

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Gregory Alan Jones for the degree of Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies in Philosophy, Philosophy and History presented on May 5, 2000.

Title: Racism and Bad Faith.

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Abstract approved: _____

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Human beings are condemned to freedom, according to Jean-Paul Sartre's Being and Nothingness. Every individual creates his or her own identity according to choice. Because we choose ourselves, each individual is also completely responsible for his or her actions. This responsibility causes anguish that leads human beings to avoid their freedom in bad faith. Bad faith is an attempt to deceive ourselves that we are less free than we really are. The primary condition of the racist is bad faith. In both aware/blatant and aware/covert racism, the racist in bad faith convinces himself that white people are, according to nature, superior to black people. The racist believes that stereotypes of black inferiority are facts. This is the justification for the oppression of black people. In a racist society, the bad faith belief of white superiority is institutionalized as a societal norm. Sartre is wrong to believe that all human beings possess absolute freedom to choose. The racist who denies that black people face limited freedom is blaming the victim, and victim blaming is the worst form of racist bad faith. Taking responsibility for our actions and leading an authentic life is an alternative to the bad faith of racism.

Racism and Bad Faith

by

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A THESIS

submitted to

Oregon State University

in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the
degree of


Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies

Presented May 5, 2000
Commencement June 2000


Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies thesis of Gregory Alan Jones presented on May 5, 2000

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Gregory Alan Jones, Author

Acknowledgment

This thesis has been a long time in coming and could not have been completed without the help of many wonderful people. I want to thank Chris Bowman, Amber, and Dave Wimberly for proofreading, housing, and coffee. Heff, thanks the use of your car to make the trips necessary to finish this thesis—that Hebo road *is* a lot of fun. I owe a great deal of gratitude to United States Immigration and Naturalization Service for forcing me to stay in Scotland for eight months and allowing me to give this project the attention it required.

I very much appreciate the patience and assistance of my graduate committee: Dr. Lani Roberts, Dr. Flo Leibowitz, Dr. Robert Nye, and Dr. Peter Copek. Lani, I can't thank you enough for sticking by me when I was more interested in working against you rather than with you. You are a special person and your work has, and will, always mean a great deal to me. Flo, thank you for being the nicest person in the world and always making me feel capable of doing good work. Bob, if The Plague hadn't been required reading, I'm not sure I would have made it to Sartre. Thanks for bearing with me.

If it wasn't for the support of my parents, I don't know what would have happened to me—much less where this thesis would be. Thanks Jeannie and Chuck. Most of all, I want to thank my incredible wife Kirsten. You have every ounce of love and thanks I can muster for hanging in there and believing in this thesis and in me.

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Racism and Bad Faith

Chapter 1. Introduction

I am a white man. What do I know about racism in the United States?

Whites are not on the receiving end of racism, and the inability to fully comprehend the severity of racial oppression is one of racism's leading causes. I am in no position to tell black people what racism is, or what it means to them. As a white man, I know why racism exists, and how it is perpetrated. This is the context from which I can contribute to the discourse of racism. I do not pretend to know how it feels to be a victim, but I do know how it feels to be a racist. I benefit from the fact that white is the preferred skin color in society. When I am walking down the street, women do not clutch their handbags tightly as I walk by. People who are walking towards me do not cross the street to avoid me. I can inhabit the most affluent suburban areas without encountering the uncomfortable stares of my neighbors who wonder how I can afford it. These are privileges that black people do not share, and which I have done nothing to merit. Societal advantages are mine no matter how vehemently I oppose racism. This fact does not dismiss or diminish the necessity of opposition; it reinforces the requirement for change. I am part of an oppressive group. I know the ways it wants to oppress. This thesis intends to invalidate, among my fellow whites, racist oppression according to the ways I know this oppression exists.

In this work, I speak generally of whites and blacks. I am neither attacking all white people nor claiming that every white person is guilty of the racism I describe. When I discuss “whites” in this thesis, I am talking about racists who perpetuate two kinds of racism. The first sort of racism is described by Gloria Yamato as “aware/blatant.” In this type of racism, which I focus on in Chapters Two and Three, the racist openly reveals his hatred of black people and his belief of white superiority for the purposes of intimidation. These “(o)utright racists will, without apology or confusion, tell us that because of our color we don’t appeal to them. If we so choose, we can attempt to get the hell out of their way before we get the sweat knocked out of us” (Yamato, p.90). The second type of racism, aware/covert, I discuss in Chapter Four. This racism is not flaunted; it is a private racism that is most dangerous when blacks are blamed for their own oppression. Yamato describes occasions when she has experienced aware/covert racism:

Apartments were suddenly no long vacant or rents were outrageously high, when black, brown, red, or yellow persons went to inquire about them. Job vacancies were suddenly filled, or we were fired for very vague reasons. It still happens, though the perpetrators really take care to cover their tracks these days. They don’t want to get gummed to death or slobbered on by the tooth-less laws that supposedly protect us from such inequalities (p.90).

My arguments are addressed to the white people who exhibit aware/blatant and aware/covert racism. There is a direct link between the white skin of these people and the significance of their racist ideas. For this reason, white and racist are synonymous in this work. I also talk about blacks as a group. I do not, however, wish for it to appear as though black people are helpless and dependent upon white recognition. This is an absurd suggestion if one considers the strength

and courage so many black individuals exhibit when faced with racist oppression every day. I speak generally of blacks because racism is directed at all black people. Just because racism is directed at all blacks, I certainly do not want to insinuate that it overwhelms all blacks. The racism I discuss is powerfully dehumanizing, but black people have, and will, overcome concerted efforts to destroy their spirits.

I also want to point out that I refer to people of color as “blacks” in order to avoid the potential middle class distinction of “African-Americans.” I follow the opinions of Lewis Gordon in this respect. As he says:

(T)he recent history behind the term African American caters to concerns of the black pseudo-bourgeoisie. More than what it purports to be—an effort toward a politically acceptable nomenclature—it also serves as a way of differentiating a certain class of blacks from the dismal global situation of most blacks. I don’t meet many working-class blacks who are “African American” (1995, p.1).

W.E.B. DuBois also tells of the potential difficulty of using African American in reference to blacks. “If men despise Negroes,” he says, “they will not despise them less if Negroes are called ‘colored’ or ‘Afro-American’ ” (Monk, 1996, p.i). In this thesis, I see no reason to create any more division within an oppressed people.

The oppression suffered by black people affects every aspect of their existence. The definition I use in this work is the same that Albert Memmi uses to describe “total oppression.” Black oppression is “total” because “there is no one aspect of his life, no single action of his, that is not thrown off balance by this fundamental aggression” (Memmi, p.23). The aggression consists of myths of

blackness forced upon black consciousness as fact. Whites justify the oppression of blacks through the belief in innate black inferiority. The racial categories of “white” and “black” are racist constructions intended to generalize traits associated with skin color. “The origins of race,” says Paul Spickard, “are socio-cultural and political . . . Putting simple, neat racial labels on dominated peoples—and creating myths about the moral qualities of those peoples—makes it easier for the dominators to ignore the individual humanity of their victims. It eases the guilt of oppression” (pp.18-19).

“White” is purity, cleanliness, light, and growth. “Black” represents that which is dirty, decaying, unhealthy, and death. The English language is one of the greatest indicators of positive and negative symbols of white and black. Robert Moore reveals how “(‘g)ood guys’ wear white hats and ride white horses. ‘Bad guys’ wear black hats and ride black horses. Angels are white, and devils are black. The definition of *black* includes ‘without any moral light or goodness, evil, wicked, indicating disgrace, sinful,’ while that of *white* includes ‘morally pure, spotless, innocent, free from evil intent’ ” (p.319, emphasis in original). Whites are the perfect human balances between intellect and physique, according to the racist. Blacks, coming from wild, untamed, dark Africa, are purely animalistic physical beings. Traits like these, believed to be inborn and referenced according to skin color, are the building blocks of myths the racist views as fact. The myths of black inferiority pertain to all blacks and supply justification for oppression that the racist

acts on as a law of nature. Blacks are oppressed in order to make racist “truths” universal.

Oppression affects black people at the roots of their existence. A black person’s identity is “pressed” and limited by a racist determination of black character traits. Total oppression restricts and denies the actualization of free possibilities among blacks. The onslaught of negative images and stereotypes determining blacks to be evolutionarily inferior to whites severely inhibits the capability of black self-determination. The racist chooses to oppress from the same depths of his existence.

Existentialism is a useful means of examining racist oppression. I rely almost exclusively upon Jean-Paul Sartre’s Being and Nothingness due to its emphasis on the project of self-deception Sartre calls bad faith. The racist has constructed myths about black inferiority and white dominance. Blacks are oppressed on the basis of these myths being seen as true. As weaker and less evolved, says the racist, blacks are animals and should be treated accordingly. “(A) given branch of humanity,” Frantz Fanon says, “is held by a form of civilization that pretends to superiority”(1967, p.224). The racist “pretends” that myths of black inferiority are true. He does this in order to avoid his own mediocrity. He knows blacks are human beings just like him, but that undermines the racist construction of innate white superiority. The racist “pretends to superiority” because there is no human nature to determine what we are. We choose ourselves. According to Sartre, this is because all humans are “condemned” to freely construct

our essence and identity. The racist, like all other persons, feels this freedom in anguish, realizing that he alone is responsible for what he is and what he does. Nothing grants him superiority over another human being. Racism is a choice, and the responsibility for its implementation, its violence, its inhumanity, and its destruction rest with the racist alone.

In order to hide from the anguish of freedom, and its concomitant responsibility, the racist chooses a form of self-deception that Sartre calls bad faith. Human beings are a combination of physical and mental properties. We are mind (subjects) and body (objects). In bad faith, we choose to deny one of these aspects of our existence and convince ourselves that we are completely the other one of them. Sartre describes how a waiter in bad faith ceases to be an unpredictable human being and assumes the role of an object. His behavior, attitude, and actions are all those of a thing—the role of waiter. This is an animated existence determining his every move. Sartre also uses the example of a woman choosing to deny her body. When a prospective suitor places his hand upon hers, she dislocates herself from her hand and her body. She chooses not to notice or confront his action, and relieves herself of deciding what to do about it. She exists in her mind alone—a pure consciousness. She and the waiter are in bad faith.

