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# Existence in Black: Understanding My Situation

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Existence in Black: Understanding My Situation

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Acknowledgments:

### *Chapter 1: Why Race Matters*

*American's believe in the reality of "race" as a defined indubitable feature of the natural world...In this way, racism is rendered as the innocent daughter of Mother Nature, and one is left to deplore the Middle Passage or the Trail of Tears the way one deplores an earthquake , a tornado, or any other phenomenon that can be cast as beyond the handiwork of men-Ta-nahesi Coates*

We were all playing a full court basketball game in suburban America. We had been playing all afternoon, laughing, sweating, winning, losing: the whole deal. During the game a cop car drove by the courts, and everything stopped. We all stopped playing one by one as the cop car came closer, and even the people on the sidelines stopped goofing around. The cop car stopped at the stop sign, and we all just stared, and although I could not see through the tinted windows I am sure that the police were staring right back at us. And we all stood there staring for as long as the police stayed at the stop sign, and when they left we resumed our game as if nothing out of the ordinary had just taken place.

Unfortunately, this is something that happened time and time again as I grew up playing at those same basketball courts. When the cops drove by we stopped, and when they left we continued. What is even more odd than the fact the presence of the police made us stop what we were doing is the fact that we never really asked why we stopped. We hadn't done anything wrong. The only thing that we were doing was being Black, and as many great Black thinkers have pointed out in the past to be Black is to have done something. The interesting point there is that we internalize that without even thinking about it. Additionally, White people treat us like we have done something too, and we never talked about that growing up either.

The internalization of racism, and the pathologizing of Black people begins at a very young age. I was in fifth grade the first time that I was called the n-word by a White classmate.

We hardly knew fractions, but we knew that Black people were supposed to be very upset when they were called the n-word. A few summers ago I had a camper tell me that another White counselor and I couldn't date because I was Black and she was White. This was a camper that I was great friends with, so it was disappointing to hear, but enlightening nonetheless to hear a child make such a racist statement. Clearly he didn't come up with this by himself; he had to have learned it from an adult in his life. This is another thing that is so interesting about racism; it is passed on from one generation to the next. However this passing of the racial torch is quite mystified. It is unclear when, where, and how that torch is passed, yet generation after generation are taught the same lies about races and are led to believe in improving racial conditions.

This is something that we have to be able to talk about in the future or nothing will ever change. Race impacts everything we do and, is an inescapable fact of life. However rarely if ever do people think about race in a critical manner, which is part of the reason that race still plays such an important role in our lives today. Talking about race is a daunting task; its unreasonable nature almost makes it inexplicable. Race is such a powerful concept that it is hard to articulate the experiences that it creates. It's often taken at face value, but the power of racism is truly remarkable. Racism is a shared experience between the oppressor and the oppressed, it takes place on an institutional, and personal level, and it also happens on group and personal levels as well.

Even institutions that preach "diversity and inclusion" still have much to learn and improve upon. It is an odd experience to be racially profiled at a place that you would call your home. I have spent more time at Connecticut College than I have anywhere else in the world since enrolling here. However, that sense of home is not enough to protect me and my group of

friends from what transpired. We were standing outside of the Library talking, as we had just randomly crossed paths after a night out. We stood talking for about five minutes when a group of campus safety officers walked by us. We were doing nothing wrong, so when my friends pointed out their presence, I naively assured them that they would continue walking down the street because they would have no reason to approach us. However after walking just past our location they turned around and all three of them approached us. They asked us to quiet down saying that they had a noise complaint in Central, and then asked us for our ID's to make sure "we belonged there" because there were also reports of strangers on campus. That moment truly infuriated me because we were clearly being profiled, and they came over under the guise of a noise complaint. If their true intent was to just ask us to quiet down, then they easily could have done that from where they were and continued walking to wherever their destination might have been, and the entire situation could have been avoided. However that is not what they did. Ultimately they approached us the way that they did because me and my African-American friends fit the description that they were looking for. That was another surprising experience for me because you would think that you were safe in your home. Perhaps I should have paid more attention to the Henry Lewis Gates' story a few years prior.

The question is: why do we avoid having a conversation that both parties stand to gain from? We go out of our way to avoid conversations about race in America, although it is a fundamental aspect of our nation's history, because trying to talk about and understand race relations is incredibly challenging. Race is like a dirty river that you cannot clean without a large-scale effort. Sure you can scoop out some dirt and try to figure out what that dirt is, and where it came from, but there is always more dirt, and then more dirt after that, and then the next

scoop is an entirely different kind of dirt from before, and now you have to figure out how to rid yourself of this new dirt while keeping the old dirt at bay.

Racism has an uncanny ability to persist over time, reason, context, you name it. Racism has shown the ability to transform, and remain. That can be very discouraging for some, but it is important that we still push forward with discussions about racism anyway. Just because race is conceptually murky, slippery, and confusing doesn't mean that we should make it easy on race to be that way by not talking about it. Fortunately, there have been a large number of Black thinkers that have tried to bring some clarity to the experience of racism. Voices like W.E.B. Du Bois (1868-1963), Frantz Fanon (1925-1961), Malcolm X (1925-1965), Martin Luther King Jr. (1929-1968), James Baldwin (1924-1987), Stokely Carmichael (1941-1988), Kwame Anthony Appiah (1954-), Lewis Gordon (1962-), Ta-nahesi Coates, (1975-) have all made unique contributions to the literature surrounding Black identity on an American and global scale. Their work will help guide the exploration through the aforementioned elements. The experience of racism can be boiled down into a few unique elements that will guide this exploration. The first section is dedicated to the role of the racist, the people that are in theory for the creation and maintenance of the current power structure. The second section focuses on the people that must live under those conditions, and while they live under those conditions surely a major train of thought is how to deal with their condition. The final section focuses how to put an end to their situation.



## *Chapter 2: Concerning Racists*

### *Section 2.1: Appiah on Racists*

The driving question behind this conversation will be: What are we to make of racists? It would be hard to imagine any sort of meaningful conversation about the impact of the social construction of races without talking about the individuals that are responsible for their construction and maintenance. If races themselves aren't real, then what do we do with the person who damages others by living in denial of the truth? Appiah takes a hard look at the structure of racist beliefs and accompanying counter-evidence that should dissuade racists from holding those beliefs in theory. However racists are not so easily dissuaded. Appiah breaks down racist beliefs into three distinct doctrines: namely, racialism, extrinsic racism, and intrinsic racism.

**Racialism** is the belief that “there are heritable characteristics, possessed by members of our species that allow us to divide them into a small set of races.”<sup>1</sup> These so-called heritable characteristics function as racial “essences.” These characteristics are not shared between races, and are both morphological and moral.

Appiah makes the case that racialism as a morphological idea is not necessarily problematic so long as moral characteristics are distributed evenly. It becomes problematic, however, when moral qualities are unequally distributed. In the United States today, for example, Whites almost exclusively hold the rights to all of the positive moral characteristics, and other peoples of color are painted with negative moral characteristics. Whites are seen as safe, stable, and educated, while Black people are seen as the exact opposite; the distribution of moral

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<sup>1</sup> 4, Anthony Appiah, 1990. “Racisms.” In David T. Goldberg, ed., *The Anatomy of Racism*, University of Minnesota Press.

characteristics here is uneven. If characteristics cannot be shared between races, then it does not seem to me that they can be distributed evenly. Determining what exactly is even would be challenging, and a hierarchy could still be set up identically if the certain positive characteristics become more valued than others. Racialism is just as dangerous as the doctrines that it presupposes. In addition to, the fact that racialism is problematic because it divides people into fictitious groups. Racialism in this way is false regardless of the distribution of morals characteristics.

Appiah believes that racialism is a false doctrine, but racialism is, “a presupposition of other doctrines that have been called “racism””<sup>2</sup>, so it is worth discussing. **Extrinsic racism** - the belief that racial essences entail certain morally relevant qualities - goes beyond racialism. The extrinsic racist believes that the differences between racial groups warrant differential treatment. For example, an extrinsic racist will treat Black and White people differently based on the belief that all White people are honest, and all Black people are dishonest. Evidence that there is no difference in the moral makeup of Blacks and Whites should in theory be enough to make the extrinsic racist treat both groups the same way.

If showing that crime rates are actually similar in both groups and that physical features hold no moral relevance are not enough to dissuade the extrinsic racist, then perhaps there is something else at play. This person may not be a *sincere* extrinsic racist, Appiah says, but could actually be an *insincere* **intrinsic racist** who believes that “the bare fact of being of the same race is a reason for preferring one person to another.”<sup>3</sup> So the White intrinsic racist sees all White people as members of a larger family, and is not necessarily interested in the actual behavioral

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<sup>2</sup> 5, Appiah, Racisms

<sup>3</sup> 6, Appiah, Racisms

differences in groups. The White intrinsic racist will always grant fellow Whites preferential treatment, and would not grant members of other racial groups that type of treatment strictly based on their race. It is important to note that Appiah sees the latter two doctrines as having the potential to overlap so that one may find it difficult to determine whether one's racism by nature is extrinsic or intrinsic.

A key part of Appiah's argument is that a practice that "cannot be rationally reconstructed ought surely to be given up by reasonable people."<sup>4</sup> So far we have seen that both extrinsic and intrinsic racists are unreasonable in their beliefs about race, and that they tend to cling to their beliefs despite being presented with counter-evidence. Appiah overlooks a crucial aspect of racism, which is power. Power has shown the ability to corrupt throughout the course of history. And Appiah doesn't take note of the power structure that exists outside of the individuals beliefs. Racism is about more than feeling good about your own superiority. This is because one's superiority is relational. One's superiority has group-level political implications for the group that is considered inferior. People do stand to benefit from their false beliefs, but the impacts of those beliefs are far greater than Appiah's position accounts for. Appiah traces the unreasonableness of racists to their apparent "cognitive incapacity." This begs the question, is it possible for "reasonable people" to hold on to unreasonable beliefs? If so, then how?

First, Appiah claims, people hold onto their unreasonable beliefs because they stand to benefit from them. The White racist who believes in their supremacy sees that belief reflected in the society, and ultimately can behave as such. From the perspective of an extrinsic or intrinsic racist giving up racism would mean giving up the benefits that come with belonging to a superior

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<sup>4</sup> 4, Appiah, Racisms

race. One can imagine how this could be difficult; why give up something that you and the people you know all stand to benefit from?

Appiah also considers a scenario where someone resists a true proposition although he doesn't believe that its acceptance would disadvantage him. We see thinking like this most often as a response to pro-Black sentiments. They think that "pro-Black" automatically means "anti-White," when in reality "pro-Black" movements are asking for equality rather than supremacy. That being said, the White racist whose entire experience has been supremacy may feel threatened by the prospect of equality. Perhaps the most salient example is when someone resists a true proposition that is actually to their own advantage. This type of thinking is seen in Black people that believe in White supremacy, or their own inferiority. This is an example of internalized racism; the person of color has internalized what they have been told about their people by society. Racists are not the only people that resist the truth.

