

Amir Jaima, review of *Being Apart: Theoretical and Existential Resistance in Africana Literature*, by LaRose T. Parris, Symposium: Canadian Journal of Continental Philosophy, 2016, <http://www.c-scp.org/2016/08/08/la-rose-t-parris-being-apart.html>

LaRose T. Parris, *Being Apart: Theoretical and Existential Resistance in Africana Literature*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015; 208 Pages. ISBN 978-0813938127.

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Being Apart by LaRose Parris is a groundbreaking contribution to Africana thought in particular, and Western thought in general. Parris presents three critical themes: the existentialist concerns of a) being and b) freedom vis-à-vis the black experience in the Americas, and c) an incisive recasting of the philosophical historiography in the light of Africana contributions and challenges to classical questions. First, through the words and ideas of exemplary figures from the Africana philosophical tradition, Parris defends the clear and well-researched thesis that Western culture in general, and Western philosophy in particular, is premised upon and maintained by a network of racist ideas. The compelling title labels this network: “Being apart,” Parris explains, consists of “three interrelated conceptual projects: the erasure of ancient Africa’s role in the development of classical civilization; the transmutation of the African into the bestial Negro slave; and the denial of chattel slavery’s import to the growth of modern Western capitalism and empire.” (8) Second, each figure’s particular formulation of “being apart” prefigures a mechanism of resistance and manner of Black liberation. And third, Parris highlights the ways in which the insights of her selected figures extend and often challenge those of canonical thinkers; moreover, the fact that these Africana insights and challenges often *predate* the canonical ones of which, in Parris’ re-framing, they are critical, further evidences the epistemological ramifications of “being apart.”

Parris begins by demonstrating the ways in which the Enlightenment and its attendant practice of scientific racism have and continue to buttress the ontological and epistemological exclusion of black people and their thoughts. In short, in order to justify the American institution of slavery and European colonization, anthropological and pseudo-scientific methods became commonplace in the service of “proving” the ahistoricity and natural inferiority of the Negro. For example, enlightenment thinker David Hume states in an infamous footnote to “Of National Character” that the Negro is “*naturally* inferior to whites.” (quoted at 29) Parris notes that Hume’s notoriety and “reputation as an empiricist” (30) imbued this unscientific claim with scientific authority. Similarly, in *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Thomas Jefferson echoes Hume in his argument that, since Negroes are presumably naturally inferior, neither the Declaration of Independence nor the ideology of the American Revolution necessitate the abolition of slavery. In addition to the explicit denigration of the African, Parris notes that a major consequence of

these spurious, quasi-scientific claims is that the inferiority of the Negro is erroneously attributed to nature, rather than recognized as a Western cultural achievement. Consequently, we fail to appreciate the ways in which the Enlightenment furthers ideas of racial difference, we overlook the conceptual slippage whereby “the institution of slavery has come to be almost exclusively associated with people of African descent,” and we misperceive the institution of slavery as “the distinct lot of the African” rather than “one of the many *cultural* developments in Western history.” (36; my emphasis) Following this, Parris presents a series of critical observations and existentialist reflections from the history of Africana philosophy that foreground the injustice and erroneousness of these enlightenment ideas.

In his *Appeal in Four Articles*, which cites Jefferson’s *Notes* directly, David Walker sought to decry the “degraded, wretched, and abject” (quoted at 38) status of the Negro, i.e. her status *apart*, resulting from “the unprecedented inhumanity of Western chattel slavery.” (39) In the same vein, Frederick Douglass observes that in spite of his acquired freedom, he was considered, even by abolitionists, fundamentally *chattel*, i.e. property, legally and ontologically *apart*. Quoting Samuel Coleridge as an epigraph to *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass notes, “a PERSON is eternally differenced from a THING; so that the idea of a HUMAN BEING necessarily excludes the idea of PROPERTY IN THAT BEING.” (quoted at 54) Douglass contends—anticipating Sartre by almost a century—that a human being is inherently free, betraying one of the ontological paradoxes of American slavery. If the Negro were in fact wretched and chattel, then she would not have, as Lewis Gordon notes, a “point of view” (quoted at 58), much less the conscious awareness of her deprivation or the desire to escape. The institution of slavery itself concedes that the Negro is human—inherently equipped with agency and necessarily desirous of freedom—as evidenced by the history of insurrections and escapes, and the systems in place designed to prevent them. Consequently Walker expresses “the need for unified black resistance...a call to arms for the enslaved to initiate their own liberation.” (39) Such actions are justified because the ontological status of humans, which include the enslaved African, demands it. As Douglass argues in his “Letter to His Old Master,” “In leaving you, I took nothing but what belonged to me.” (quoted at 60)