The racist in bad faith wishes to believe there is more determination in the human condition than there actually is. By “determination” I mean innate qualities that dictate human behavior beyond the control or abilities of each particular person. This determination is a social construction, but the racist in bad faith

considers actions to be dictated, “determined,” according to nature. The racist constructs an image of himself and of blacks that is believed to be naturally valid. To him, nature has caused whites to be superior. Essentially, white skin provides involuntary societal superiority for its owner. He attaches to himself and others characteristics according to skin color, myths and stereotypes about himself and blacks, in order to avoid the existential truth of his own, human, mediocrity. The bad faith of racism, seen in both aware/blatant and aware/covert forms in this thesis, determines the essence of whites with superior qualities, and blacks with negativity. The racist attempts to deceive himself that these determinations are true according to nature and then oppresses blacks in order to further the reality of his dominance.

Freedom, anguish, and bad faith are central topics to my thesis and I will discuss them in detail in Chapter Two. I begin by examining Sartre’s conclusion that existence precedes essence in humans. This is existentialism’s defining point, and the dynamic through which a human being is “condemned” to freedom. I exist and create my essence through my choices and actions; it does not pre-exist my choices. In Chapter Two, I also emphasize the importance of anguish. The anguish of an unpredictable future is what leads to the choice of bad faith. I use the work of Frederick Douglass, Ralph Ellison, and Richard Wright to help clarify Sartre’s points by placing them in a context of racial oppression. Chapter Two identifies bad faith as the primary existential condition of the racist.

Bad faith is a denial of individual freedom. Racism permeates entire societies and provides a context of institutional bad faith in which an individual may hide from freedom. Chapter Three looks at bad faith as an institution of racist society. The white individual chooses self-definition according to dominance of whites that is based on myth, yet is a very real and actual condition of racist society. Two of Sartre's most important works detailing oppression are examined in detail to illustrate bad faith on an institutional level. Anti-Semite and Jew and The Respectful Prostitute, a play, are called upon to reveal how and why the racist has constructed the myths and stereotypes of black negativity. The anti-Semite proves perfectly analogous to the racist. Both are in fear of their mediocrity among other humans, and both have created vast, distorted "portraits" of what Jewish and black people have been, are, and can only be.

In Chapter Four, I examine "Existence with Others," a crucially important section of Being and Nothingness. I discuss relations with the Other, another self besides me, as revealed through "the look." According to Sartre, being seen by the Other causes me to realize my object-side (body) as opposed to the appraising Other subject looking at me. Confronted by my object-side and the Other-as-subject, I become aware of myself as also a subject capable of becoming Other to this person. In this chapter, I will look at the implications of a black person choosing to become a subject under the gaze of a white Other whose racism attempts to forever lock blacks within their black bodies. I must make clear that "the look," being seen by the Other, affects us whether someone is physically

looking at us or not. "The look" is similar to the way in which women perceive themselves through the male gaze. A man does not have to actually be looking at a woman for her to critique herself according to the desires and appraisals of men in a sexist society. It is a free choice, according to Sartre, whether to be an object, or to be a subject. Sartre's analysis of "the look" displays a specific, one-on-one instance in which every individual can choose to be free from objectification brought on by the Other.

In Chapter Four, I critique Sartre's arguments in the section "Existence with Others" for providing the possibility for the racist to blame the victim. The racist accuses blacks of avoiding their human freedom in bad faith by assuming the role of victim. I, on the contrary, argue that universal human freedom only applies to those who are not oppressed. Sartre's "freedom" of Chapter Two is a white freedom. Whites have the freedom that, in bad faith, is not assumed. Black existence, due to oppression, is something different. Slavery, segregation, and continuing racial prejudice have oppressed the existential situation of blacks. For whites, existence precedes essence, and we have the freedom to define ourselves. For blacks, a negative essence is imposed by the racist and is thought to precede existence. According to the racist, a black person is born inferior. The oppressive imposition of myths of black inferiority as fact has greatly inhibited the ability of blacks to develop an independent sense of self. The myths and stereotypes that make up the racist's "portrait" of black identity have maimed black selfhood. Paget Henry relates how "(t)he confrontation with such monstrously distorted images of

self poses in the most fundamental way the problem of human negation of selfhood, agency, and the autonomy of Africans as human beings” (p.29). I rely heavily on Fanon, Douglass, and W.E.B DuBois to describe the black “existential deviation” which has resulted from racist oppression. And while Fanon does not deal directly with the racism of the United States, his work concerning racist existential exploitation of blacks worldwide is applicable, and central, to this thesis. Through him, it is possible to see how oppression has, for many blacks, taken away the luxury of choosing bad faith, as whites are able to do.

The racist accusation that blacks are in bad faith is itself another form of oppression. Victim blaming is a denial that oppression has caused as much damage as it has to blacks, and that the subhuman status forced upon blacks is “not real.” At the conclusion of Chapter Four, I focus on blaming the victim as an attempt to hide from an original bad faith, itself a form of bad faith. I discuss in detail how victim blaming belittles past oppression yet justifies previous racist myths in the present, and how this is institutionally manifested as a racist humanism. The racist is in bad faith about the extent of their racism when he blames the victim. Victim blaming appears to be the most non-violent form of racism, yet reveals the subtle sophistication of the racist’s adaptation to a more “liberal” age. Victim blaming is the ultimate bad faith because whites continue to hold to the bad faith determination of black inferiority yet appear to avoid responsibility by supporting, in a second assumption of bad faith, universal human freedom.

As long as the aware/overt and aware/covert racists continue to choose bad faith, racism in this country will continue. In Chapter Five, I will talk about the possibilities of its continuation. The most important thing about bad faith is that it is a choice. Bad faith does not have to be a permanent condition. The racist must choose and commit to an authentic life. Authenticity, according to Sartre, is “willing” oneself to take responsibility for one’s actions. It is a commitment not to blame others. Racism is a white problem, and in this thesis it is a problem directed at specific kinds of racists in language that is often harsh and accusatory. The racist in bad faith does a great deal of damage to blacks, but because there is a deliberate choice to assume bad faith, the racist is also harming himself. Choosing not to make an object out of others and of oneself is very much in the power of the racist. I want to reiterate, however, this does not mean the racist is conferring human status upon black people. If whites hand out human status, the failure of the racist to recognize black selfhood would not change. As Fanon says: “The Negro is a slave who has been allowed to assume the attitude of a master. The white man is a master who has allowed his slaves to eat at his table” (1967, p.219). The only thing the white person who does not choose bad faith is giving up is the validity of white privilege and the unmerited advantage of his skin color. Black humanity is not granted; it will no longer be hindered by the relentless onslaught of negative images and attitudes of the racist. Black people continue to thrive in spite of the bad faith of the racist. It is the harm the racist does to himself that is most crippling.

Chapter 2. Freedom, Anguish, and the Racist in Bad Faith

This chapter will describe Sartre's views about freedom, anguish, and bad faith. Then, with the help of Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, and Frederick Douglass, I will talk about the bad faith of the aware/blatant white racist. There is nothing secretive about the overt nature of this type of racism, which stretches from ruthless violence to condescending conversation. Like all people, the aware/blatant racist in bad faith is hiding from the responsibility to choose freedom that, according to Sartre, humans must assume because our existence precedes our essence.

Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism is a philosophy of freedom. To be a human being is to be free. Nothing else is responsible for me being the person I am other than my own decisions, choices, and actions. The proclamation that "I am what I make myself to be" places great responsibility on me to embrace my freedom. "(T)he peculiar character of human-reality," Sartre says, "is that it is without excuse" (1956, p.708). I am the "author" of my life, of what I choose, and what I do. Since I am the coordinator of my human project, and since the freedom to choose is omnipresent, according to Sartre, there is no one else to blame for my actions except me. Freedom is, consequently, a constant existential condition of human reality. To exist is to be free. To be human is to live an existence that is "condemned to be free" (Sartre, 1956, p.563).

Sartre's emphasis on individual freedom does not appear as a trait of human society. One hundred and thirty-five years ago whites enslaved blacks in the United

States. Slavery was abolished, but racial prejudice of murderous ferocity has kept the legacy of white hatred of blacks very much alive. The oppression of blacks certainly does not exhibit humanity that is universally free. How, in terms of all human beings, can Sartre justify the position that “we are not free to cease being free?” (1956, p.563).

Sartre’s concept of freedom is based upon the distinction between humans and all other “things.” An apple, for instance, is a particular thing in the world just like I am. We both exist. Apples, however, are not capable of making themselves anything other than apples. As a conscious human being, my choice of action continually redefines the essence of who I am. My particular essence, the combination of characteristics that distinguish me from other items in the world, is something I construct. My existence precedes my essence. It is Sartre’s contention that “with man the relation of existence to essence is not comparable to what it is for the things of the world. Human freedom precedes essence in man and makes it [essence] possible; the essence of the human being is suspended in his freedom” (1956, p.60).

Ralph Ellison exemplifies Sartre’s definition of freedom in Invisible Man. The protagonist, having been mistaken for someone else numerous times because of a conspicuous hat he is wearing, makes the following realization about his choices: “You could actually make yourself anew. The notion was frightening, for now the world seemed to flow before my eyes. All boundaries down, freedom was not only the recognition of necessity, it was the recognition of possibility” (1965, p.401).

Sartre views freedom as a “condemnation” because we cannot avoid the necessity of continual self-definition. A human “first *is* [exists], and only subsequently is this or that. In a word, man must create his own essence” (Sartre, 1974, p.57, emphasis in original). The empowerment of the individual to freely construct herself as she wishes attacks a Christian or biological notion of a human nature. If human reality is freedom, there cannot be a consistent natural order to the world coordinated by God. Sartre is adamantly opposed to explaining human actions as “God’s will.” “*The absence of God*,” according to Sartre, “is not some closing off—it is the opening of [the] infinite” (1992, p.34, emphasis in original).

Racists have, nonetheless, used biblical references and “biology” to declare the inferiority of blacks to whites. Historically, the American South has been notoriously guilty of such justification. Frederick Douglass tells of an overseer who, when whipping a slave, “in justification of the bloody deed, he would quote this passage of Scripture—He that knoweth his master’s will, and doeth it not, shall be beaten with many stripes” (p.56). Sartre visited the South in 1945 and was told by a white physician “it is not safe for black blood to circulate in our veins” (Sartre, 1997, p.87). Sartre claims that we are “condemned to be free” yet there are situations, such as slavery and racial prejudice, which limit freedom. Blacks did not choose their skin color any more than I chose to be left-handed. There are *facts* of existence we do not select, and which limit our capabilities.

