admiration for resisting the colonial power shows up in the songs that mothers hum to their children, and children dream of living up to the figures who died heroically resisting the colonizing country (Fanon 1963, 69). Despite being ignored by the nationalist parties, often it is in the countryside that the insurrection begins. The nationalist parties find these insurrections both helpful and disconcerting. They secretly "share the optimism of the colonists" that these insurrections will probably lead to nothing, and proudly have nothing to do with these efforts, which they view as being doomed to fail (Fanon 1963, 78).

The expulsion of two groups from the nationalist party is what catalyzes the sustained decolonization effort. These groups leave when they find that their politics make them too radical and militant for the nationalist party. The first group is the intellectuals, who push the nationalist party to engage in a specific way with the question of what decolonization and

independence mean to them; these questions are viewed as divisive and beside the point, and this group eventually no longer feels welcome within the party. The second group consists of the on-the-ground party organizers who are so active in mobilizing the urban proletariat that they become targets of the colonial power's surveillance, eventually getting detained and tortured. The development that turns the tide is when these kinds of exile seek safety outside of the cities. Fanon counsels: "The nationalist militant who decides to put his fate in the hands of the peasant masses, instead of playing hide-and-seek with the police in the urban centers, will never lose" (Fanon 1963, 78). When these militants seek refuge in the interior, what they find is "unimagined tenderness and vitality" (Fanon 1963, 78) – a people who stay true to their principles and to their attachment to the nation. He describes this moment as one of mutual education: the militants put themselves in the school of the people, and they also share their own political and military knowledge in the service of the people (Fanon 1963b, 124).

To summarize, Fanon lays out how these different forms of Black knowledge relate to each other, and he is unafraid of saying which kinds of knowledge are more valuable within the effort to decolonize and to craft a meaningful national independence. According to his conception of the run-up to a decolonial war, national liberation for a colonized people only becomes possible when the radical militants expelled from the national party come into contact with the rural masses and are humbled by them, and put their knowledge at their service. Proximity to power and whiteness, both in the form of European intellectual history, traditions and values and also in the form of proximity to the spoils of the colonial system, limits a group's ability to understand the problem of colonialism – specifically, the ability to correctly the identify the fact that the struggle for dignity and fairness will never be realized through reform, accommodation, assimilation, and integration, but instead requires the violent expulsion of the

colonial power. As the experience of the nationalist bourgeoisie shows, privilege also has a direct impact on a group's ability to imagine a version of independence that is truly different from colonialism.

The problems in perspective that characterize the national bourgeoisie also pervade post-colonial politics. Once a colonized country has gained independence, the nationalist bourgeoisie's ambition is the simple, selfish one of simply taking the place formerly occupied by the colonizing bourgeoisie. But because their basis for wealth is far more limited than that of the colonizing bourgeoisie that they seek to replace, they find themselves resorting to simply re-establishing the same kinds of economic relationships that existed under colonialism, so that they can still enjoy the benefits of being at the top of a system in which the country serves as a market for European exports.

Moreover, after independence the national bourgeoisie still views the rural masses with distrust. There are still no relationships between them and the rural masses. Rather than seeking to bring them into the national project, the nationalist party's goal is mainly to control the masses. Whereas nationalism had functioned as a mobilizing clarion call during decolonization, after independence, nationalist rhetoric functions as a palliative. Nationalist parties parade out heroes of the struggle for independence during large national ceremonies, and party leaders ask the rural masses to recall with pride the victories that they won in order to shift attention from the ways in which things have not changed.

Proximity to the ideological mainstays and material spoils of colonialism pervert one's ability to understand colonialism as well as one's ability to imagine different futures, and this is every bit as true of Europeans as it is of the nationalist elites that Fanon critiques. He identifies the ahistorical and self-congratulatory way that Europeans narrate their own prosperity relative to

the colonized world. While the nationalist elites are not able to gauge the necessity of violence within efforts to decolonize, Europeans are unable to gauge the necessity of a global redistribution of wealth in light of the massive, cross-generational thefts that colonialism entailed. Fanon discusses Europeans in three ways in *Wretched of the Earth*: first, the content of their myths about Algerian inferiority; second, their views around the politics of decolonization and independence; and third, the ways in which they too are guilty of failures of imagination, moral and otherwise, on the subject of what a just future must comprise.

Fanon's discussion of myths about Algerian inferiority reveals that Europeans believe Algerians to be habitually murderous, favoring particularly heinous and bloody forms of murder and often committing them for trivial and irrational reasons (Fanon 1963, 222-223). For Fanon, these beliefs are not disembodied or ambient, but are the convictions held by the magistrates, police officers, and medical examiners who make up the apparatuses of colonialism in Algeria before independence (Fanon 1963, 223-224). In addition to the individuals who populate the colonial criminal justice system, Fanon also describes the myths at work within the medical and psychiatric professions. He says that these groups believe North Africans to be congenitally incapable of complicated thought, disinclined to engage in analysis, and bereft of an inner emotional or mental life, but instead captive to their rebellious, aggressive impulses (Fanon 1963, 224).

In addition to these myths about Algerian inferiority, Fanon also identifies ways in which Europeans are involved in myths about how wealth and poverty are allocated in the world post-independence. Europeans watch newly independent countries struggle to meet the needs of the people in their country, narrate this struggle as a failure on the part of these countries, and take it as proof that these countries were foolish to attempt independence in the first place. They make

these characterizations while they "wallow in the most ostentatious opulence" (Fanon 1963, 53). This opulence is "literally a scandal," insofar as it was "built on the backs of slaves, it fed on the blood of slaves, and owes its very existence to the soil and subsoil of the underdeveloped world," that their comfort and prosperity "were built with the sweat and corpses of Blacks, Arabs, Indians, and Asians" (ibid). Fanon notes the lack of a sense of guilt or responsibility, or even historical memory within the way that Europe orients itself toward its former colonies.

For Fanon, this failure to contend with the true nature, history and source of their wealth informs how Europeans interact with newly independent countries in the present, and as a result, they chronically fail to understand what should happen post-independence. He argues that increasingly, this division will become more salient than divisions around socialism versus capitalism or even than colonialism versus anticolonialism – that increasingly, the division that will matter globally will be between those who recognize the absolute necessity for a massive, global redistribution of wealth and those who do not (Fanon 1963, 53-55).

When he's talking about the international context of decolonization, he speaks generally about how "Europeans" frame these questions and positions themselves with regard to the question of independence. In his chapter on the mental disorders he encountered in the midst of Algeria's war for independence, he also describes how the behaviors that operate at a macro level play out for individuals. His reflections on treating several European patients reveal the paradoxical ways in which racial privilege prompts them to see and not see, to know and not know – to register guilt and feel shame about their actions but also be determined to continue them because they feel they have no choice, because continuing to occupy a privileged position within a racial hierarchy requires these actions.

One patient, a police officer whose job included torturing militants, referred himself for psychiatric help because he was behaving violently toward his wife and children. His description of what the experience of torturing consists of is woven together with concerns about the career incentives at work; because credit is apportioned based on who actually acquires the relevant information, he tries not to "hand over the customer all nice and ready for the other guy to take all the glory" (Fanon 1963, 198). Fanon's depiction of the patient conveys that he recognizes a connection between the violence against his family was connected specifically to the guilt associated with the job: "As he had no intention of giving up his job as a torturer… he asked me in plain language to help him torture Algerian patriots without having a guilty conscience, without any behavioral problems, and with a total peace of mind" (WOTE, 198).

Fanon shows that these officers feel uncomfortable and guilty about what they do, and they try, unsuccessfully, to cope with that guilt by displacing moral responsibility onto the person being tortured. Another European police officer narrates the way that his detainees hold out for so long before giving him information as an unkindness that they are doing to him: "If they had any consideration for us, they'd cough up and not force us to spend hours on end squeezing information out of them word by word" (WOTE, 195). He explains that generally, officers continue torturing detainees even after they have given the information the interrogator was seeking: "Mind you, we'd prefer not to. But they don't make things easy for us" (WOTE 196).

For Fanon, occupying this position within the racial hierarchy will tend to corrupt one's understanding of both the facts and the ethics surrounding colonialism. Yet while this relationship exists, whiteness is not synonymous with possessing these warped priorities. He regards racial identity as epiphenomenal to material conditions: whiteness functions as a set of

power relations, a set of entitlements, a history of entitlements. Possessing whiteness tends to place an individual closer to the center of power, where one's principles and morals warp in self-serving ways. But proximity to power and capital makes people less sensitive to moral consequences, whether they are white or Black. A position in the upper ranks of the colonized elite means greater proximity to power and capital, and so the effect is different but still marked and damaging. And the rural masses, furthest away from capital and power, are least susceptible to these dynamics, though they have their own different kinds of problems.

