Racist Variations of Bad Faith: A Critical Study of Lewis Gordon's Phenomenology of Racism

1. Introduction

Within the relatively specialized field of philosophy of racism—a field that is particularly well developed in the Anglo-American world—the work of the African-American philosopher Lewis Gordon is well known. This is especially the case for his work on the interpretation of the existential structures of racism on the basis of the early Jean-Paul Sartre.[1] He is not the first, however, to find in Sartre's existential phenomenology a fertile ground for discussing themes concerning oppression, racism, and human conflict. Yet what makes his contribution unique is that he focuses on a particular brand of racism, namely "antiblack racism," and that he explores the meaning of racism as bad faith not so much from the receiving side (the oppressed)—as for instance Franz Fanon and to a lesser extent Albert Memmi have done—but mainly from the perspective of the racist worldview itself (the oppressors). Especially in his earlier book *Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism* (1995), Gordon sets himself the goal of phenomenologically analyzing what it means to look through the eyes of hatred.

Before I proceed, a short methodological remark is called for. Given

[1]Racism is a recurring theme in the work of Lewis Gordon. Two of his books that are especially important in this regard are *Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism* (New York: Humanity Books, 1995) and *Her Majesty's Other Children: Sketches of Racism from a Neocolonial Age* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997). His other books deal with the related issues of black thought and Africana philosophy; for example, *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man: An Essay on Philosophy and the Human Sciences* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Lewis Gordon (ed.), *Existence in Black: An Anthology of Black Existential Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 1997); *Existentia Africana: Understanding Africana Existential Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2000); and Lewis Gordon and Jane Anna Gordon (eds.), *Not Only the Master's Tools: African-American Studies in Theory and Practice* (London: Paradigm, 2006). His most recent book is a critique of monodisciplinarity, a more methodological issue, although it too has Africana philosophy and race as prominent themes: *Disciplinary Decadence: Living Thought in Trying Times* (London: Paradigm, 2006). I will use the abbreviation "*BF*" for *Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism* (followed by page numbers in parentheses in the text).

what Gordon refers to as the standpoint epistemological approach—that is, writing with a sense that one has only limited knowledge of any group of which one is not a member[2]—I would feel somewhat inhibited as a white European in speaking about the phenomenon of antiblack racism from the receiving side, that is, from the lived experience of the victims of antiblack racist hatred. According to Gordon, the risk of such a project would be epistemic colonization, that is, white theorists interpreting the experience of "colored folks." In this article, however, I will mainly focus on Gordon's claims concerning the existential *sources* of racism. My ethnic location does not appear to be particularly problematic from that perspective, especially for describing a typical white variant of racism. To talk about a "privileged" epistemic position in this regard, however, would be unfortunate, and not merely because of the ambiguity of the word "privileged." Generally, every human being, no matter what his or her ethnic identifications, can succumb to ethnic hatred. In fact, this is precisely what the idea of racism as bad faith conveys—that racism should be understood as a permanent possibility (or even a permanent temptation) that is interwoven with the dynamics of human existence itself. In this regard, the standpoint logic could lead to the incorrect conclusion that a phenomenology of racism is only possible if one is part of an oppressive social group.

After a reconstruction of Gordon's early phenomenology of antiblack racism (section 2), I will argue that Gordon's interpretation of racist hatred from a Sartrean perspective has not taken the transformative nature of racism sufficiently into account. The interpretation of racism as a type of bad faith ought to acknowledge the distinction between the racist motivation and the racist attitude itself. By not making this crucial distinction, Gordon's analysis of racism is phenomenologically unconvincing.[3] According to Gordon, the racist perceives himself as "presence" while the racial other is construed as "absence" or "emptiness." This claim fails to do justice to the *other-reification* that is central to all variants of racism. The perception of the other as a disturbing lack of being, as absence, is characteristic of the racist's motivation rather than of his or her attitude itself, or so I will argue. A social relation characterized by racism must not be understood in terms of "presence of being" versus "absence

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[2]Lewis Gordon, "African-American Philosophy, Race, and the Geography of Reason," in Gordon and Gordon (eds.), *Not Only the Master's Tools*, pp. 3-50, at p. 31; Gordon, *Existentia Africana*, chap. 2.

[3]Hence I disagree with Clevis Headley's positive evaluation of Gordon's work in this respect in his review article of *Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism*. Here Headley concludes that "Gordon has provided a good existential phenomenological account of antiblack racism." Clevis Headley, "Existential Phenomenology and the Problem of Race," *Philosophy Today* 41 (1997): 334-45, p. 341.

of being," as Gordon argues, but in terms of "presence of good being" versus "presence of evil/lesser being." Racism involves a double flight from transcendence and thus a double reification, of both self and other (section 3).

I will argue next that there is one variant of racism that does not fit this model. That is the type of racism recently described by Robert Birt as "the bad faith of whiteness." This refers to the racist supposition that the white perspective is neutral, universal, and raceless, while "the others" are ethnically structured and attached to particular social groups with shared characteristics (e.g., culture, ethnicity, traditions). In contrast to the type of racism that I refer to as the double flight from transcendence, in this case the racist existential dynamic should be interpreted as a denial of (or flight from) facticity. The facticity that is being denied here is that of the self, while the outgroup is identified with inferior, reified being (section 4). Hence, other-reification is characteristic of this second variant of racism, too. For that reason, Gordon's theory of racism does not fit this second variant either. I will argue that both these alternative models cover most existing manifestations of racism.

2. Gordon's Phenomenology of Racism as Bad Faith

In his treatment of the concept of bad faith, Gordon interprets Sartre's original idea of bad faith as a flight from a "displeasing truth" to a "pleasing falsehood" (*BF* 8). The truth that is at stake here is not about a particular state of affairs, but about the general human condition itself. This condition is fundamentally characterized by freedom and responsibility. In line with Sartrean existentialism, Gordon argues that the confrontation with one's freedom leads to anguish, because freedom—or in Sartre's terms "transcendence"—involves the sense that the self is not a stable given, a fixed substance. Rather, what constitutes my freedom is the fact that I always face my own possibilities. This is a situation "without comfort," as Gordon puts it, because mental comfort implies a condition of rest, while the human condition is characterized by a constitutive lack of fixed qualities (*BF* 14).[4]

At the same time, human freedom should not be understood as a bundle of free-floating possibilities. Freedom is always "freedom-in-situation," that is, it is always bound by a particular set of circumstances that is not the direct result of choice itself.[5] This means that human reality is characterized by both freedom and facticity. Facticity refers to

[4]Cf. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology* (London: Routledge, 1958), part 1, chap. 1, section 5.