Far from being able to modify our situation at our whim, we seem unable to change ourselves. I am not “free” to escape the lot of my class, of my nation, of my family, or even to build up my own power

or my fortune or to conquer my most insignificant appetites or habits. I am born a worker, a Frenchman, a hereditary syphilitic, or a tubercular (Sartre, 1956, p.619).

Sartre is contradicting himself. He informs us we are nothing but what we make ourselves, yet we cannot become anything we want. It is true that I did not choose the facts of my existence, but the attitude I take toward the facts is completely up to me. I decide what the facts mean to me, and that is my freedom. Sartre explains that “(h)uman-reality everywhere encounters resistances and obstacles which it has not created, but these resistances and obstacles have meaning in and through the free choice which human reality *is*” (1956, p.629, emphasis in original). Slavery is a historical fact of black existence. Confronting racism is a fact of black existence. Frantz Fanon has responded: “I am not the slave of the Slavery that dehumanized my ancestors” (1967, p.230). Fanon decided to not allow the oppression of blacks that began with slavery to make him feel as if he is still a slave. White skin is a fact, but allowing white skin to mean black inferiority is a free decision. The perpetuation of racism is a choice.

When I make a choice, I decide in favor of one possibility over another. Making a decision is often a stressful process simply because I do not know what the outcome of my choice will be. This is why Sartre characterizes our freedom as something “condemning.” The severity of the word “condemn” describes the painstaking process through which we choose and “make” ourselves. Because the results of our selections are ambiguous or unknown, making decisions can be excruciating. This anguish is the “frightful notion” which Ellison described on the

second page of this chapter. Ellison's invisible man felt anguish because "the world seemed to flow before [his] eyes." Freedom is the multitude of choice. Anguish is having to make a choice of one possibility for ourselves over other options.

Freedom and anguish are inseparable. Frederick Douglass illustrates the anguish of freedom when contemplating a second escape attempt from slavery. As he says, "the dread and apprehension of a failure exceeded what I had experienced at my first attempt . . . It required no very vivid imagination to depict the most frightful scenes through which I should have to pass, in case I failed. The wretchedness of slavery, and the blessedness of freedom, were perpetually before me" (p.93).

Sartre declares that anguish is "precisely my consciousness of being my own future" (1956, p.32). Making a choice, as Douglass did, in which one of his possibilities was death, represents the epitome of deciding "our own future." Douglass deliberated his possibilities and in anguish made a choice for which he alone was responsible. Douglass chose to act, but often the anguish of constructing our own future leads to a choice of inaction.

In 1940, Ralph Ellison wrote a short story posthumously titled "A Party Down At The Square." The narrator is a white man from Ohio who has recently relocated to the Deep South. A black man is burned alive in the story, for no apparent reason other than being black, and the narrator is one of many whites crowded around the bonfire. At one point in the mayhem, the narrator confesses: "I had enough. I didn't want to see anymore. I wanted to run somewhere and puke, but I stayed. I stayed right there in the front of the crowd and looked" (1996, p.8).

The narrator is free to choose from many options at the bonfire: he could have left the scene, spoken out against the murder, tried to free the man, or he could have done nothing but continue watching. He must decide whether or not this burning is something he will go along with or disapprove of. His freedom to object and attempt to stop the madness is quite plain to him. In anguish, says Sartre, "I distrust myself and my own reactions" (1956, p.29). The narrator did not distrust the crowd; he distrusted himself combating the sentiments and influence of the crowd. He exercised his freedom and chose to do nothing. He freely limited his freedom. The narrator became an anonymous member of the murderous mob.

Ellison's passage states that the narrator is not only in the crowd, but also in the front row. He was nauseated by the spectacle, yet was able to remain in the position that offered the best view. What happened to his anguish? The narrator decided he was not free to do anything to stop the murder. He became a part of the crowd because dealing with the anguish of what to do in that situation was more than he wanted to bear. There was no question what the crowd thought should be done to the black man. "(F)olks started yelling to hurry up and kill the nigger" (1996, p.4). If he acts like the crowd, the narrator's anguish is eased because he no longer has to choose what to do. He allows the crowd to define him. He does not feel individual responsibility for his action when he becomes a part of the crowd. I am doing nothing wrong, he tells himself; I am just like everyone else standing here watching. The narrator convinces himself he is not free to help the black man. By not only becoming a part, but also a front row participant, of the bantering mob, he

guarantees to himself there is nothing he can do. He is in the position of leading the cheers, not of stopping them. The brutal murder of blacks? “(Y)ou get used to it in time,” the narrator’s uncle instructs him reassuringly the following day (1996, p.10). By getting “used to it,” the narrator begins to think the man deserved to be burned. He defines himself by racist ideology in order to avoid the anguish he felt at the bonfire. He ignores his freedom to treat black people as human beings.

Sartre describes the attempt to evade freedom as bad faith. The Ellison narrator is certainly in bad faith because he manipulates the realization of the truth of his freedom in order to relieve himself of the anguish of what to do at the bonfire. It makes him feel better to believe he could do nothing to help the murdered black man. Sartre explains, “(t)he one who practices bad faith is hiding a displeasing truth or presenting as truth a pleasing untruth. Bad faith then has in appearance the structure of falsehood. Only what changes everything is the fact that in bad faith it is from myself that I am hiding the truth (1956, p.89).

We are free, we construct ourselves, and we are totally responsible for what we do. Sartre says, “be nothing but what you have made of yourself” (1974, pp.157-8). The narrator in Ellison’s story cannot claim that he was swept up by crowd sentiment and that they are to blame for his presence there. He cannot excuse his actions by stating that he was only going along with everyone else. He chose to stay there. He chose to watch. He has a responsibility for that murder, just as everyone else in the crowd does. He allowed it to happen. The decision was his alone. Sartre says, “nothing foreign has decided what we feel, what we live, or what

we are" (1956, p.708). The narrator is responsible for what he does. This is his freedom. He feels this freedom in anguish, though, because he must assume total responsibility for himself and the actions in which he partakes. The anguish of this responsibility is avoided with the choice of bad faith. In bad faith I convince myself that I am more determined, that I have less control over my actions than I really do. The racist convinces himself that what determines his actions, and the actions of black people, is the innate superiority of people with white skin. Lewis Gordon describes the racist as "a figure who hides from himself by taking false or evasive attitudes toward people from other races. The antiblack racist is a person who holds these attitudes toward black people" (1995, p.94). In a world where human beings are free to determine themselves, the racist creates an artificial determination of white as superior, black inferior. "From the perspective of bad faith," explains Paget Henry, "racism is a set of discriminatory attitudes and practices toward a specific group that provides the racist with a false layer of determinacy against the anguish of indeterminacy" (1997, p.32). The white person in bad faith convinces himself that his superiority is just the way the world is. It is factual. It is determined beyond his control. It is natural. He tells himself he is not only justified in his racism but, because the inferiority of blacks is a fact of existence, he is not responsible for his racial prejudice.

Sartre identifies two ways bad faith is chosen. In one case, I determine myself or another strictly as an object. In the second, I deny my body and determine myself definitively as a consciousness. To deny my body is to ignore a fact of my

existence that I do not wish to claim. To “divorce” myself from my white skin color is to avoid personal blame for what is racist about white society (Sartre, 1956, p.91). I am writing, as a white man, about racism. To critique and blame the white world for its racial injustices might mean I am disengaging myself from my whiteness. I remove my white skin and become the consciousness of critic of racism. As a white man, I benefit from the preference for, and acceptance of, white skin. As a critic of racism, placing blame upon outright racists like skinheads seems to alleviate my responsibility as a racist. A consciousness bears no visible features of whiteness, and so is not seen with the eye as white or oppressive to blacks. I hide from my whiteness by becoming a pure consciousness. To do so, in bad faith, would make me feel as if I can avoid responsibility for my actions as a white.

In Native Son, Richard Wright also illustrates pure consciousness bad faith. Bigger Thomas is supposed to be driving his employer’s daughter, Mary Daulton, to a university lecture. She tells him, however, to drive to her boyfriend’s place instead. Bigger spends the evening talking with the communist sympathizing Mary and her Party member boyfriend Jan. Jan discusses the possibilities of a communist revolution in the United States. Upon the completion of this revolution, Bigger is told: “What a world to win! There’ll be no white, no black; there’ll be no rich and no poor (p.69). Jan tells Bigger that skin color does not matter, white or black. “You’re a man just like I am,” Jan says, “I’m no better than you” (p.70). Jan and Mary then digress into the most racially condescending of conversations. They tell Bigger they want to eat in “one of those places where colored people eat” (p.69).

Mary and Jan are constantly talking to Bigger about his “people” (74). And Mary expresses her desire to visit a house where his “people” live. “Never in my life have I been inside a Negro home. Yet they *must* live like we live . . . There are twelve million of them . . . They live in our country” (p.70, emphasis in original).

Jan and Mary are trying to convince themselves they have abandoned their white skin, and that skin color doesn’t matter. We are all the same, they say; look at us—we are not white. They then reveal their bad faith by distinctly pointing out Bigger’s blackness and emphasizing their white skin. A consciousness that claims to value no color has the gall to refer to blacks as if they are tenants, living in “our [white] country.” In the presence of Jan and Mary, Bigger, rather than feeling at ease, “was very conscious of his black skin and there was in him a prodding conviction that Jan and men like him had made it so that he was conscious of his black skin. . . Maybe they did not despise him? But they made him feel his black skin just standing there looking at him” (p.67).

Mary and Jan want to think they do not have white skin. They want to ignore that white skin means something to both of them, and to Bigger, no matter what their consciousness says. They tell themselves they are two consciousnesses in the world. This may make them feel better about themselves in terms of anguish and the acceptance of responsibility for who they are, but this is a product of their bad faith. Their “open-mindedness” and denial of whiteness may make them feel free from what is oppressive about whiteness simply because they do not see how a black man can feel any anger toward them. As Fanon tells us, “(b)ut, I will be told,

there is no wish, no intention to anger him [the black man]. I grant this; but it is just this absence of wish, this lack of interest, this indifference, this automatic manner of classifying him, imprisoning him, primitivizing him, decivilizing him, that makes him angry” (1967, p.32).

The other form of bad faith is the determination of myself, or others, as things. When I choose this kind of bad faith, “I am as I am made up to be . . . As a pure factual, causal, thinglike body. I move as a determined being. Motion becomes ensnared by factual demands” (Gordon, 1995, p.37). Ellison’s narrator who stands at the bonfire and watches a man burned alive, chooses to escape anguish and become a thinglike member of the crowd. He allows the mob’s influence to dictate his actions. He decides to help murder a black man.