But as his section on why a political education is necessary makes clear, the emphasis is on proximity to power and capital, not on race per se. While the spontaneity, passion and clarity of the rural masses is enough to lead the people into the decolonial conflict in earnest, ultimately these qualities need to be paired with a political education. The people will need analytical and emotional tools for grappling with the moment when the reassuringly simple Manicheanism that seems to characterize the conflict breaks down. When the war for independence is in full swing, people will make the painful discovery that some of their countrymen will choose to profit off their people's sacrifice, that "some Blacks can be whiter than whites" (WOTE 93). The people also need education to make sense of the moment when they have to make sense of the fact that not all white men "succumb to the ambient climate of criminal hysteria" (94) - that sometimes prominent white people "go 'native,' and volunteer to undergo suffering, torture and death" to end French colonialism (94), and that sometimes white French soldiers refuse to fight against independence and are incarcerated for it.

To summarize, in the course of Fanon's analysis of how the fight for independence gets underway and the pitfalls that arise in its aftermath, he provides a model for democratic politics that is deeply radical, insofar as it inverts previous understandings of who possesses valuable

knowledge. In the story that he tells, the people who have had access to wealth and education under colonialism and have risen to prominence within nationalist political parties are the least trustworthy, and do not possess the knowledge or instincts that can sustain the decolonial movement. It is the "rural masses" in the country's interior whose understanding of the colonial situation itself is clearest and who have the strength, resolve and vision to ignite the decolonial movement. When the movement ultimately needs to transition from the country's interior into its cities, it does not do so because of the leadership of party elites, but rather through the efforts of what Fanon calls the "lumpenproletariat," a group who left the rural interior to find jobs in the city but did not manage to gain access to the spoils of relative privilege within the colonial system.

This model reveals several valuable principles about how to pursue liberation in ways that not only set a colonized country free of colonial rule but also invert and reconfigure oppressive patterns within the colonized community itself. In identifying the rural masses as the key to freedom, he subverts understandings about wealth, education, and other ways that colonialism confers value and creates class hierarchy. Rather than value being directly proportional to access to traditional forms of education, for Fanon, access to privilege within the colonial system only obscures one's sense of the necessity of decolonization and the impossibility of reform. By highlighting the importance of the knowledge and perspective the rural masses possess, he thus inverts class hierarchies. What's more, he lifts up and values the rural masses without essentializing them or putting them on a pedestal. He depicts the rural masses as complex – on the one hand possessing clarity and commitment when it comes to uprooting the ills of colonialism, but on the other hand committed to traditions and tribal difference in ways that do not serve the ends of national liberation. He envisions the relationships

within the colonized community to involve interdependence and growth, where people allow their priorities and modes of being to be shaped by each other across differences in education and economic class.

More specifically, the model that he suggests is one in which we must reject neoliberal ways of pretending that all knowledge and all perspectives are of equal value, a way of thinking about things that comes from the notion of every person having identical rights. In the model that he describes, it is first the case that the way that the rural masses evaluate the colonial context is more helpful than that of the urban proletariat and of nationalist parties. While it is true that the decolonial effort gets underway once radicals from urban centers make contact with the peasantry, his attention is far more on the ways in which urban radicals and intellectuals are transformed by the peasantry. He is clear that it is the synergy between these two groups that creates the conditions for change. Nationalist militants are not unidirectionally transformed by the contact with the rural masses; rather, they bring valuable knowledge and information which is crucial to the transformations that occur. Yet while there is a mutual dependence and edification, the way that he allocates his attention underscores that it is not as two groups with equally valuable knowledge. On the contrary, whatever knowledge and expertise the militant radicals from the city bring into the conversation is only useful insofar as it put in the service of "the people." The perspective of the rural masses transforms and overwhelms the urban militants, shakes them to their core, whereas the knowledge of the urban militants serves the rural masses.

What's more, by contending seriously with the issues that Black people specifically must face in the context of decolonization without much reference at all to a white gaze, he makes the text itself an example of his praxis. He argues that decolonial efforts must center the wisdom and

needs of the most oppressed, and he puts this notion into practice by placing Black people at the center of his analysis. The stakes are so high, the white colonial power is so daunting, yet he seems unaffected by the possibility that white people may read his book and think less of Black people or find their perspective and demands frightening. Rather, he engages with Black people seriously, lauding them and calling them to task when appropriate. Because he is not addressing his argument to a white audience, he avoids the pitfalls of respectability politics and the attending temptation to portray Black people in the most noble light so that white people will treat them as equals. He does not gloss over differences within Black people or the problems within the Black community out of fear that speaking about such differences and problems will harm the way that white people view Black people. He seems to believe that the "humanity" Black people possess – the basic agency, capacity, and integrity they have as real people with rich internal lives, desires, fears, interests and struggles – is so taken for granted that of course being deeply honest about who they are and what they get right and wrong is a possibility. He does not argue that questions about how to convince white people that Black people can be included in democracy are wrong on face. Instead, he proves that he believes those questions to be irrelevant by simply not engaging with them. He simply talks to and about this community as a real one, with real hierarchies, problems, debates and differences.

Leaving Hierarchies Intact

In the previous section, I discussed the components of Fanon's framework, in which he argues that decolonization requires prioritizing the needs and wisdom of the least advantaged in order to secure and enact freedom. Fanon's analysis about how different socioeconomic groups relate to each other provides a radical, emancipatory way of doing politics because of the way that it inverts hierarchies. He argues that Black freedom requires reversing the ways in which

colonialism confers respect and recognizes knowledge as valuable. Because proximity to power corrupts one's perspective and priorities, freedom necessitates prioritizing the voices of the vulnerable. Yet despite his investment in dismantling hierarchies, Fanon also reinscribes hierarchies at several points in his work. In this section, I explore two such cases. In the first case, an analysis of the assumptions he makes about what Blackness is will reveal that far from challenging Black inferiority, he sometimes seems to cosign it. In the second case, a comparison of how he treats Black men versus Black women in interracial relationships will reveal this to be another context in which Fanon does not challenge hierarchy. The overall argument of this section is that if the first part of his argument is right – that our success in building a meaningful freedom is made or broken by the extent to which we can challenge these hierarchies – then he has work to do in ways that meaningfully circumscribe the kinds of freedom that his framework enables.

One dimension of Fanon's analysis regarding what Black identity consists of is at the individual level; in *Black Skin, White Masks* in particular, he explores the psychological and emotional experience of being Black. Fanon explores Blackness at the individual level through the lens of the inferiority complex Black people have, which results from internalizing the wide-ranging anti-Black racism that pervades French culture. He characterizes an acute and pervasive sense of one's own inferiority as being a defining element of the Black experience, resulting from having grown up within a culture in which Blackness is associated with evil. These associations between Blackness and evil are pervasive at the level of language: Blackness is associated with the torturer, with Satan, with both physical and moral dirtiness, and he contrasts these associations with expressions and notions such as "the bright look of innocence" and "the white dove of peace" (BSWM, 145-146). In addition to the linguistic level, these associations occur in

other cultural spaces, such as the stories that children in French-speaking countries are told. When Black children are disobedient, they are told to 'stop acting like a nigger'" (BSWM, 148), and Black people learn that they are Black "to the degree to which [they are] wicked, sloppy, malicious, instinctual" (BSWM, 149). The conundrum of self-hatred in which all Black people are trapped is: "If I order my life like that of a moral man, I simply am not a Negro" (149). This same idea manifests itself multiple times in his chapters on romantic and sexual relationships between Black and white people – where either Black people aver to themselves and others that they are not Black because they are genteel, educated, or attractive, or white people assure various Black people that they are not Black because of their possession of these positive qualities.

In reaction to this deep-seated feeling of inferiority, Antilleans are obsessed with proving to themselves and others that they are successful within the criteria of whiteness, to such an extent that he makes the claim that "the Negro is comparison" (164). Whenever Black people encounter any other person, Black or white, they are always preoccupied with how their value or merit compares to that of the other person - indeed, he argues that Antilleans "have no inherent values of their own, but are always contingent on the presence of The Other" (164). They find security and define their own virility through the lens of diminishing those around them (ibid). Their obsession with how they are perceived is "because it is The Other who corroborates him in his search for self-validation" (165).

For Fanon, Black people experience Black identity as feeling frustrated and trapped as they passively receive the meanings that white people layer onto their skin. They absorb in an uninterrogated way the dominant narratives that exist about the relationship between Blackness and evil. He seems to conceive of Black identity as mainly negative, as an empty space; he gives

no indication of Black people having authorship for themselves and each other in defining or interpreting what being Black means. Their racial identities are determined almost entirely by white people.