[5]Ibid., pp. 79 ff., 481 ff.

those aspects of our situation that are factual and that we somehow have to come to grips with, such as the color of our skin, being born in an unjust society, having a handicap, and so one. At the same time, however, we are free to imagine possible ways of dealing with these facts, like interpreting them in a certain way and choosing certain life plans accordingly.

Bad faith is the evasion of this freedom-facticity ambiguity. It refers to the affirmation of one's facticity at the expense of one's transcendence or to the affirmation of one's transcendence at the expense of one's facticity. Hence, bad faith can refer to both a flight from human freedom and a flight from facticity. The flight from freedom, however, seems to be not only more common in a general sense,[6] but also in the more specific case of racism as bad faith.

Racism tends to manifest itself as a flight from human ambiguity toward the extreme of facticity.[7] Generally, the racist essentializes his or her own "race," ethnicity, culture, or national belonging in terms of rigid qualities and innate abilities. Gordon tries to make this clear by using certain root metaphors. For instance, he describes bad faith in this context as an attempt to "identify ourselves as 'full' and others as 'empty' or existing in the condition of lack" (*BF* 6). Instead of the unsettling openness and indeterminacy that comes with the sense of one's own freedom, the racist perceives himself as "full." But while the racist is in the grip of self-reifying tendencies, the racial other, according to Gordon, is perceived in terms of "emptiness" or "lack."

Elsewhere, Gordon introduces a similar oppositional pair of concepts, namely that of "presence" versus "absence" (*BF* chap. 14). Here, Gordon associates absence with Sartre's vocabulary of transcendence (or freedom), while presence is interpreted as a modus of facticity (*BF* 98). But instead of valuing absence of being as typically human, the racist values it as inferior. Gordon refers to this as a "deep or ontological denial of human reality" (*BF* 98). Although Gordon considers the notion that the dominant group in an antiblack world might want to understand itself in terms of absence of being, in order to affirm its own freedom, he is quick to point out that what a racist really wants is to avoid anguish and responsibility. Hence, it is precisely freedom that the racist is running away from. So it is the antiblack racist who develops a sense of him- or herself in terms of presence (or "thingness"). In contrast, the racist constructs the outgroup as an instance of absence, sometimes referred to as a "form of nothing" (*BF* 105), a "black hole" (*BF* 99), or a "hole in being" (*BF* 124). The presence of a black person in an antiblack world signifies the

[6]Neil Levy, *Sartre* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2002), p. 78.

[7]In the introduction, however, I have sketched another variant of racist bad faith, the bad faith of whiteness. I will come back to this later (section 4).

presence of absence. In such a world, Gordon stipulates, there is always something absent whenever blacks are present. "The more *present* a black is, the more absent is this 'something'. And the more absent a black is, the more *present* is this something" (*BF* 98).

One of the problems with Gordon's phenomenology of racism is that this "something" that is absent whenever blacks are present—given the antiblack world—has different meanings throughout his work, meanings that are not clearly differentiated and that cannot always be easily reconciled. I have found three different ways in which "something" is absent in this sense, namely, "something" understood as (1) facticity, (2) individuality, and (3) human substance.

We have already touched upon the first of these meanings, where Gordon describes the process of othering in terms of ascribing to the outgroup "the value of transcendence (Absence)" (*BF* 98). In this perspective, the racist's outgroup is perceived as ontological "nothingness" or as a "hole in being," as Gordon puts it (*BF* 124). In the philosophy of Sartre, nothingness refers to nonbeing as a constitutive aspect of human consciousness. Hence, nothingness (*néant*) as a technical concept denotes a lack of properties, and is opposed to being (*être*). When Gordon describes blackness from the standpoint of the antiblack racist he refers to it as "a form of nothing" (*BF* 105). What is typical of this absence or lack of being is that it constitutes a kind of invisibility, similar to the phenomenon Ralph Ellison describes in his famous novel: "I am an invisible man … I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me."[8] Invisibility here refers to the misrecognition of black people in an antiblack world.

Sometimes Gordon's reference to blackness as "a hole in being" is attributed with a power that is very similar to the notion of "leak" (*fuite*) in Sartre's phenomenology of the gaze,[9] for instance, where Gordon speaks of a "black hole" that sucks presence into itself. For the antiblack racist, the black man is seen and experienced as a locus of destruction, namely a "destruction of presence" (*BF* 99).

This racist perception of the black man as a "hole" leads Gordon to introduce a particular sexual imagery. Because both black men and black women in an antiblack world are "situated in the condition of the 'hole'" (*BF* 124), Gordon argues that antiblack racism is intimately connected to misogyny. This is so because even the white woman in an antiblack world represents secret blackness hidden in her whiteness. Hence, the white woman represents a living contradiction, according to Gordon,

[8]Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (London: Penguin, 1952/1965), p. 7.

[9]Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 256; Sartre, *L'être et le néant: Essai d'ontologie phénoménologique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943), p. 295.

namely, "white blackness" (*BF* 126). But this dynamic works the other way as well. The black man, by being in the condition of the hole, becomes a "chasm to *fill*": "a black man in the presence of whiteness stands as a hole to be filled" (*BF* 127).

The second way in which the black man in an antiblack world represents a "lack" is with regard to individuality. This is explained by Gordon with a quote from Fanon that I repeat here because it is very relevant to this aspect of his phenomenology of racism:

> "Look, a negro." The circle was drawing a bit tighter. I made no secret of my amusement.
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> "Mama, see the Negro! I'm frightened." Frightened! Frightened! Now they were beginning to be afraid of me. I made up my mind to laugh myself to tears, but laughter had become impossible …
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> Then, assailed at various points, the corporeal schema crumbled, its place taken by a radical epidermal schema. In the train it was no longer a question of being aware of my body in the third person but in a triple person …
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> I was responsible at the same time for my body, for my race, for my ancestors. I subjected myself to an objective examination, I discovered my blackness, my ethnic characteristics; and I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetichism, racial defects, slave-ships, and above all else, above all "Sho good eatin'."[10]

It is important to point out that Gordon is aware of the fact that there seems to be a tension here with the idea that an antiblack racist perceives the black man as "absence." For the problem Fanon describes—apparently sitting in a train—seems to be a problem of presence instead, a sense of being "overdetermined from without," as Fanon himself puts it a few pages further.[11] How does Gordon (re)describe this manifestation of objectification as an instance of being perceived as "absence"? It will take some interpretative creativity, because Fanon clearly feels "too much," sitting in this train and being objectified by an alienating gaze. Omitted from the section that Gordon quotes, Fanon even states: "I occupied space." How can Gordon maintain that this sensation—that is, of occupying space—is really a manifestation of becoming absent in the eyes of the others?