Appiah brings up these different cases of people resisting the truth, because he believes that they have what he calls "cognitive incapacities." His aim is to show that, "the refusal on the part of some extrinsic racists to accept evidence against their beliefs, is an instance of a widespread phenomenon in human affairs."<sup>5</sup> We tend towards moral and intellectual distortions of judgment, especially when we stand to benefit from the judgments we have made, or our self-images are at stake.

Appiah also makes the claim that "there is no subject matter about which most sane people cannot, in the end, be persuaded to avoid partiality in judgment."<sup>6</sup> If we assume that most racists have been exposed to counter-evidence at some point in their lives, then counter-evidence

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<sup>5</sup> 7, Appiah, *Racisms*

<sup>6</sup> 8, Appiah, *Racisms*

would unravel racism in the blink of an eye. As Appiah has already shown, however, a racist's judgements are quite immovable. Appiah even goes as far as to say that if someone was easily dissuaded from racism, then it would not make sense to call them a racist in the first place. Part of being a racist would seem to be the ability to ignore appropriate counter-evidence, and a level of entrenchment in the racist judgments that they hold.

Appiah argues that to consistently ignore counter-evidence, especially when others would not, is to exhibit a "systematically distorted rationality."<sup>7</sup> Appiah calls this "racial **prejudice**." Here Appiah is making a distinction between racists based on how willing they are to rationally consider counter-evidence. Note that not all propositional (extrinsic and intrinsic) racists are racially prejudiced, though they do indeed hold false moral beliefs. Appiah describes racially prejudiced people "**dispositional** racists." Their racist beliefs are linked to something deeper than extrinsic or intrinsic propositions. Appiah details the scenario where propositional racists give up their racist ideologies.

By showing that some intrinsic and extrinsic racists can in fact change their views, he sets up his subsequent argument that reasonable people who refuse counterevidence are responsible for their views. He argues that if we were to show propositional racists who are not racially prejudiced that society has enforced their extrinsic racist stereotypes, and "ask them whether they really believe that race in itself, independently of those extrinsic racist beliefs, justifies differential treatment, many will come to give up racist propositions."<sup>8</sup> Certainly no one enjoys changing their beliefs, because this entails admitting to having believed in something wrong. However, it also shows a sense of self-responsibility that seems to be lost on dispositional racists. Showing

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<sup>7</sup> 8, Appiah, *Racisms*

<sup>8</sup> 9, Appiah, *Racisms*

that some intrinsic and extrinsic racists can in fact change their views implies that reasonable people who refuse counter-evidence are responsible for their views.

The sense of self-responsibility that reasonable people seem to have in regards to their beliefs is so lost on dispositional racists that Appiah doubts whether we can consider them responsible for their own beliefs. He argues that their prejudices are seemingly immune to any sort of rational control, so he questions their moral responsibility for their beliefs. Appiah states, “it is not clear to me that they are responsible for the fact that they are bad. Racial prejudice, like prejudice generally, may threaten an agent's autonomy, making it appropriate to treat or train rather than to reason with them.”<sup>9</sup> This is certainly a hard pill to swallow as a reader.

It is frustrating because if we cannot blame people for their racial prejudices, then we have no one to blame for racism itself. Appiah may be right that racists are unreasonable people, but to acquit them from responsibility takes things too far in my opinion. He is dirtying the river of racism by not holding racists accountable. If we cannot hold the racists accountable, then we will begin to lose touch with the realities of racism. Racism is not an invisible force. It has a face, and that face belongs to the dispositional racist that cannot see beyond themselves.

Nonetheless, Appiah continues his train of thought, and suggests that perhaps we should give up reasoning with the unreasonable racists: that a better method may be to teach or train them instead, although he admits that even this path to treatment will be a challenging one. “If it is clear that racial prejudice is regrettable, it is also clear in the nature of the case that providing even a superabundance of reasons and evidence will often not be a successful way of removing it.”<sup>10</sup> At this point it looks as if Appiah has given up hope on dispositional racists. He

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<sup>9</sup> Appiah, *Racisms*

<sup>10</sup> Appiah, *Racisms*

hypothesizes that if we look at the history of this country, and think about how racism was once a part of the national ideology, then we will find many people who believe racist propositions largely because that is how they were raised. Appiah believes that these are the reasonable racists that can be convinced to change their beliefs.

The question now is whether or not Appiah's counter-evidence is convincing and thorough enough to do so. As Appiah has said before he thinks that intrinsic racism is a moral problem, and that even if racialism were true it still would not necessarily lead to morally differential treatment between the proposed races. Another problem for the intrinsic racist is the seemingly arbitrariness of race itself. There is no reason that skin color should be the morphological feature that is more morally relevant than hair, height, eye color, etc. If we look past the arbitrary nature of the moral relevance of race, the key mistake that the intrinsic racist makes is that they think of their race as members of a larger family. They use what Appiah calls "the family model," and will use the same arguments that one typically uses to defend the moral relevance of family members to explain their moral preference for members of their own race. However, the philosophical move that the intrinsic racist makes to generalize the moral relevance of the family to their race is immediately a mistake. The major reason for the moral relevance of the family is its presence in private life. The family is "the unit through which we live what is most intimate, as the center of private life."<sup>11</sup> Racial groups are far too large to be the center of one's private life.

The moral relevance that is extended to one's family is exclusive by nature. Therefore, its extension to strangers is problematic because one does not share a morally relevant bond with

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<sup>11</sup> 14, Appiah, *Racisms*

them. The bond between an intrinsic racist and their fictional White family does not have “the substantial body of shared experience, shared attitudes, shared knowledge and beliefs”<sup>12</sup> that a real family has. For most people their families are the source of a great deal of meaning, and justifiably so. On the other hand, generalizing moral relevancy to one’s entire race isn’t done through familial connection but through “brute biological force”, and Appiah argues that families care for one another for reasons of greater moral relevance than just biology. To me it is apparent that the intrinsic racist’s defense via the family model does not withstand Appiah’s critique. Intrinsic racists simply misuse the family model, and as that is their primary mode of defense, it would seem that intrinsic racism isn’t rationally defensible.

The real thing that holds the intrinsic racist’s family together is their privileged and powerful position in society, not the intimate connection that is found in family. Families gain significance from their private nature we bond with our family due to the amount of time we spend together our shared views, and memories drive us to take responsibility for other family members. Extrapolating the familial bond to millions of other people doesn’t make sense in this regard. Power on the hand is much less personal. One does not need to know another person to enjoy the same amount of societal status and power. Perhaps there is a level of mutual respect from two powerful individuals that are unfamiliar with one another, however the familial bond that intrinsic racists extend to their fictional family members involves much more than just mutual respect.

Appiah has shown that the propositional and dispositional racists hold unreasonable views. However, Appiah must answer the question of responsibility. It isn’t abundantly clear why some

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<sup>12</sup> 14, Appiah, *Racisms*



racists are more responsible for their racist beliefs than others, when it is clear that both groups believe in the same stereotypes about the groups that they oppress. Unfortunately, it doesn't seem as if Appiah has a better answer than what he has already given us. His position uncovers the irrationality of racists, but misses the subtle nature of a racist's resistance to counter-evidence. In reference to dispositional racists that refuse to see the reason behind his argument he states, "Still I do not know how I would *argue* against someone who could not see this; someone who continued to act on the contrary belief might, in the end, simply have to be locked up."<sup>13</sup> Obviously this not a sustainable solution either. Appiah did well to uncover the irrationality of racists, but it doesn't really matter if we do not hold them accountable for it.

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<sup>13</sup> 13, Appiah, *Racisms*

## *Section 2.2: Gordon on Racists*

***"For the racist it is not just that the other races are inferior, but also that they must be inferior."*<sup>14</sup>-Lewis Gordon**

In Bad Faith and Antiracism Gordon defines racism as “the self-deceiving choice to believe either that one’s race is the only race qualified to be considered human or that one’s race is superior to other races.<sup>15</sup>” What marks off Gordon’s definition of racism from Appiah’s is the component of self-deception. As Gordon puts it, “the core assumptions of bad faith are that human beings are aware, no matter how fugitive that awareness may be, of their freedom in their various situations, that they are free choosers of various aspects of their situations, that they are consequently responsible for their condition on some level, that they have the power to change at least themselves through coming to grips with their situations.”<sup>16</sup> From the start it is evident that Gordon believes that bad faith and racism go hand in hand because racists are responsible for evading their own reality. Gordon thinks that racism itself is a form of self-deception. Gordon plans to use transcendence, and facticity to illustrate that the racist is in bad faith, by leading knowingly leading an unbalanced life.

Here it is important to note that there is a difference between self-deception and simply being mistaken. Being mistaken about something implies that one does not know the truth impartially. One can be mistaken when they misspell a word that they are unfamiliar with, or take a wrong turn enroute to an unfamiliar destination. Self-deception is a much more active process. In order for the racist to be in bad faith, the racist must know better. The racist actively ignores everything that tells them that they are not superior. In order for self-deception to work

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<sup>14</sup> 75, Gordon, Lewis R. *Bad Faith and Antiracism*. Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities, 1995. Print.

<sup>15</sup> 2, Gordon

<sup>16</sup> 5, Gordon

the racist must be aware on some level that they are in fact not superior. Therefore, the choice to behave as if they are superior is a denial of the truth. Racists also typically benefit from their choice to believe in their own supremacy. The difference between self-deception and being mistaken is the possession of truth within the chooser.

Bad faith is a life out of balance, and Good faith is the opposite of that. Each person must find the balance between two elements of their human condition: facticity and transcendence. One's facticity is that, which is relevant to their lives which they cannot escape or control. For example a person can never change the situation that they were born into, whether it is the time, place, or their ethnicity. One's transcendence is how one relates to the world. A person has the ability to make choices that ultimately decide the course of their future, and their entire lives. A key tenet of Gordon's position is that bad faith gets at the core of the human condition. One must choose and accept responsibility their own project. From one's project we can learn "what kind of human being that chooser is."<sup>17</sup> The goal then is a life in good faith, where we find an authentic project and avoid making bad faith decisions where we deceive ourselves and evade the realities of being human.

Gordon defines bad faith as "the effort to hide from responsibility for ourselves as freedom...In bad faith I flee a displeasing truth for a pleasing falsehood."<sup>18</sup> In one way or another that displeasing truth that we fear is our human condition. The displeasing truth that we fear is that we are freedom and we bear responsibility for our choices .Racists live in denial of their human condition. They find pleasure in the pleasing falsehood of their supremacy. Gordon states, "In Sartrean language I am a freedom."<sup>19</sup> What exactly does it mean to be freedom?

