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AT THE INTERSECTIONS

Existentialism, Critical Philosophies of Race, and Feminism

Kathryn T. Gines

This chapter explores how the idea of existentialism—thought as a method of inquiry and community of inquirers—changes when viewed at the intersections of critical philosophies of race and feminist philosophies. I argue that existentialism as a method of inquiry and community of inquirers is expanded, enhanced, and enriched by the existential insights of a broader range of philosophical figures. The chapter is presented in three sections. “Existentialism as a Method of Inquiry and Community of Inquirers” considers dominant representations of existentialism as European in origin and the ways in which this myopic representation of existentialism is perpetuated in anthologies from the 1950s to 2008. In “Critical Interventions: Expanding the Community and Methods of Inquiry,” I highlight the critical interventions to expand existentialism in the US context by Lewis Gordon (and critical philosophies of race) and Margaret Simons (and feminist philosophies engaged with issues of race). This section also explores contacts and influences between figures like Jean-Paul Sartre, Frantz Fanon, Lorraine Hansberry, Richard Wright, Simone de Beauvoir, and Ralph Ellison. In “Existentialism Beyond the Black/white Binary,” I take seriously the importance of thinking through existentialism, critical philosophies of race, and feminist philosophies beyond the Black (African American or Africana) and white (European) binary.¹ Toward that end, the final section provides a concise literature review of analyses of existentialism and Latina feminism, Mexican existentialism, and Latin American existentialism. I also provide examples of analyses of existentialism in modern fiction in China, Japan, and India, as well as in the music of Trich Công Sơn (a Vietnamese singer and songwriter). The chapter contributes to existing secondary literature by diversifying the community of existential inquirers and methods of inquiry beyond European, white, male figures and taking seriously the diverse lineages of existentialism.

Existentialism as a Method of Inquiry and Community of Inquirers

As a method of inquiry, existentialism has often extended beyond myopic boundaries of what counts as “properly” philosophical by explicitly engaging literature, memoir, poetry,

art, and other modes of expression. Existentialism examines the idea of existence—the human condition, being, power, agency, freedom, fear, angst, despair, choice, responsibility, subjectivity/inter-subjectivity, authenticity, and so forth. Existential philosophies have called into question (or even rejected) closed philosophical systems and have been more inclined to value the tensions and ambiguities of life and ethics. Jean-Paul Sartre has described existentialism as “a doctrine, which makes human life possible and, in addition, declares that every truth and every action implies a human setting and a human subjectivity” (Sartre 1957: 10). Identifying two versions of existentialism (Christian and atheistic), Sartre explains that both share in common the claim that “existence precedes essence” or that “subjectivity must be the starting point” (Sartre 1957: 13). Simone de Beauvoir describes existentialism as aiming at the goal of preventing the disappointments that arise from false idols and instead focusing on being authentic and the value of living authentically (Beauvoir 2004: 216). She notes that all of our acts have their starting point and source in subjectivity (Beauvoir 2004: 212).

In *The Worlds of Existentialism: A Critical Reader* (1964), Maurice Friedman explains, “Insofar as one can define existentialism, it is a movement from the abstract and general to the particular and the concrete (Friedman 1964: 4). Existentialism is about authenticating one’s existence; “it means personal choice, decision, commitment, and ever again that act of valuing in the concrete situation that verifies one’s truth by making it real in one’s own life—in one’s life with man and the world” (Friedman 1964: 9). In *Existencia Africana: Understanding Africana Existential Thought* (2000a), Lewis Gordon notes that “Existentialist philosophy addresses problems of freedom, anguish, dread, responsibility, embodied agency, sociality, and liberation; it addresses these problems through a focus on the human condition” (Gordon 2000a: 7). He adds, “we can regard existentialism—the popularly named ideological movement—as a fundamentally European historical phenomenon. It is, in effect, the history of European literature that bears that name” (Gordon 2000a: 10; 2003: 36).²

Following this line of thought, existentialism as a community of inquirers has too frequently been conceptualized (implicitly or explicitly) as exclusively European, white, and male (e.g., focusing on Dostoevsky, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Sartre, among others). Philosophy anthologies and readers, as well as numerous articles, conferences, and syllabi in the US context, (re)present existentialism as predominantly European, white, and male. Put another way, the community of inquirers most frequently associated with existentialism in the Western philosophy canon does not typically include women and/or Black existential writers and thinkers (or other people of color). For example, mid-twentieth century collected editions like Walter Kaufman’s *Existentialism From Dostoevsky to Sartre* (1956) includes readings by Dostoevsky, Keirkegaard, Nietzsche, Rilke, Kafka, Ortega, Jaspers, Heidegger, Sartre, and Camus. A book described as introducing existentialism to America, William Barrett’s *Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy* (Anchor Books, 1962), identifies “The Existentialists” as Keirkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Sartre. These texts anthologize European (white and/or Jewish) male writers from France, Germany, Russia, Spain, Denmark, and so forth, but there are no women or people of color (e.g. Simone de Beauvoir, Frantz Fanon, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Lorraine Hansberry) in the table of contents.