In addition to this inferiority complex, he also analyzes the Black experience by examining the role that interactions with other people play in constituting an individual's identity. He conceives of the self as the result of the myriad ongoing, subtle, continual "dialectical" processes connecting the body to the social world (BSWM, 83). For Fanon, the substance of Black identity emerges from the moments when a Black person encounters a white person. He writes more generally about the period in his life when he first "had to meet the white man's eyes," and how in that moment he felt "an unfamiliar weight" (BSWM, 83). Being in the white world entailed experiencing his body mainly from the outside in, in a way that was highly conscious of how his body's movements appear in space to others (ibid). He describes his reaction when a white child repeatedly points him out by saying, "'Look, a Negro!' and then finally adds, 'Mama, see the Negro! I'm frightened!" He also describes the way that the external stimulus of this comment "flicked" over him as he walked past; his language gives the impression that this child's observation of and reaction to him literally glances over his skin. Additionally, he describes noticing while in military service that white women made "involuntary gestures of flight, of withdrawing" when they saw Negroes at dance halls (BSWM, 121). He identifies these many moments of encounter between himself and white people as being of foremost importance when thinking about how the Black self is created.

Fanon moves directly from making the general observation that all people "make" each other in the course of social interactions, and then when discussing Black people, he pays exclusive attention to the ways that Black people are made in these moments of encounter.

Entirely elided from these processes of self-construction are the moments in which Black people make and remake each other. He says that when Black people are at a stage where their whole world consists of other Black people, they never encounter the other, and so they never have to construct themselves, or see themselves constructed in the eyes of another. But this assertion is hard to reconcile with his observations about the intersubjective nature of identity, and the idea that all individuals make each other as they meet each other, that who they are exists as a construction that they and others participate in making. If this is true, it makes little sense that Black people as subjects are unable to see each other and make each other. Given how important it was for him to treat Black people as subjects throughout *Wretched of the Earth*, his denial here that they have agency to create each other in ways that contradict how white people construct them is striking.[5]

It also points to one way that his analysis differs significantly from that of James Baldwin. As Baldwin's work highlights aptly, this capacity of Black people to make and remake each is critical for Black survival. Black people go out into the world and the white people they encounter construct them as thieves, as monsters, but then they go home and their little sisters construct them as older siblings, their parents constructs them as children worthy of love, their friends construct them as people worth knowing. It therefore seems deeply incomplete that Fanon does not take into account the ways that Black people can and do construct each other, and the way that those constructions matter as they shape their sense of what Black and white identity mean. For Baldwin, Black people often view white people as deluded. It's also true that the world they've built seems designed to make Black people hate themselves – for sure. But the idea that Black people would automatically trust white people more than they would trust their

[5]hooks (1996) makes a related point in her essay on Fanon: "

own parents, siblings, friends when it comes to the question of who they are would make little sense within Baldwin's framework. In trying to show the harm that white supremacy causes on the psychological level, Fanon actually here underplays Black agency and makes Black people seem a bit duped by white people.

His analysis further shows that this void quality of Blackness is not limited simply to Black individuals and their sense of self, but also extends to huge elements of the Black culture. He casts aspersions on people who claim to be attached to Black cultural symbols that existed pre-independence. He acknowledges that under colonialism, colonists view adherence and loyalty (what he calls "complacent attachment," WOTE 171) to cultural symbols as national pride, and so in that sense, it functions as resistance. Yet maintaining loyalty to these cultural symbols doesn't actually do anything to "redefine relations" (WOTE 171). Demonstrating loyalty to these symbols is "merely a desperate clinging" (171). After hundreds of years of being exploited, and having to exist under the mantle of colonialism, he describes national culture that exists under colonialism as "increasingly shriveled, increasingly inert, and increasingly hollow" – as "radically shriveled" (171), devoid of any "real creativity" or "ebullience," "atrophied," just "an inventory of behavioral patterns, traditional costumes, and miscellaneous customs" (171). For him, changes in culture correspond directly to changes in where the people stand in relation to liberation and independence. As the revolution begins to be set in motion, national culture becomes revitalized.

Much like his analysis of Black culture under colonialism, his position with respect to Black political arrangements that survived through colonialism is also highly dismissive. When describing what must happen in the course of the struggle to decolonize, Fanon makes the case that the struggle for nationalist independence by its very nature destroys alternative, local sources

of authority in order to replace them with the nation. Violence produces a single, coherent identity under the banner of nationhood, in the process sweeping aside other modes of conferring authority. He claims that this is necessarily the case, and that it is positive. He characterizes these other sources of authority – religious, tribal, and ethnic leadership structures which command people's loyalty – as self-serving and complicit with colonial authorities, which is why dismantling them is so necessary. Violent decolonization dissolves this tribalism in a pitiless way. He narrates these other ways of organizing society as in tension with national unity and therefore in need of eradication. He avows the moral defensibility of this violence and destruction as an absolutely necessary step on the path to national independence from the colonial power.

The call for figuring out how to be in unity across difference, so crucial to his analysis of solidarity across class hierarchy in the decolonial struggle, is absent from this part of his analysis. There is the implication that difference and unity cannot coexist – that the only way a nation can function is if everyone is homogenous in their endorsement of the importance of national identity over other salient identities.

He conceives of nationalism as a project to eliminate the local in favor of the national, and he treats this project as neutral, obvious, inevitable and positive. Ironically, this mimics the exact logic of domination, subjugation and erasure of identities that happened as European countries transformed into nations. In the process, he perpetuates this concept of the nation as an unmarked, neutral norm.[6] His seeming obliviousness about the ways in which he is taking up this European logic is itself perhaps an example of the ways that being in the center of power

[6]Another irony here is that this is an example of a system of exploitation put in place to replace a previous form of exploitation. The fact that a new mode of exercising power would be necessary to replace the previous one is not in itself a cause for concern necessarily – indeed, he identifies contending with this reality as an inevitability, and one of the reasons why a robust political education is so necessary both during and after the fight for independence.

corrupts one's ability to explore one's complicity in the system currently in place, as his own framework identifies. There is so little respect for the extent to which these folks' ability to maintain these alternative sources of authority and the identities associated with them might point to a history of resisting colonialism, and contain knowledge that can be worthwhile in crafting a meaningful freedom.

To summarize, I have shown two ways that Fanon talks about the substance of Blackness: in the context of the individual experience of Blackness, as well as the collective Black experience more broadly about Black people in various formations. In each of these sites, we find that his understanding of Blackness is very sparse. Interestingly, previously it was his choice to conceptualize race as a product of material conditions that allowed him to avoid essentialism, and instead to foreground the ways that a racialized economic structure produces painful identities. This choice made it possible for him to avoid treating either Black people as a single monolith, which in turn enabled him to analyze relationships with the Black community through the lens of hierarchy – and to identify that the rural masses had the most important knowledge.

Yet despite the benefits of thinking about race as a function of a structural hierarchy rather than claiming or believing that there is some "essence" that inheres to these identity categories, this analysis suggests that there are nonetheless reasons to hold a different kind of tension. This tension would mean on the one hand recognizing that Blackness is a political and social creation, but on the other hand acknowledging that the people who inhabit these identities produce traditions and practices which take on a life and a weight of their own. These traditions and practices take on an independent existence to such an extent that the texture that makes up a racial identity cannot be reduced to the material conditions responsible for producing Blackness

as a social construction. The analysis he has about how relationships must change in the pursuit of decolonization, strong as it is, would nonetheless be enriched if his understanding of Blackness were less reductionist. This view of Black identity leads him to take the contradictory position of claiming to admire the knowledge that the rural masses bring to the revolution while simultaneously devaluing and dismissing the ways in which that knowledge and perspective were produced and kept safe within distinctively Black forms.

What's more, the fact that he's using such a sparse understanding of Blackness is itself proof of parameters within the relational framework he provides. His almost callous assertion that national identities must exist and all other identities must be eliminated indicates that he has decided that he will not be changed by the rural masses that he claims to admire so much, given that these identities are meaningful to precisely those masses. It is not necessarily problematic to suggest that there should be parameters around how Black folks are transformed in the course of the radical relationships that decolonization requires – in other words, to own that there are ways in which Fanon will be changed and will refuse to be changed. Perhaps one principle one should hold as one takes on the work of radical transformation in the service of decolonization is that all involved should or must identify and protect certain core principles even while they seek to be transformed. But if such parameters are necessary, his analysis sheds little light on how to erect those parameters in ways that don't continue to devalue the people whose knowledge he has narrated as being so key to freedom.

To summarize, despite the radical nature of Fanon's analysis about how the relationships between different groups must change, his understanding of the groups in question – namely, who Black people are and what Black identity consists of – is reductionist. His analysis is characterized by a second shortcoming: Fanon fails to apply the same principles of radical

relationship to gender as a source of hierarchy. In the remainder of this section, I analyze this by comparing the way that Fanon characterizes interracial relationships between Black men and white women with those between Black women and white women. I argue that his refusal to contend seriously with Black women's subjectivities as complex individuals limits the potential of the freedom he envisions.