The murdered black man was defined and determined as an inferior thing. A “thing” is not human; it has an unchangeable essence like the apple I described earlier in this chapter. The white narrator told himself the murder was acceptable because the black man has a “naturally” inferior essence. The narrator decided the murdered man was an animal, like a piece of meat. “I’ll never forget it,” the narrator tells us; “(e)very time I eat barbeque I’ll remember that nigger. His back was just like a barbequed hog” (Ellison, 1996, p.9). The narrator trivializes the event in order to avoid the fact that a human being was murdered, not an animal, and that he chose not to stop it. He went along with what was considered proper behavior for him. As Ellison remarks in *Invisible Man*, “I had accepted the accepted attitudes and it had made life seem simple” (1965, p.216).

The narrator in Ellison's "A Party Down at the Square" assumes the role of a white racist. The mob tells him how to act. He does not have to decide for himself what his values will be. The mob values tell him that the black man is not human like whites. The narrator chooses to accept a role among the crowd as a person whose actions are defined by racism. He paradigmatically shows how bad faith, and the denial of our own freedom as well as the freedom of others, is the backbone of racism.

Frederick Douglass also recounts experiences that manifest themselves as examples of Sartre's conception of bad faith. Douglass reveals how the most ardently Christian members of society were also the most exploitative of slavery. He describes the actions of one white man, Mr. Covey, who is, to all appearances, an extremely pious man.

He seemed to think himself equal to deceiving the Almighty . . . and, as strange as it may seem, few men would at times appear more devotional than he. I do verily believe that he sometimes deceived himself into the solemn belief that he was a sincere worshipper of the most high God; and this, too, at a time when he may be said to have been guilty of compelling his woman slave to commit the sin of adultery (p.61).

Mr. Covey purchased a young slave woman as a "breeder" (Douglass, p.61). More slaves mean more property. Covey hired a married man to "breed" with the woman so that she might have children to which Covey could claim ownership. Douglass is stunned that Covey would consider himself such a good Christian man, and yet support and cultivate a denial of one of the Ten Commandments. Covey uses religion to define himself as a Christian man. He convinces himself that he is

good because of his worship of God. He does not have to claim responsibility for his treatment of another human being as an animal, for his hypocritical actions condoning adultery, or as a man abolitionists would consider a disgustingly evil slave owner. His defense is his religious zeal. He is Christian. He is excused from all other evil actions because he defines himself as this most importantly. He is in bad faith.

Slaves were “things” in the South. Slaves were property, and were treated like cattle or pigs or any other owned animal. This fact was built into Southern society. A white person was born as a man or a woman; a black was born a slave. The ability of Mr. Covey to assume the role of “Christian” man while treating black people like animals was due to the institutions of slave society, religion, morality, economy, the legal system, provided justification for Covey’s behavior. Society condoned and encouraged such behavior. It had to, otherwise slavery would have dissolved upon the institutional recognition that blacks and whites are both human beings. Bad faith is an individual choice. Societal norms can influence each person’s decisions, but these influences serve only to alleviate the responsibility of the individual from what he does as an individual. Covey does not want to face the responsibility for his actions as a slave owner. The institution of slavery did not dictate Covey’s behavior. He chose what he wanted slavery to mean to him. He chose his place and his actions in a slave society. As Sartre reaffirms: “(O)ne does not undergo his bad faith; one is not infected with it, it is not a *state*. But consciousness infects itself with bad faith. There must be an original intention and a

project of bad faith; this project implies a comprehension of bad faith as such” (1956, p.89, emphasis in original).

Covey chose to assume a role in society and deny his freedom to be something other than what he is, that is, to continually create his essence. The influence of society upon Covey’s choice is a fact, however. The code of conduct for white people in the South revealed a ready-made set of values to which Covey could adhere. He could avoid the anguish of freedom because that which was evil in society was black. He never had to make his own value judgements if he conformed to societal roles in bad faith. He was white and, therefore, represented what is good, right, and just. Societal norms that provide roles for the individual to choose bad faith reveal how bad faith can become institutionalized. Institutional bad faith is the societal determination of behavior roles to which an individual can choose as dictatorial and justifiable of their individual actions. Institutional bad faith is “a convenient context—group denial—for individuals to hide from themselves” (Gordon, 1995, p.48). Bad faith on an institutional level allows the racist to “stifle his anxieties at their inception by persuading himself that his place in the world has been marked out in advance, that it awaits him, and that tradition gives him the right to occupy it” (Sartre, 1948, p.54).

At this point, I would like to clarify individual and institutional bad faith. Sartre’s example of the waiter, as I described in Chapter One, represents bad faith. I have described how the narrator in Ellison’s short story is also in bad faith. The waiter in bad faith is an individual object. He is *this* good waiter among all others.

He is trying to be the best. The waiter is not choosing to assume the role of all waiters, he is attempting to define himself as the ultimate waiter. He wants to distinguish himself as a better waiter than the rest. The narrator makes the same personal, individual choice to assume bad faith. The bad faith he chooses, however, is a concealment of his individual situation in the world by allowing the sentiments of a group to define him. The narrator wishes to become part of the herd where, as Nietzsche says, "it is virtuous to be zero" (p.33). The narrator's bad faith also takes on significance at the institutional level. Institutional bad faith allows the narrator the context to assume a consciousness of the group—a white consciousness. This white consciousness believes whites to be naturally superior to blacks, and is the consciousness of racism. It is a consciousness that supports the continuation of white as the dominant paradigm in society. White people are the most privileged societal group. The racist does not wish to recognize that this privilege is part of racism and bad faith that is institutional; he sees it as an acknowledgment of innate white superiority. He attributes this superiority to himself according to his belonging to whites as a group. Without his group definition that he has chosen in bad faith, he is an isolated individual who is the only responsible party for what he makes of himself. He is like every other human being.

Another important point about institutional bad faith is that, unlike the waiter's job, a white consciousness does not go away when its shift ends. It is institutional because it permeates all aspects of life. Since it is a societal context for living, institutional bad faith has a permanence about it that remains possible as long

as society is racist. The waiter is in bad faith as an individual, and his role dictates his behavior. The narrator also makes a choice of bad faith as an individual, but his is the individual choice to no longer be an individual free human, or to be a particular, specific, and isolated object like the role of the best waiter. His initial bad faith joins the beliefs in bad faith of an entire societal group, and which society's institutions require. The narrator no longer feels responsible for his actions because he accepts a multitude of racist attitudes that can placate all personal accountability for his actions. He did nothing to stop the murder at the bonfire, for example, because no one else did anything either. He doesn't think blacks are fellow men and women because other whites don't think so. Fanon says, "a given society is racist or it is not" (1967, p.85). White privilege as an institution allows the narrator to choose a societal endorsed bad faith—a white, racist consciousness.

The importance of institutional bad faith to the promotion and sustainability of racism is great, and so will be examined in detail in Chapter Three. To further illustrate bad faith on institutional and individual levels, I will analyze two of Sartre's most important works on oppression and racism: Anti-Semite and Jew and the play, The Respectful Prostitute. The latter is a representation of racist bad faith in the South, and the former is useful by analogy because "what others have described in the case of the Jew applies perfectly in that of the Negro," according to Fanon (1967, p.183).

Chapter 3. Institutional Bad Faith in Anti-Semite and Jew and The Respectful Prostitute

In this chapter, a discussion of institutional bad faith begins a transition from aware/blatant racism to aware/covert. This chapter shows that the anti-Semite and the racist still exhibit the characteristics of blatant racism, but outright and public racism is not as socially acceptable as in the days of segregation. An aware-covert racism that is much more discreet, such as victim blaming, has proven an effective technique for the modern racist. "Blaming the victim," says Suzanne Pharr, "leads to the victim feeling complicit with the oppression, of deserving it" (p.60). By the end of this chapter, I argue that victim blaming is the most damaging form of racist bad faith. This is because it suggests that black people yield to the validity of racist oppression.

A belief of racist society is that whites are, and have been, superior. As Lewis Gordon says: "The system of antiblack racism is lived as a self-justified god in its institutions and its inhabitants flesh. The system is fact; it is "what is." It is absolute. Whatever "is" what ought to be and have ought to have been" (1997, p.70). It matters not that it was in the institution of slavery that such beliefs were rooted; white dominance is "what is." It is what is acceptable, appreciated, encouraged, and condoned. It is factual. White society is the dominant force in society's institutions. Our leaders are white, our wealthiest people are white, and our most powerful individuals are white. Our institutions are in bad faith because the conglomerate of beliefs, values and accepted norms of racist society make it easy

and convenient for an individual to choose racist bad faith. Institutional bad faith is the social condition in which an individual can choose to hide from his freedom by becoming part of a group. This social condition and context for bad faith allows the racist to no longer feel like an isolated individual who must continually choose his values. He no longer has to decide what the people and objects of the world mean to him. Individual bad faith relieves the anguish of his freedom, but institutional bad faith gives the racist a sense of belonging to a societal group that relieves his individual responsibility for what he does. Institutional bad faith gives me direction in my life because it is a behavioral map for me to follow. In terms of pronouns, institutional bad faith is the context in which "I" no longer have to decide what to do as an individual because "we," as the societal group of white people, act as a unit for a common goal—the maintenance of white privilege.

Anti-Semitism displays the same propensities as racism on many counts, and a false sense of superiority is one of them. "Anti-Semitism," Sartre says, "is an attempt to give value to mediocrity as such, to create an elite of the ordinary . . . By treating the Jew as an inferior and pernicious being, I affirm at the same time that I belong to the elite . . . There is nothing I have to do to merit my superiority, and neither can I lose it" (1948, pp.23, 27, emphasis in original). Anti-Semitic societies do not value Jewishness, and a racist society does not value blackness. "White" stands for what is civilized, normal, proper, rational, law abiding, essentially, all that is "good" in society. One aspect of our individual freedom is the creation of our own personal values. This is part of continually "making" our essence. Institutional

bad faith allows white people to define themselves according to societal values steeped in racism. Sartre describes the same process in anti-Semitism. "Without respite, from the beginning of our lives to the end, we are responsible for what merit we enjoy. Now the anti-Semite flees responsibility as he flees his own consciousness, and choosing for his personality the permanence of a rock, he chooses for his morality a scale of petrified values" (1948, p.27).