One of the more comprehensive anthologies from this period (1950s–1960s) is Maurice Friedman’s aforementioned *The Worlds of Existentialism: A Critical Reader* (1964). It features more than 50 authors ranging from Sartre, Buber, Frankl, Kierkegaard,

Camus, Tillich, Jaspers, Heidegger, Nietzsche, and Dostoevsky to Rosensweig, Ebner, Berdyaev, Lynd, and Maritain. Friedman criticizes earlier existentialism anthologies (specifically Kaufman's aforementioned) for omitting religious existentialists. He asserts,

The fact is that there is no one story to tell, and any attempt to reduce existentialism to a single story is an unwarranted oversimplification of a tremendously complex group of interrelated phenomena. Today no mature anthology of existentialism can omit the religious existentialists.

(Friedman 1964: 11)

The Worlds of Existentialism features not only religious existentialists, but also “important forerunners of modern existentialism, including a number of thinkers who are not properly labeled existentialists but who have marked existentialist strains” such as mystics who “have often made an important contribution to the converging and diverging stream that has issued into this modern movement” of existentialism (Friedman 1964: 5). For Friedman, we cannot limit existentialism to philosophers because literary writers like Franz Kafka are also able to deal with concrete existence and arrive at a unique understanding of it (Friedman 1964: 13). And yet, for all of its inclusions, Friedman's anthology features one woman—Helen Merrell Lynd—and no persons of color. Taking seriously his claim about including religious existentialists, I would add that today no mature anthology of existentialism can omit women and people of color.

One might argue that these anthologies are a product of their time, published before interventions in existentialism from the perspective of critical philosophies of race and feminist philosophies. In some cases such narrow approaches to existentialism anthologies have been slowly changing, in other cases, time seems to have stood still. Examples of more expansive anthologies of existentialism include Linda E. Patrik's *Existential Literature: An Introduction* (2000) which features Dostoyevsky, Sartre, Camus, Beauvoir, Wright, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and Kafka. George Cotkin's *Existential America* (2003) is also more inclusive—with sections on “Kierkegaardian Movements,” “The Era of French Existentialism,” “Realizing the Existentialist Vision” (with a chapter on Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison, Norman Mailer, and Robert Frank), and “Post-War Student and Women's Movement.” Gordon Marino's *Basic Writings of Existentialism* (2004) includes sections on Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, Unamuno, Heidegger, Sartre, Beauvoir, Camus, and Ellison. But limited representations of existentialism persist in textbooks and anthologies published in the twenty-first century. For example, *Existentialism: Basic Writings* (2001) edited by Charles Guignon and Derk Pereboom, features Hegel, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Husserl, and Sartre. And *On Existentialism* (2008) edited by Mark Tanzer, highlights Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Sartre.

Up to this point, I have offered several examples of more narrow conceptions of existentialism as a white and male community of inquirers along with a few more recent attempts to be more inclusive in existentialism anthologies. In the next section I explore critical interventions in existentialism made possible by expanding the community of inquirers and methods of inquiry through critical philosophies of race and feminist philosophy.

Critical Interventions: Expanding the Community and Methods of Inquiry

Lewis Gordon has been a trailblazer in publishing books on existentialism, Blackness and anti-Black racism, such as *Bad Faith and Anti-Black Racism* (1995a), *Existence in Black: An Anthology of Black Existential Philosophy* (1997b), *Her Majesty's Other Children: Sketches of Racism from a Neocolonial Age* (1997a), and *Existencia Africana: Understanding Africana Existential Thought* (2000a).³ Earlier I noted Gordon's definition of existentialism that emphasized European literature, but he also offers more expansive conceptualizations of existentialism. He explains, "It is clear that, without the contributions of the Africana thinkers, reflections on concerns such as existence, ethics, aesthetics, politics, and human studies exemplify, at best, a false universal" (Gordon 2000a: 40). With this understanding, expanding beyond false universals and taking seriously particularity (and facticity) in existentialism, Gordon considers a far more diverse range of figures to be included in the community of inquirers and methods of inquiry. He offers a broad and expansive range of male *and* female figures contributing to what he calls Africana existential philosophy: Anna Julia Cooper, W.E.B. Du Bois, Frederick Douglass, Ralph Ellison, Frantz Fanon, Toni Morrison, Martin Delany, Maria W. Stewart, William Jones, James Baldwin, Noel Manganyi, Angela Davis, Anthony Bogues, Robert Birt, Bernard Boxill, Tommy Lott, Thomas Slaughter, Percy Mabogo More, Naomi Zack, bell hooks, Joy James, Audre Lorde, and a myriad of others (Gordon 2000a: 7–21, 37–40).