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<sup>17</sup> 6, Gordon

<sup>18</sup> 8, Gordon

<sup>19</sup> 9, Gordon

To be freedom is to accept the responsibility of continued choice. To be freedom is to accept the responsibility of self-construction. To accept the responsibility of self-construction one must also accept that self-construction is an ongoing process, for we are constantly making choices that constitute ourselves. A racist can bypass the process of self-construction by throwing themselves into their identity as a racist. The racist need not make decisions for themselves; they can just throw themselves into the racist caricature that they present themselves as. Self-construction should be an ongoing process. Making the decision to be a racist allows for you to escape that process. The racist doesn't have to weigh their options because their decisions have already been made for them. Rather than deciding to regard an African-American as human, they lean on their racist values and behave accordingly.

The pleasing falsehood that people seek is the notion of a stable self. To illustrate the concept Gordon uses the example of a biography: "The choices I make from this point onward will unfold into the continuation or construction of a biography. I am an unfinished story, a story in progress of which I am the author. I can choose an end. But I can never know the end in advance, for I could choose at the last moment to change it. Therefore when the story is complete, the writer literally disappears, and only readers and the text remain."<sup>20</sup> To be a freedom is to be the writer of an unfinished story. That story is the project of self-construction, and it leaves you in "a strange place," for, as Gordon explains, "what I "am" slips constantly into the past, and what I can be is always ahead of me...As a freedom I seem to have nowhere to settle down."<sup>21</sup> "There is no fixed self" in Sartre's ontology, and that is the displeasing truth that we wish to avoid through self-deception.

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<sup>20</sup> 8, Gordon

<sup>21</sup> 9, Gordon

Being a racist allows one to bypass the challenges of self-construction. The racist's story is already finished because their values are already selected. In normal circumstances we face the challenge of deciding our values. They avoid the "strange place" that is the present, they can stabilize themselves by throwing themselves into the racist archetype. They give up their transcendence, it is no longer a question of what they will be, racists already know what they will be, unsurprisingly they will continue to be racists. In bad faith, racists escape anguish, and find their fixed self by picking a role to play rather than facing their freedom.

Stepping up to the responsibility of choice is no small task. This becomes evident when considering the name of the human confrontation with choice is called anguish. To define anguish Gordon cites Kierkegaard, whom Sartre adopted the term from: "According to Kierkegaard anguish is a confrontation with the self. In anguish we face the fact that we are the ones who must make the choices that constitute ourselves."<sup>22</sup> Keep in mind that the human condition lacks foundation, so not only are we responsible for making the choices that constitute ourselves we also have to make those choices over and over again.

For example completing this Honors Thesis was an ongoing choice. Just because I decided at one point to sit down and research or write doesn't mean that I will do so in the future. I must choose in every word that I write to continue writing. People have asked me, "What made you write your thesis?" In good faith I would respond "The reality is that I wrote this paper because I wanted to, and this was an ongoing and challenging process to say the least." If I were to say that it was because my professors told me to, I would be evading the reality of my responsibility of choice. I decided to write the words, and each word was a separate decision. I

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<sup>22</sup> 13, Gordon

cannot say that I wrote this because of my Professor's because they exist externally from me. My Professors were encouraging, and they helped me out in writing this a great deal. However the decision to write this was ultimately mine and mine alone.

Let's say that Gordon has decided not to throw himself off the bridge, and begins walking down the bridge instead, "A problem emerges. For if I must choose myself, then myself is an open possibility at the moment of choice. In other words the "self" that I seek is an unstable problematic self. For suppose I chose to be a person who doesn't jump off of the Brooklyn Bridge this doesn't mean that I *won't* do so...despite the choice I have made up to that point not to do so.<sup>23</sup>" As I said before facing oneself as freedom is not an easy thing to do, as Gordon says the situation of anguish "is without comfort."<sup>24</sup> The racist bypasses this whole process, and even if they were to continuously choose to ignore the fallacy of race they would be choosing to deceive themselves over and over again.

Just because the notion of the fixed self is not actually possible does not mean that people do not try to avoid that reality and attempt to find stasis. In bad faith people find stasis by overemphasising their facticity or their transcendence. Gordon explains, "In bad faith I may assert that what I "really am" transcends my situation in the world; for example I "am" my freedom but not my gender or biography over which I seem to lack control. I can assert that I can't help being what I am. Furthermore I can make an effort to be what I was or to disengage myself entirely from my past and my present by claiming only to be what I will become. Each of these cases involves taking refuge in a form of being what I "really am" as though my real being is as static and as complete as a stone."<sup>25</sup> Here Gordon is describing scenarios where one is

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<sup>23</sup> 14, Gordon

<sup>24</sup> 14, Gordon

<sup>25</sup> 17, Gordon

overemphasizing their transcendence, and denying whatever they don't like about their current situation. On the other hand one can also deny their freedom by overemphasizing their current situation, one attempts to avoid the responsibility of freedom by claiming they had no choice in the matter. Racists can lean on either their transcendence or, their facticity.

They can avoid considering the impact of their decisions by saying, "What I really am is a good person, I am not actually a racist. Those Klansmen are actually racist, I just don't feel safe around people of color." The racist can overemphasize their transcendence, and deceive themselves and rationalize their decisions, and avoid taking responsibility for their beliefs. The racist may be correct that there are people who have committed worst acts than they have, and they too have the potential to be a good person. However that potential is not enough to alleviate them of their responsibility to choose their own values, and future. They can also avoid taking responsibility for choices, by overemphasising the factual dimension of their existence. They can say to themselves, "It's how I was raised, and I don't know any better." However, in doing so they deny their responsibility to pick their own values.

Gordon says that people who over emphasize their facticity, and evade the responsibility of freedom are too serious, meaning that they take their values too seriously. There are two forces at play here. The serious man is in bad faith because he denies the fact that he is the one constructing his own values. The serious man regards values as given rather than constructed. Values are not to be taken too seriously because we are continuously constructing them through choice. Gordon explains, "The serious man is in bad faith because he denies his freedom. He regards his values as objects to be *known*, not constructed. He eliminates himself as a source of value and hence simultaneously hides from himself as free and hides from himself as responsible

for his freedom.”<sup>26</sup> Additionally, if one thinks that they are not in control of their values for Gordon’s serious man, “ the question of what human beings choose to be isn’t important. What is important is determining the ways human beings are already predisposed to act.”<sup>27</sup> For the serious man values are chosen by external factors. However we have already seen that crediting choice to anything external is a move of bad faith.

When applying Gordon’s analysis of the human condition to racists we can see that they are mistaken for a number of reasons. Racists take their values too seriously, and see them as given rather than self constructed, and in doing so blind themselves from seeing their own ability to construct their own values, and choose their own projects. They overemphasize their own facticity, and deny the transcendence of others.

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<sup>26</sup> 23, Gordon

<sup>27</sup> 26, Gordon



### *Section 2.3 Comparisons: The Importance of Responsibility*

When Appiah introduces the concept of cognitive incapacities, he is making a divide amongst racists. The racists without cognitive incapacities are the intrinsic and extrinsic racists, who could be convinced by counter-evidence that the beliefs that they hold are false. Appiah's strategy for dealing with racists that have cognitive incapacities shifts, he plans to take a more psychological approach. Rather than presenting the dispositional racist with counter-evidence that they will surely judge partially, Appiah ties their beliefs to a desire to protect their own self-image. Even so Appiah isn't particularly convinced that this psychological approach will yield any better results.

The term "cognitive incapacities" is troublesome for Appiah. When a dispositional racist has a cognitive incapacity are they unable to change to their point of view, or is it just extremely difficult for them to do so? The answer to this question has important implications for the nature of responsibility that racists hold for their own beliefs. It seems unlikely to me that racists are actually cognitively incapable of changing their beliefs, and it would be problematic for oppressed people if we could not theoretically hold racists responsible for their beliefs.

I think that we can blame the racist for their false beliefs. In today's day and age there is no excuse for still holding their beliefs. We live at a time where information about any topic conceivable is readily available via the internet. Unlike previous generations of racists - slave owners during the Abolitionist period, for example - we are not in a period of transition. Racists in a period of transition had a better defense because they could say, "I don't know any better, nor have I seen any others do better." This is an important point because the slave owners back then did not live in a time when information moved so quickly. Nor did they live in a time when

their views were not the status quo. This doesn't mean that they were not wrong to hold views, because it really shouldn't take more than eye contact or the mere presence of another person to recognize their humanity. This is something that has always been true. The point about information is that if a racist was to give history an honest look then the counter-evidence available would be overwhelming to say the least.

Today it is unclear whether the majority of people hold racist beliefs as people try and do a better job of concealing them. However it is quite clear that racist beliefs face constant scrutiny. So while we can say that the slave owners should have known better it is debatable whether we can blame them for their beliefs. It is not necessarily fair to blame slave owners during the Abolitionist period; however we would certainly like to be able to reproach them. Today's racists are inexcusable; there's no reason for them to hold their beliefs. Any racist that just leaves the house should be able to see that they are not apart of a supreme race, and that they do not deserve preferential treatment. The irrational, immovable, and almost inexplicable nature of racist beliefs is something that Appiah was trying account for with his concept of cognitive incapacities; however he misses the mark, and ends up letting racists off of the hook. If we are to accept Appiah's concept of cognitive incapacities, then we can neither blame nor reproach today's dispositional racists as we should be able to. Just because it may be highly challenging to sacrifice one's self-image for the sake of the greater good, this does not mean that individuals do not have a responsibility to do so.

Not being able to hold racists accountable for their racist beliefs and practices presents a major problem for people who are systematically oppressed. We have to be able to call the individual racists responsible, especially after Appiah shows that there are racists that do in fact

change their minds. If they can take responsibility, so can the dispositional racists that refuse to change. We have to be able to call the individual racists responsible because if they aren't then who is to blame? It wouldn't make much sense for the racist system or society that we live to be racist if it wasn't ran by racists. It is not like people that aren't racist just sit around and pass anti Black legislation, promote negative Black stereotypes, and generally oppress Black people. If we are going to battle against racism, then someone must be held accountable for its general persistence. The point is that racism doesn't perpetuate itself, and there are parties responsible for its survival, so in order for there to be any progress we have to be able to hold the appropriate parties responsible.

Gordon voices the same critique of Appiah that I had, but based on an existential framework. Gordon begins, "The adoption of stubborn racist beliefs cannot simply be cast off as "irrational," as Appiah suggests when he writes: "Real live racists then exhibit a systematically distorted rationality. We may wonder whether it is right to treat such people as morally responsible for the act their prejudice motivates, or morally reprehensible for holding the views to which their prejudices leads them...It is not clear to me that they are responsible for the fact that they are bad. Racial prejudice, like prejudice generally, may threaten an agent's autonomy."

<sup>28</sup> Appiah lets the stubborn racist off of the hook here. Gordon critiques Appiah's disregard of choice for the stubborn racist, "somehow the stubborn racist seems unable to choose to do something about his situation. His attitudes are regarded as effects of causes that are beyond his control."<sup>29</sup> How is it that stubborn racists are not responsible for their entrenched racist beliefs? This is where Gordon argues for examining racism from the standpoint of bad faith. Gordon

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<sup>28</sup> 71-72, Gordon

<sup>29</sup> 72, Gordon

argues that what Appiah leaves us with is racism as “mental quirk,” but what is actually needed is “to address the transcendent and factual dimensions of human reality as a situated reality.”<sup>30</sup> More times than not racists lean on one or another in order to evade their responsibility of choice.