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon deals with interracial relationships between women of color and white men and between men of color and white women. To investigate what each case reveals about the effects of racism, his strategy is to explore a piece of writing by individuals who are in each kind of relationship, and to apply tools of psychiatric analysis to explore how race has an impact on the individual. For the relationship between women of color and white men, he analyzes *Je suis Martiniquaise* [I am Martinican], a memoir written by Mayotte Capécia, and for the relationship between men of color and white women, he analyzes *Un homme pareil aux autres* [A Man like the Others], a novel by René Maran. In the rest of this section, I will begin by examining his analysis of romantic relationships between Black men and white women through his treatment of Jean Veneuse, the protagonist of *Un homme pareil aux autres*.

Before diving into the details of the interracial romantic relationship at the center of the chapter, Fanon begins by sketching who Veneuse is as a person. He gives a sense of this character's childhood. Veneuse was sent to a provincial boarding school in France as a child. His race meant that he could neither assimilate nor be invisible, and because his classmates frequently left the school to be with their families, he was regularly lonely; he coped with his loneliness by nourishing a love of books, "so that his best friends are his books" (BSWM, 46). Veneuse's love of books and solitude continue into his adulthood; his white friends and

acquaintances know him as helpful, trustworthy, "the kind of Negro that a lot of white guys ought to be like" (BSWM, 47). Andrée Marielle, a beautiful white woman and the daughter of a well-known poet, tells Jean Veneuse that she loves him. He loves her too, but as he has absorbed a lifetime's worth of ideas about Black inferiority, he finds the idea that she could love him impossible to believe or accept. Jean Veneuse writes to a white friend of his for advice, and the friend assures him that he has nothing to worry about: he thinks the way that white people think, he behaves the way that white people behave, he essentially is white, and so there is nothing more natural than that he would marry a woman like Andrée Marielle.

Fanon analyzes the psychology of Jean Veneuse by applying theories regarding the psychology of abandonment. Fanon argues that what the novel narrates as Jean Veneuse's introversion is actually the result of him being an "abandonment-neurotic" (BSWM, 53). Because he experienced so much rejection and loneliness as the only Black child at his school, expelled from his family home, Veneuse responded by retreating into himself; as an adult, he deeply resents the ways that his life path has consigned him to loneliness and to being misunderstood, and he has extremely low self-esteem. This prompts him to try to reject and abandon others before he himself is rejected, and also to be so mistrustful once he is in romantic relationships that he requires constant validation and reassurance.

For the purposes of this analysis, the most noteworthy feature of Fanon's chapter is that Fanon portrays the character at the center of the chapter as a complete, complex human being. He is a person with hopes, dreams, fears, desires, a complex psychology that is worth exploring in detail, traumas from his childhood that affect how he navigates romantic relationships as an adult. As a result, when this Black man falls in love with this white woman and struggles to accept that she has feelings for him, Fanon's analysis illuminates how one person's psychology

interacts with larger forces like colonialism and internalized racism, to produce an experience specific to Jean Veneuse and yet also informative about the experiences of Black men more broadly.

His analysis of Mayotte Capécia, the main figure in Je suis Martiniquaise, could not be more different in these respects. In both cases, Fanon judges the ways that these Black people hate Blackness and hate themselves. Yet whereas Fanon treats the phenomenon of internalized racism as an outcome that Jean Veneuse experiences in a specific way and that should be understood on its own terms, in the case of Mayotte, Fanon attempts no such understanding.

Fanon reduces the entirety of Mayotte's personality to the ways that she values and pursues whiteness at all costs. Fanon does not offer much description of what Mayotte is like as a person. In one of the few reflections he offers on what she is like as a person, he describes her as possessing an "artificiality" which is fed by her "resentment," both of which make her and people like her unable ever to access love (BSWM, 30). She does not appear to have any personality traits that are not tied directly to her obsession with whiteness. Whereas Jean Veneuse is described reading, interacting with peers, as a professional, the only actions Mayotte ever engages in are reflecting on how white people are superior to Black people or, once married to a white man, averring his superiority in every way. Whereas Jean Veneuse has colleagues who have an opinion of him – and a positive one, at that – Mayotte exists in a vacuum, with no apparent friends or social context. Whereas Jean Veneuse had hopes and struggles, the only hope Mayotte has is to marry a white man, and the only struggle is that she is Black.

Another difference between how Fanon treats the two is that whereas with Jean Veneuse, Fanon's analysis favors depth, with Mayotte, he focuses on breadth regarding Black women. In other words, his goal is not to understand the factors that produced and shaped Mayotte's

internalized racism. Rather, it is simply to identify the phenomenon and the many ways it manifests itself, and then prove that it is not specific to Mayotte but characteristic of many Black women. “I know a great number of girls from Martinique, students in France, who admitted to me with complete candor – completely white candor – that they would find it impossible to marry Black men” (33). He describes “all these frantic women of color in quest of white men” who are in for the worst surprise of their lives when they find that while white men take Black women as sexual partners, “white men do not marry Black women” (34). The chapter consists of a veritable parade of Black women articulating that Blackness is inferior in every sense and then explicitly distancing themselves from Blackness. Indeed, throughout the book, the only Black woman he describes in even somewhat neutral terms is his mother, and even then, he mentions the way that she sings him French love songs that have nothing to say about Black people (BSWM, 148).

What Fanon demonstrates in his interpretation of Black women’s behavior and motivations is a willful apathy. He chooses, over and over again, not to understand. It is of course entirely possible that some of these issues arise because he places at the center of his analysis of Black woman an individual that he finds to be genuinely morally dubious. Indeed, the personal and vitriolic way that he addresses her in a footnote suggests that he has reached precisely that judgement. In addition to calling her a “mudslinging storyteller” and expressing the hope that she “add no more to the mass of her imbecilities, he also addresses her directly: “But remember that, beyond your 500 anemic pages, it will always be possible to regain the honorable road that leads to the heart. In spite of you” (BSWM 37). He despises her personally, and perhaps for good reason. But then, without any nuance, he goes to great lengths to show that her behavior is typical of Black women more broadly. He does not show even remotely the same

level of personal knowledge, let alone antipathy, for René Maran, the author of the novel about Jean Veneuse.

What this bad faith consists of is that rather than treating the behaviors of Black women as endogenous to the phenomena of colonialism and racism, the causes of which are worthy of investigation, he leaves the cartoon character of Black women unproblematized, instead choosing to take the least sympathetic approach possible. He describes a behavior, and then does the massive injustice of assuming that he can allow the heinousness of it to speak for itself, as though the behavior tells his audience all that they need to know about the motives underlying it. The generosity he could have extended was to assume that any complicated, interesting person engages in a behavior that seems heinous, this must have happened because of the pressures that they are experiencing, because complicated, interesting people do not choose to do heinous things for no reason. Engaging in good faith would mean assuming that all Black women are not stupid, immoral and racist, and then seeking to explain why Black women nonetheless reach for whiteness. Engaging in good faith would mean assuming that Black women, like Jean Veneuse, have dreams and hopes and pain, that they too have experienced silences and loneliness and hurt as broad forces of colonialism and racism acted on their families, bodies, and psychologies. Engaging in good faith would then require contending seriously, not rhetorically, with the question of why this mass of diverse and complex people reject themselves and other Black people so stridently. If, as Fanon suggests, the way that Black women reject Blackness is qualitatively different from the way Black men do, engaging in good faith would involve seek to explain the causes of those differences.

Furthermore, the text indicates that the choice not to take up this kind of analysis does not arise out of ignorance about the material conditions that pressure Black women in unique ways.

While he remains ignorant of their internal lives, he demonstrates that he is aware of the structures that affect Black women's lives and psychologies. In a footnote, he contextualizes why Mayotte Capécia says that she takes pride in knowing she had a white grandmother. He says that in the case of white men and Black women, white men can "allow himself the luxury" of having multiple partners (BSWM, 37). With white women, by contrast, when they choose to "accept" a Black man, it "automatically" is romantic (ibid). When white women engage in romantic relationships with Black men, it is a "giving," whereas when white men sleep with Black women, it is a "seizing" (ibid). He further observes that even though interracial marriage and cohabitation is very rare, there is an "amazing" number of biracial people, because it is fairly common for white men to have sex with their servants. Mayotte Capécia is proud when she learns that her grandmother was white because it means that she was not "made in the bushes" (ibid).

What is still absent in the way that he presents these facts is the Black woman's subjectivity. He does not explore, nor does he seem to care about, what it feels like to be "seized" by white men. He does not engage with the question of what it would mean for it to be so extremely normal to have children who are viewed as "illegitimate." He does not spare a thought for what it would mean to live in a world where, at best, deeply hidden and shame-filled sex and at worst just sexual assault and rape is so common that "made in the bushes" is a common idiom. He shows no interest in the question of what it would mean when it is so normal for sex, reproduction, and family life to happen within that field of shame and violence.