While space will not allow us to explore how all of these figures cited by Gordon have contributed to philosophies of race and existentialism, I will take some time to explore interconnections between a few key figures in existentialism, including Jean-Paul Sartre, Frantz Fanon, Lorraine Hansberry, Simone de Beauvoir, Richard Wright, and Ralph Ellison.

In *Bad Faith and Anti-Black Racism*, Lewis Gordon theorizes race (and racism) existentially, describing the method of his study as a "descriptive ontology" or an "existential phenomenology" (Gordon 1995a: 5). He examines the resources within Sartre's writings for theorizing and combating the phenomenon of anti-Black racism. In *Being and Nothingness* (1943), Sartre identifies race, class, and gender hierarchies in the examples that he gives of being-for-others. Race and physical appearance are presented as "objective characteristics which define me in my being-for-others," and Sartre asserts that although we may assume our being-for-others in infinite ways, we are not able to NOT assume it (Sartre 1956: 671 and 677). Sartre describes this condemnation to freedom (or to choice) as facticity.⁴ But Gordon is most interested in Sartre's notion of bad faith.⁵ Using what he describes as Sartre's "fundamental insight into the human condition: that whatever we are is not always what we have to be," Gordon analyzes anti-Black racism as a form of bad faith (Gordon 1995a: 6).

Of course, Gordon is also attentive to Fanon's existential insights on anti-Black racism—especially in *Black Skin, White Masks* and *The Wretched of the Earth*, two texts that are very influential on theoretical frameworks of race, racism, violence, and colonialism in the United States (e.g., with the Black Panther Party) and elsewhere. Underlining both the political and existential aspects of racism, Gordon asserts,

The relationship between bad faith and antiblack racism results in the following remarkable conclusion: not only does it challenge Fanon's death sentence

on ontological studies of race, but it also challenges the view that existential ontology, as developed in *Being and Nothingness*, is without political distinction. (Gordon 1995a: 136)

For Gordon, “what is existential about racism is that it is a form of bad faith, which is a phenomenological ontological or existential phenomenological concept” (Gordon 1995a: 135).

Later, in *Her Majesty's Other Children: Sketches of Racism from a Neocolonial Age* (1997), Gordon takes up the intersections of philosophy, existential humanism, race, and racism, along with (neo)colonialism and (post)colonialism. He describes Fanon's philosophy of race as an existential humanism and adds, “His [Fanon's] call for the ‘restoration’ of humanity makes his existential humanism a form of *revolutionary* existential humanism” (Gordon 1997: 30, emphasis in original). Gordon notes that Fanon offers fundamental assumptions as well as theoretical advances about Western philosophical attitudes. One of the fundamental assumptions is the idea that “racism is a conflict between the self and the Other” and a related theoretical advance offered by Fanon has to do with “the existential reality of oppression” (Gordon 1997: 36). For Gordon, one of Fanon's greatest insights was that articulating the lived experience of the Black required an appeal to sociohistorical reality (Gordon 1997: 144). Gordon adds that this is an insight “at the heart of black existential philosophy,” namely, that “existential concepts like anxiety, dread, and despair carry *historical* urgency in black existential thought” (Gordon 1997: 144, emphasis in original).

While Gordon's analysis of race and existentialism in relationship to Sartre, and even more so to Fanon, is often cited, I have seen less attention paid to his discussion of the interconnections between Fanon and Lorraine Hansberry. Among philosophers, the importance of Hansberry as a philosophical figure has been largely overlooked.⁶ Gordon observes how both Fanon and Hansberry view race and racism as white constructions that persist in over-determining the lived experience of the Black (Gordon 1997: 159). He notes “ironic similarities” between Hansberry and Fanon worth quoting at length:

Although the two were six years apart in age and individuals from very different cultures, both were heavily influenced in their early adult years by direct engagement with revolutionary black voices in their communities: Fanon with Aimé Césaire; Hansberry with Paul Robeson and Du Bois. Both produced their first major work in their twenties; Fanon *Peau noire, masques blancs*, at age 26; Hansberry *A Raisin in the Sun* at age 28. Both works were complex explorations of black subjectivity in the face of attempting a dialectical relationship with the White World. (Nearly all of the themes in *Peau noire* emerge in *Raisin*, including the complex relation with negritude that marks a defensive strategy in the struggle for black liberation.) Both delivered important speeches on the role of the black writer in 1959. Both devoted a portion of their last works to the question of violence in a liberation struggle. Both had white spouses who played crucial roles in their literary production. Both were revolutionary humanists. And, as is well-known, both died very young.

(Gordon 1997: 153)

But I would like to take a closer look at Hansberry beyond her similarities to Fanon. More specifically, I am interested in Hansberry's play *Les Blancs*—which takes up

issues of race, racism, colonialism, and anti-colonial revolutionary violence (terror/terrorism).