Racism has thrived according to the "petrified" belief that whiteness represents what is morally and physically "good." Black must correspondingly be what is "bad." The racist believes there is something in the essence of blacks that determines them to be "bad" compared to whites. In individual bad faith, the racist chooses to believe in an innate black inferiority, and institutional bad faith supports this inferiority of blackness. "*(T)he black man is the symbol of Evil . . . The torturer is the black man, Satan is black, one talks of shadows, when one is dirty one is black—whether one is thinking of physical or moral dirtiness . . . The black man stands for the bad side of character*" (Fanon, 1967, pp.188-9, emphasis in original).

There is an interesting and important point to be made here about one of the paradoxes of racism. Racists are making moral distinctions between whites and blacks. Only human beings can be either good or evil, so the racist is clearly recognizing the humanity of black people. Blacks are, according to the racist, animals. To the crowd around the bonfire in Ellison's short story, blacks were not human. Blacks were not treated as human, anyway. What the moral distinction of blacks as "evil" helps show is the awareness of the racist of black humanity. The

racist is not ignorant to the fact that blacks are human beings. The racist tells himself untruths about how "human" black people are in order to justify a superiority of white mediocrity. This is why the racist is in bad faith, and why bad faith is a conscious, intentional choice by the racist. Whether aware/blatant, or aware/covert, the bad faith of the racist is a deliberate act to avoid the truth of black humanity. This truth reveals to the racist that white is not naturally superior. The racist in bad faith must conceal this truth, apparent by the moral distinction between Good whites and Evil blacks. Ignorance is not an excuse for the racist, at least not when it comes to the recognition that blacks are human beings.

Sartre identifies a similar procedure of negative generalization and stereotyping undertaken by anti-Semites. In order for goodness to be a general trait of gentiles, the anti-Semite "localizes all the evil of the universe in the Jew" (Sartre, 1948, p.40). The essence of Jews and blacks is believed to be naturally and unchangeably negative. The anti-Semite," Sartre says, "has traced out a monstrous portrait which is supposed to be that of the Jew in general" (1948, p.93).

White society determines black people as inferior. Blacks are members of a "race" that is less evolved, thus black submission to whites is justified in evolutionary terms. White superiority "is fed from the heart of those various theories that have tried to prove that the Negro is a stage in the slow evolution of monkey into man. Here is the objective evidence that expresses reality" (Fanon, 1967, p.17). Slaves were treated like animals, and sold as property. Slaves were then emancipated, but this does not mean whites believed blacks to be any less

“primitive.” Freedom from bondage also did not mean, for the white racist in bad faith, that blacks were any closer to being human, that is, to being white. “The Negro is a human being,” Fanon remarks, “that is to say, amended the less firmly convinced, [says the white racist] that like us he has his heart on the left side. But on certain points the white man remained intractable. Under no conditions did he wish any intimacy between the races” (1967, p.120).

The “petrified values” which the racist and anti-Semite choose for themselves are elaborately concocted to recognize anything related to Jews or blacks as inferior. Blacks must be kept in their place, the racists say; they are wild animals. Jews are trying to take over the world with their stinginess and greed. Everyone and everything that is not white and Christian is tainted with evil according to the racist and anti-Semite in bad faith. Sartre describes these sentiments in the anti-Semite: “The Jew, he says, is completely bad, completely a Jew. His virtues, if he has any, turn to vices by reason of the fact that they are his; work coming from his hands bears a stigma . . . for the Jew contaminates all that he touches with an I-know-not-what-execrable quality” (1948, p.34).

Segregation in the South kept blacks from “touching” what was white. While in the United States, Sartre observed, “there is not one public place where one sees blacks and whites mixing together. The access to theatres, restaurants, cinemas, libraries, swimming pools, etc. frequented by whites are forbidden to blacks” (1997, p.85). Ralph Ellison’s invisible man was forced to ride in the back of the bus from Alabama to New York. Black blood is not suitable for whites, Sartre

was told. Fanon relates that “(i)n New York, Simone de Beauvoir went for a walk with Richard Wright and was rebuked in the street by an old lady” (1967, p.183). Blacks and whites are not even supposed to be seen on the street together. In Ellison’s short story, “Boy on a Train,” a white man gropes the mother of the boy (James) on her way to the “colored” section of the train. After the incident James wonders to himself, “Why couldn’t a Negro woman travel with her two boys without being molested?” (1996, p.14). Racism, in terms of bad faith, considers black people subhuman. People who are not white do not receive human treatment. They are not people. “The white world,” says Fanon, “the only honorable one, barred me from all participation. A man was expected to behave like a man. I was expected to behave like a black man—or at least like a nigger” (1967, p.114).

Focusing all the evil in the world upon the representation of blacks places white racists within the realm of what is “good” for society. As good, the white racist protects society from the dregs trying to undermine white superiority: the Jews and the blacks. Racist society is a stagnant, unalterable thing. Racist values are set in stone and chosen by individuals in bad faith in order to avoid the anguish of being free, as an undetermined and continually speculative human being in the world. The racist or anti-Semite “chooses finally a Good that is fixed once and for all beyond question, out of reach; he dares not examine it for fear of being led to challenge it and having to seek it in another form . . . Anti-Semitism, in short, is fear of the human condition [freedom]” (Sartre, 1948, pp.53-4). Afraid of accepting the freedom and obligation of deciding who and what they can become, racists side-step

anguish by assuming a role that defines what they should be, how they should act, and what they should think. A racist society, as a whole, institutionalizes bad faith. Beliefs and values revealing the bad faith of racism, such as the natural superiority of white people, are the societal norms.

Sartre's play, The Respectful Prostitute, is an excellent example of the belief in the superiority of whiteness as a societal value. The setting is the American South during the 1940's. Lizzie, a white prostitute, is relocating by train from New York. During her trip, four drunken white men board the train and two of them make unwanted advances toward her. Rebuffed, the white men turn their attention to throwing two black men out of a train window. A fight ensues, one black man is murdered, the other escapes. The murderer is held by local police pending investigation of his side of the story—a yarn that claims the two black men were trying to rape Lizzie and the four whites came to her rescue. Lizzie knows the truth of the incident, yet it is a truth that does not correspond to the institutional values of the Southern society. The dominant white population, finding the murderer's story much more acceptable than the truth, desires the incarceration and execution of the fugitive “rapist.” The reason for their fervor is seen by a declaration in the play, “a nigger has always done something” (Sartre, 1955, p.255).

Lizzie must choose to either tell the truth, or uphold the status quo distinction of white superiority. She is from the North, a part of the country slightly less barbaric in its racism. This fact, as well as her own unacceptability by “proper” society due to her occupation, helps her empathize with the black man on the run.

He comes to ask her to tell the police the truth, and she offers him a revolver to defend himself against the white mob attempting to burn him alive. His response displays the indisputable and untouchable value of white goodness and superiority that is ingrained in the consciousnesses of both black and white inhabitants.

The Negro: I can't shoot white folks.

Lizzie: Really? That would bother them wouldn't it?

The Negro: They're white folks, ma'am.

Lizzie: So what? Maybe they got a right to bleed you like a pig just because they're white?

The Negro: But they're white folks (1955, p.277).

The "petrified value" of white superiority acts as a shield protecting its white individuals from all blame and responsibility for the racist crimes undertaken.

Whites cannot be attacked by a black man simply because they are white. The societal value of white decency is bad faith that is institutionalized. The condemnation of blacks as evil is also spelled out in the play. "(I)t's always bad luck when you see a nigger," says the white man Fred, "(n)iggers are the Devil" (1955, p.255). Blacks are always bad, the epitome of Christian evil, and eternally guilty because they have "always done something."

Lizzie remains dedicated to telling the truth, however, and reassures the black man she will vindicate him as an attempted rapist and tell the police what really happened on the train. She promises to let the authorities know that the white man in custody is not telling the truth. But in the South, a white man cannot be proven a liar. He cannot go to jail instead of a black man. And he cannot go to jail *because* of a black man. Realizing the seriousness of the situation as a threat to

white dominance, the state senator visits Lizzie and attempts to convince her to conceal the truth and align herself with the rest of the whites, that is, to follow institutionalized racism. The Senator first asks her to back up the story of Thomas, the jailed white man, on behalf of Thomas' mother.

The Senator: I can read your mind my child. Do you want me to tell you what's going on in you head? [Imitating Lizzie] "If I signed, the Senator would go to her [the mother] and say: Lizzie Mackay is a good girl, and she's the one who's giving your son back to you . . . And I [Lizzie] who have no family, relegated by the cruel fate to a social banishment, I would know that a dear old lady was thinking of me in her great house; that an American mother had taken me to her heart (1955,270).

The Senator preys upon the fact that Lizzie has been an outcast all of her life. She has been an isolated individual, a loner, because her occupation is not acceptable to "good" society. She is facing the anguish of having to make a decision. She is troubled because she doesn't have to do any one particular thing. She can deliberate. She does not know what the results will mean for her life once she makes up her mind what to do. The Senator is trying to give her a factual outcome of choosing to lie about the murder. A sense of friendship and belonging in society is what she has never had. The possibility of Lizzie being accepted by the conglomerate of "good people" is appealing to her. She can finally *be someone* in the minds of others-instead of being a "thing" for them. The Senator appeals to her whiteness and to what is "good" for America.

The Senator: Lizzie, this Negro whom you are protecting, what good is he? What does he do for me? Nothing at all . . . The other one, this Thomas, has killed a negro, and that's very bad. But I need

him. He is a hundred-percent American, comes from one of our oldest families . . . he employs two thousand workers in his factory . . . He's a leader, a firm bulwark against the Communists, labor unions, and the Jews. His duty is to live, and yours is to preserve his life (1955, p.270).

By clearing the murderer Lizzie will not only become a pseudo-member of the killer's family, fondly regarded by his mother, but she will join the "good" Americans battling the evils of society: communists, Jews, and blacks with any semblance of freedom. She no longer has to suffer the anguish of making a decision in this case. She can hide from her anguish and elevate herself from her societal ostracism simply by ignoring a truth that is "unpleasant" to whites. She tells herself the "truth" of the matter is that blacks are not as human as whites. Black people are perpetually up to no good. This societal opinion becomes a fact for her; it replaces the facts of the murder case. She chooses bad faith, frees the murderer, condemns the innocent black man already found guilty by society, and receives thanks from the Senator. "I thank you," he says, "in the name of the seventeen thousand white inhabitants of our town, [and] in the name of the American people, whom I represent in these parts" (1955, p.271).