This lack of curiosity or interest on his part has several implications. First, it is stunning that he expects his audience to believe, in light of all of these pressures, pains, indignities, that the only thing Black women know, experience, and express is the wish to be close to whiteness

to distance themselves from Blackness. The simplicity of that behavior is not commensurate with the complexity of the facts on the ground. Second, even if one grants that these wishes for distance from Blackness really do comprise the vast majority of what Black women express in Fanon's experience, engaging with generosity and good faith would prompt us to wonder whether they express this wish comes from the fact that being a Black woman in the context he describes must be associated with considerable pain and danger associated with it. The pervasiveness prompts us to sympathize with the very basic wish not to hold such things, or for one's children to hold such things. It prompts us to try to maintain a tension. It prompts us to on the one hand recognize that anti-Blackness of course is racist, but also for us to spend our attention changing the material processes that make anti-Blackness among Black women so pervasive.

This analysis of the differences in how Fanon treats women of color as compared to men of color complements the work of others who have explored gender in Fanon's writing. Young catalogues several important differences in how Fanon treats women of color. While the moment in which a white child "races" a Black man features prominently in his work, there is no analysis or interest in whether an analogous moment exists for Black women, and if not, why that would be the case. One of the disparities she observes is that Fanon denies women of color an "inner world," not analyzing their "psyches" at all (Young 1995, 95). Another major difference Young notes is that according to Fanon, men of color engage in interracial relationships with white women as a kind of "rite/right of passage into masculinity" (Young 1995, 94), whereas he characterizes women of color who engage in relationships with white men as responsible for the "denegrification" of the race. Young attributes this difference to the capacity that women of color have to give birth to interracial children. This capacity to have interracial children threatens

the stability and cohesion of the racial community. The presence of this biracial identity confuses the boundary between Black and white in ways that are threatening.

Chow (1999) too centers her analysis on the profound difference in treatment that Fanon bestows upon women of color. Like Young, she argues that Fanon attributes a kind of responsibility for threatening the race to women of color who pursue interracial relationships in a way that he does not for men of color. He represents the woman of color as "potentially if not always a whore, a sell-out, and hence a traitor to her own ethnic community" (Chow 1999, 43). When the woman of color chooses a white partner, to Fanon this choice represents abandoning men of color, and it is because of these moral deficiencies on their part that women of color are "unworthy of the careful analytic attention" that Fanon granted men of color. Fanon extends to men of color what Chow calls the "privilege of ambivalence," by which she means that Fanon interprets the choices of men of color through the lens of "the impossible choice between whiteness and Blackness" that they face, in ways that he does not for women of color.

While some read and react to Fanon in ways that complement the close reading I have provided, others interpret Fanon in ways that directly oppose these conclusions. Sharpley-Whiting, in particular, argues that it is possible to recover from Fanon's text a coherent theory of women's liberation from both colonialism and patriarchy. She argues that Fanon takes up Capécia's book not because he wishes to engage women of color in bad faith, but rather because it made an enormous impact on literary circles; Capécia became the first Black woman to win the Grand Prix Littéraire des Antilles for the book. His investment in exposing Capécia's anti-Black racism is due to the fact that it seemed highly telling to Fanon that were so enamored with this book, given that its main character espouses hatred of her own skin and adulation of whiteness. Furthermore, Sharpley-Whiting regards the attempt by Bergner (1999) to redeem Capécia's

behavior or characterize Capécia as feminist as being both tokenizing and contrary to feminism. She argues that it is crucial not to narrate problematic behaviors as feminist or anti-racist simply because women are engaged in them; pretending otherwise necessarily involves again refusing to take Black women seriously as agents who are responsible for their behavior. Lastly, Sharpley-Whiting disagrees that Fanon treats women of color more harshly than he treats men of color. She argues that he is harsh to the two kinds of people in different ways, which makes perfect since given that the two texts he analyzes are very different kinds of work with very different tones. Indeed, Sharpley-Whiting argues that in some ways Fanon is harsher to Jean Veneuse, the man of color he studies, than he is to Capécia. Whereas Capécia's "psychical crises" are "culturally produced," Veneuse's "emanate from within," serving only as the means by which he "externalize[s] his neurosis" (Sharpley Whiting 1999, 73).

Sharpley-Whiting's analysis on, in particular, why Fanon chooses the work of an author that he dislikes so profoundly, and even the notion of why the stakes of proving her beliefs and attitudes to be problematic, is an enormously helpful context that many do not address when analyzing *Black Skin, White Masks*. All the same, her argument that Fanon's treatment of Capécia is not problematic relies on the conflation of two distinct issues: the substance of Capécia's writing, on the one hand, and the practices that Fanon deploys in the course of analyzing her writing. Even if the substance of Capécia's writing is racist, it is still possible to evaluate the ethics of the assumptions and practices that Fanon brings to his analysis of her. Similarly, the issue is not merely that he treats the character Veneuse and the person Capécia differently. It is of course perfectly sensible that he would treat the works differently, for the reasons Sharpley-Whiting mentions and others. Indeed, according to the argument advanced in this chapter, part of the brilliance of Fanon's framework is precisely the idea that radical politics

require people with different positionalities possess different kinds of knowledge which must serve different purposes within efforts against colonialism. The issue, then, is not that the treatment is different; it is rather that the specific ways in which the treatment is different are problematic. The issue is that where Fanon should have extended more generosity, he instead shows less.

Rabaka (2011) builds on Sharpley-Whiting's arguments with respect to Fanon and gender. Rabaka argues that when it comes to issues of identity, scholars regularly have no problem engaging with the ideas and contributions of the white male authors who people the theoretical canon. For writers like Hegel, Even though significant portions of their work espouse deeply prejudiced beliefs, the fact that they at times advance harmful narratives does not disqualify them as thinkers. Rabaka thus takes issue with the structure of argument wherein Fanon was deeply imperfect on gender issues and therefore his whole body of work and vision for freedom and resistance become disposal. He calls to task feminist scholars who apply different standards to Black male authors than they do to those authors' white counterparts. Rather than "throwing the baby out with the bath water" (220), Rabaka's approach is instead to be attentive to the "pro-feminist fragments" within Fanon's work (220). To this end, the pro-feminist fragments that Rabaka analyzes are "Algeria Unveiled" and "The Algerian Family," from A Dying Colonialism, reading each of these essays in order to demonstrate the ways in which Fanon's thought complements feminist values and objectives.

In "Algeria Unveiled," Fanon identifies the way that the colonial power claimed that its continued rule was necessary for the benefit Algerian women, in order to liberate them from the oppressive and backward ways of the Algerian men. The FLN's ability to use women wearing veils for their guerrilla tactics was only possible because of the extent to which the French

colonists consistently underestimated the courage, intelligence, and commitment of Algerian women, despite the purported interest of the French in these women's liberation. The effort to overthrow colonial rule prompted the Algerian activists to challenge and cast aside several patriarchal beliefs about women's roles should be. French persecution of Algerian militants made it necessary to include Algerian women in new and radical ways. Similarly, in "The Algerian Family," Fanon argues that the Algerian revolution fundamentally transformed traditional relationships between Algerian women and their fathers, husbands, and brothers. Fanon claims that they went from having no responsibility to being "sisters" in the struggle.

Rabaka specifically diverges with McClintock (1999), who argues that the ways in which the FLN incorporated Algerian women into their mission is not the same thing as recognizing them as agents, able to make choices and frame the agenda. McClintock asks whether simply being included within a political project formulated by men is the same thing as wielding agency. While Rabaka finds the question to be valid, he takes McClintock to task for not providing an answer to it: "It would seem that an otherwise sophisticated poststructural and postmodern feminist such as McClintock would be able to detect the crucial difference between destructive criticism and constructive criticism, but here she seems to be self-righteously committed to the former and to have all but forgotten the latter" (Rabaka 1999, 250-251). What's more, Rabaka finds McClintock too ready to lay the blame at Fanon's feet rather than placing the blame where it should go, on the French colonists and on the Algerian men who held patriarchal beliefs. Even if Fanon's depiction of women's involvement in the FLN is beset by "inaccuracies" and "mythmaking," as the Algerian activist and scholar Marie-Aimée Helie-Lucas (1999) claims, Rabaka reminds us that it at least acknowledges and celebrates women's contributions.

Rabaka is right to raise questions about whether there is an instinct among scholars to disregard Fanon's work in total when they would never disregard the work of other canonical writers to that same extent. But the fact that these other canonical writers are also deeply problematic on issues of identity does not in itself erase the shortcomings in Fanon's work. Additionally, while we should always be attentive to the reasons why we may bring different standards to authors of different backgrounds, and make sure as much as possible that these differences in standards are not driven by prejudice. But it may be necessary to maintain the wish to hold ourselves accountable in conjunction with the idea that perhaps Fanon *should* be held to different standards. The reason for this relates to the places where Fanon's work intersects with the scholarship of Jacques Lacan, where he explores in minute and embodied detail the ways in which individuals construct each other's identities. As I argued in the previous section, the intersubjective space in which Black men and women can encounter each other and make each other – as partners, as friends, as people with dignity who are worth knowing – is replete with radical possibility. In some ways, it is one of the most important and unique respites that Black people and Black communities have to carve out spaces for their own subjectivities, their own visions for who they are and what their lives can be. To some extent, it is precisely the ability to create that separate space in which alternative epistemologies of resistance are possible that motivates this project. When Fanon chooses to speak from that space in ways that imbue Black women's bodies and positionalities with these unfair and inaccurate meanings, it represents a sort of failure which is different from when white men engage in the same act.