There are several existentialist themes at work in *Les Blancs*, including the gaze, the Other, freedom, responsibility, and authenticity. In “To Be(come) Young, Gay, and Black: Lorraine Hansberry’s Existentialist Routes to Anticolonialism” (2008), Cheryl Higashida offers an in-depth analysis of existentialism and existentialist feminism in Hansberry’s writings. She describes Hansberry as intertwining anti-imperialist Black leftist politics with post-war European and US existentialism (Higashida 2008: 899), but is careful to note Hansberry’s strong critiques of existentialism for sexual and racial othering, individualism, and solipsism, along with its association with despair and apathy (Higashida 2008: 901). Despite her critiques of these aspects of existentialism, Hansberry appreciates Simone de Beauvoir’s existentialist feminist insights in *The Second Sex*. Rejecting the gender politics working against Beauvoir, Hansberry asserts, “This writer [Hansberry] would suggest that *The Second Sex* may very well be the most important work of this century. And further that it is a victim of its pertinence and greatness” (Hansberry 1995: 129). Higashida sees affinities between Hansberry’s *Les Blancs* and existentialist feminism along with the notion of reciprocal recognition in Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (Higashida 2008: 905). She argues,

Hansberry’s overt engagement existentialism focused on critiquing its nihilistic and solipsistic articulations of sexual and racial others. However, in countering Genet’s vision of anticolonial struggle and its sexual politics, *Les Blancs* invokes ideas of mutual recognition that Hansberry had developed in thinking through gender and sexuality via Beauvoir.

(Higashida 2008: 911)

With Higashida’s analysis in mind, I now turn to Beauvoir and Wright.

Gordon made critical interventions into existentialism by articulating Black and Africana existentialisms, and underscoring theoretical connections and insights between figures like Sartre, Fanon, and Hansberry (plus numerous others). Likewise, Margaret Simons is one of the first white feminists to take up feminism, race, and existentialism—specifically connections between Beauvoir and Richard Wright—in her groundbreaking book *Beauvoir and the Second Sex: Feminism, Race, and the Origins of Existentialism* (1999).⁷ Simons describes Wright and Beauvoir as holding “a shared concept of the oppressed Other” as well as a similar “focus on the importance of social relations and recognition in the formation of the self” (Simons 1999: 176–177). She adds that both theorists use phenomenological, and I would add existential, descriptions of oppression in an effort to challenge negative stereotypes (Simons 1999: 178).⁸ More recently Penelope Deutscher in *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Ambiguity, Conversion, Resistance* (2008) has explored influences on Beauvoir’s writing on sexism and racism. Describing some influences as important interventions, Deutscher asserts, “Beauvoir’s engagement with American racism, and particularly with the analysis of race relations offered by Wright, John Dollard, and [G.] Myrdal constituted, therefore, a decisive intervention into her reflections on relations between the sexes” (Deutscher 2008: 78).

Several biographers have chronicled the interconnections between Wright, Sartre, and Beauvoir—from Wright’s writings published in French (often in *Les Temps*

modernes), to Sartre's and Beauvoir's separate visits to the United States, to Wright's relocation to France.⁹ Taking up the white problem in *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir draws from Wright, Sartre, and Gunnar Myrdal when she argues, "Just as in America there is no black problem but a white one, just as 'anti-Semitism is not a Jewish problem, it's our problem,' so *the problem of woman has always been a problem of men*" (Beauvoir 2010: 148). She references Wright in her description of alterity, explaining,

American Blacks, partially integrated into a civilization that nevertheless considers them an inferior caste, live it; what Bigger Thomas experiences with so much bitterness at the dawn of his life is this definitive inferiority, this accursed alterity inscribed in the color of his skin: he watches planes pass and knows that because he is black the sky is out of bounds for him.

(Beauvoir 2010: 311)

Sartre references Wright in *What is Literature?* (asserting "The books of Richard Wright will remain alive as long as the Negro question is raised in the United States," Sartre 1948: 116) and in *Anti-Semite and Jew* (recalling "Richard Wright, the Negro writer, said recently: 'There is no Negro problem in the United States, there is only a White Problem'"; Sartre 1995: 152).¹⁰