That being said, Gordon continues his critique of Appiah for not taking the choice to remain racist in the face of counter evidence into account. Gordon argues for his model of bad faith, “the stubborn racist has made a choice not to admit certain uncomfortable truths about his group and chooses not to challenge certain comfortable falsehoods about other people. The stubborn racist can be regarded as having made the self-deceiving choice either to believe in his own group's superiority, and therefore his own superiority, or he has made the decision to believe in other groups inferiority, ostensibly for the same reason.”<sup>31</sup> Making that self-deceiving choice is what makes the stubborn racist and the serious man so similar to one another. Recall that Gordon's serious man is one who lives in bad faith through overemphasizing his facticity: “The serious man is in bad faith because he denies his freedom. He regards his values as objects to be *known*, not constructed. He eliminates himself as a source of value and here simultaneously hides from himself as free and hides from himself as responsible for his freedom.”<sup>32</sup> Gordon makes the direct connection between the stubborn racist and the serious man during his critique of Appiah. The serious man seeks to evade the responsibility of re-choosing his values from one moment to the next, by granting them a certain level of stasis. In doing so he begins to take his values too seriously, and sees them as granted, or given rather than chosen. Unfortunately, this may be supported by institutional racism in a culture where it's what most believe. The serious

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<sup>30</sup> 72, Gordon

<sup>31</sup> 75, Gordon

<sup>32</sup> 23, Gordon

man takes himself too seriously in an attempt to avoid the anguish of our fluidity from one instance to the next.

This leads Gordon to his effective explanation of why the stubborn racist is in bad faith he begins, “Why not simply refer to the stubborn racist as a person who chooses a certain emotional, or effective self presentation to hide from that of which he is simultaneously ignorant yet aware?”<sup>33</sup> Gordon explains Appiah's position as one where “choice is solely reflective... The stubborn racist's rejection of truth seeking activity and reflective consciousness- what we have been calling the norms of evidence and truth-make him appear to be a figure whose capacity to make choices has been impaired.”<sup>34</sup> Gordon disagrees and says that there is no way for them to escape their responsibility of choice in doing so he appeals to both Descartes and Sartre, “Descartes' argument still leaves room for the agent to stand in a free relation to his passions: he may not have caused them, but he is certainly responsible for them in virtue of his ability...Sartre argues that the agent is not only responsible for his passions in the sense of being able to overcome them, but his is also responsible for them in virtue of being their ultimate source.”<sup>35</sup> Here Gordon appeals to Descartes and Sartre to illustrate his point that we are responsible for our passions, and the impact that they have upon us as individuals. To deny recognition of that capacity is to lie to oneself, and live in bad faith. Gordon then concludes, “ If our thesis that the stubborn racist is in bad faith is correct, we should be able to show how the stubborn racist in in fact lying to himself about his racist beliefs.”<sup>36</sup> To show that the stubborn racist is indeed in bad faith Gordon states that, “The impassioned person in bad faith throws himself into an emotional

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<sup>33</sup> 28, Gordon

<sup>34</sup> 80, Gordon

<sup>35</sup> 80, Gordon

<sup>36</sup> 80, Gordon

fit in order to take on an identity that enables him to evade himself.”<sup>37</sup> Those who live in bad faith can escape choice through emotion. That “identity that enables him to evade himself” Gordon argues is the identity of the stubborn racist.

The stubborn racist looks to avoid the anguish of fluidity by what Kant calls, “self-incurred immaturity.” Gordon points out that Kant's self incurred immaturity is rather similar to Sartre's concept of self-incurred unfreedom or bad faith. Gordon explains that for the stubborn racist it is easier for him to evade fluidity by consistently assuming an identity in response to choice, “the behavior that one is expect to live by as a racist is far easier than the behavior one is expected to live by as a human being”<sup>38</sup>. It is easier to live as a racist because rather than deriving purpose and meaning from the choices that one makes, one derives meaning from the facticity of being a racist, “the anti-Black racist in this case makes himself seen in order not to be seen, for the “object present is the Black. Thus the Black other's facticity enables the sadist/racist to fancy himself an evader of anguish precisely by giving the other a pejorative name which in turn gives the anitblack racist a factual meaning...The problem then is that what may be an initial evasion can transform into an ongoing lived reality”<sup>39</sup>. The racist can stereotype, or scapegoat the black in order to support their evasion, as often as they deem necessary.

No amount of counter-evidence can make them see what they already know to be true because they have already made a conscious decision to deny the humanity of black people. In reality racists are likely bombarded with counter-evidence all the time, and they maintain their evasion by counting certain cases as exceptions, “My black friend Jack, is really different from

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<sup>37</sup> 84, Gordon

<sup>38</sup> 87, Gordon

<sup>39</sup> 88-89, Gordon

other black people. He's practically human!" Or they may say to themselves, "The black people I met in college were so nice. I just wish the rest of them could be as nice as them. All the other black people seem so dangerous on TV always rioting and looting like animals. The black people I've met are definitely different." Racists are probably willing to make exceptions to the rules, and values that govern their being, but to change those rules would be far too much to ask of them. Racists are certainly not fans of change, and as Baldwin puts it, "In order to act you must be conscious and take great chances, and be responsible for the consequences" (62). Perhaps the only thing that racists hate more than change is responsibility. They certainly aren't a fan of either, so in conclusion Gordon states that, "The racist can sink into his emotions under the guise of his facticity; he can live himself as being determined by them."<sup>40</sup>

At this point Gordon has shown that the stubborn racist lives in bad faith on two plains, and Gordon returns to his original critique that Appiah's tool of analytic philosophy is inappropriate. Gordon concludes, "Appiah's position is thus limited in either direction for the racist retreats into bad faith and is therefore responsible, under both rational and passionate self-presentations."<sup>41</sup>

It is clear that Gordon's goal is to attach responsibility to the racist individually, by showing that being racist, or becoming a racist is a choice made in bad faith. Gordon writes "Since racism is an extreme (calling for the exclusion of other groups, Appiah's analytic breakdown is problematic. He needn't resort to the "truth" of extrinsic racism or "intrinsic" racism. As forms of racism, they are already extreme. And how can one reason with an extreme, whether intrinsic or extrinsic? Our conception of bad faith offers a different approach-identifying and demystifying

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<sup>40</sup> 89, Gordon

<sup>41</sup> 89, Gordon

the commitment involved in the racist's resorting to an extreme in the first place.”<sup>42</sup> Gordon’s argument has shown the commitment involved to becoming a racist, one must take intentional steps one must take to be racist. This is something that Appiah provides less of an explanation for remember in reference to a dispositional racist refusing Appiah’s argument he states, ”Still, I do not know how I would argue against some who could not see this; someone who continued to act on the contrary belief might, in the end, simply have to locked up.”<sup>43</sup> Although neither of the two positions take into great consideration the larger power structure, and political system at work, Gordon’s position is much more productive in terms of change. While Appiah struggles to figure out exactly how to combat the stubborn racist, Gordon directly addresses their evasion of reality and places the blame squarely on their shoulders. It does not seem appropriate for us to coddle racists by not holding them accountable as Appiah suggests this plays directly into their hands. Under Appiah’s position the relationship between racism and racists is obscured, and that relationship needs to remain as clear as possible in order for any sort of progress to be made. On the other hand, bad faith allows for Gordon to appropriately address that relationship.

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<sup>42</sup> 77, Gordon

<sup>43</sup> 13, Appiah, *Racisms*



### *Chapter 3: On Black Identity*

#### *Section 3.1: The History and State of the African-American Condition*

##### *There is no Black conscious from the standpoint of an antiblack world-Gordon*

Fanon said, “The Black is not a man.”<sup>44</sup> Gordon says, “The Black body lives as absence.”<sup>45</sup> Ellison said, “ I am an invisible man.”<sup>46</sup> All of these authors are referring to the same thing, which is the paradoxical nature of the Black experience in the Western World Fanon called it the “zone of nonbeing.” African-Americans are recognized, if at all, as less than human. However each and every single African-American knows that they are human. Fanon says that the Black is not a man because he is not recognized as such. Gordon says that the Black body lives as Absence because his presence, and humanity goes unseen. Ellison is invisible because people do not see him; instead they see a fictional entity.

The African-American paradox is the loss of individuality. Racism transforms individual Blacks into a single mob where it is unclear where one begins and another ends. A Black person does not just exist as themselves; they exist as their entire race. Fanon explains this state of being with incredible precision, “I was responsible at the same time for my body, for my race, for my ancestors.”<sup>47</sup> African-American individuals face all of the normal existential challenges of the human condition such as making something of yourself, the responsibility of choice, and the prospect of death to name a few. In addition, African-Americans also have larger than life responsibilities forced upon them as they are constantly held accountable for people besides

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<sup>44</sup> 1, Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. London: Pluto, 1986. Print.

<sup>45</sup> 99, Gordon

<sup>46</sup> 3, Ellison, Ralph. *Invisible Man*. New York: Vintage International, 1995. Print.

<sup>47</sup> 112, Fanon

themselves. African-Americans are held together by oppression. This is similar to the bond of power that holds the family of the intrinsic racist together. Each individual has their own body that they are accountable for. African-Americans on the other hand are responsible for every African-American that has come before them, and every African-American that will come after them. For example, when there is an all White panel on a talk show with only one Black guest whatever that guest says will be interpreted as the Black opinion. That guest is a spokesperson for their race, and is expected to speak for every single Black person ever. As if there is one unified Black voice or perspective. The White voices exist independently of one another, and are interpreted as such. When Chris Matthews and Rachel Maddow disagree, they are representing just two differing views on a spectrum of White opinions, but when Roland Martin speaks he is representing his entire race. That's not to say that there are not multiple black voices available in the media, because there are a number of daily correspondents. The problem is that these correspondents are never put in conversation in a meaningful way, and even when they are presented in opposition to each other that just means that there happen to be two black opinions on the subject. Black spokespersonship also takes place in classrooms everywhere. Especially when students learn about slavery, or other "Black" topics, African-American students are often called upon to give the Black point of view, and speak for their whole race.

Furthermore, African- American spokespersonship is not limited to solely providing the "Black perspective". Whenever a Black person does anything regarded as negative they are also a spokesperson, and their negative actions get attributed to everyone as well: especially in contexts where there are a small number of Black people and a larger number of White people. They transform from being an individual reacting to a certain situation into an archetypal

character like the mad Black man or woman, or the thug or hoodlum. When Black people commit crimes they are treated as a part of a larger problem, which is why we have terms like “Black on Black Crime,” yet the premise of White on White crime is made to seem ridiculous. It is all part of Black people being responsible for other Black people, and the larger image of African-Americans. We are just as responsible for the history of Black people, as we are for our African-American peers and ourselves, as Fanon pointed out.