Yet Gordon maintains this by interpreting the objectifying gaze as an instance of deindividuation (*BF* 99). The "something" that is fading away in the eyes of racial others—and even in Fanon's own eyes, if we read carefully—is Fanon's individuality, his singular inner self. Like Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Fanon's presence in the train, according to Gordon, embodies a certain absence, namely, the absence of an individual perspective. The only thing the passengers (and eventually Fanon) perceive is "a Negro" who frightens a child; a black man who is associated with racial

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[10]Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), p. 112. For Gordon's interpretation, see *BF*, pp. 99 ff.

[11]Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 116.

defects. They do not see a potential partner to interaction, someone to talk to, and to agree or disagree with, but an exemplar of a certain class, not fully human and sometimes dangerous, like a wild animal.

This process of deindividuation leads Gordon to the claim that black bodies take on a peculiar kind of "anonymity."[12] Characteristic of this is that the black person completely coincides with his or her black skin and deficient characteristics. As a consequence, he or she is without a particular, unique perspective on the world. Blackness becomes synonymous with interchangeability, as was most obvious in the extreme case of slavery. In fact, the black man is taken as part of a large anonymous Black Body, as Gordon puts it, and this Black Body is associated with "crime and licentious sexuality, bestiality."[13]

Here we move to the third layer of the meaning of absence: this absence of individuality in fact constitutes an absence of human presence, or rather, as Gordon puts it, of "human substance" (*BF* 101). Being black in an antiblack world is to be rendered a nonbeing and to create doubt concerning the humanity of the black, a doubt that has the potential to extend to the self-understanding.[14] This dehumanizing aspect becomes especially clear in Gordon's observation that the racist does not ask something of a black, but concludes about him or her.[15] The black is not seen as representing a particular perspective on the world. Hence, there is no point in talking to a black.

3. The Racist Social Relation as "Good Presence" versus "Bad Presence"

If we evaluate the different modes of "absence" that are supposed to be characteristic of the racist worldview, certain tensions in Gordon's phenomenology of racism appear. Let's start with the idea that racism involves the perception of the "other" as an absence of human substance. On the face of it, this claim is not very controversial, considering the fact that racism is a type of dehumanization. Antiblack racism involves perceiving the black as being partially or completely situated outside of the moral community. To speak about an absence of "human substance,"

[12]Lewis Gordon, "Existential Dynamics of Theorizing Black Invisibility," in Gordon (ed.), *Existence in Black*, pp. 69-79, at pp. 74-75; Lewis Gordon, "Fanon, Philosophy, and Racism," in Susan Babbitt and Sue Campbell (eds.), *Racism and Philosophy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), pp. 32-49, at p. 42; Gordon, *Her Majesty's Other Children*, chap. 1.

[13]Gordon, "Existential Dynamics of Theorizing Black Invisibility," p. 75.

[14]Stephen Nathan Haymes, "Pedagogy and the Philosophical Anthropology of African American Slave Culture," *Philosophia Africana* 4 (2001): 63-92, at p. 72.

[15]Gordon, *Existentia Africana*, p. 162.

however, is a misleading way of articulating this type of exclusion, given the fact that dehumanization should be interpreted as a denial of those aspects of human reality—freedom and consciousness—that cannot be understood in objectivistic terms. Gordon's use of the concept of "substance" in this regard announces another, closely related, problem.

The vocabulary of absence is also used by Gordon to refer to a lack of facticity, a lack of being. This leads to the notion that the target of the racist's dehumanization is seen by the racist as "a hole in being," "a form of nothing." But given Sartre's ontology, this is very puzzling. After all, in Sartre's ontological framework, perceiving your interaction partner as a "hole in being" means perceiving him or her as a free and thus *human* being. So how can the absence of being be defining for racist dehumanization if it is indeed this absence that ultimately defines human subjectivity?

Although *self*-reification—the self-understanding in terms of facticity and fullness—is indeed part of the racist's being-in-the-world, I want to argue that, for a phenomenological understanding of racism, it is wrong to suggest that the outgroup is identified by the racist in terms of the opposite pole of the human ontology, that is, in terms of absence and nothingness. For what is characteristic of the racist's worldview is not only *self*-reification—the self-perception as presence—but also *other*-reification. To be sure, the reified groups involved are valued very differently. While the self-reification is constructed from positive qualities, the outsider is reduced to a bundle of inferior features. This description is supported by the results of social-psychological research into racism. Stereotypes of both the other and oneself are identified as central to racist attitudes, just as with ingroup favoritism.[16]

Sartre's interpretation of anti-Semitism in his *Anti-Semite and Jew* corroborates this. Not only does the anti-Semite understand him- or herself in terms of a fixed set of qualities,[17] the Jew is identified with an essence as well, namely, an evil essence. The Jew in the universe of anti-Semitism is perceived as presence of being, not absence of being. After all, the anti-Semite in Sartre's sketch of racism discerns in the Jew "a metaphysical principle that drives him *to do evil* under all circumstances." This "principle" is in fact "an essence, a substantial form, and the Jew, whatever he does, cannot modify it, any more than fire can keep

[16]Henri Tajfel, *Human Groups and Social Categories* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Henri Tajfel and John Turner, "An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict," in William Austin and Stephen Worchel (eds.), *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations* (Monterey: Brooks/Cole, 1979), pp. 33-47; S. Alexander Haslam et al., "Social Identity Salience and the Emergence of Stereotype Consensus," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 25 (1999): 809-18.