It has been assumed by some that Richard Wright suddenly became an existentialist after relocating to France. Two of Wright's later novels *The Outsider* (1953) and *Savage Holiday* (1954) were written in Europe after Wright became a European (i.e., a French citizen) in 1947. While these novels are thought to be more explicitly existentialist, they were not well received. Beauvoir wrote to Nelson Algren in a personal correspondence, "Dick's *Outsider*? He can tell a story, but what a meaningless, crazy, stupid story that is—don't you think so?" (Beauvoir 1998; Rowley 2001: 409 and 578). Rowley states that Ellison found Wright's early collection *Uncle Tom's Children* to be better existentialist writing than *The Outsider* (Rowley 2001: 409 and 578).¹¹ Lorraine Hansberry also wrote a scathing review of *The Outsider* in *Freedom* (April 1953). As Higashida notes, "Hansberry reiterated wider critical views that exilic Wright had applied foreign, inauthentic existentialist tenets to the black American experience—with aesthetically and politically disastrous results" (Higashida 2008: 899). But (as I have argued elsewhere) we must remember that there are existential themes across several of Wright's writings, including his story "The Man Who Lived Underground" (first published in 1942, then reprinted in 1945 and 1961) and his autobiographical *Black Boy* (1945)—both examples of Wright's existential literature published years before his expatriation to Paris (Gines 2011).¹²

Darwin Turner has asserted, "Wright leaned toward existentialism long before the philosophy earned its literary reputation in America and perhaps even before he fully realized the philosophical position which he was articulating" (D. Turner 1984, 164). C.L.R. James describes a conversation with Wright in which Wright explains that he understood the concepts expressed in existentialism *before* reading European existential writings. James recalls Wright pointing to a stack of books by Kierkegaard and saying, "I want to tell you something. *Everything that he writes in those books, I knew before I had them*" (Cappetti, 2001: 62, emphasis added).¹³

Similarly, we find several existential themes—freedom, choice, responsibility, anguish, alienation, authenticity, subjectivity, inter-subjectivity—in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*.

Michel Fabre suggests that Ellison presents existentialist literature to Wright, citing a 1945 letter in which Ellison writes to Wright:

I've been reading some fascinating stuff out of France . . . Kierkegaard has been utilized and given a social direction by a group who have organized what is called "Existentialist Theater" . . . France is in ferment . . . Sartre, one of the younger writers, would have no difficulty understanding your position in regard to the left. He writes "Every epoch discovers one aspect of . . . the condition of humanity, in every epoch man chooses for himself with regard to others, to love, to death, to the world (Kierkegaardian categories aren't they?)." (Fabre 1982: 184)

Jerry Gafio Watts and Michel Fabre have both noted that Wright and Ellison often read existentialism and discussed it together. According to Watts, Ellison came to existentialist literature through André Malraux's *Man's Hope* and adds, "Ellison and Richard Wright met often to discuss Unamuno's *The Tragic Sense of Life*" in the 1930s (1994: 55).

In *Existentialia Africana: Understanding Africana Existential Thought* (2000), Gordon offers an analysis of Africana existentialist thought as it relates to critical philosophies of race, engaging questions concerning Blackness as a problem as well as mixed race identity. Here Gordon notes, "Sartre stands as an unusual catalyst in the history of Black existential philosophy. He serves as a link between Richard Wright and Frantz Fanon (undoubtedly the twentieth century's two most influential Africana existentialist 'men of letters')" (Gordon 2000: 9). There are connections between Wright and Fanon also worth noting. Aside from the insights of Wright's work that can be seen in *Black Skin, White Masks*, biographer David Macey notes that Fanon wrote a letter to Wright in which Fanon said he was "working on a new study of the 'human breadth' of Wright's novels. He owned, he explained, copies of most of Wright's books, and added: 'I'd greatly appreciate your letting me know the titles of those works I might be ignorant of'" (Macey 2000: 280).¹⁴ Lou Turner has examined connections between Wright and Fanon in more detail in "Fanon Reading (W)right, the (W)right Reading of Fanon: Race, Modernity and the Fate of Humanism" (2003), where he notes that Wright organized the historic First International Congress of Negro Writers and Artists (1956) and invited Frantz Fanon as one of the speakers (L. Turner 2003: 152).¹⁵

My aims in exploring these contacts and influences are to highlight interesting explorations of existentialism among these figures, as well as to push back on the assumed one-directionality of influence from men to women and/or from white French existentialists to Black existentialists.¹⁶ In the next section I provide a short overview of literature that explores existentialism, critical philosophies of race, and feminist philosophies beyond the Black/white binary.

Existentialism Beyond the Black/white Binary

Important work is being done at the intersections of existentialism, critical philosophies of race, and feminist philosophies beyond the Black/white binary. For example, in "Phenomenological Encuentros: Existential Phenomenology and Latin American & U.S. Latina Feminism" (2006) Mariana Ortega examines existentialist and phenomenological traditions taken up in Latin American feminism. She argues,

Heideggerian existential phenomenology remains largely ignored by Latin American feminists due to their preference for more Marxist and Sartrean philosophies. But its [Heideggerian existential phenomenology] influence can be felt through the work of thinkers such as Beauvoir and Irigaray who have had a great impact on Latin American feminists' involvement in political movements and theories.