On the other hand typically, when White people commit crimes they are treated as individual incidents and anomalous. White people are simply not held accountable for one another the way that Black people are. The lack of White accountability in America results in a distorted perception of reality. This is why calls to the common thread of the absence of human recognition in incidents of police brutality and the murders carried out by Dylan Roof, George Zimmerman, and Darren Wilson go unheard. Stokely Carmichael’s 1966 interview for a CBS Special Report *Black Power/ White Backlash* with Mike Wallace perfectly illustrates the lack of White accountability, Stokely says “If a Black man is walking down the streets of Mississippi with, down the highway with a Bible in his hand. He is shot because he is Black.”<sup>48</sup> To which Mike Wallace responds, “That’s one incident.” Dismissing a racially charged attack as anomalous is a failure to understand the history of racial injustice in America. Stokely Carmichael was referring to the shooting of James Meredith, the first African-American student to attend the University of Mississippi, Meredith was shot multiple times while doing a solo march through Memphis, to highlight ongoing racism, in the post Civil Rights Act world. Carmichael responded to Wallace’s remark by saying, “I can name you a lot of others, and you

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<sup>48</sup> *Black Power/ White Backlash*. Perf. Mike Wallace and Stokely Carmichael. CBS Interactive Inc, 1966. Transcript.

know that yourself.”<sup>49</sup> It is important that Carmichael insisted that way because in doing so he shifted the paradigm of accountability on to White interviewers, and audience. They have to know about more than one incidence of a racial attack or murder, and it is their responsibility to see the connections between them. Racially charged attacks do not happen in a vacuum; they are apart of a larger narrative that everyone is aware of, and Carmichael critiques their self-deceiving response.

Wallace’s reaction would be appropriate in a world where Meredith had no reason to march in the first place: that would be a world without slavery, and universal recognition of humanity. Even in this non-racist perfect world Wallace’s reaction still may not be appropriate because racially charged attacks would be so uncommon that the fact that Meredith was shot would warrant a much greater reaction. Although this interview took place 50 years ago, everyone that has watched coverage of any unwarranted killing of Black people has heard detractors say, “This was an isolated incident.” One would think that when someone is called in once a month to discuss another killing, then just maybe they would realize that the killings are not so isolated. Racists live in a world that is distorted beyond measure.

Black spokespersonship directly contributes to overdetermination. The distribution of responsibility directly impacts our perceived ability to transcend. In Sartrean terms the facticity of the African-American is overemphasized. The Black body is not an individual with the potential to become anything, but a larger part of a group with no subjectivity. The Black body is objectified by the White gaze. The individual Black person is invisible, and only their body remains. This condition exists in contrast with Whites who are never reduced to mere bodies.

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<sup>49</sup> Wallace and Carmichael

The White person's facticity is kept in check, and they are afforded the potential to determine what they will become through the choices that they make. The Black person faces different circumstances to quote Gordon, "they live in the world of the when...when will I make a mistake? When will my wrongness come to fruition."<sup>50</sup> The wrongness that Gordon is referring to is blackness. A Black person's only sin is skin, and it is only a matter of when their skin color will be the deciding factor in a negative event in a Black person's life.

The overdetermination of the Black body is far from just an old theory. This is key a part of the visceral experience of race. Just in my time at Connecticut College I have seen far too many instances of White people shooting unarmed Black people. They failed to see them as individuals, and in their minds they were shooting at the indistinguishable Black mass that rendered these individuals invisible. Jordan Davis, a 17 year-old boy who was shot to death by a White man while parked at a gas station following an argument over the music that he was playing. Tamir Rice, a 12 year-old boy, was shot by police literally upon arrival, he was shot indescribably fast. Walter Scott, a 50 year old man, was shot while running away from police. The common thread is their criminal blackness. These are just three examples out of many other men and women, and children shot for their blackness. Not to mention the people who were who were lucky enough to just be arrested, harassed or beaten for the same reason.

The Black body has no potential because its future has already been determined by its blackness. It is not a matter of "if" but "when." However as a Black person you are fully aware of your own potential, and power to choose, yet at the same time you are aware of your individual invisibility. You exist in the zone of nonbeing where you are fully aware of you

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<sup>50</sup> 101, Gordon

humanity, but it goes unrecognized on an institutional, and often personal level as well. Du Bois called it the double conscious where you are fully aware of the paradoxical duality of your experience. On one level you live the same way as any other human, and on another you are always aware of the White gaze. Should you fail to be aware of the White gaze you will almost certainly find yourself in harms way like Tamir, and Jordan and Walter. On the other hand, even if you are aware of your criminal blackness, that does not guarantee your protection either, that is what makes the paradox of blackness so scary. It is a daunting task to live one's life in face of the question: Am I Next?

So long as your body is Black there is no safe haven for you. We often face a double edged sword because of the impoverished condition that we live under, Coates explains, "Fail to comprehend the streets, and give up your body now. But fail to comprehend the schools and give up your body later."<sup>51</sup> Due to the lack of individualization the Black person can find themselves constantly contorting themselves to play whatever role is necessary for their situation. You are not just yourself, you are the Black-student, teacher, player, kid, officer, politician. You must learn to carry yourself as a "Black something" in a myriad of settings, and this directly impacts your ability to just be yourself, as you find yourself in a new racialized roll every time you walk into a room, and if you should fail to understand how to carry yourself in those rooms it could cost you your life. The only certainty is uncertainty for the African-American this is may be true for many other people as we do not know what the future holds. However the future isn't as inherently dangerous for everyone else as it is for African-Americans.

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<sup>51</sup> 25, Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *Between the World and Me*. Melbourne, Victoria: Text, 2015. Print.

We are constantly under threat from antiblack violence, this will always be the case so long as our humanity is unrecognized. This violence is possible because it is sanctioned, and that has been the case historically. Coates makes the point that “The destroyers [of Black bodies] will rarely be held accountable. Mostly they will receive pensions...All of this is common to Black people. And all of this is old for Black people. No one is held responsible.”<sup>52</sup> There is a lineage of violence upon the Black body in America. Although it has transformed over time violence against the Black body has been weaved into the fabric of this country. It started with the centuries of slavery, which were followed by 100 years under Jim Crow. The history of lynching African-Americans especially in the south is nothing new. The Blacks were guilty of being Black, and that was enough for the White community to gather and rejoice in their power at their expense. Today African-Americans do not worry about getting lynched as much as they do about getting killed by a police officer, that will go unpunished. African-American have to deal with the fact that their lives have no social value, and their lives have been neglected on a massive scale. Anyone can die at anytime, but knowing that your death has a high chance of being meaningless is particularly daunting. A Black person in every choice they make faces the possibility of becoming “just another statistic,” or in other words dying a meaningless death. Surely if your life was worth anything in the first place whomever is responsible for taking your life would be held accountable, and there are certainly a great number of people in this country that have been held accountable for taking the lives of another human being.

Coates is absolutely correct that antiblack violence is not a new phenomenon. It is merely another consequence of the invisibility of the Black individual. The fact that antiblack violence

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<sup>52</sup> 9, Coates

goes unpunished only serves as more proof that the humanity of African-Americans is not recognized. It is much easier to rationalize hanging something that is not human, from a tree than hanging a fellow human being from a tree. If you were hanging a fellow human being from a tree, you would understand that as equals you could also be hung from that tree, and most likely your own self interest you would not hang people from trees.

The world that African-Americans live in is ran by the racist's values, and the worst thing an African-American can do is to internalize those values and think of themselves as less than human. Internalized racism can be rooted in our upbringing. As Baldwin says, "Negroes in this country are taught really to despise themselves from the moment their eyes open on the world."<sup>53</sup> More times than not African-Americans are hard to pressed to find positive images of themselves, and are often given negative images instead. The African-American child is taught that his or her elders are uneducated, violent, and jail-bound. Rather than making the decision to combat the available narratives the African-American that has the internalized racist doctrines can support them. They too can point and call other Blacks the n-word, the same way that the White man can. However when antiblack Black person does that he falls into the same traps that a White racist does.

When the antiblack Black person calls another Black person the n-word, they are attempting to avoid their own oppressive situation by pointing out a group that deserves to be oppressed. They are looking down upon a group to which they still belong. Gordon describes the n-word as, "the lowest denominator; it robs itself of most human possibilities-freedom, value, self awareness."<sup>54</sup> In an antiblack world N-words are representative of a sub-human category.

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<sup>53</sup> 25, Baldwin, James. *The Fire Next Time*. New York: Dial, 1963. Print.

<sup>54</sup> 105, Gordon



When Fanon tells the story of how a White child pointed at him, and said “Look Mom, an Nigger,”<sup>55</sup> he reflects on the powerlessness of his situation even in adulthood. Although he knows he is not an n-word he is aware of what it means to be called one, “I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects.”<sup>56</sup> When someone calls you an n-word you are forced to confront the zone of nonbeing. N-words are treated as objects. They are less than human which is why they can be enslaved, hung from trees, and exploited with no afterthought. The Black antiblack racists look at themselves, and say “I am not the n-word, they are the real n-words they deserve to be oppressed, and I do not.” They have internalized the White value structure, while trying absolve themselves from it at the same time. They are evading the reality of their situation, which is that they are in fact Black, and will be treated as such by Whites. Regardless of what they do or say they will never be able to transcend their factual situation (blackness).

While they call other Blacks the “n-words” that are deserving of their oppression, it is easily possible for a White person to call them both “n-words” and should this happen the antiblack Black person will have no defense. This is by no means to justify the position of the White antiblack racist as they too evade reality by believing in their own supremacy. It just goes to show that belief of White supremacy is incorrect regardless of the believer. The White is wrong to think that he is better Black people. The Black person is wrong to believe that White people are better than Black, and is also wrong to believe that his belief in White supremacy somehow makes him better than other Blacks.

So what are we to do with this paradoxical and challenging identity that we have as African-Americans? This is a question that we all have to answer for ourselves, and there is no

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<sup>55</sup> 81, Fanon

<sup>56</sup> Fanon, 82

one right answer to this question. Gordon argues that racial identity itself is not a move of bad faith. On the contrary to deny one's own racial identity *would* be a move of bad faith. Gordon states, "We must choose, but we must choose as is already set for us. Try as I may, whenever I choose, no matter what I choose to choose as-what I choose to "be"- the fact of the matter is that it always turns out to be a Black man who chooses."<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, racism itself is not a personal choice. Tamir, Jordan, and Walter did not have the option to choose as White people before they died. We cannot escape our blackness. Our only sin is in our skin, and it will remain that way. This is because blackness was born out of whiteness and exists in relation to whiteness. Without whiteness there is no blackness the two are inextricably connected. "The Black man," Baldwin explains, "has functioned in the White man's world as a fixed star, as an immovable pillar: and as he moves out of his place, heaven and earth are shaken to their foundations."<sup>58</sup> Black people are held down in order for White people to stand up. How and why White-Americans, and the Western world became so became so bent on superiority are questions that go beyond the scope of this thesis. The Western world has made world domination its project, and White-Americans are a product of that larger thought process.