Next in Parris’s series are the radical, historiographic interventions of W.E.B. Du Bois’s *Black Reconstruction in America* and C.L.R. James’s *Black Jacobins*. In these texts, Du Bois and James each “reconceptualize enslaved Africans in the Americas as *workers*...as the black worker and the black proletariat, respectively.” (66–7; my emphasis) This reformulation is radical most importantly in that it recasts the enslaved Africans, perceived as mute objects, as “historical agents of social revolution.” (67) In the familiar existentialist manner, Du Bois and James begin by articulating the ontological condition of the Negro. Du Bois explains that “the South had been taught to look upon the Negro as a *thing apart*. He was different from other human beings. The system of slave labor, under which he was employed, was radically different from all other systems of labor.” (quoted at 84; my emphasis) Du Bois and James both contest

that enslaved Africans were only a separate class in appearance, mere chattel to be driven to various tasks as a direct consequence of an unjust labor system. History and experience, conversely, demonstrate that they were like workers the world over; they had agency. In the case of the unjust system of slavery, their agency needed to be violently coerced in the service of their masters. Evidence of this recalcitrance is found in the frequent documented slave revolts, the economic impact of fugitives during the Civil War, the legal and political impact of Negro enfranchisement, and most notably, the consequences of the Haitian revolution. In their rigorous retelling of history—of the American reconstruction from 1860–1880 and the Haitian revolution of 1791–1804—Du Bois and James “refute canonical claims of African ahistoricity and circumscribed historical relevance in traditional and radical Western histories.”(70)

Next Parris features the “Existentialist, Dialectician, and Revolutionary” psychiatrist and thinker Frantz Fanon. (104) Fanon emerges as the most explicitly existentialist of Parris’s figures, literally beginning in *Black Skin, White Masks* from the “lived experience” of racism. Fanon’s project is two-fold. On the one hand, he sought to “explain the colonized subject’s collective psychological complex,” and the on other, the “racist colonial impulse itself.” (119) He concludes that the “colonial subject experiences a complete and utter disunity of Being with the internalization of not only a foreign language but also the imperial language of an oppressively racist value system.” (118) In Fanon’s words, the colonial subject experiences “a dislocation, a separation,” not simply “aware of my own body in the third person but in a triple person.” (quoted at 119; 127). Liberation requires “the historical process of decolonization,” which entails “a confrontation, indeed a demand for human recognition for the colonized by the colonizer.” (130)

Finally, through the ideas of Kamau Brathwaite, Parris offers us the most radical of her proposals, the idea of “nation language theory.” Nation language is a “counterhegemonic New World discourse” that “privileges the voice in its communication of sound, words, and music from both African and Western cultural sources.”(134–135) It takes the “syllable as a unit of oral intelligence...unlocking a world of reclamation and resistance.” (140) For example, Parris invites us to consider the difference in Jamaican patois between “cyan,” meaning *can*, and “cy-y-a-a-an,” mean *can’t*; the latter is the same word drawn out over an additional syllable in such a manner that the sense is inverted. In presenting the spoken syllable—as opposed to the written word—as the fundamental unit of intelligibility, nation language outflanks Western discourse, particularizing it and denuding it of its imperial purview and authority. Whereas those who were “illiterate” in the imperial language were presumed unthinking, if not inhuman, now a new plethora of cultural resources, including the written word, emerge as philosophical activities. The revolutionary force of nation language is felt most palpably in the subversive effect of creolizing vernaculars, which, rather than merely rejecting or reacting to a Master’s idiom, incorporates it and ultimately even alters “the way the languages of European empire were spoken.” (142)