(Ortega 2006: 45)

Ortega notes that “Inspired by Beauvoir” Graciela Hierro (former coordinator of the Center for Feminist Studies at Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México), “denies the essentialism some attribute to women. . . . She defends the position that gender is socially constructed and that, consequently, society can provide an education that allows girls and women to occupy spaces other than domestic ones” (Ortega 2006: 51). Ortega also names María Luisa Femenías (Philosophy Department at the Universidad Nacional de la Plata, Argentina), who “analyzes the role of Beauvoir’s thought in the development of feminist theories in the later part of the twentieth century . . . [including] Beauvoir’s contribution to philosophy and feminism and her critiques against Marxism and Freudian psychoanalysis” (Ortega 2006: 52).¹⁷ Additionally, Ortega highlights the significant import of existentialism, phenomenology, and experience in the scholarship of Latina feminists such as María Lugones, Gloria Anzaldúa, Linda Martín Alcoff, Ofelia Shutte, and Paula Moya.

A few examples of scholarship on Mexican existentialism include Carlos Alberto Sánchez’s recent book *Contingency and Commitment: Mexican Existentialism and the Place of Philosophy* (2016).¹⁸ But there are also earlier articles like “The Mexican Existentialism of Solórzano’s *Los Fantoques*” (1976) by Katharine C. Richards, in which she examines how existential anguish and a sense of the absurd serve as backgrounds to Carlos Solórzano’s play *Los Fantoques*. Foundational contributions to Latin American existentialism are examined by Edwin Murillo in “Existentialism *Avant la Lettre*: The Case of Enrique Labrador Ruiz’s *El laberinto de sí mismo*” (2011). He problematizes the marginalization of Latin American contributions to the global cultural phenomenon of existentialism. Murillo explains,

Historically, Existentialism garnered the immediate attention of critics, as is the case of the work of Luigi Pareyson, Sabino Alonso-Fueyo and Julián Marías, who recognized the precursory involvement of the Spanish philosophers Miguel de Unamuno and José Ortega y Gasset.

(Murillo 2011: 63)

But Murillo also considers figures that have been omitted from these discussions, explaining, “these studies overlooked almost in unanimity the contributions of an entire Latin American contingency composed of Raimundo de Fariás Brito, Carlos Astrada and Moisés Vincenzi, to name but these” (Murillo 2011: 63). Offering an example of an overlooked existentialist novel from Latin America, Murillo points to Labrador Ruiz’s *Labertino*, “which predates Sartre’s *La Nausée* (1938), Camus’s *L’Étranger* (1942), Camilo Cela’s *La familia de Pascual Duarte* (1942) and Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952), the insignias of Existential narratives” (Murillo 2011: 64).

There are also examinations of existentialism in Asian philosophy and literature. For example, in “Elements of Existentialism in Modern Asian Fiction” (1989) Mita

Luz de Manuel explores existential theses and themes in the novels of three modern Asian writers, Lu Xun of China, Kamala Markandaya of India, and Yasunari Kawabata of Japan. Manuel examines the themes of these novels using insights from Buddhism, Hinduism, and existentialism (making connections with figures like Nietzsche, Camus, Kierkegaard, Marcel, and Dostoyevsky). And in “Death, Buddhism, and Existentialism in the Songs of Trich Công Sơn” (2007), John Schafer considers the philosophy of life (including Buddhism and existentialism) that is expressed in the music of singer and songwriter Trich Công Sơn. Of course, these are not exhaustive examples of the diverse lineages of existentialism, but they are intended to help us expand beyond Europe as well as consider expressions of existentialism beyond the Black/white binary.

Conclusion

What does it mean to lay claim to labels like “philosophy” and “existentialism”? Taking up and taking on these labels often involves positive possibilities in tension with potential pitfalls. On the one hand, I refuse to give over reason, rationality, and thinking in general—or philosophy and existentialism in particular—to the continent of Europe and its white descendants (living and dead). On the other hand, I recognize that even in my efforts to expand terms like philosophy and existentialism, or my efforts to trouble disciplinary canons, I remain in a bind—Europe, Europeans, white men (and women) living and dead remain a constant reference point or point of comparison for examining philosophy and existentialism, even from a critical philosophy of race and/or feminist perspective (Gines 2012). Each of the authors cited here faces the same bind. As much as we seek to critique the Western philosophical tradition it seems that we remain entangled within it. This is not a case for abandoning the critiques or the philosophical traditions themselves. Rather, it is an acknowledgement of the existential crisis that often arises when engaging philosophical traditions, even critically. In this chapter I set out to explore existentialism at the intersections of critical philosophies of race and feminist philosophies. Toward that end, I examined how existentialism is expanded and enhanced for the better when we take a broader and more inclusive view of the community of inquirers and methods of inquiry. I would encourage more engagement with existing scholarship on the diverse lineages of existentialism (a small sample of which is represented here), and I look forward to seeing more new scholarship at the intersections of existentialism, critical philosophies of race, and feminist philosophies.