Lastly, some of Rabaka's argumentation seems to rely on a very different way of conceptualizing what it means to make use of Fanon. This becomes especially evident in the way he dismisses McClintock's criticism of Fanon as "destructive" rather than "constructive"

(Rabaka 2011, 250-251). Distinguishing between true agency versus the capacity to act is not a helpful, interesting contribution. By pointing this out, McClintock prompts her audience to deepen their understanding of what true agency entails. It is incumbent upon Rabaka to explain why it would be true that rehabilitating Fanon or avoiding finding fault with him is more constructive than coming to a nuanced understanding of what women's agency comprises. A similar issue arises in how he takes McClintock to task for not finding fault with French colonists, or with Algerian men who constrained women's agency. Of course both groups are responsible. But the fact that they are responsible – even granting that they are more responsible - their responsibility, it is not clear why that would mean that Fanon is not at all responsible for the way that he depicts women, or why talking about the nature of that responsibility is counterproductive. Rabaka concedes several times throughout the chapter that Fanon is not perfect with regard to gender; what he never clarifies, however, is how responsible scholars are allowed to hold him before he considers their efforts should be considered destructive rather than constructive. Ultimately, in much the same way that Fanon proves his respect for Black people by addressing them as real, complex people whose politics can at times be flawed, respecting Fanon means being very clear about, and being interested in learning from, the ways in which his own politics are flawed. The notion of combing through his work for pro-feminist fragments seems not just problematic but beneath the commitment to holding people who pursue justice to higher standards that Fanon models so well in his own work.

What is fascinating is how frequently authors engage precisely the same texts in order to reach diametrically opposed conclusions. They disagree on whether Fanon treats women of color unfairly relative to white men, whether he is harsher to women of color than he is to men of color; whether he means his conclusions to apply to all women of color or just Mayotte Capécia.

Insofar as it seems unlikely that any of these scholars are reading Fanon in bad faith, what becomes clear is that the way these scholars differ is in what agendas they bring to the task of how to read Fanon productively, and how they conceptualize the task in the first place. Though I disagree with the conclusions they draw about the text itself, like Rabaka, I am disinclined to throw the baby out with the bath water; like Sharpley-Whiting, I find Fanon's work incredibly instructive with respect to Black women's liberation. The way that I find it instructive, however, is quite different. To me, what making use of Fanon entails is extending to him the generosity he refuses to extend to the women of color he discusses in his text. By this, what I mean is that I will treat the prejudices in his analysis as political outcomes worth understanding, rather than as character flaws or reasons to dispose of or dismiss him. In addition, to Rabaka's fear about throwing the baby out with the bath water, the way I will be attentive to the enormous value and insight that his theory represents is by using his model for how to do politics in community in order to shed light on what the problems are with his analysis, what the consequences of those problems are, and how one would go about rearranging modes of doing politics in order to address those problems.

As mentioned, extending analytical generosity to Fanon means treating his interest in rendering Black women and their motivations invisible as a political outcome in itself. The level of apathy – the way that his sentences avoid treating Black women as the subject – is nothing short of artful, and engaging Fanon in good faith means considering the structures that are in place that allow such carefully maintained apathy and ignorance. This apathy and ignorance is so different from the ignorance that exists between the bourgeoisie and the rural masses that he describes in *Wretched of the Earth*, for instance. In that case, one possible cause of the ignorance and apathy the bourgeoisie feel toward the rural classes comes from geographic separation,

coupled with the fact that the ability to embody, perform, and reify ignorance and a stinginess of sympathy about the rural masses has material benefits to the bourgeoisie – that for a bourgeois Black person, remaining ignorant of the rural masses can lead directly to social capital, opportunities, and advancement. The ignorance Fanon has about Black women's internal lives is also so much less obvious than the ignorance between white and Black people under colonialism; the vested material interest that white people have in maintaining ignorance and apathy about Black subjectivity is obvious, and the material conditions of colonialism very much reflect this ambition insofar as they create physical separation wherever possible. In other words, for both of these other instances of ignorance and deciding not to take subjectivities seriously, there is an element of physical separation in ways that differentiate them from ignorance and apathy surrounding gender. It is beyond the scope of this paper, but Fanon prompts us to wonder what specific structures exist in order to preserve such ignorance; it is far less likely that a Black man would never live in close quarters with at least a few Black women.

This has consequences for his analysis. One consequence is that there are things about colonialism that he does not know anything about, does not understand, which in turn means that there are challenges to seeking freedom for which he will be unprepared. He's doing to women precisely that which the urban elites did to the rural masses. And in much the same way – your vision of freedom is shortsighted, fatally incomplete and doomed to fail.

And – according to his own logic – this shortsightedness has consequences for the kind of freedom that he can envision and realize. Central to Fanon's framework is the claim that decolonization got underway the moment the expelled urban radicals put their knowledge at the service of the rural masses. By refusing to sympathize with Black women, by looking at their behavior from a distance, he has perhaps made it impossible to forge a freedom worth pursuing.

In much the same way that urban radicals must allow themselves to be transformed by the rural masses in ways that they couldn't ever have conceptualized beforehand, Fanon has foreclosed for himself the personal transformation that might have been possible – the sense of freedom, clarity and possibility – that might have come if he had put yourself in the service of the bearers of gendered knowledge.

To summarize, while Fanon's framework about the ways that relationships must transform in order to pursue decolonization is indeed radical, he nonetheless does not go far enough with respect to the nature of Black identity and the centrality of Black women's perspectives and knowledge. Interestingly, the two might actually be related. His problems with Blackness speak to a desperate need of the Black mother Audre Lorde says we all deserve. The freedom his framework would have made possible might have benefited considerably had he allowed his vision and praxis to be transformed by the knowledge of Black women in the way he allowed them to be transformed by the knowledge of the rural masses.

CONCLUSION

Introduction

This dissertation is a comparative study of the epistemological elements of structural racism. In Chapter 1, I first produced a close reading of three essays by James Baldwin, with the goal of distilling several of its key insights into a framework for understanding epistemologies associated with particular locations within a racial structure. In the Chapter 2, I then used this framework to guide an analysis of the work of Albert Camus. I found that several of the epistemological mechanisms that James Baldwin identifies within American whiteness also characterize Albert Camus's writing. In the Chapter 3, I juxtaposed Baldwin's framework for conceptualizing the epistemological elements of structural racism with the work of Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* and *Wretched of the Earth*. This juxtaposition revealed several key insights. First, similarities in how Fanon characterizes white people's attitudes and the nature of racism suggest that the view from the bottom of a racial hierarchy within French empire bears some similarity to the view from the bottom of American empire. Second, in this close reading, I also explored the epistemology of resistance developed and explored by Frantz Fanon at the beginning of his career. I then use this model of prioritizing the knowledge and orientations of the most disadvantaged, in order to explore the gender dynamics of *Black Skin, White Masks*. What becomes clear through my analysis is that Fanon's solidarity politics model is so robust that it sheds light on how he could have done better with gender.

I begin this last chapter by summarizing my findings. I begin by discussing some insights I gained about what it means to study epistemology; I then turn to the research questions organizing this project and summarize how the analysis of the preceding three chapters applies to and answers the questions posed by this dissertation. In the course of this work, I also explore the

connections that exist between the epistemologies and arguments offered by these authors. After my discussion of the research questions, I then take a broader view and discuss several implications of this work, as well as several avenues of inquiry that I may pursue in the future based on this research.

Summary of Findings

Methodological Findings

This study involved tracking epistemological mechanisms by paying attention both to what authors say explicitly about how knowledge functions in their political world but also by paying attention to what they did not say. In some ways, Camus represents one extreme in terms of how these dynamics can relate to each other. What Camus said explicitly about what it means to live a meaningful life revolved around refusing to shy away from the unreasonable and apathetic universe, no matter how unsettling that is to face. Yet, in the novels he wrote in order to explicate this philosophy, he wrote out of existence entire sectors of society and the political problems associated with them. Here, omissions and erasures on his part were incredibly useful in illuminating how processes of knowing work to reinforce power arrangements within a racialized system.