Perhaps the subjugation of the African-American came to fruition because of the profitability of slavery, and the masters had to be able to justify what they were doing. Frederick Douglass explains that, "The evils most fostered by slavery and oppression are precisely those which slaveholders and oppressors would transfer from their system to have the inherent character of their victims. Thus the very crimes of slavery becomes slavery's best defense. By making the enslaved character only fit for slavery they excuse themselves for refusing to make

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<sup>57</sup> 133, Gordon

<sup>58</sup> 9, Baldwin *The Fire Next Time*

the slave a free man. A wholesale method of accomplishing this result is to overthrow the instinctive consciousness of the common brotherhood of man.”<sup>59</sup> They were able to alleviate themselves of the responsibilities of enslaving a group of people by telling themselves that these people were lesser in the first place. This perceived lack of African-Americans persisted past the time of slavery, because they were unwilling to admit to their wrong doing.

It is not easy to admit that you or your former loved ones were wrong, and even harder to give up power. In an 1959 interview with Louis Lomax, Malcolm X theorized that feelings of guilt are what have taken a hold of the racist mind set he said, “I think that White people feel guilty knowing what they have done to Black people. They feel that if the deeds were reversed then they would hate the black man if he had done the same thing to them. So it reflects a guilt complex on the part of Whites when they ask us “Do we hate them?”” From this standpoint they do not want to free us because they are afraid that we would do the same thing onto them, because that is what they would do if they were oppressed and then freed.

Baldwin also points to guilt as the thing that holds White racists back he says, “The American found himself in a very peculiar position because he knew that black people were people...And the attempt to avoid this, to avoid this fact, I consider one of the keys to what we can call loosely the American psychology. For one thing, it created in Americans a kind of perpetual, hidden, festering, and entirely unadmitted guilt. Guilt is a very peculiar emotion. As long as you are guilty about something, no matter what it is you are not compelled to change it.”

<sup>60</sup> Guilt is a major part of the reason why racism persists because guilt is not an emotion that

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<sup>59</sup> 166, Gutmann, Amy, and Anthony Appiah. *Color Conscious: The Political Morality*. Press: Princeton UP, 1998. Print.

<sup>60</sup> 63, Baldwin, James. "Uses of the Blues." *The Cross of Redemption* (2010): 57-66. Web.

leads to action. For example when people say that they are angry they typically want to break something, or punch something, they wish to take action to alleviate the physical tension that they feel. Guilt is nothing like anger, as Baldwin explains it is not an inspiring emotion, frankly it is easier for White people to hold on to their racist values, than it is for them to own up to their mistakes, and this is where we still are today. Ultimately blacks are not kept down because Whites need a scapegoat per say, it is because that is what they have been taught. If there were no Blacks to stand over, then there would be no Whites. So as long as the current hierarchy exists there will always be Blacks, and Whites. Because superiority, especially the kind that racists claim is relational. In order for one group to be superior there must be another group that marked as inferior.

*Nonetheless*, if it were the case that we could choose our racial group independently of others everyone would have the ability to claim that they are White. However, we know that even if I say that I am White it will have little consequence to how I am treated in the world. To say that race is a personal choice would be to deny the perception of others. Although the perception of others is not always keen there have been and always will be indisputable cases of blackness, and whiteness in an antiblack world. We would fall into the trap of the sadist. If we were to believe that race was solely a personal choice. We would be objectifying everyone else by denying their perspectives. Race is not a choice nor biological, race is a social fact, and apart of our facticity. It is inescapable; to deny our race would be to deny a crucial element of our facticity. I could never in good faith decide that I was going to choose as a White person for the rest of my life.

### ***Section 3.2: What to do with Black Identity***

***“To be a Negro in America is often to hope against hope. It means fighting a daily double battle—a battle against pathology within and a battle against oppression without.”—Martin Luther King<sup>61</sup>***

Race is not a biological fact. It is something that has been constructed by the dominating classes of the Western World. Keeping this fact in mind transforms the conversation surrounding racial identity. What Appiah shows us is that race is an unreasonable concept that has infected the social life in America. As Fanon would say, unfortunately the battle against race has become a battle against the unreasonable. However, the mere fact that race is unreasonable means that racial identity is malleable. If race had the biological and cultural backing that the dominant class claimed that it did, then how one dealt with race would not be up for interpretation, it would be much more rigid. If races were real, then paths of thought like cultural geneticism would hold merit, and racial scripts would actually be useful things. Because races are not real racial identification is something that can be taken less seriously than we previously assumed. Historically, races have been the basis of large scale differential treatment. This differential treatment has taken numerous forms, including discriminatory practices, stereotyping, and

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<sup>61</sup> 121, King, Martin Luther. *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* New York: Harper & Row, 1967. Print.

prejudice, and if races were reasonable or rational then the aforementioned outcomes of differential treatment would at least be warranted and at most be useful.

The lack of seriousness surrounding racial identity directly stems from the unreasonable nature of race itself. The only reason that racial identity is such an important group identity is because racism is a part of the social life and history of America. To treat racial identity as negligible because race is unreasonable would be to deny an irremovable aspect of American social life. Martin Luther King, Jr. speaks for countless 20th century African-American thinkers when he states, "In America there is no escape from the awareness of color and the fact that our society places a qualitative difference on a person of dark skin"<sup>62</sup> Racism is something that we cannot run from even though races have no biological reality. Though we may not have to talk about races, we cannot stop talking about racial identification. For better or for worse, race has been and will be a major part of everyone's individual struggle to construct their identity in an authentic manner.

For Appiah, authenticity is balancing the personal and collective dimensions of identity. Appiah argues that an individual's identity can be broken down in those two dimensions. The personal dimension of identity is all of the "socially or morally important features of the person -intelligence, charm, wit, cupidity - that are not themselves the basis of forms of collective identity."<sup>63</sup> The collective dimension of identity is made up of larger group identities that are shared among people with the defining trait. Collective identities are things like race, age, gender, sexual orientation. They are of much greater interest and social importance than the personal features that make up the personal dimension of an individual's identity. Collective

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<sup>62</sup> 117, King

<sup>63</sup> 93, Appiah, *Color Conscious*

identities have much greater implications than personal identities because historically, collective identities have been the basis for differential treatment.

Compare, for example, being funny versus being Black. Being funny is a part of the personal dimension of one's identity. Socially, being funny is generally seen as a positive trait, and while people may have differing senses of humor, whether or not someone finds you funny will not be the basis of differential treatment. On the other hand, being Black is a part of the collective dimension of identity, and has a long-standing history as the basis of differential treatment. In addition to differential treatment there are also proper modes of being – or scripts - that come with being Black. Such scripts are not entailed in being funny. In a similar sense there is no such thing as comedyism, or funnyism, while racism is a very real aspect of life in America. There is no one way that one should properly be funny, yet there are ways to properly be Black. Being funny will never have the same type of impact that being Black will have on your life. This is a key difference between the traits that comprise the personal dimension and the traits that comprise the collective dimension of identity.

When Appiah suggests that we should not take our racial identities too seriously he means two things. First, we should not let our racial identities limit our potential options and choices. Unfortunately for Black people, society has historically provided highly negative scripts for us. Proper modes of being Black include being uneducated, lazy, violent, and hypersexual, to name a few. There is also a host of stock characters that are appropriate for Blacks to emulate -like the Black athlete, the angry Black man or woman, the drug dealer or drug addict, the gang member, the single mother, the rapper, the thug or criminal, the list goes on - but all of these

scripts are without a doubt negative. To make matters worse, African-Americans who do not fit these negative modes of being are subject to ridicule from Blacks and non-Blacks alike.

The stereotypes are the same but they manifest themselves differently from in each group. Take, for example, the stereotype of speech patterns. African-Americans are supposed to talk a certain way that most would call broken English, and White-Americans are expected to speak perfect English. This presents a problem for the African-American who speaks perfect English. If they speaks to their African-American peers, they may find themselves getting criticized for “talking so White.” When talking to their White peers they are just as likely to get complimented for being “so articulate.” Receiving compliments of this nature are problematic because they actually imply that your speech patterns are out of the ordinary, and that you are not supposed to be able to talk as well as you do. Both comments reinforce the same stereotype of African-Americans only being able to speak broken English. The African-American speaker may feel lost in this situation, when they walk amongst their Black peers they are constantly associated with whiteness, yet when they walk amongst their White peers they are constantly associated with blackness. They can find themselves just living to fulfill the roles of each perception, and can begin to lose themselves in the process, as their individuality goes unrecognized.

The racist scripts imposed upon African-Americans diminish individual dignity, respect, and autonomy. When faced with these “proper” modes of being, African-Americans have traditionally faced the choice to either subject themselves to these negative scripts or find ways to combat them. Appiah points out that the individuals that have had their autonomy limited, and their dignity insulted typically respond by “learning to see these collective identities not as



sources of limitation and insult but as a valuable part of what they centrally are. Because the ethics of authenticity requires us to express what we centrally are in our lives, they move next to the demand that they be recognized in social life as woman, homosexuals, Blacks, Catholics.”<sup>64</sup> We see this sort of thinking come about during the late 60’s and early 70’s in the Black Power Movement, or the Black is Beautiful cultural movement. Those in power from outside of the Black community to that point had provided purely negative scripts for Black lives, so in refutation people from *within* the Black community flipped the scripts and created positive scripts for themselves.

At first this seems like a reasonable response, but its long-term stability is questionable. Appiah points to some negative implications of taking on these self-provided positive scripts. The first is that by being Black one must reject White norms of speech and behavior. By rejecting what are perceived to be White norms of speech and behavior we limit the range of possible norms and behaviors for Black people. This inherent limitation plays itself out today when African-Americans think about blackness as a quantity. There are certain ways to be Black, and if you don’t fit into those scripts you are not “Black enough.” “Enough” implies that there is a certain amount of blackness that one must have in order to “really be Black.” When someone tells a Black person that they talk White, they are attempting to police blackness. The policing of blackness is a negative outcome of the aforementioned pro-Black scripts that involved rejecting perceived whiteness.

The second consequence is that by taking on the pro-Black script you have to acknowledge that you exist in a racist world that is constantly assaulting your dignity. One would

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<sup>64</sup> 98, Appiah, *Color Conscious*

not need a script that is pro-Black if there was not an anti-Black world in the first place. Appiah makes the claim, therefore, that “insisting on the right to live a dignified life will not be enough. It will not even be enough to require that one be treated with equal dignity despite being Black.”

<sup>65</sup> When we ask to be treated with equal dignity despite being Black or any other collective identity we are conceding that blackness negatively impacts the amount of dignity that we can have in the first place.

Asking for equal dignity or respect despite being Black requires that being Black is a negative condition. When Black people ask for respect despite their blackness they are unknowingly internalizing the racist rhetoric that they initially set out to overcome. This is clearly a mistake, for surely they do not mean to say, “Black people are in fact bad, but I am a Black person that happens to be good. I would like for you to respect me despite the fact that I am Black.” Perhaps a better way to go about it would be to ask for respect *as* a Black rather than despite being Black.