[17]Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), pp. 18-19, 53; cf. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Colonialisme et néo-colonialisme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), p. 55.

itself from burning."[18] Thus, Thomas Martin rightly articulates the social relation between anti-Semite and Jew—as it is portrayed by Sartre—as follows: "the anti-Semite in his bad faith experiences himself as an essence-driven object, [and] he perceives the Jew in a similar way. In the anti-Semite's Manichean worldview, *both* 'the Aryan' and 'the Jew' are *governed by their respective racial essences*. Thus both 'the Jew' and the anti-Semite exist as objects in the anti-Semite's world."[19]

It would be wrong, however, to suggest that a metaphysical determinism should be attributed to the anti-Semitic worldview, as if the action of both the anti-Semite and the Jew are, in the perspective of the anti-Semite, wholly predictable or causally necessary.[20] Sartre points out that a certain type of freedom—though a very limited type—remains involved here. Where it concerns the outgroup, its members have the exclusive freedom to do evil. Members of the ingroup, however, only have a freedom to do good. So although the Jew in an anti-Semitic world (or the black person in an antiblack world, for that matter) is not seen as completely predictable, all his or her actions are contaminated by a

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[18]Sartre, *Anti-Semite*, p. 39. Cf. Jean-Paul Sartre, "Reflections on the Jewish Question: A Lecture," in Denis Hollier (ed.), *October 87: Jean-Paul Sartre's Anti-Semite and Jew* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999), pp. 33-46, at pp. 36-39.

[19]Thomas Martin, *Oppression and the Human Condition: An Introduction to Sartrean Existentialism* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), p. 115 (italics mine). Charmé also confirms the double reification of the Sartrean model of racism: "being-in-itself, is most often embodied for Sartre by the racist and anti-Semite who *seek to establish essentialist definitions of both themselves and others.*" Stuart Zane Charmé, *Vulgarity and Authenticity: Dimensions of Otherness in the World of Jean-Paul Sartre* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1991), p. 214 (italics mine). This structure of double reification is different from the two original relationships of being-for-others in *Being and Nothingness* that are dominated by conflict. After all, these two types of relationships are characterized by a particular reversible asymmetry: either I am dominating the other, in which case I am affirming my own freedom by objectifying the other's freedom—by transcending the other's transcendence—or the other dominates me by making me into a quasi-object and by acknowledging his or her own freedom in the process. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, part 3, chap. 3. Although racism introduces its own type of asymmetry, it is essentially not characterized by the self-experience as transcendence versus the object-other (sadism), or the self-experience as object-state versus the other as transcendence (masochism), but by two differently valued object-positions. Gordon, however, does give the object-state versus transcendence model of *Being and Nothingness* a rather central place in his interpretation of racism. Cf. *BF*, chap. 14. A complication in this regard is that Sartre himself, at one point, speaks of sadism as a possible aspect of anti-Semitism. Sartre, *Anti-Semite*, pp. 46-49. The question is how this can be reconciled with the self-reification of anti-Semitism. To that extent, there are some unresolved tensions in Sartre's model of racism itself. For a related internal tension in Sartre's *Anti-Semite and Jew*, see n. 33 of my "To What Extent is Racism a Magical Transformation? An Existential-Phenomenological Perspective on Racism and Anti-Racism," *Journal of Social Philosophy* 38 (2007): 292-310.

[20]Martin's claim that racism literally involves a picture of the universe as causally determined is too strong. Martin, *Oppression and the Human Condition*, pp. 79-80.

metaphysical essence that gives them an evil, immoral, or untrustworthy quality.[21] There is just enough freedom present to hold the Jew responsible for this evil, but not enough to equip him or her with a potential to achieve something good and valuable.

This other-reification is characteristic too of the kind of antiblack racism that defined the historical context of slavery and racial segregation during the Jim Crow era in the United States. Although the black slave was invisible to the white person, it was not the facticity of the black that was invisible or absent—as Gordon suggests—but his or her subjectivity. Blacks were so to speak "invisible to most white people, except as a pair of hands offering a drink on the silver tray."[22] This reduction of the black person to his or her body as an instrument of labor in the service of white people crucially depended on the attempt to deny all traces of subjectivity in the black; the precise opposite of perceiving him or her as a "hole in being." One of the most prominent mechanisms for doing this, according to bell hooks, centered on the "white control of the black gaze." Looking a white person in the face was a crime for blacks that called for punishment: "black slaves, and later manumitted servants, could be brutally punished for looking, for appearing to observe the whites they were serving." By denying subjectivity and thus, in a way, reducing the black to "a pair of serving hands," they could be better, less threatening servants.[23]

Hence, perceived from an antiblack perspective the "something" that is absent whenever blacks are present is certainly not "facticity," according to hooks, and as Sartre himself also observed in a newspaper article on the fate of American blacks published after his first visit to the United States in 1945. Sartre remarked that "they serve you at the table, they shine your shoes, they operate your elevators, they carry your suitcases … they attend their tasks like machines, and you pay no more attention to them than as if they were machines." This dehumanizing reduction of the blacks to "machines" was closely related to what hooks so aptly describes as the white control of the black gaze. The white-supremacist terror that was felt by many blacks in those days led to a habitus of looking away, of avoiding looking directly. As Sartre observes: "if by chance their eyes meet yours, it seems to you that they do not see you and it is better for them and you that you pretend not to have noticed them."[24]

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[21]Sartre, *Anti-Semite*, p. 39; Nevitt Sanford, "The Roots of Prejudice: Emotional Dynamics," in Peter Watson (ed.), *Psychology and Race* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), pp. 57-75, at p. 60.

[22]Sallie Bingham, cited in bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), p. 168.

[23]hooks, *Black Looks*, p. 168.

[24]Jean-Paul Sartre, "Return from the United States," in Gordon (ed.), *Existence in Black*, pp. 83-89, at p. 84.

And Fanon, to whom Gordon often refers, clearly indicates in his chapter "The lived experience of blackness" (*L'expérience vécue du Noir*)[25] that antiblack racism involves a reification of its victims, even *in the eyes of these victims themselves*. This chapter starts with a description of a telling experience that clearly articulates this sense of becoming reified:

> "Dirty nigger." Or simply, "Look, a negro!"
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> I came into the world imbued with the will to find a meaning in things, my spirit filled with the desire to attain to the source of the world, and then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects […] The movements, the attitudes, the glances of the other fixed me there, in the sense in which a chemical solution is fixed by a dye.[26]

It is unconvincing to claim (as Gordon does with regard to the passage from Fanon quoted earlier) that this type of testimony should mainly be read as a sign of deindividuation. Deindividuation is rather an epiphenomenon of the more fundamental process of reification, of becoming "sealed into that crushing objecthood."[27] This feeling of being "fixed" (or of "occupying space") is so overwhelming that, instead of trying to *escape* from invisibility, Fanon actually develops a *longing* for the shelter of invisibility and anonymity: "I slip into corners, I remain silent, I strive for anonymity, for invisibility. Look, I will accept the lot, as long as no one notices me!"[28]

The central concepts that Gordon uses in explaining the racist way of being in the world—that is, in terms of perceiving the other as "absence" and a "hole in being"—are completely inappropriate given this dynamic of racism. These notions miss the point of racism, in which members of the outgroup are not perceived as a *lack* of being, but as a *surplus* of being. So the basic dynamic of racism must be understood as an escape

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[25]This title of chapter 5 from Fanon's *Peau noire, masques blancs* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1952) has been mistranslated as "The Fact of Blackness." Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 109.