The belief in white superiority is a potential way for all whites to bond together. When one has a false sense of superiority, one feels much better about his or her attempts at self-deception when there are many others under a similar illusion. The same unity based on a fear of the individual human condition can be seen in the anti-Semite. "The social bond is anger. . . He wants his personality to melt suddenly into the group and be carried by the collective torrent" (Sartre, 1948, p.30). To be a

white man defending white American values transcends, in the mind of the racist, all personality and class barriers within the white population. As the fugitive black man in The Respectful Prostitute reveals, “(w)hen white folk who have never met before, start to talk to each other, friendly like, some nigger’s goin to die” (1955, p.252). Poorer whites feel better about their lot in life because they have a bond with the wealthy and “well-bred” whites. The bond is that they all detest blacks. When a lynching was over, the poor whites went back to being poor. There is, in other words, nothing for the poor white to defend other than the “pleasing truth” of their superiority. The black man in Sartre’s play is hunted and shot at following Lizzie’s concealment of the truth. She finds herself, however, not in a position of social glory and acceptance, but in the clutches of another “john.” Nothing has changed for the better in her life. She is still a prostitute, and is still treated as such by her “thankful” townspeople. As Sartre remarks about choosing anti-Semitic views: “It seems to all these featherbrains that by repeating with eager emulation the statement that the Jew is harmful to the country they are performing a rite of initiation which admits them to the fireside of social warmth and energy” (1948, p.51). Socially, Lizzie is nothing more than she was; however, she convinces herself she is at least better than blacks. She may be a prostitute, but at least she is a white prostitute. Her skin color is what makes her respectable. Racism is the self-imposed deception of superiority. It is bad faith.

Human beings are in anguish because we are “condemned” to the freedom of creating our own essence. It is difficult dealing with the responsibility of “making”

ourselves because the accountability for our choices lies solely with us. We are not determined to act in any certain way, other than the determination that we must create our essence. In bad faith, we convince ourselves that we are determined, however, in order to avoid the anguish of freedom. Institutional bad faith allows individual whites to hide from indeterminacy and, jointly, we convince ourselves we are a group, we are greatness, and we are justifiably dominant because the functioning of our racist society defends this position of white power. As an individual, I am nothing but what I make of myself. As a part of white America, I am *something*. I act in accordance with what history has told me: I am master. What I do is no longer my responsibility alone because I act in accordance with the racist beliefs of my white group. My superiority is a law of nature, and it is a fact of life. I choose my racism to be a fact of my existence. As for the black man, "you are guilty because you are black, and you are black because you are guilty" (Birt, p.210).

Some racists attempt to defend themselves, however. In order to avoid responsibility for his racism, the defensive racist will try and turn the tables and blame black people for furthering racist oppression. He understands that "(b)laming the victim for their oppression diverts attention from the true abuser or the cause of the victimization" (Pharr, p.60). The oppressor claims to be innocent of racist motives. Blacks are the only ones who point out their blackness, say the whites. When I see a black person, I only see a person. Racists also defend the accusation of bad faith by charging black people with bad faith as well. If Sartre says all human

beings are condemned to be free, why isn't a black person responsible for what he does? Blacks are in bad faith, too.

Frantz Fanon makes an important point about the scene in The Respectful Prostitute where the black man on the run declares that it is impossible for him to shoot whites. Of this scene, in which the black man cannot see the possibility of shooting white people, Fanon has described the black man as having "(a) feeling of inferiority? No, a feeling of nonexistence. Sin is Negro as virtue is white. All those white men in a group, guns in their hands, cannot be wrong. I am guilty. I do not know of what, but I know that I am no good" (1967, p.139). The unfounded guilt of black people is a reaction to the racist blaming the victim. Black people have done nothing to warrant guilt, yet whites impose this feeling and cause blacks to internalize racist oppression. When the racist blames the victim, the damage done to the black psyche and ability to promote self-worth can be devastating. A guilt that has no source frustrates and festers within some blacks until this negativity is believed to be legitimate by the victims.

The victim lives in an environment of negative images (stereotypes) and messages, backed up by violence, victim-hating and blaming, all of which leads to low self-esteem and self-blame in the victim. The oppression thus becomes internalized. The goal of this environment is to lead the victim to be complicit with her/his victimization: to think that it is deserved and should not be resisted (Pharr, p.59).

Blaming the victim allows the work of the racist, the oppression of blacks, to be undertaken by blacks themselves. The racist spouts that blacks are in bad faith because they refuse to acknowledge the freedom innate to all humans. However,

blacks cannot be in bad faith like the racist in a white supremacist society because the existential situation of blacks is not the same as whites. Whites have the freedom Sartre discusses. Slavery, colonialism, segregation, and the continuing fact of racial prejudice have caused an “existential deviation” in blacks according to Fanon (1967, p.14). In Chapter Four, I will look at relations with others according to Sartre. An examination of the “Existence of Others” section of Being and Nothingness reveals his mistakes and misjudgments concerning a universal human freedom to create our own essence. Sartre’s existential freedom and anguish is a “luxury” enjoyed by white people. White people experience the existential situation Sartre describes as free, but whites have trounced upon the freedom of blacks. Victim blaming then arises from whites who wonder why blacks do not just see their existential freedom according to Sartre and alleviate their own oppression. Chapter Four will trace the existential situation of blacks in order to show that telling blacks to quit blaming black problems on racism is the most catastrophic form of white racist bad faith.

Chapter 4. The Existential Deviation

The kind of racism I will discuss in this chapter is aware/covert racism. I will make clear that victim blaming is the most destructive way for the aware/covert racist to be in bad faith. The racist's "awareness" of his own bad faith is critical to my argument. There are white people who do not intend to behave in racist ways, but do. These people, as Yamato describes, "can just 'nice' somebody to death with naiveté and lack of awareness of privilege" (p.91). The "unintentional" racist is not a part of this thesis because Sartre makes clear that the choice of bad faith is clearly and distinctly intended and selected. There is ignorance, and there is bad faith. I do not think white people are ignorant of the racism inherent in blaming the victim.

I make this claim for two reasons that this chapter will explore in detail. First, I argue that blaming the victim validates the myths and stereotypes of black inferiority. Second, when the victim is blamed, there is an awareness of the history of racist oppression. The racist who blames the victim is not only in bad faith about the level of freedom most black people possess, but is also in bad faith about the severity of his own racism. Sartre's work concerning relationships between individuals, by continuing to hold to the idea that human beings are "absolutely" free, underestimates the severe effect racist oppression has on black existence. Racist oppression has "deviated" the existence of many black people by attempting to limit the ability of black people to freely construct their own identity.

I will begin with a discussion of relationships with others according to Sartre's work in Being and Nothingness. A great deal of what we know about ourselves comes from our interactions with other people. The Sartrean individual (condemned to freedom and solely responsible for his actions) exists in a world consisting of her, and Others. People other than myself are not objects or things; they are individuals with their own possibilities to choose from and their own anguish and freedom to accept. Sartre tells us that "(t)he Other is a thinking substance of the same essence as I am . . . whose essential structure I find in myself . . . others are *the Other*, that is the self which *is not* myself" (1956, p.303, p.312, emphasis in original).

My initial relationship to the Other is realized through what Sartre calls "the look." When I am aware of someone looking at me, I recognize that this Other is a subject, that he or she is a human, "thinking substance," just like I am. When looking at me, I don't know what the Other thinks. I realize the Other is free to come to whatever conclusions he or she wants about me. "To be looked at," says Sartre, "is to apprehend oneself as the unknown object of unknowable appraisals—in particular, of value judgments" (1956, p.358). Since I do not know what the Other is thinking about me, I feel threatened. This is because there is an inherent ambiguity in "the look" of the Other. What does the Other see? The Other sees a body, first and foremost. His look makes me feel like an object. Because I apprehend his ability to judge and appraise me, I realize that the Other is free. His

freedom reveals the Other to me as subject. I am the object of “the look” of a free subject.

In the context of racism, blacks feel their blackness when seen by whites. In a racist society, whites are subjects. As I described in Chapter Two, Bigger Thomas felt his black skin when Jan and Mary looked at him. Ralph Ellison wrote a short story in 1943 called “That I Had Wings,” and in this story, he relates how a young boy, Reilly, is reprimanded by his aunt for pretending that he is President of the United States. His Aunt Kate is alarmed at his antics and bawls him out for contemplating a possibility that both whites and God would find “sinful.” “Reilly looked at her from under lowered lids. It was always God, or the white folks. She always made him feel guilty, as though he had done something wrong he could never remember, for which he would never be forgiven. Like when white folks stared at you on the street” (1996, pp.47-8). Bigger and Reilly feel themselves as black objects in “the look” of whites. Most importantly, however, there is negativity in this look that is simultaneously linked to black objectness. It is not just “thingness” blacks feel when seen by whites, it is being an object that is “bad.” There is negativity inherent in “the look” of the racist toward black people. It is intended by the racist, and the black person feels it.

This immediate and racist association of blacks with negativity in “the look” of the racist is in conflict with Sartre’s views in a couple of ways. In the first place, for a black person there is nothing ambiguous about the kind of object the white Other, as subject, sees. The racist sees a negative, inferior thing. According

to Fanon, “(i)n the universal situation of the Negro, there is an ambiguity, which is, however, resolved in his concrete existence . . . *Wherever he goes, the Negro remains a Negro*” (1967, p.173, emphasis in original). The only thing that is unclear, as Reilly points out above, is what has caused the negative judgment. Without a rational answer, and because this negativity is condoned by society as a whole, blacks begin to believe they are to blame for racist oppression. As I described at the conclusion of the last chapter, when black people are oppressed to the point of believing that the racist’s negative stereotypes and judgments are true, blacks have internalized racist oppression. Sartre’s contention that there is ambiguity in “the look” of the Other does not apply when it comes to what the racist thinks about blacks. The negativity in “the look” of the racist is not only very clear and intended, but it can pave the way to the self-hate and pain of internalized oppression. Two more flaws in Sartre’s beliefs about human relationships must be addressed before I can discuss the bad faith of victim blaming.

The second problem I have with Sartre’s analysis of “the look” relates to Sartre’s position that the person who is seen realizes himself as object, and the Other as subject. There is nothing stagnant about my relationship to the Other, however. I see myself as object, but I also have the capability to be a subject. At this point, I have a choice to make concerning my relationship to the Other, and “he is now what it depends on me to not-be” (Sartre, 1956, p.383). I have the freedom to choose to make the Other an object for me, in which case I impose myself on the Other as a subject. The pendulum of existence between object/subject swings back

and forth according to my choices and reactions to the Other. Once again, Sartre is telling us that we make ourselves what we want to be.