Notes

- 1 I prefer to keep “Black” and “Blackness” capitalized as African American is capitalized, though I use Black rather than African American throughout because it is a more inclusive term. Also, I prefer to keep “white” in lowercase as an intended disruption of the “norm” (i.e., using either capitals or lowercase letters for both terms). This preference is applied to the text in my own voice, but not to quotes of other texts.
- 2 For Gordon, the terms *philosophies of existence* and/or *existential philosophies* are more inclusive and go beyond the specifically European manifestation of *existentialism*. I am sympathetic with Gordon’s project here and I see the import of his point, but I hesitate to give Europeans intellectual ownership of existentialism in the same way that I resist the idea that philosophy in general is exclusively white or European. I do not think that

- Gordon would disagree with me here. It is also worth noting that Gordon's more inclusive terms, existential philosophies or philosophies of existence, are closely aligned with Sartre's account of existentialism, which focuses on concepts like subjectivity, meaning, self-definition, existence, freedom, and responsibility.
- 3 See also Lewis Gordon, *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man* (New York: Routledge, 1995); "Existential Dynamics of Theorizing Black Invisibility," in *Existence in Black: An Anthology of Black Existential Philosophy*, ed. Lewis Gordon (New York: Routledge, 1997), 69–80; *Fanon: A Critical Reader*, ed. Lewis Gordon, T. D. Sharpley-Whiting, and R. T. White (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996); Lewis Gordon, "Racism as a Form of Bad Faith," in *Newsletter on Philosophy and the Black Experience*, ed. Jesse Taylor and Leonard Harris, *American Philosophical Association Newsletters* 99, no. 2 (2000): 139–141; and Lewis Gordon, "A Short History of the 'Critical' in Critical Race Theory," in *Newsletter on Philosophy and the Black Experience*, ed. Richard Nunan and Jesse Taylor, *American Philosophical Association Newsletters* 99, no. 2 (2000): 151–154.
 - 4 Sartre wrote about American racism in *The Respectful Prostitute* (a play written in 1946, originally titled *La Putain respectueuse*) and "The Oppression of Blacks in the United States" in Appendix II of "Revolutionary Violence" of *Notebooks for an Ethics*, trans. David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 561–574, originally published as *Cahiers pour une morale* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983). Additionally, he denounced colonialism and defended anticolonial counterviolence in *Critique of Dialectical Reason: Volume One [CDR]*, trans. Alan Sheridan-Smith (New York: Verso, 1991), originally published as *Critique de la raison dialectique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960); the introduction to Albert Memmi's *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, trans. Howard Greenfield (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991), originally published as *Portrait du Colonisé précédé du Colonisateur* (Corrêa: Buchet/Chastel 1957); and the preface to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 1964), originally published *Les damnés de la terre* (Paris: François Maspero, 1961), as well as other essays now collected in *Colonialism and Neocolonialism*, trans. Azzedine Haddour, Steve Brewer, and Terry McWilliams (New York: Routledge, 2001), originally published as *Situations V* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964).
 - 5 Gordon (1999a: 5) explains,

The core assumptions of bad faith are that human beings are aware, no matter how fugitive their 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, and that there exist features of their condition which provide rich areas of interpretive investigation for the analyst or interpreter.

- 6 I have heard papers on Hansberry by two philosophers (both black women), V. Denise James (at a conference honoring Joyce Mitchell Cook at Yale University in 2015) and Donna Dale Marcano (at a philoSOPHIA Conference at Penn State University in 2014).
- 7 Elisabeth Spelman's *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (1998) offers important critiques of white feminism, including figures like Simone de Beauvoir. Simons appreciates these insights but also offers something different by focusing on feminism, race, and existentialism and examining the influences on Beauvoir by Richard Wright and W.E.B. Du Bois. See also Simons, "Beauvoir and the Problem of Racism," in *Philosophers on Race: Critical Essays*, ed. Julie K. Ward and Tommy L. Lott (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 260–284.
- 8 Simons (1999) asserts: "Wright provided a phenomenology of racial oppression to challenge the claims by segregationists that blacks are happy and contented with their naturally inferior place in society, much as Beauvoir, in the second volume of *The Second Sex* (titled *Lived Experience*), relies on a phenomenological description of women's experience to challenge the oppressive stereotypes of popular myths and Freudian psychology" (178).
- 9 The first issue of *Les Temps modernes* (October 1945) included a French translation of Wright's "Fire and Cloud" (Rowley 2001: 326). *Les Temps modernes* editors Sartre, Beauvoir, Merleau-Ponty, and others continued to feature Wright's writings between 1945 and 1947. A special issue of *Les Temps modernes* on the United States (1946) featured Wright's "The Early Days in Chicago"—later published in *Eight Black Men* (1961) under the title "The Man Who Went to Chicago." See *Les Temps modernes* 2, no.