However even asking for respect as a Black has its own shortcomings. As soon as we ask for respect as a Black we acknowledge that there are scripts that come with being Black. Appiah is concerned that “we have replaced one kind of tyranny with another.” <sup>66</sup> On one hand, the availability of positive Black scripts was a necessary departure from the negative modes of being that were traditionally supplied by society, but on the other they are just as constricting as the negative modes of being they sought to replace. As we have seen, the pro-Black script was an inappropriate solution long term because it set blackness, as something that was directly

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<sup>65</sup> 98, Appiah, *Color Conscious*

<sup>66</sup> 99, Appiah, *Color Conscious*

relational to whiteness. It was, nonetheless, a requisite step towards the ideal of unscripted blackness.

The best scenario is one where there are no proper ways of being Black and each Black individual is free to interpret the role that blackness will play in their lives, without facing ridicule from others, both Blacks and non Blacks alike.

The second thing that Appiah means when he says that we should not take our racial identity too seriously is that race should function in the same manner as any other collective identity. Appiah realizes that we are not just Black or White, or men or women, or young or old. We are multiple things at once. For instance, I am a young Black man, and the collective dimension of my identity as an individual is comprised of all of those identities together. So we should not take our racial identity so seriously as to overpower some of the other identities that we have. Appiah says that racial identities have the tendency to go imperial and “lead people to forget that their individual identities are complex and multifarious.”<sup>67</sup>

While it is true that we are complex and multifarious individuals, I do worry that Appiah may be endorsing a position that takes racial identity too lightly. “It is crucial,” Appiah states, “to remember always that we are not simply Black or White or yellow or brown, gay or straight or bisexual, Jewish, Christian Moslem, Buddhist or Confucian but that we are also brothers and sisters...fans of the Padres and the Bruins...movie buffs; MTV-holics...”<sup>68</sup> I think that Appiah runs the risk of trivializing racial identity. By my estimation the impact that one’s racial identity is likely to have on someone’s life is far greater than someone’s favorite MLB team. The social impact of one’s addiction, or lack thereof, to MTV pales in comparison to that of racial identity.

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<sup>67</sup> 103, Appiah, *Color Conscious*

<sup>68</sup> 104, Appiah, *Color Conscious*

We are not necessarily in control of our racial identity, and racism is something that people of color have to face on a daily basis when they leave their homes, as I am sure Appiah is well aware of in his personal life. I understand his desire to not have race dominate our other dimensions of identity, but at the same time someone's racial identity is far more important than their interest in movies.

However identity is not so clean cut because there is a tangible amount of internal conflict that comes with racial identity. Appiah has made the case for unscripted blackness, and while his points may be valid, most individuals also have the desire to belong to something greater than themselves. So when we think about Black scripts and culture, individuals have competing desires to claim African-American culture as their own, yet at the same time be free of scripts and stereotypes that are also associated with African-American culture. Interestingly enough, it could be true that the desire to be a part of something larger than one's self is an animating notion behind racism. Much in the same way that the common dehumanization of black people pushed us together in the first place. Collective identities then do have the potential to be a double edged sword. The same way that the racist's choose to unite around their shared sense of power. The oppressed groups are forced to unite under the pressure of that same power.

### ***Section 3.3: Racial Identity and Meaning:Decisions***

#### ***“Why don’t Blacks kill themselves?” -Gordon***

As African-Americans we are all faced with the prospect of dehumanization. Regardless of who we are, and what we will be, our humanity is and always will be denied. The question then is: How do we respond to our condition? And in a great twist of philosophical irony the answer is that there is no answer. The only answer that can be given is to assert your agency. However that is subjective, and by nature will be different for every single person.

Each person has the ability to choose how to assert their own subjectivity. Slaves violently had their individuality and humanity stripped from them; they were violently forced into collective anonymity. At this point the individual slave sees that his or her humanity is being challenged as their inherent ability for potential is being physically denied by chains. Some slaves decided to pray to their gods, while other slaves resolved to kill themselves. The slaves choose different means to reach the same end: asserting their own agency and reclaiming their humanity. Objects cannot kill themselves, for there is no self to kill as an object. Objects cannot choose death because they have no life in the first place. Committing suicide is something that only a subjective being can do. Objects also don’t pray. Objects don’t have anything to pray for because they have no future. In prayer you acknowledge your potential as a human, which the slave traders tried to take away from the slave. We cannot say that one slave was right and the other was wrong. There cannot be a wholesale group response to the challenge, because that disregards the subjective nature of humanity in the first place.

The situation of the African-American parent is just as daunting as the slaves. How are they supposed to raise children that they have no way to protect as they cannot even protect

themselves? Deciding whether or not to take the life of your child to prevent them from a life of bondage was a very real response. Raising children is difficult in any context, but the pressures of raising kids under the condition of oppression is beyond challenging. Subjective responses are a key part of understanding the battle against dehumanization. For this is the same reason that we cannot be upset at Du Bois for writing *Of the Passing of the First-Born*, where he found himself oddly glad that his son had died before experiencing the terrors of dehumanization, “All that day and night there sat an awful gladness in my heart-nay, blame not if I see the world thus darkly through the Veil.”<sup>69</sup> Others may have decided to weep over the loss of potential, but Du Bois found an odd sense of joy knowing that his child would never have to have the experience of having his human potential denied. There is no proper response to the situation, and both reactions are meritorious in their own right, as they both recognize the humanity of the child at stake. Although neither decision is better than another. Each choice is more than just a matter of opinion. It is a political response, and a demonstration of agency

Ultimately what’s important is recognition of the question at hand. Once we realize the nature of our situation we can work to change it. It’s a process to even arrive at the right question. We don’t just wake up one day and realize that we are in the zone of non-being. We have to go through the process of living in order to gain our experiences. We have to be the invisible man: “One night I accidentally bumped into a man, and perhaps because of the near darkness he saw me and called me an insulting name. I sprang at him, seized his coat lapels and demanded that he apologize...But he continued to curse and struggle, and I butted him again and again until he went down heavily, on his knees, profusely bleeding...when it occurred to me that

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<sup>69</sup> 151, Du Bois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folks*. New York: Dodd, Mead, 1961. Print.

the man had not seen me, actually; that he, as far as he knew, was in the midst of a walking nightmare!"<sup>70</sup> We don't all have to beat a man half to death to gain an understanding of the condition that we face, but we all go through some experience that illuminates our situation to us. We all have different experiences that awaken us to the fact of our shared situation, and our responses to that situation can vary as much as the experiences that awaken us to our oppression. The journey to the question, and the answer, if we can even call it that, demonstrates an understanding of your situation which is crucial if one wishes to change their situation.

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<sup>70</sup> 3, Ellison

### ***Section 4.1: What About Everybody Else?***

#### ***To act is to be committed, and to be committed is to be in danger-James Baldwin***

One thing that Appiah and Gordon do not adequately account for is group transcendence. So much of the work that they have done focuses on the individual and their quest for authenticity. Although discussions of this nature are warranted, finding individual authenticity does not suffice to bring about the type of social change that oppressed individuals ultimately seek. That type of change can only be brought about by group level social change. Groups are obviously made up of individuals, so their individual authenticity is certainly important, but if the focus of racial discourse becomes over-individualized, then oppressed groups will just become home to great individuals that are atypical and disjointed from their peers, and the groups will become even easier to oppress. This lies in stark contrast to the predetermined nature of the Black body that I described earlier, yet both narratives are problematic because they are too extreme. Neither demonstrate recognition of the humanity of African-American people on a large scale. Predeterminism doesn't recognize any Black individuals, and over-individualization only recognizes a chosen few, while disregarding all of the others. Effective political and social organizing around collective identities should involve balance. African-Americans should work together on a group level, however they should be recognized as full fledged individuals within that same group. *The importance of group organization is something that Martin Luther King has been advocating since the 60's, "This form of group unity can do infinitely more to liberate the Negro than any action of individuals. We have been oppressed as a group and we must overcome that oppression as a group."*<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> 133, King



Up until the fairly recent birth of the Black Lives Matter Movement, there had been a lull in social justice movements coming from within the Black community starting in the 80's. Prior to that the Civil Rights Movement dominated the 60's, and the 70's saw the rise and fall of the Black Power Movement. Since then instead of group action we have been given great figures, and idols. These individuals were all exceptional by virtue of their own merits. However they are anomalies, and should not be expected to be the norm. We have mistaken individual achievement for group success. We need tangible social change, and not just for Oprah to have her own TV Channel. When Obama, was elected into office there was widespread misinterpretation of what that would actually mean for Black people. Barack Obama, is powerful, but he is just one man, so when we tell Black kids to be like Obama, or when we take Obama as a sign of progress we are mistaken. Obama has done well for himself to become president, and there was once a day and age where that would have been impossible. Furthermore, Obama is an extraordinary person to say the least, and when we tell kids to be like Obama we are asking for them to be extraordinary which isn't fair. We have to be able to find a healthy middle ground between poverty and Presidency. We are far too easy to oppress if we just spend all of our time looking up to Obama, or trying to be like Oprah. They are exceptional individuals, who have reached the highest of heights, yet if the groups that they supposedly represent do not climb with them then it is meaningless. We are mistaken to think that exceptional individuals are a sign of progress, or that in order for us to make anything of ourselves we have to be extraordinary to such a degree.

Mike Wallace in that same interview with Stokely Carmichael, told him that "You are one black man. Who went to a good essentially white high school in the city of New York. You

obviously have had a good education and a good many of the people who work with you in SNCC can say the same thing, and you are a black man that came from a New York ghetto.” Carmichael responds, “And we are saying that there is a system that allows for one or two black people to get out, and that that's the rationale for keeping other black people down.”<sup>72</sup> Wallace wishes to push the narrative of black exceptionalism, and Carmichael refutes that by talking about the system that keeps the group down rather than the successes of the individual.

Blacks did not come to this country as individuals, we were brought here as a group. Our shared experience of oppression initially forged the bond that still holds us together. In order for us to overcome that oppression we have to do so as a group. The importance of group organization is something that Malcolm X has been advocating since the 60's, The problem isn't personal and it isn't individual. The problem is collective, and just as Negroes suffer collectively from the collective attitudes of White people in the country. You can't approach it on an individual level.”<sup>73</sup> However even this type of thinking is somewhat flawed, in that it doesn't tell the whole story of what is necessary to bring about social change. Social change does not only mean united activity from oppressed groups but, activity from the oppressing groups as well. The Black man is not the one who set up the system against himself. The White man is responsible for that.