As Parris notes in her conclusion, *Being Apart* is “a beginning and a continuation.” (163) It is an indispensable continuation of the black radical tradition. It is a beginning, however, in two important senses. First, it is an invitation to consider a number of questions upon which Parris’s analysis opens the door, so to speak. At this juncture, I will evaluate a few of these. First, in spite of the critical historiography and the discredited science, many Enlightenment ideas persist today in almost the same form, resulting in similar contemporary epistemological and ontological exclusions. Parris’s work makes great strides in challenging these trends. Second, with the notable exception of Brathwaite, Parris’s analysis focusses primarily on texts, or aspects of texts, written in a traditional argumentative style. This leaves open the opportunity for the further analysis of “being apart” through Africana *literary* contributions. For example, C.L.R. James’s short work of dramatic, historical fiction, *Toussaint L’Ouverture*, provides a rich counterpart to the scholarly, historical *Black Jacobins*. Similarly, a few of Du Bois’s literary works would provide illuminating complements to *Black Reconstruction*. Third, Parris gestures toward a number of avenues for further analysis on the work of Fanon. For example, as Parris notes more than once, Fanon curiously omits an examination of the revolutionary potential of French Creole languages. Also, Fanon’s analysis of Maran’s *Un homme pareil aux autres* is a rich site for further research on the existential paradoxes that confront the racialized subject. One critical point on Parris’s reading of Fanon: Fanon is ultimately more critical of Hegel than Parris suggests. Parris notes the irony of Fanon’s invocation of Hegel, given his project and Hegel’s racism; but the dissonance goes further. Fanon notes in a footnote, “I hope I have shown that here the master differs basically from the master described by Hegel. For Hegel there is reciprocity; here the master laughs at the consciousness of the slave. What he wants from the slave is not recognition but work.” (Fanon 1967, 220 n.8) Decolonization does not consist in negotiating or demanding recognition. As Parris ultimately concludes, liberation requires “self-actualization” of the oppressed, which entails the control of “their sovereignty and the economic and political means of survival.” (133)

The other sense in which *Being Apart* is a beginning is as a model for reading and research. In addition to the rigorous scholarly service that Parris provides her readers in bringing to light these important figures from the history of philosophy, she levies a performative meta-argument as well. Counter to the epistemological exclusion of “being apart,” Parris teaches us how to read in a non-racist manner. Thomas Jefferson’s *Notes* can no longer be read in good faith without accounting for David Walker’s *Appeal*. Frederick Douglass offers us existentialist meditations on human freedom that anticipate Sartre, and predate him by almost a century. Du Bois and James extend and criticize Marx’s characterization of the proletariat. In short, if the enslaved African is understood as a *worker*, then we must reconceptualize a number of ideas. For example, the slave is alienated, not only from the products of her labor, but also from her body, the very “medium” through which she is a

worker. This paradox of the slave/worker is another site for further research. Fanon calls into question the Sartrean (and Hegelian) formulations of the master/slave dialectic, a conceptual structure that proves inadequate to account for the colonial dynamic. And Brathwaite foregrounds the *decadence*, to use Lewis Gordon's term, of our disciplinary and methodological boundaries. *Being Apart* is a timely and important contribution to philosophy for a number of reasons. Parris explicates clearly and concretely the ways in which three of the foundational thought systems of modernity—Hegelianism, Marxism, and the Enlightenment—have sustained the negation of Black people and their thoughts. She highlights exemplary figures from the history of Africana philosophy who have explicitly penned rebuttals to this negation. And she introduces readers to the novel insights of these figures, who, for reason related to the questions of this text, have remained understudied. I very much look forward to Parris's future work.

Additional Works Cited

Fanon, Frantz (1967), *Black Skin, White Masks*, (tr.) Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press).