- 11–12 (Août–Septembre 1946). Translations of *Black Boy* (1945) were included in the journal's first six issues in 1947. And they published Wright's "The Literature of the Negro in the United States" and "I Tried to Be a Communist" in 1948. This is also discussed by Simons (1999: 175).
- 10 Sartre (1995) adds, "In the same way we must say that anti-Semitism is not a Jewish problem; it is our problem" (152). In *An American Dilemma*, Myrdal (1944) makes a similar claim: "The Negro problem is primarily a white man's problem" (669).
- 11 See also *Conversations With Ralph Ellison*, ed. Maryemma Graham and Amritjit Singh (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995), 84.
- 12 Multiple versions of this manuscript were published between 1942 and 1961. It was first submitted as a short novel in December of 1941 to Wright's agent Paul Reynolds, who did not like it (Rowley 2001: 262). Two excerpts of the novel appeared in *Accent: A Quarterly of New Literature* (Spring 1942). The second half of it appeared in *Cross Section: A Collection of New American Writing*, ed. Edwin Seaver in 1944 (New York: L. B. Fischer) and then in *Eight Men* in 1961 (New York: World). For more background, see Michel Fabre, "From Tabloid to Myth: 'The Man Who Lived Underground,'" in *The World of Richard Wright* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1985), 93–107. For a description and brief analysis of the different variations of the story, see John M. Reilly's "Criticism of Ethnic Literature: Seeing the Whole Story," in *The Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature* (Spring 1978), 2–13. Reilly (1978) explains, "Structurally Wright's revisions show him converting a form that might achieve effect as fictional pretense of history (realism) into a philosophically informed tale" (11).
- 13 Carla Cappetti (2001) asserts that "the philosophical readings encountered by Wright . . . gave him the language for articulating the experience. The experience, however, did not come from books. He lived the experience" (62).
- 14 Letter dated January 6, 1953.
- 15 Lou Turner highlights the fact that this would be Fanon's last public speech in France. According to Richard King, the congress "included sixty-eight participants from eight African colonies, five Caribbean islands, India, and the United States, [and] Wright had the unenviable task of mediating between the moderate American delegation and the more radical French-speaking Africans and their Franco-phone allies." See King's *Race, Culture, and the Intellectuals, 1940–1970* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2006), 210. The fiftieth anniversary of this historic meeting was sponsored by Henry Louis Gates Jr. and UNESCO and commemorated September 19–22, 2006, in Paris, France.
- 16 I think we can now put to rest the myth that Beauvoir was a mere follower of Sartre as philosopher in general and/or as an existentialist in particular. See Kate Fullbrook and Edward Fullbrook, *Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre: The Remaking of a Twentieth-Century Legend* (New York: Basic Books, 1994) and Nancy Bauer, *Simone de Beauvoir, Philosophy, and Feminism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001). Concerning the myth that Sartre introduced Richard Wright to existentialism after Wright's visit and relocation to France where he eventually became a citizen (1947), see Gines 2011. Examples of the assumed one-directional influence from white figures to black figures can be found in Robert Bernasconi and David Macey. On the one hand, Bernasconi has noted that Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason* and Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* "represents a continuation of existential philosophy," adding "this story has still not been fully integrated into the history of existentialism as it is told in Europe and North America" ("Racism is a System: How Existentialism Became Dialectical in Fanon and Sartre," 343–344). On the other hand, he has read Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* as a fulfillment of Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. Emphasizing Fanon's intellectual debt to Sartre, he acknowledges,

I have been criticized for neglecting Fanon's influence on Sartre. . . . However, I still agree with David Macey that there is no direct evidence Sartre was even aware of Fanon until the middle of 1959. And I would add that I am not persuaded that there is any indirect evidence from Sartre's texts before that time that he had read Fanon either. (Bernasconi, "Fanon's Wretched of the Earth as the Fulfillment of Sartre's Critique of Dialectical Reason," 48, note 18)

- 17 Stephanie Rivera Burrus has been more critical of Beauvoir and *The Second Sex*. In "At the Crossroads: Latina Identity and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*" (*Hypatia* 31, no. 2 [2016]: 319–333),

she argues that the text fails to give an account of the multidirectionality of identity in part because of its reliance on a race/gender analogy along a black/white binary. This approach, Berruz explains, leave identities at the crossroads between categories of race and gender imperceptible. She offers Latina identity as an intervention in attempting to address this shortcoming. See also Stephanie Rivera Berruz, review of Kathryn T. Gines, *Sartre, Beauvoir, and the Race/Gender Analogy: A Case for Black Feminist Philosophy*, in *Sapere Aude*, Belo Horizonte 3, no. 6 (2012): 504–507. See also Gines 2010 and 2014.

- 18 See also Andrea J. Pitts (2016) “Carlos Alberto Sánchez: Contingency and Commitment: Mexican Existentialism and the Place of Philosophy.” *Human Studies*, 39, no 4: 645–652.

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