[26]Ibid.

[27]Ibid. To what extent this *existential* reification is also responsible for the *cultural* ossification of colonized peoples is an intriguing question. Fanon does not provide us with an answer to this question, although he acknowledges the phenomenon (and describes the way out): "After a century of colonial domination we find a culture which is rigid in the extreme, or rather what we find are the dregs of culture, its mineral strata." Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (London: Penguin Books, 2001), pp. 191 ff. Albert Memmi does give an existential explanation of this phenomenon: "Formalism … is the cyst into which colonial society shuts itself and hardens, degrading its own life in order to save it. It is a spontaneous action of self-defence, a means of safe-guarding the collective consciousness without which a people quickly cease to exist." Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965), pp. 101-2. The question is whether this cultural calcification can be understood as a way to *safe-guard* the "collective consciousness" of the oppressed, as Memmi puts it, rather than being a symptom of its *repression*.

[28]Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 116.

from the human lack of being (*le néant*) to the order of things (*l'être*), a solidification of freedom into total ethnic security. And this escape from freedom is an escape not just from one's *own* subjectivity, but also from the disturbing freedom of the ethnocultural other.

The question this raises is how to understand this in terms of Sartre's existential phenomenology. Because Sartre's *Anti-Semite and Jew* was written at high speed for a wider audience, he avoids the more technical vocabulary of his other work. Although he speaks of bad faith here and explains the *self*-reifying tendency of the anti-Semite as a flight from freedom, he fails to address the existential motive for the anti-Semites' *other*-reification. This is puzzling, given the fact that Sartre, of all people, had the tools to provide an existential explanation for this phenomenon, that is, in terms of his analyses of the gaze. After all, according to Sartre's phenomenology, alongside the unease that an acute sense of my own freedom can generate, the other's freedom is also experienced as a source of shame and fear.[29]

At the moment I realize that I am being looked at, something profound changes in my way of being. I realize at the moment that the other looks at me that I occupy a particular position in his or her universe. Yet I am not sure what the meaning of this "position" is. This leads to a feeling of shame. My facticity is being disclosed to the other, but the meaning of it is not in my control. At the same time, the look of the other is also experienced as a threat—to my subjectivity, to my freedom. Because the other pins me down to a limited dimension of my being, my very freedom is at risk. The other represents the death of my possibilities. Through the gaze, I *experience* myself as ossified in the world. This reification does not put me at ease (it cannot be an answer to my "lack-of-being"), because it is to the *other* that I am known, *not* to my self. I arise for myself as the "unrevealed" (*non-révélé*).[30] Hence the gaze of the other leads not only to shame, but also to a sense of threat.

These affects—"shame" (*honte*) and "fear" (*peur*)—are related to a sense of the other's freedom, while "anguish" (*angoisse*) is generated by an acute sense of my own freedom. These dimensions of existential unease seem to be part of the existential motivation to adopt a more simple and "attractive" worldview by the process of double reification. In terms of Sartre's theory of emotion, the racist point of view is the consequence of a magical transformation of a world that is experienced as "too" diffi-

[29]Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, part 3, chap. 1, section 4. This analysis of the experience of one's own freedom and the freedom of others is famously one-sided. We have to remember, however, as Fanon already put it, that "*Being and Nothingness* describes an alienated consciousness." Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 138.

[30]Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 268 Sartre, *L'être et le néant*, p. 308.

cult.[31] The challenging resistance that this world offers might have many different factors, including economic and other factors. But from an existential-phenomenological perspective, it is particularly the existential factors that contribute to the lived complexity of the world that are of theoretical interest. After this affective conversion, the racist perceives both ingroup and outgroup as coinciding with particular, but opposite, essences. Freedom has been cancelled, both within and without, for members of both the ingroup and the outgroup.

It is crucial for a correct understanding of this analysis to differentiate between the *motive* for racism and the actual racist *attitude* itself. The motive for racism seems to be the discomfort or even anguish that accompanies the sense of one's own freedom and that of the other, but in response to that, the ethnic other is, on the contrary, not experienced as an abyss-like indeterminacy into which my subjectivity threatens to disappear. The racist sees the black man as coinciding completely with his deficient features. For him, the "nigger" over there is not an absence of being, as Gordon claims, but an *obscene presence*. The other can only be a destabilizing "leak" in one's universe if one recognizes his or her subjectivity. However, the racist has plugged this leak by attributing rigid qualities to himself and to members of his own group, just as he attributes rigid qualities (albeit different ones) to outsiders. So racism seems to presuppose an existential transformation.

Racism involves a double reification: the ingroup becomes identified with a positive substance and the outgroup with a negative or evil substance. The result is a social universe divided into Good and Evil: a world of pure Manichaeism.[32] This universe should not be understood in terms of *presence versus absence*, as Gordon does, but in terms of *good presence versus evil presence*. The affects that are involved here are different in kind from those related to existential anguish. Instead, what is at stake here is self-righteous hatred, contempt, or—less dramatically—a sense of mental comfort.

So from the standpoint of racism, it is misleading to claim that mem-

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[31]See my "To What Extent is Racism a Magical Transformation?" Emotion, according to Sartre, "is a transformation of the world. When the paths before us become too difficult, or when we cannot see our way, we can no longer put up with such an exacting and difficult world. All ways are barred and nevertheless, we must act. So then we try to change the world …" Jean-Paul Sartre, *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 39-40. As a result of this transformation, the day-to-day practical world suddenly appears in a new light. The complex nature of the situation we were in a minute ago disappears through a kind of magical behavior. The consequence of this complexity reduction is that it offers a way out. The relevance of Sartre's emotion theory for an understanding of racism is considerable, especially given his own observation that racism should be understood as a "passion." Sartre, *Anti-Semite*, p. 10.