Fanon represented a more balanced version of this dynamic. When seeking to understand how epistemology operates within his depiction of his political and social landscapes, the explicit was an important source of information. Fanon directly speaks to how contact between urban radicals and farmworkers in the country's interior has a transformative effect on the perspective that these radicals brought and the way they understood how they fit within racial politics. Yet in Fanon's case, too, it was sometimes the omissions and the erasures that spoke to underlying

epistemological mechanisms at work. In his case, showing no interest in or compassion for Black women's perspectives in romantic relationships proved a telling choice, particularly when compared with how Fanon treated Black men. There choices regarding what to exclude spoke volumes, and, specifically, these choices showed how omission and silence function within an epistemology of privilege in order to legitimize power arrangements.

In this study, Baldwin was the only case in which so I gave almost exclusive priority to his explicit reflections on how knowledge, perspective and epistemology relate to the politics of race. Because his writing supplied some of the key conceptual tools that framed the rest of the study, my focus was on the ideas that were within the parameters of debate. But one avenue for future research would be to apply this same method to other works of Baldwin himself.

Research Question 1: What is the relationship between racial system and epistemology?

As mentioned in the introduction, it is not clear that a definitive, generalizable answer to this question is possible. All the same, this research suggests that the observations James Baldwin makes about whiteness in America are not reducible to the specific history, culture, and context of the United States. Rather, some of the epistemological mechanisms he identifies, and the fears and motivations from which they arise, may be a consequence of the structure of racial politics in the United States. It may be the case that groups who experience racial privilege may, because of their privileged position within a hierarchy, almost necessary experience the wish and instinct to avoid knowing realities that threaten their sense of deservingness. Equally important, they may almost necessarily experience greater access to the means to actually indulge that instinct.

For James Baldwin, whiteness entails interposing a set of beliefs between oneself and reality. The beliefs that white people place between themselves and the world pertain to who they are relative to Black people, as well as a narrative about the factors that lead to the racialized distribution of safety and economic well-being. This is one epistemology that Baldwin associates with a position of privilege within the racial hierarchy of the United States. My close reading of Albert Camus reveals that many of the observations Baldwin makes about how white people know and choose not to know in the United States are also highly applicable in France. The chapter on Camus shed light on the many ways that Camus exhibited an epistemology of privilege that resembles what Baldwin analyzed. My chapter particularly focused on the asymmetry of knowledge between people with privilege and people without, as well as the tendency toward objectifying Black people who entered the scene. Additionally, Camus engaged in the tendency to refer to racial problems in ways that are sociological and far removed, which had the effect of flattening and simplifying communities of color in his fiction, precisely as Baldwin describes. Lastly, Camus's work also involved instrumentalizing Black people; his fiction treats Black people as little more than an opportunity for white characters to show their moral authority.

While Baldwin alludes to several possible Black epistemologies, the one he focuses on in "Down at the Cross" involves a very particular relationship with the unknown. While he focuses on this deeply positive epistemological strategy within this essay, he also alludes to a multiplicity of options, some more likely to lead to personal peace than others. This reality, while alluded to more abstractly within this selection of works by James Baldwin, becomes even more unavoidably salient through the close reading of Frantz Fanon. In *Black Skin, White Masks,*

Fanon explores how Blackness and Black culture have little value within the Black community. This pervasive internalized racism becomes obvious in interpersonal relationships.

In *Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon provides more insight about the epistemology associated with being within a position of disadvantage in a racial system. Specifically, he clarifies how class privilege heavily influences the epistemology associated with a person's position in a racial system. Black people who have class privilege and greater access to the economic and intellectual hub of the metropole view colonialism as inevitable and the notion of militarily overthrowing a colonial power absurd. Algerians with little or no capital and privilege have a totally different orientation toward these questions. Black people that capitalism locked out of any way to succeed within capitalism, who live and work in the rural periphery, have a clearer view of the fundamental wrongness of colonialism that prompts them to be willing to seriously engage in the struggle in a way that privileged Black people initially will not be.

While these two seminal works shed light on how one's position in a racial system impacts one's epistemology, Fanon's work also points to the situations in which people can exert agency and make choices about the schemas governing how they process the world around them. . This idea surfaces in his work in two different ways. First, it becomes clear in the process that Fanon depicts in which Black radicals whom the moderate nationalist parties expelled seek refuge in the countryside. This moment illustrates how epistemological frameworks are dynamic, in the sense that people learn and adopt novel ways of conceptualizing their own political contexts. Indeed, Fanon narrates revolutionary possibility as hinging upon precisely that moment.

Another place where Fanon's analysis points to how these epistemological positions are not inherent is in the section where he talks about the necessity of a political education. In

Wretched of the Earth, he argues that a political education is what can help a community come to terms with the complexities that will arise in the process of rising up to seek independence and revolution. He argues that a political education is necessary because it can help prepare organizers for the disappointing and heartbreaking moment in which they must come to terms with the fact that sometimes their fellow Black countrymen will let them down. A radical political education can also help anticolonial Black organizers prepare for the reality that sometimes white people can and will put down their privilege and work to pursue Black independence, freedom and justice; put themselves on the line; and serve as allies upon which one can rely as faithfully as one would a brother. .

Indeed, while there are many significant differences between how Baldwin and Fanon conceptualize an ideal and liberated future, it is striking that both analyses are marked by an utter unwillingness to oversimplify or essentialize – to claim that Black people have a monopoly on the truth, or that white people are incapable of working to promote Black liberation.

Research Question 2: How are epistemologies of privilege and resistance similar across different racial systems?

The dissertation shows that there are similarities in epistemologies of privilege across different racial systems. The epistemology of racial privilege that James Baldwin identifies as being at work in his context in the United States shares several features with the epistemology of racial privilege at work in the reading of Albert Camus. In both cases, people with greater racial privilege and people with less racial privilege are locked into a relationship that is characterized by an asymmetry of knowledge. In the American context, Baldwin argues that the economic relationships that bind these groups to each other produce a situation in which Black people witness white people and some of the most crucial moments of their lives – their births,

weddings, funerals, meals. The reverse is not at all true, however; white people know very little about who Black people are, what their family lives are truly like, or what they think.

Albert Camus does not explicitly describe anything like what Baldwin articulates, yet his novels reveal precisely the dynamics that James Baldwin identifies in full swing. In *The Stranger*, people of color play a critical role for the purpose of the novel's plot. The protagonist Meursault's friend Raymond abuses and assaults his Arab girlfriend and consequently angers her friends and family. These relationships and the allegiances and loyalties that they imply are ultimately what puts Meursault and Raymond in conflict with this nameless group of Arab Algerians. Yet Camus makes narrative use of this community and its connections without ever entering into, showing any interest in, or offering even the barest depiction of any of the content of this community's connections. Similarly, in *The Plague*, while several of the novel's main characters walk through "Negro" neighborhoods, there is not a Black character to be found in the entire novel, despite the fact that it occurs in a country whose population was ninety percent Black. These products of Camus's imagination provide a unique opportunity to explore how privilege involves the ability and right to know whole groups of people out of existence.

Another way that epistemologies of privilege seem to be similar in both contexts is how race problems are displaced, rendered abstract and removed. Baldwin argues that white people sometimes discuss Black people as a sociological problem, couching the problem in the safe and anesthetized language of statistics, often characterizing problems of racial inequity in ways that are highly disembodied, remote from and unrelated to the lives of white people. The phenomenon that Baldwin explores is also at work in the novels of Camus. In *The Plague, Camus allude*s to inequity and the poor living conditions that the Arabs experience broadly but only to make a point about the integrity of the white characters. The living conditions of Arabs

functions as a point of reference that the audience can use to gauge and compare the integrity of various white characters, as well as their orientation to the willingness to speak truth to power.

While the parallels between epistemologies of privilege feel straightforward, similarity regarding epistemologies of resistance seem far more complex. One reason for this may be the framework structuring the analysis in the first place. While Baldwin is clear about an epistemology of privilege, he is very specific about the multiple epistemologies he has seen at work within Black people as they have responded to their location within a racist structure. In "Down at the Cross," he identifies a tradition that functions as an ideal type.

Interestingly, the epistemology of resistance that Fanon identifies in *Wretched of the Earth* also functions as something of an ideal type. Placing those two ideal types next to each other reveals similarities, yet even there, those similarities feel more complicated and ambiguous than the parallels that arose in epistemology of privilege. Baldwin clarifies the epistemology of resistance that he regards as critical for Black survival in "Down at the Cross," the letter to his nephew. He contextualizes this epistemology of resistance by describing how the entire family related to his nephew's birth, and what it meant to them. He describes how their love for him slightly changed how they moved through the world, forced them to want and hope for certain kinds of outcomes despite the cruelty and unfairness of the world around them. Baldwin goes on to argue that this choice to hope for the future as embodied in a community's children is part of this tradition within the Black community. He says that Black people have for a very long time chosen to contend with the long odds of present circumstances in order to create possibilities for their children that they had never seen or imagined before. He tells his nephew: "If we had not loved each other none of us would have survived. And now you must survive because we love you, and for the sake of your children and your children's children" (TFNT, 6). This tradition

strikes Baldwin as being one of the most noble and impressive histories that America has ever produced.