Racism denies the possibility of blacks achieving a subject position relative to whites. The negative judgment a black person receives in “the look” of the racist intends to keep blacks perennially an object in relation to whites. As Fanon points out, “Jean-Paul Sartre has forgotten that the Negro suffers in his body quite differently from the white man. Between the white man and me the connection has irrevocably been one of transcendence” (1967, p.138). In a context of racism, “the look” is much more than just a physical glance. Fanon describes how “the white man is not only The Other but also the master, whether real or imaginary” (1967, p.138). The sense of negativity in “the look” of the racist intrudes upon black people whether the eyes of whites physically see them or not. As discussed in Chapter Three, racism often causes blacks to internalize racist myths and stereotypes. In the most damaging scenarios, racist attitudes are internalized to the point where black people believe these false generalizations are true. According to Suzanne Pharr: “As one takes in the negative messages and stereotypes, there is a weakening of self-esteem, self pride and group pride . . . [Internalized oppression] takes the form of self-hatred which can express itself in depression, despair, and self-abuse” (p.60). A similar form of internalized oppression can be seen as a result of sexism. The need for women to value themselves according to the male gaze is also a case where “the look” has oppressed well beyond physical eye contact. What these two cases share is radical embodiment, one as sex, the other as race.

Sartre is talking about the freedom of white people when he is describing the ease of asserting one's subject side, relative to black people.

The third point on which I disagree with his analysis of "the look" is Sartre's denial that the Other is a significant influence on my opinion of myself. His argument is that I have the freedom to abandon the objectivity the Other causes me to feel about myself because the object that I feel myself to be is created by me. The Other, according to Sartre, only causes me to see myself as an object. The Other does not influence what kind of object I see myself as. "The Other," Sartre says, "does not constitute me as an object for myself but *for him*. In other words he does not serve as a regulative or constitutive concept for the pieces of knowledge which I may have of myself" (1956, p.367, emphasis in original). The negativity a black person feels in the gaze of the racist is certainly not a figment of the black imagination. The racist belief in natural black inferiority comes across in "the look." The racist attempts to condemn black people, on the basis of skin color, to perpetual "thingness" according to the mythical negativity of blackness the racist has constructed. "I am given no chance," Fanon says, "I am overdetermined from without. I am the slave not of the 'idea' that others have of me but of my own appearance . . . I am *fixed*" (1967, p.116, emphasis in original).

Sartre's explanations of "the look" and relations with others is crucial to my analysis of the racist in bad faith. I have used the concept of "bad faith" to critically denounce the behavior of the racist as an attempt to hide from freedom and make himself either a subject only, or an object which denies responsibility to

act as a free individual. If the analysis were complete at this point, the racist could claim that because Sartre puts forth a “universal” human freedom, blacks and whites are both free to choose bad faith. Bad faith offers a potential criticism of the racist, but Sartre’s work concerning Others gives the racist Sartrean grounds to blame the victim. Sartre’s theory tells us blacks are just as free as whites. Blacks are, subsequently, just as capable of choosing bad faith. To the racist, blacks are in bad faith when they claim that white oppression limits black possibilities. Blacks are to blame for their own misfortune.

Sartre may be right when it comes to the choice of bad faith, but he is wrong to think the condition of absolute human freedom pertains to anyone besides those in the dominant culture. In reference to “the look” within the context of racism, I have argued three points showing how racial oppression causes the existential situation of many black people to be much different than that of whites. In the first place, there is negativity inherently associated with “the look” of the racist toward blacks. Second, this negativity is based on the appearance, the skin color, of black people, so the choice of the black person to impose himself as a subject is tantamount to removing his skin, which is impossible. Third, the Other is far more significant an influence on black self-worth than Sartre proposes. The internalization of racist myths and stereotypes can seriously affect autonomous self-definition by a black person. Black people suffer, as Albert Memmi describes, total oppression.

If we define total oppression as a state which affects the human being in all aspects of his existence, in the “way he sees himself” and the way

others see him . . . the oppression of the American Negro is undeniably a total oppression . . . it affects the "whole of the black man's existence." If we look closer, we see that there is no one aspect of his life, no single action of his, that is not thrown off balance by this fundamental aggression (pp.22-3).

Total oppression affects all parts of black existence. Of primary importance is oppression's effect on the ability of black people to assume the freedom of self-definition Sartre describes as the primary condition of human reality. Racist oppression has "violated" the freedom of most blacks to create their own essence. As Robert Birt says: "The various forms of social oppression and domination obstruct the actualization of that freedom which constitutes the being of human reality, thereby blocking the ultimate source of energy for the creative formation of identity. Thus, oppression may be seen as an existential violation" (p.207).

Oppression has limited the existential freedom of black people. The racist is in bad faith about the extent to which racism has oppressed the freedom of the black existential situation. I now want to examine ways in which racial oppression has caused black people to suffer an existential violation. Once I have done this, I will examine the bad faith of the racist who blames the victim.

As Fanon says, "(w)hite civilization and European culture have forced an existential deviation on the Negro" (1967, p.16). The colonization of Africa, slavery, segregation, and continual racial prejudice have greatly constricted the existential freedom of blacks to create their own essence. European colonization of Africa began the policy of "emptying [of] the native's brain of all form and content" which so characterizes the oppression of slavery (Fanon, 1963, p.210).

Ripped from Africa or born into the institution in the United States, the slave was not treated as a human being. Frederick Douglass testified that, as a slave, “his head, his eyes, his hands, his whole body . . . [and] his immortal spirit were the property of another” (p.x). As a “thing,” any semblance of human existence, of family, of personal identity, even of time, was denied the slave.

[There was a slave] belonging to Colonel Lloyd. The young man’s name was Ned Roberts, generally called Lloyd’s Ned . . . By far the larger part of slaves know as little of their ages as horses know of theirs . . . they seldom come nearer to it than planting-time, harvest-time, cherry-time, spring-time or fall-time. A want of information concerning my own was a source of unhappiness to me even during childhood. The white children could tell their ages. I could not tell why I ought to be deprived of the same privilege (Douglass, p.19, p.15).

Physically bonded, the mind of the slaves was also brutally controlled. To teach a slave to read or write “would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would become at once unmanageable, and of no value to his master . . . [the slave was told that] it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy” (Douglass, 39). Brainwashing the slave into thinking ignorance was good for him is crushing, but perhaps not as traumatic as the threat of violence to control the slave’s thoughts. Brutality was the response to the simplest of actions by the slave: “A mere look, word, or motion, --a mistake, accident, or want of power, --are all matters for which a slave may be whipped at any time” (Douglass, p.30). Douglass tells of masters who would send spies among the slaves in order to police how the slaves felt about their situation. When one slave responded negatively, he was “immediately chained, handcuffed; and thus, without a moment’s warning, he was snatched away, and forever sundered,

from his family and friends, by a hand more unrelenting than death. This is the penalty of telling the truth” (p.28). A slave has no rights because he is not a human being.

After slavery was abolished, a different situation concerning the ability of blacks to create their own identity arose. As free, blacks were “Americans.” Blacks were also, however, still black, and were beaten, raped, and murdered for that reason. Blacks remained trapped by racist oppression that considered them to be innately inferior. Free, yet persecuted, oppression created a schism in the development of a true self-consciousness. W.E.B. DuBois referred to this condition as “two-ness”:

One ever feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one body . . . It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity (pp.364-5).

Two-ness is the frustration felt by blacks attempting to lead a “normal” life, yet unable to avoid racist sentiments. Blacks were free from slavery, yet still imprisoned by racism within the negativity of their black skin. It did not matter how successful or admirable a black person’s achievements, that person was still black. Even the lowest of whites were superior to the likes of DuBois. When a black person works hard and does well for himself, he is still considered inferior to whites in a fundamental way. Blacks who are well educated are referred to by whites as intelligent *blacks*. “When people like me,” Fanon says, “they tell me it is in spite of my color. When they dislike me, they point out that it is not because of

my color. Either way, I am locked into the infernal circle” (1967, p.116). A black person remains black because he cannot abandon his racial distinction. The designation of blacks as a separate and lesser “race” than whites has been the most successful justification for black inferiority.

The concept of “race” is an attempt by racists to separate one human species into divisions of varying evolutionary status, with white representing the most advanced form of humanity. As Sartre said later in his life: “Since none may enslave, rob, or kill his fellow man without committing a crime, they lay down the principle that the native is not one of our fellow men” (1963, p.15). Race categorization justifies the treatment of blacks as slaves, and as second-class citizens. Black cultural differences manifest themselves as symptomatic of evolutionary inferiority to Western Civilization. All the negative stereotypes that make up, for the racist, the natural essence of blacks stem from the fact that blacks are a lesser “race.” Blacks are not as human as whites because blacks are a less evolved form of primate. The result of such distinctions is that the racist attempts to prove biological inferiority among blacks that justify white oppression.

The modern concept of race emerged in the 18th and 19th centuries as a rationalization for actions of enslavement and other forms of colonial exploitation that contradicted political theories premised upon universal human rights. Without the concept of race, the enslavement of kidnapped Africans and the colonial exploitation of Native populations in the Americas, which included genocide, would have been recognized as the crimes they were (Zack, pp.99-100).

Slavery, prejudice, and the racism of “racial” distinctions all affect black people at the core of their existence. I examined these forms of oppression, past

and present, to show how the existential situation of most blacks does not present the same freedom of self-definition that most whites experience. The racist is in bad faith when he claims that blacks are just as free as whites and, therefore, responsible for their oppressed situation. The racist is blaming the victim for the consequences of racist oppression. I will now examine victim blaming as a form of bad faith.

Victim blaming is aware/covert racism, and I consider it to be more dangerous than any aware/blatant form of racial oppression. I say this because racism has adapted to modernity. The blatant racism of the segregated South, for instance, is far less prevalent in the present. Outright racism still exists, but the fact of the matter is that racists are being arrested, tried, and convicted of racially motivated crimes. It is not practical for the racist to blatantly express his contempt for black people. Racism has, consequently, become more covert. It has had to change with the times. Racism has adapted itself to the modern environment. "Like a virus," Gloria Yamato says, "it's hard to beat racism, because by the time you come up with a cure, it's mutated to a 'new cure-resistant' form" (p.90).

Victim blaming is an offshoot of aware/blatant racism. The same negative myths and stereotypes that contribute to the aware/blatant belief in natural black inferiority are still present and accepted by the victim-blamer. These sentiments are hidden, however, because it is not as "safe" to be a racist as it used to be. Victim blaming is the racist's most "cure resistant" form of bad faith.