[32]Sartre, *Anti-Semite*, pp. 40 ff.

bers of the outgroup are perceived as a mighty "black hole" into which one's subjectivity threatens to disappear. To the extent that someone is racist, he or she perceives the ethnocultural other as fullness and presence, not as nothingness or a hole in being. It is true that this presence of being conceals a sense of individuality and humanity. These aspects of the other are certainly absent. But the absence of these two aspects is precisely constituted by the reduction of the members of the outgroup to "facticity." Reducing a black person to a "pair of serving hands," leaves no room for acknowledging and recognizing him or her as a unique individual who belongs to the moral community of people.

We should be careful, however, not to confuse "facticity" with "reality" in this regard. In the case of racism, it would be inaccurate (and even potentially reprehensible) to claim that the racist tends to focus on those aspects of the outgroup that are "factual." The racist perception that is involved here cannot be fully explained in terms of a mere structuring of attention, thereby making certain aspects of the subjects of perception more salient, such as particular aspects of their practices and ethnic traditions.[33] What plays a constitutive role in addition to selective attention is what Sartre refers to in the context of his theory of imagination as "quasi-observation" (*quasi-observation*). Quasi-observation is the process of reading *into* the objects of perception nothing other than what one has put there in the first place.[34] Intention itself constitutes essential features of the object that are subsequently "recognized." In practice, this means that racist stereotypes may lead the perceiver to "see" certain things that are not part of the stimulus configuration.[35] Hence differences between ingroup and outgroup in this situation are not only magnified but also manufactured. These differences can be composed wholly of "hearsay evidence, emotional projections, and fantasy."[36]

Therefore, the ethnic hatred or contempt that is being established by dividing the social world in this manner precedes the "facts" about the outgroup that the racist refers to in order to justify his or her outlook. The hatred functions rather as a principle of interpretation that itself is beyond questioning, and that selects or even fabricates the facts very carefully to confirm the hostile attitude and to feed upon them.

This magical transformation—which can occur in many different

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[33]As Thomas Martin wrongly claims. See Martin, *Oppression and the Human Condition*, pp. 49-51, 85.

[34]Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'imaginaire: psychologie phénoménologique de l'imagination* (Paris: Gallimard, 1940/1986), pp. 107, 22-30.

[35]David Hamilton, "A Cognitive-Attributional Analysis of Stereotyping," in Leonard Berkowitz (ed.), *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, vol. 12 (New York: Academic Press, 1979), pp. 53-84, at p. 68.

[36]Gordon Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice* (Cambridge: Perseus, 1954/1979), p. 27.

degrees[37]—implies that fear and anguish only play a role as a motive to magically transform a difficult world. These affects are not in themselves part of the racist worldview. As soon as my own freedom and the freedom of the other are transformed into ossified realities that are opposite each other, existential anguish is replaced by other feelings, such as aversion or hatred.

Finally, let's concentrate for a moment on the sexual imagery that Gordon introduces as characteristic of the antiblack universe. As we saw, Gordon claims that in the racist perception the black man is seen as a hole to be filled. He associates effeminacy with black bodies in an antiblack world, because these bodies are situated as a "hole": "Blackness is regarded as a hole in being … A black man in the presence of whiteness stands as a hole to be filled; he stands to the white man in a homoerotic situation" (*BF* 124, 127). Although this chain of associations is consistent with Gordon's approach to racism, I believe it is indicative of the fact that this approach is inaccurate. In the case of the black male, part of the racial hatred seems to be based on the myth of tremendous sexual powers. Instead of a "hole," the black man is rather perceived as a "penis symbol," as Frantz Fanon argues.[38] And here Fanon asks rhetorically: "Is the lynching of the Negro not a sexual revenge?" The basic characteristics of the practice of lynching confirm Fanon's suggestion. Is it not telling that a distinctive feature of these types of lynching is the act of castration rather than of anal intercourse? Instead of being preoccupied by a hole, the racist is put off by a perceived excess. What a gruesome piece of evidence for the thesis that the racist perceives the black man as a surplus of being rather than as a "hole to be filled."[39]

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[37]It is not the case that the magical transformation inherent in emotion implies that the magical world, the imaginary reality, always completely replaces the usual pragmatic world, although Sartre sometimes suggests this. In reality it is rather mixed with the everyday pragmatic world. The instrumental and the magical attitude should be understood as *limiting cases*, as opposite extremes on a scale of degrees of emotion. This interpretation is supported by Sartre's conception of weak and subtle emotions. See Joseph Fell, *Emotion in the Thought of Sartre* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965); William Irwin, "Sartre on the Emotions," *Dialogue* 38 (1995): 1-7; Sartre, *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions*, p. 55. The implication is that racism based on these magical emotions can occur in many different degrees.

[38]Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 159. Sartre, less critically, refers to this myth as well in his controversial essay on the negritude movement. For instance, Sartre characterizes the "natural Eros" of the black man as a balancing of two complementary tendencies: "the dynamic feeling of being an erect phallus, and that more deaf, more patient, more feminine one of being a growing plant" (sic). Jean-Paul Sartre, "Black Orpheus," in Robert Bernasconi (ed.), *Race* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2001), pp. 115-42, at pp. 131-32; cf. Charmé, *Vulgarity and Authenticity*, pp. 206 ff.

[39]In one of his more recent publications Gordon admits that castration is often part of lynching. But this is so, according to Gordon, because "the black 'penis' is phobogenically not a penis at all." In fact, "it is a vagina bent on revenge"—hence the perceived

4. The Bad Faith of Whiteness: "Good Absence" versus "Bad Presence"

We have contrasted Gordon's model of racism with an alternative account of racism as double reification, that is, reification in terms of both self-reification and other-reification. I have referred to this racism as a double flight from transcendence. But there is another type of racism that not only doesn't fit Gordon's model but is quite different from the alternative model that I have described. This racism manifests itself without a strong racial or ethnic self-awareness. On the contrary, "race" and "ethnicity" from this perspective are exclusively properties of the "other." This occurs for instance when, in national media and politics, the notion "ethnic group" refers solely to social groups within a society that are deemed to be other than what is considered normal and normative. This type of self-deception can be referred to as the bad faith denial of facticity, although it is only the facticity of self that is being denied or ignored, not the facticity of the other.