Fanon is probably no less proud of the ideal type he depicts in *Wretched of the Earth*. His ideal type begins when people expelled from the nationalist party flee into the exterior of the country in order to evade colonial authorities. In the course of this flight into the rural parts of the country, radicals encounter very different ways of being in community as well as very different perspectives on colonialism. For Fanon, radical change occurs the moment that Black people with greater intellectual and economic privilege enter into relationship with Black people who have been excluded. For Fanon, the struggle against colonialism really begins the moment that privileged Black people can allow their values and ways of thinking to be transformed by these relationships and then choose to apply all their resources and privilege in order to serve the Black people who have been most disadvantaged and exploited by colonialism.

The epistemologies of resistance offered by these two Black authors share some elements. For one, they are similar in the sense that they are both community-oriented. In both cases, transformative liberation is not an individual effort and is instead bound up in the relationships that connect members of a community to each other. They both hinge on the notion that Black people sometimes save themselves by prioritizing each other. Relatedly, while both authors represent communities that are contending with racial injustice caused by white people, the path to a world on the other side of those injustices does not pass through changing white people's minds. In different ways, both models characterize Black people as their own best salvation.

Additionally, while the way that knowledge functions in each of these arguments is different, the purposes that it serves may be similar. For Fanon, part of why the connection

between urban radicals and rural communities is so crucial is that when urban radicals are stuck within the framework of moderate Black nationalist political parties, beliefs about the inevitability of the colonial situation are so pervasive that they feels like fact. Being in contact with people who have been far more excluded from even the possibility of advancement within the institutions of colonialism is beneficial to urban radicals because it provides a total reorientation regarding these questions. Black people who are further from the center of colonial administration, people who have never had a way to advance within the paltry opportunities offered to Black people within those apparatuses, are less likely to have internalized colonial ways of assigning value. They are less likely to believe that reforming these systems would make them more inclusive or accessible. Furthermore, Black people who are in the rural interior of the country are more loyal to their own ways of doing politics and community. Indeed, Fanon even argues they are loyal to a fault, and he characterizes some of these loyalties and investments as backwards and counterproductive.

My larger point is that the reason urban radicals benefit so much from being in community with Black people who have no hope of being able to succeed within the terms of colonialism is that it offers an entirely different way of looking at the world, a different way of understanding what is and is not important, valuable, worth paying attention to. One way that Black people save each other within Fanon's framework is that they can know each other back into existence. In a world that seeks to convince Black people they are inferior, that they must have less, and that they must accommodate systems that devalue them, for Fanon, being in community across privilege is useful because it can undo the damage of being surrounded by ideas like that all the time – and in the process, it can repair the damage that being within a system like that can do not only to one's sense of self but to one's sense of what is possible.

I would argue that similar processes of repair and healing are occurring in the letter Baldwin writes to his nephew. Baldwin argues in several places that there is nothing more damaging and isolating for a Black person than when they believe what white people say about him. In the letter to his nephew, Baldwin says that his own father lived a terrible life "because, at the bottom of his heart, he really believed what white people said about him" (TFNT, 4). Similarly, in the essay that I referenced in the introduction, Baldwin says that part of why he went to Paris was because he "was as isolated from Negroes as I was from whites, which is what happens when a Negro begins, at bottom, to believe what white people say about him" (Discovery, 17). Part of the purpose of the letter he is writing to his nephew is precisely to offer him resources against the ways in both the symbolic and material details of the world around him conspire to make him believe he is inferior. For both Fanon and Baldwin, one of the saving graces of Black community, one of the great services Black people can do for each other, is to provide counter-knowledges. While the rest of the world might project beliefs about inferiority, Black people can know each other as brothers and sisters, uncles and aunts, nieces and nephews, friends, romantic partners deserving of love, good people who deserve a chance to believe in a better future. Black people can know each other in ways that run directly counter to what white supremacy would have Black people believe. Indeed, Fanon's great failure in his chapter on Black women lies precisely here, in his choice not to know Black women as anything other than opportunistic and to view their romantic relationships and the way they engage with whiteness through such harsh and objectifying terms.

Research Question 3: How does one's epistemology shape the way one pictures freedom and justice?

The answer to the previous research question was complex, particularly with respect to the epistemology associated with being Black in a racist system. There are similarities in the

healing and the vision represented by the arguments of Baldwin and Fanon, similarities in the methods that could be used and the problems that those methods solve. Even with these similarities in mind, though, the ends to which Baldwin and Fanon imagine applying these strategies are extremely different.

Baldwin's vision of freedom and justice involves improving upon the United States as a structure, and he conceptualizes that structure as one in which Black people are owed a place. What Baldwin calls for is certainly radical in the sense that it demands material sacrifices and psychological discomfort by white people. Yet Baldwin's vision of Black freedom leaves the basic structure of the United States intact. Indeed, he specifically differentiates himself from thinkers who call into question the legitimacy of the United States as an enterprise. For Baldwin, there is no way of abandoning or separating Black people from what the United States is. This is not only because Black people built the country, but also because the relationships linking Black and white people are, to Baldwin, familial relationships. Relatedly, his vision for American transformation involves white people changing their ways. As the title of his book of essays alludes to, his argument is that the country cannot survive unless white people stop shielding themselves from the truth and instead come to terms with their own history. This differs enormously from the way Fanon characterizes Algeria. For Fanon, there is no version of justice or freedom in which white people and Black people share Algeria. It is not a matter of dramatically reconfiguring how Black and white people interact within the structures that make up the state; rather, Black freedom involves dissolving several of the structures that comprised Algeria as a country before its independence.

To summarize, while there may be elements of commonality that link epistemologies of resistance produced by different racial systems, this research also indicates that the assumptions

that minoritized or disadvantaged people make about the relationship between their identity and the nation have a material impact on how they understand what freedom and justice mean substantively. Baldwin conceptualizes his own Blackness as being inextricably linked to the United States. He feels no shame or regret about this relationship, and his vision of freedom and justice is firmly situated within the United States, albeit a United States whose population is transformed. Fanon, by contrast, does not regard himself or Algeria as being French. Indeed, for Fanon, proximity to Frenchness and the hierarchies this proximity produces are actively damaging to Black people, because of how they limit Black people's sense of what is possible. His vision of freedom and justice involves having nothing to do with the French nation-state.

Recommendations for Future Research

These findings suggest several worthwhile avenues for future research. One such avenue, for instance, is whether the idea of epistemologies of privilege can be problematized. In particular, the experience and story of Albert Camus points to how class and racial privilege intersect and overlap in complex ways that have real effects on the epistemological mechanisms at work in how one views the political, moral and social world, particularly when comparing how these positions function within different colonial legacies. Camus was born to working class parents in Algeria, and there were elements of his experience and life that undoubtedly shaped his thinking in interesting ways. As I mentioned in the chapter, Camus was actually positioned along what one might think of as a boundary of French whiteness – included, but also different from and less than. While this position of being on the edge of whiteness is an experience that several immigrant groups in the United States might share, the analogy does not work perfectly. Future research could consider and seek to disaggregate the many different experiences included within the category of whiteness.

Making sense of these distinctions may play an important role in charting a path forward regarding racial justice because it may provide more nuanced information about what the stakes are for the various people involved. O'Brien, a scholar who is both critical of and sympathetic to Camus, alludes to this question when he shows that while Sartre was on the correct side of the Algerian question, it is also the case that he had so much less to lose than Camus did (O'Brien 1970). While I agree with Said (1994) that this does not make Camus's position against Algerian independence defensible, there may be value in understanding how Camus thought of the stakes and how that might be compare with someone who grew up in the metropole.

Relatedly, another area for future research has to do with revisiting the model of solidarity politics described by Fanon and thinking about how it works in action. For the Black community in Algeria before independence, Fanon focuses on race and class as two important elements of identity. The vision he expresses, of people allowing themselves to be transformed across lines of privilege and a community propelling itself toward radical revolution as a result, feels heartening. But it may be the case that what it means to prioritize the wisdom of the most vulnerable seems more straightforward in his work because he is only dealing with two aspects of identity. When the Black community consists of women, queer and trans folx, people with and without college education, people from urban centers and from rural areas, undocumented folks and citizens, people with and without disabilities, and when these identities can overlap or not overlap in complex ways, the actual mechanics of what it means to prioritize the most vulnerable becomes highly complex. One way to investigate this would be to see how Black activists in the Movement for Black Lives manage, or try to manage, these questions.

These questions are thorny, with no obvious answers. Yet if nothing else, this project speaks to the notion that new wisdom and new possibilities arise when communities choose not

only to face but to proactively reconfigure how privilege and knowledge function. One conclusion that this project underscores for me is the very real power minoritized people possess to imagine different futures and to see possibilities in the unlikeliest of places and the bleakest of times.

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