We have a situation where not only is the victim suffering, but the victim is also expected to explain the nature of the oppression to the very same people that oppress them. Gordon comments on this situation, “This demand for explanation is a core feature of racism that other's

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<sup>72</sup> Carmichael and Wallac

<sup>73</sup> Lomax, Louis E. “A Summing Up: Louis Lomax Interviews Malcolm X.” *When the Word Is Given: a Report on Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, and the Black Muslim World.*

existence isn't justified."<sup>74</sup> This is actually rooted in Emancipation. African-Americans were given their freedom, however they were still oppressed economically and politically by Jim Crow laws. However, they were now "free" and because they were free they were now portrayed as responsible for their situations because they were free from slavery. Racists were able to push the burden of responsibility onto Black people, when in reality Black people lived under circumstances that Racists had manufactured from start to finish. The lack of accountability on the part of the oppressor goes hand in hand with the lack of change for the oppressed people.

So long as the African-American is seen as solely responsible for a situation which they had no part in creating, progress will be as slow as it has ever been. As James Baldwin says "What I am much more concerned about is what white Americans have done to themselves; what has been done to me is irrelevant simply because there is nothing more you can do to me. But in doing it you've done something to yourself. In evading my humanity, you have done something to your own humanity" The same way that oppressed people must proactively work for their own political freedom. The Oppressor must also educate themselves about the struggles of the oppressed group. This is a key component of creating social change, White people that stand to benefit from a racist power structure have to make a concerted effort to understand that system and what they can do to make a difference.

That requires taking political action. That doesn't mean that just being nice to Black people. Being nice to Black people falls in the same boat as exceptional Black individuals. It too demonstrates a fundamental misunderstanding of the relationship between race and power in this country. Racism isn't about White people being mean to Black people because they don't like

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<sup>74</sup> 153, Gordon

the color of our skin, this is just a part of the problem. Racism is about structural oppression on a political level. White people do not have to like us in order for us to be free. We need things like police brutality, and access to education to change for us to be free. For a White person to be nice, or even like a Black person is nice for those two people, but it has no impact on the political standing of the group of the oppressed group.

Regardless of how many nice White people there are, or the number of White friends that I have, when I go to New York City “Stop and Frisk” is for me, and for the people that look like me. The thought that if a White person is just nice to Black people, then they are doing their job to combat social injustice, is detrimental to the cause. We need more than that, we need people on both sides taking tangible political action. The change which we seek, requires a shift in thinking on the part of the oppressor, and on the behalf of the oppressed.

Here we see a unifying narrative about individuals both black and white that is false. Black people are lead to believe in the potential of great African-American figures as signs of progress and this is simply not true as Baldwin points out that, “The fact that Harry Belafonte makes as much money as, let's say Frank Sinatra, doesn't really mean anything in this context. Frank can still get a house anywhere, and Harry can't...They love him onstage, or a cocktail party, but they don't want him to marry their daughters.”<sup>75</sup> African-American individuals who are highly successful, are not symbols of group progress. The same way that nice people don't have a significant impact on race relations in this country, it is important to question what they seek to accomplish with their niceness. As Coates says, “But my experience in this world has been that the people who believe themselves to be white are obsessed with the politics of personal

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<sup>75</sup>60, Baldwin, *Uses of the Blues*

exoneration.”<sup>76</sup> While the nice White person certainly does not wish to cause harm unto the Black person, this may be in the self interest of exoneration. The point is that both sides are led to believe that individual action is enough to change the group-level situation. We are always told how much people can do on an individual basis. This narrative is generated to the benefit of the system in place. To cite Coates again, “A society almost necessarily, begins every success story with the chapter that most advantages itself, and in America, these precipitating chapters are almost always rendered as the singular action of exceptional individuals.”<sup>77</sup> Both Blacks and Whites must be sure not to fall into the trap of individualism, racism is not a problem that can be fixed by one person, keeping in mind what King said it takes the effort of an entire group.

Here, Amy Gutman’s essay, “What’s Morally Relevant about Racial Identity?” proves to be insightful. Gutman opens up the obligation to fight for social justice to an even larger group. Gutman proposes that, “everyone should do his or her fair share to overcome racial (as well as any other) injustice.”<sup>78</sup> This is how things should already be in theory, yet we all know from experience that this is far from the truth. Gutman endorses an all-encompassing ideal that if made into a reality would cause social change of the likes which we have never seen. This has not yet happened because there is some mental work that has to be done to get to that point . Gutman makes the key distinction between color consciousness and race consciousness.

The two are often convoluted, but have key differences. First off there is race consciousness: “the kind of consciousness that presumes the existence of separate human races and identifies race with essential natural differences that are morally relevant.”<sup>79</sup> Just like with

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<sup>76</sup> 97, Coates

<sup>77</sup> 96, Coates

<sup>78</sup> 170, Gutmann

<sup>79</sup> 163, Gutmann

extrinsic racism, the “natural differences” are phenotypical and indicative of morally relevant differences. This type of thinking is seemingly the root of all our problems as it is essentially the consciousness of propositional and dispositional racists. The core presumption of difference is the core of White supremacy, and the power structure in this country. It is unequivocally vital that we rid ourselves of that core presumption, for, as should be clear by now, the entire African-American condition has been manufactured by that presumption.

On the other hand, Gutmann describes color consciousness which “rejects an essential, natural division among human beings and also rejects the idea that there are morally relevant differences that correspond to racial divisions among human beings. Color consciousness entails an awareness of the way in which individuals have historically come to be identified by superficial phenotypical differences.”<sup>80</sup> If we were unable to have color consciousness, then we would be unable to see the source of racial injustice for what it is. Right now, in America not everyone can see the racial injustice that takes place on a day to day basis. There are the people that are actively racist and commit racist acts, and then there are also people that are more passively racist. Active racists deny the humanity of others, by repeating racial slurs, antiblack violence, and signing antiblack petitions, these are the people that don’t like Black people and wish to punish them for it. On the other hand, there are people who do not recognize the humanity of Black people, but in a more passive form. These are the type of people that Coates was referring to they are more concerned with their own “exoneration” than with real issues of social injustices. Passive racists fail to participate in stopping active racists, but they too do not draw the connections between all of the “isolated” incidents of antiblack violence. They may not

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<sup>80</sup> 164, Gutmann

throw the “n-word” around all the time, but passive racists surely compliment Black people “for being so articulate.”

When dealing with passive and active racists we have already seen that the presentation of counter evidence doesn't get the job done as far as changing their minds. Showing them statistics, and sharing personal experiences with them certainly will not do the trick. Active racists may simply take up their favorite pastime of denying the facts. Active racists don't see that humanity of Black people in the first place so, their personal experiences will surely fall on deaf ears. Passive racists, may be more willing to hear the facts, and the personal experiences of Black people. However when everything's said and done they will find that they still “Just don't like Black people for some reason.” The same goes for with simply disproving the biological basis for race, because that information has been available since W.E.B. Du Bois was born, and it hasn't changed a thing. This is because of the pervasiveness of race consciousness allows one to consistently evade reality, counterevidence and all things rational have no impact. Where race consciousness looks to divide us, color consciousness looks to unite us all under the common flag of humanity.

When Gutmann talks about social change she means positive color conscious policies. Typically, there is the misconception that color conscious policies do more damage than good because they indirectly perpetuate racism. In reality, color conscious policies simply work to acknowledge and redeem the all important history of injustice. Color conscious rejects racism, but acknowledges the fact that years of social injustice, and systematic oppression cannot be swept under the rug, and they have to be addressed.

We see this type of resistance to affirmative action, and most recently the Black Lives Matter movement. Detractors typically argue that they only serve to divide us, by shedding light on the racial tensions that many would like to believe are long gone. Detractors would ask for us to forget about the incredibly important history, and just move into a color blind future. This color blind future is an attempt to hide active racists, while allowing for passive racists to continue doing what they have been doing, but what we need is a shift in consciousness from both groups. Detractors paint leaders within the movement as race-baiters, in order to protect their irrational perceptions. The “Race Baiting” rhetoric in response to the Black Live Matter movement is dismissive, and an attempt to evade critical conversations about race. This isn’t to say that the movement should never be critiqued, but ultimately it is just an appeal to the common thread of humanity in all of us, and that isn’t something that should be dismissed any longer. It is important that we first walk before run. We have to work through and acknowledge the issues at hand before blindly moving forward to some post racial utopia.

Black and White people may have different roles in combating social injustices, yet neither role is larger than the other. It is important for everyone to participate in social justice projects. By not doing so you run the risk of indirect support, and you also could run the risk of freeloading. For example if there was a community organized group that was working on building some sort of community center , and you did not sign any petitions or make any donations of money, time, or even material, then you would benefit from something that you did not contribute to. Obviously, this becomes a problem if everyone tries to freeload. This is a question of fairness. It would not be fair for someone that had \$500 to not donate anything, when people with 50 dollars are making up the majority of donations. One's silence on issues of social



injustice can also be seen as indirect support for the status quo, for the same reasons. Change cannot occur without activity. In principle Gutmann states, “We should give to others according to our capacity, and we should not be free-riders on the moral efforts of others. In this society our identities as well as our obligations cannot help but be color conscious, but their source is the principle of fairness which is colorblind.”<sup>81</sup> Most importantly this type of thinking can be expanded to deal with social injustices outside of racism. Under the principle of fairness people who are less oppressed must do what they see fit to help others that are more oppressed than they are, the animating goal here is to not ride the wave of change without contributing to that wave itself. For example it is unfair for a rich White man to make no contributions the same way that it is unfair for a middle class black man to benefit from the work of a poor black woman.

In conclusions, Guttman's framework is helpful because it offers a theoretical framework to appropriately distribute obligations for social justice change on a group level. Her framework also provides a new set of labels for two perspectives that this thesis has been attempting to uncover. Color and Race consciousness represent two important perspectives in the conversation surrounding racism, and although the two opposing sides are nothing new per say. Guttman's definitions provide a much more nuanced understanding, especially when both of them are taken into account. However, ultimately Guttman's labels don't answer the question of how to get rid of racism. We can now label Race consciousness when we see it, but ridding people of that sort of thinking remains the challenge.

It is important to note that this challenge is separate from the challenges of group prosperity although it is related. The challenge of changing the heart of racists seems to fall

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<sup>81</sup> 174, Gutmann

squarely on the shoulders of the individual. Even if there was group level success, and the types of things that generally plague African-American communities were brought to a halt. That does not mean that there won't still be people who see African-Americans as inferior, it just means that the system that supports, and manufactures that inferiority would be gone. We cannot legislate what is in the hearts of people. We can try to educate, and demonstrate, and converse, but it ultimately comes down to the racists willingness to change. Baldwin would say it comes down to their compassion, "There is something monstrous about never having been hurt, never having been made to bleed, never having lost anything, never having gained anything because life is beautiful, and in order to keep it beautiful you're going to stay just the way you are and you're not going to test your theory against all possibilities outside. America is something like that. The failure on our part to accept the reality of pain of anguish, or ambiguity, of death has turned us into a very peculiar and sometimes monstrous people. It means for one thing, and it's very serious that people who have had no experience have no compassion." Gutmann's framework gives us a tool to use in teaching social change, however that change that we seek is predicated on the compassion of individuals that Baldwin is referring to. In reality a balance between the two is what will give us the type of future that we desire. We need both active, and compassionate individuals working in a group towards the recognition of humanity everywhere.