Now we have to remain conceptually precise here. A lack of racial or ethnic self-awareness is not by definition immoral or racist. What I do wish to argue is that the absence of racial or ethnic self-awareness does not *preclude* a certain type of racism. This type of racism involves the state of mind that takes its own perspective as being raceless, neutral, and normative. Following Robert Birt, I will refer to this state of mind or worldview as "the bad faith of whiteness."[40] I do not refer to this kind of racism with the term "whiteness," because I want to draw a contrast between whiteness as a legitimate social identity and the bad faith of whiteness. Not making the distinction often implies that whiteness as a social identity is necessarily corrupt and for that reason it should be completely abolished. This is the position of the "new abolitionists," like Noel Ignatiev and John Garvey, editors of the journal *Race Traitor: Journal of the New Abolitionism*. According to these editors, "the key to solving the social problems of our age is to abolish the white race." In other words, "*treason to whiteness is loyalty to humanity*."[41] Whiteness, according to these editors, is so permeated with white-supremacist ideology that the only way to solve the current racial problems in the United States and elsewhere is to completely reject it as a social category. The point (of

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threat. Gordon, *Her Majesty's Other Children*, p. 83. I do not think this explanation is very credible, to put it mildly.

[40]Robert Birt, "The Bad Faith of Whiteness," in George Yancy (ed.), *What White Looks Like: African-American Philosophers on the Whiteness Question* (New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 55-64.

[41]Noel Ignatiev and John Garvey, "Abolish the White Race by any Means Necessary," in Noel Ignatiev and John Garvey (eds.), *Race Traitor* (New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 9-14, at p. 10.

course) is not ethnic cleansing, but the rejection of whiteness as a legitimate focus of identification.

There are two fatal errors with this proposal, however. The first problem, as Linda Alcoff rightly observes, is that "whites cannot completely disavow whiteness or distance themselves from their white identity."[42] The idea that people who identify as "white" should give this identification up in order to relish the hybridity of the Diaspora shows a terrible lack of understanding of what constitutes human identity.[43] Second, and more important, the suggestion that whiteness as a social category is contaminated with an evil essence could itself be called a manifestation of bad faith. The new abolitionists, for instance, maintain that whiteness simply refers to social domination and favoritism, nothing else. They completely redefine "whiteness" in political terms, without any attention to the social register. Yet this exclusive political interpretation is not based on a common conception of what constitutes "politics": it is a politics with an essentialist twist. They claim, for instance, that "so long as the white race exists, all movements against racism are doomed to fail."[44] By essentializing whiteness as inherently evil, the authors neglect the fact (of which they are aware) that "race" and "ethnicity" are human constructs, not eternal structures that define human practices and institutions from a fixed sphere that remains identical to itself in the historical process.

The problem, then, should not be defined in these terms. It is not whiteness itself that is inherently evil as a social identity, but a certain manifestation of it, namely, "the bad faith of whiteness." Whiteness itself is not by definition more problematic (or preferable) as a focus of group identification than other group identifications based on ethnic/racial traits, such as blackness. The *bad faith* of whiteness, however, refers to a value horizon, a set of social mechanisms and economic structures that, taken together, violate the basic norm of equal respect.

The bad faith of whiteness implies first of all a certain social position, one defined by economic, political, social, and cultural advantage relative to those positions defined by non-whiteness.[45] Another prominent characteristic is the implicit assumption that whiteness embodies neutral-

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[42]Linda Martín Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 215.

[43]For my view on the anthropological and moral significance of social attachments, see my "A Formal Recognition of Social Attachments: Expanding Axel Honneth's Theory of Recognition," *Inquiry* 50 (2007): 180-205; and "Social Attachments as Conditions for the Condition of the Good Life? A Critique of Will Kymlicka's Moral Monism," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 32 (2006): 401-28.

[44]Ignatiev and Garvey, "Abolish the White Race," p. 10.

[45]David Owen, "Towards a Critical Theory of Whiteness," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 33 (2007): 203-22.

ity, normality, and universality. Whites set the standard for other groups, such as colored people, to aspire to. But the trick is that the universality that white civilization supposedly embodies is not open to others by virtue of the limitations of their race. As Robert Bernasconi remarks, this universalism is not so much in opposition to racism as it is an instrument of racism.[46] The racist assumptions in the case of the bad faith of whiteness, however, are not very explicit. It is rather part of a self-evident and unproblematic orientation that itself is rarely thematized. This takes us to the third characteristic, that whiteness is largely invisible to whites. It is this characteristic of being invisible or transparent with regard to one's own location (ethnic, cultural, and economic) that distinguishes the bad faith of whiteness from the racism of double reification. This bad faith of whiteness is the paradigm example of what Thomas Martin calls the bad faith denial of facticity.[47] The racism in the case of the double flight from transcendence involves, as I have argued, a denial of transcendence of both self and other. Not only ingroup but also outgroup are understood and approached as if determined by a good and evil essence, respectively. In the case of a bad faith denial of facticity, however, the self-reification is absent. Instead, there is only the reification of otherness in terms of "culture," "ethnicity," "race," and/or "religion." Whiteness itself—that is, in its bad faith mode—is understood as the embodiment of universality and normativity. It is the others who are ethnically and culturally attached. In order to be able to cling on to this self-deceptive worldview, certain institutions and social conditions need to be in place. Only in a society in which whiteness holds a dominant position culturally and economically can there be the implicit self-understanding as exclusive transcendence.[48]

Although the bad faith of whiteness is a type of racism, it should not be confused with the much more fanatical, self-conscious white-supremacist racism. In its logical extreme, this type of racism has led to what George Fredrickson calls "overtly racist regimes," that is, regimes that fully codified racist principles into laws effectively enforced by the state and made a central concern of public policy. Examples of overtly racist regimes based on white-supremacist ideology are the Southern

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[46]Robert Bernasconi, "The Invisibility of Racial Minorities in the Public Realm of Appearances," in Bernasconi (ed.), *Race*, pp. 284-99, at p. 295.

[47]Martin, *Oppresion and the Human Condition.*

[48]Birt, "The Bad Faith of Whiteness," p. 59. There exists a clear parallel here between the bad faith of whiteness and Simone de Beauvoir's analysis of the basic pattern of sexism in *Le Deuxième Sexe*. Sexism, according to de Beauvoir, is based on a structural, asymmetrical social relation between man, who is the subject, and woman, who is the "Other" (*l'Autre*). This "Other," however, is basically seen as a living object through the eyes of the subject: as an "en soi." Simone de Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième Sexe, I: Les Faits et Les Mythes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), pp. 14, 189.

United States between the 1890s and the 1950s and South Africa between the 1910s and the 1980s.[49]

This type of white-supremacist racism cannot be understood in terms of "the bad faith of whiteness." Invisibility and transparency are conditions that were not met in these social, political, and cultural settings. After all, this more radical manifestation of racism operated with a heightened sense of racial self-awareness, which was most visibly expressed in signs like "Whites," "Whites Only," and "Negroes" or "Coloreds Only."[50] White-supremacist racism, then, should be taken as a manifestation of the racist double flight from transcendence: both self and other, ingroup and outgroup, are reified. Whereas this racist worldview involves a strong self-awareness in terms of particular "superior" properties, the bad faith of whiteness does not come with such an explicit self-thematization. Here there is rather an implicit sense of transcendence embodied in life-world convictions that are largely unacknowledged.[51]

The bad faith of whiteness cannot be interpreted in terms of Gordon's model of racism either. After all, the bad faith denial of facticity of the self *does* reify the outgroup in terms of fixed and inferior qualities. Although Gordon refers to the phenomenon of "whiteness" in some of his more recent publications, his interpretation of it remains inscribed in the general model of racism that he has already developed. And although Gordon sometimes seems to be aware of the fact that white privilege or white racism should be characterized by a typical lack of self-reification,[52] he continues to argue throughout his work that the racial *other* in the racist's universe is perceived as a lack of being or a hole in being, often in combination with the claim that the racist perceives him- or herself as presence of being.[53]

Like the racist double flight from transcendence that is characteristic of white supremacy, the bad faith denial of facticity that is characteristic of the bad faith of whiteness can be described as a type of Manichaeism

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[49]George M. Fredrickson, *Racism: A Short History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 101.

[50]Cf. Lucius Outlaw, "Rehabilitate Racial *Whiteness*?" in Yancy (ed.), *What White Looks Like*, pp. 159-71, at pp. 168-69.

[51]Shannon Sullivan speaks of the "unconscious habit" of white privilege: *Revealing Whiteness: The Unconscious Habits of Racial Privilege* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), part one.

[52]For instance: "Not being colored signifies being white, and, as a consequence, being raceless, whereas being colored signifies being a race." Gordon, *Her Majesty's Other Children*, p. 76; cf. Lewis Gordon, "Critical Reflections on Three Popular Tropes in the Study of Whiteness," in Yancy (ed.), *What White Looks Like*, pp. 173-93; Gordon, "African-American Philosophy," p. 8.

[53]Gordon, *Existentia Africana*, pp. 125-26, cf. pp. 23, 48; Gordon, *Her Majesty's Other Children*, chap. 4.

as well, although of a different kind. Whereas the first type of bad faith comes with a universe that is structured by the eternal struggle between an evil presence and a good presence, the second type of bad faith establishes the struggle between *good absence*—as in the idea of Enlightenment universalism—and bad presence, namely, primitive and backward cultures that threaten to drag "us" down to an underdeveloped level of thinking and acting. "Good absence" refers to the implicit self-understanding of being both invisible and the universal moral norm. The difference between the two racist variations of bad faith not only involves a different *self*-understanding, but also has repercussions for the structuring of the outgroup. Whereas in the first type of racism the outgroup is understood as inferior by reason of being ruled by an evil essence, in the second type the outgroup is inferior because it stands as a threat to universal Reason. Although the outgroup is not so much understood as evil *tout court*—like anti-Semites who perceive the Jews as "the Devil incarnate in human form"[54]—the outgroup is interpreted as bad presence in that it threatens to drag down the transcendent existence of the ingroup into lower forms of life, characterized by darkness, facticity, and inertia.[55] Some of the negative reactions toward recent immigrants in many Western-European countries can count as an example here.

4. Conclusion

Gordon's main flaw in describing racism from an existential-phenomenological perspective is that he does not differentiate between different phases of the process of developing a racist attitude. This lack of differentiation manifests itself in the fact that Gordon's analysis of racism does not distinguish—or at least does not do so sufficiently—between the existential motive for racism and the actual racist attitude itself. Throughout his work he claims that antiblack racism construes the

[54]Robert Wistrich, "The Devil, the Jews, and Hatred of the 'Other'," in Robert Wistrich (ed.), *Demonizing the Other* (Jerusalem: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1999), pp. 1-15, at p. 3.

[55]We are reminded here of Sartre's analysis of the ontological meaning of the "slimy" (*visqueux*), which he refers to as an antivalue (*antivaleur*). Just as the in-itself-for-itself represents an ontological (but unattainable) ideal within Sartre's framework, the slimy represents the dominance of the in-itself over the for-itself. This, according to Sartre, offers a "horrible image: it is horrible in itself for a consciousness to *become slimy*. This is because the being of the slimy is a soft clinging, there is a sly solidarity and complicity of all its leechlike parts, a vague, soft effort made by each to individualize itself, followed by a falling back and flattening out that is emptied of the individual, sucked in on all sides by the substance." Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 610; *L'être et le néant*, p. 657. In this case "the slimy" and "the substance" could stand for ethnocultural others in a traditionally white society.

black as a lack of being (or a hole in being, a form of nothingness). Although this conception of racism tries to take seriously Sartre's description of the gaze by incorporating the negative affects that the experience of the other's freedom (in terms of the hole or leak) can generate, I believe it is fundamentally misconstrued. An analysis of racism should take these negative affects seriously, though not as basic structures of the racist worldview *itself*, but as aspects of a difficult and challenging world that *precedes* racism. This preceding world is a world that is experienced as complex to such a degree that the choice to magically transform it into a more attractive universe, a universe of reified Good and reified Evil, becomes too tempting. It is only through this second phase that racism proper develops. But characteristic of this is not the perception of the other in terms of a lack of being, an absence, but instead the experience of the other as "too much."

This does not imply that racism always involves a *total* existential transformation. There are different degrees of racism, just as there are different levels of emotional intensity in general. But the main dynamic of racism seen from a Sartrean perspective is that it involves an existential transformation and that the social world looks different as a consequence. One central characteristic of this magical, racist world is that the challenging, threatening freedom of others has been cancelled. This is the reason why the racist does not like to be looked at by his or her adversary. These looks stand as threatening reminders that the transformation is in bad faith and that the gaze has the latent power of crushing the unstable racist worldview that is so carefully constructed as a way out of an uncomfortable situation.[56]

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