Victim blaming is bad faith in three ways. First, by placing the blame on black people for their oppressed condition, the racist is attempting to avoid his responsibility for and acceptance of racist attitudes. Victim blaming allows the covert racist to harbor the same beliefs chosen in bad faith by the “blatant” racist. The victim blamer believes, in bad faith, that blacks are naturally inferior to whites. He conceals this bad faith with a second choice of bad faith—claiming that blacks are responsible for their oppressed condition. In victim blaming, bad faith is used to conceal bad faith. The victim blamer avoids his responsibility as a blatant and covert racist by charging that blacks are to blame for the oppressed state of many black people.

In its second form of bad faith, victim blaming is institutional. Often, blatant racism is not behind the decision to blame the victim. Instead, blaming the victim is explained as a means of “motivating” black people to take charge of their lives. The contentions that “all men are created equal” and that everyone has the right to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” reveal how the rhetoric of humanism is institutionalized here in the United States. The hypocrisy of these messages is as clear today as it was during the time of the “founding fathers.” This is a racist society, and the hypocrisy of these beliefs form what Sartre called a “racist humanism.”

And that super-European monstrosity, North America? Chatter, chatter: liberty, equality, fraternity, love, honor, patriotism, and what have you. All this did not prevent us from making anti-racial speeches about dirty niggers, dirty Jews, and dirty Arabs. High-minded people, liberal or just softhearted, protest that they were shocked by such inconsistency; but they were either mistaken or dishonest, for with us there is nothing

more consistent than a racial humanism since the European has only become a man through creating slaves and monsters (1963, p.26).

Institutional “humanism” pledges possibilities for black people that racist oppression attempts to deny. This “humanism” is an institutional context in which the racist can blame the victim for their oppression. The racist can blame the victim, and then justify this claim to himself through the rhetoric of “humanism.” The victim-blamer defensively argues that all people, no matter what their color, are human beings. Therefore, there is nothing racist, he tells himself, in his claim that blacks are responsible for their oppressed state. Essentially, the racist is contributing to racist oppression while denying that it exists.

A denial of the existence of racist oppression is also present in the third form of victim blaming bad faith. In this instance, the victim-blaming racist denies the lingering severity of the racist oppression of the past. In bad faith, the racist believes that the most oppressive racism, slavery and segregation, was abolished so long ago that it is an “excuse” for black people to blame their present oppression on these practices. James Baldwin illustrates this point in the short story, “Going to Meet the Man.” “Here they had been in a civilized country for years and they still lived like animals,” says a white man about black people (p.233). Black existence has been deeply wounded by the oppression of the past. The racist is telling himself and black people that their oppression hasn’t been all that bad. Blaming the victim is a way of saying “forget the past and get on with your life.” If you have trouble getting on with your life, the racist says, it is your own fault.

Victim blaming is the most damaging form of racist bad faith. If the racist believes that racial oppression is a thing of the past, he is refusing to acknowledge that it exists in the present. The racist takes no responsibility for the oppression of the present. He does not believe racist oppression is his responsibility. The racist believes that oppression no longer exists. Since oppression cannot be blamed for the unfortunate position of many blacks in society, blacks are responsible for the oppression they claim to suffer. The bad faith of the racist who blames the victim is the most devious and damaging bad faith because it leads blacks to internalize racist oppression. Black people begin to hate themselves for their misfortune because the racist does not admit that there is any other responsible party.

Combating the bad faith of the racist is a formidable task. It is not an impossible one, however. In the next and final chapter, I will look at the future of racism in terms of bad faith. The racist chooses the condition of bad faith. This means the racist has the ability to take other attitudes toward himself and black people. In Chapter Five, I will show that, although the bad faith of racism can be incredibly oppressive to black people, the racist needs to realize that the choice of bad faith causes the greatest harm to himself.

Chapter 5. Conclusion

Sartre's emphasis on freedom in Being and Nothingness is what makes his philosophy unique. Human beings, according to Sartre, are completely free because our existence precedes our essence. We feel our freedom in anguish because we alone are responsible for what we choose and "make" of ourselves. The choice of bad faith, however, allows us to hide from our anguish because we select a role for ourselves that we believe dictates our behavior more than it actually does.

Bad faith is the primary condition of the aware/blatant and aware/covert racist. In both of these, the outright and the secretive forms of racism, the racist convinces himself that white people are superior to blacks according to laws of "Nature." Myths and stereotypes depicting black people as less-evolved humans are created and become institutionalized as societal norms. Both the racist in bad faith, and the racist society that has institutionalized the bad faith of racism, justify the oppression of black people according to the belief of innate black inferiority to whites. The racist has created the black person's essence and, through oppression, this eternally negative and inferior position to whites permeates every part of their being.

Black people feel the "thingness" of the racist's negative "determination" in "the look." Sartre says, however, that each human being has the freedom to abandon the objectness we feel when confronted by the Other and impose ourselves

on the Other as subjects. Sartre is wrong, in the context of racism, to think that the oppression black people experience is something chosen and easily overcome. The racist who blames the victim is also mistaken to believe that all black people can freely alter their situation just as whites can. Oppression has caused an existential “deviation” within blacks. This “deviation” occurs because the ability of black people to create their own identities is crushed by racist efforts to impose a fixed, inferior essence upon black existence. The racist who blames the victim is telling black people to accept the freedom to alter their black situation while at the same time limiting the freedom of black people through oppression.

Blaming the victim is the worst form of bad faith the racist assumes. This is because some black people, by internalizing the negative images of themselves created and imposed by the racist as “facts” of nature, begin to believe they are to blame for the oppression they suffer. The self-hatred of internalized oppression that often results from victim blaming, shows how blaming the victim is the most destructive form of racist bad faith.

Bad faith is a choice. The racist does not have to limit himself to the condition of bad faith. There is another possibility for the racist to choose, and Sartre calls this “authenticity.” The authentic human being takes responsibility for all her actions and for the situations in which she finds herself. She gives no excuses because she accepts the fact that she freely whatever situation she is in. Taking responsibility for all we do is a most serious commitment, according to Sartre. You do not suddenly “decide” to be authentic and magically become so.

As Sartre says, “if you seek authenticity for authenticity’s sake, you are no longer authentic” (1992, p.7). Authenticity consists of realizing we have no one to blame but ourselves for what we do. It is, however, “not just recognizing that one has no excuse, but also of *willing* it” (Sartre, 1984, p.113, emphasis in original). To abandon bad faith, the racist must strongly motivate himself, “will” himself, to take responsibility for all the racist activities of his past, of his society’s history, and for the white privilege he unmeritoriously enjoys in the present. Authenticity requires constant dedication to the avoidance of the bad faith attempt to “determine” the essence of himself and others. Bad faith is a static, “petrified” condition. Authenticity is constantly dynamic and adapting to new challenges presented in bad faith. Bad faith is a free choice, but authenticity is to choose freedom.

Is authenticity the way to end the bad faith of racism? I think the authentic life is the proper alternative to the condition of bad faith but authenticity, by itself, is not the answer to the problem of *racist* bad faith. The bad faith of the racist is a different kind of self-deception than the bad faith of the café waiter Sartre describes in Being and Nothingness. The significant difference between the racist in bad faith and the waiter in bad faith is that the racist is seriously harming himself (as does the waiter by making himself a “thing” and limiting what he can become) and he is also harming black people. Racist oppression can seriously damage the self-worth of blacks. By alienating himself, however, from harmonious relations with other human beings, the racist in bad faith inflicts the most pain on himself. He chooses to live his life alienated from and hating others rather than loving them,

and in doing so misses out on one of life's greatest rewards. Authenticity's focus on responsibility does not go far enough to repair the harm bad faith has caused black people, and that the racist has caused himself.

The limitations of authenticity in a racist context show a major problem in Sartre's philosophy. The difficulty is that the "future work" dealing with ethics that Sartre promises to deliver at the end of Being and Nothingness never materialized (1956, p.798). In other works not intended to deal with the "ethical plane," Sartre is too vague and too brief in his explanations of our responsibility to recognize the freedom and humanity of others. The following is one example of Sartre's "incompleteness" when it comes to his ethical writings. He says: "When I recognize, as entirely authentic, that man is a being whose existence precedes his essence, and that he is a free being who cannot . . . but will his freedom, at the same time I realize that I cannot *not* will the freedom of others" (Santoni, 1995, 166). These are promising words from Sartre which, at some point, might have developed into an existentialist ethics wherein part of the responsibility required of the authentic individual is to recognize, uphold, and protect the freedom of others. Perhaps Sartre saw the inconsistencies these ideas have with the conflicting and adversarial relationships described in the "Existence with Others" section of Being and Nothingness. In any case, authenticity alleviates bad faith through the continual emphasis on assuming responsibility for what we do. Racist bad faith, however, is a unique form of bad faith due to the intensity of the damage the racist inflicts on black people and which he causes himself. I would like to see

“authenticity” include the potential for oppressor and oppressed to reach out to each other in an effort to heal the wounds of racism.

Martin Buber, also an existentialist, writes about optimal human relationships in I and Thou. The depth of feeling necessary to adapt authenticity to the context of racism can be found there. Racist bad faith closely resembles I-It relationships. In both bad faith and I-It, the racist fragments black people and sees them as “things” and “objects.” Ironically, in doing so, he makes an object out of himself. For example, the racist defines black people, in a total sense, according to a single physical trait—black skin. This choice by the racist also defines himself within the same limits of objectness—he is white, and he is a racist. Human can never be, definitively, an object. All that we are can never be limited to our skin color, and the value of others can never be measured according to skin. This is bad faith. By contrast, Buber’s I-Thou relationship sees human beings as dynamic, whole beings. The white person, committed to authenticity, respects and fully acknowledges black people as human beings. “If I face a human being as my *Thou*,” Buber says, “he is not a thing among things, and does not consist of things . . . nor is he a nature able to be experienced and described, a loose bundle of named qualities” (Buber, 1958, p.8, emphasis in original). In the I-Thou relationship, people are greater than the sum of their parts. The white person who chooses to see a black person as a “Thou” appreciates the “whole being” of the black person, not just a skin color (Buber, 1958, p.3). The recognition and

embracing of the “wholeness” of other human beings is vital to ending racism, since “(o)nly a part of a being can be hated” (Buber, 1958, p.16).

The ideal alternative to racist bad faith is for the white person to commit to accepting responsibility for all he or she has done as a racist, and will do in the future. To this authenticity, add the respect and appreciation of others inherent in Buber’s I-Thou relationship. The white person who respects black people as “Thou” can begin recovering, in himself, the sense of “whole being” dismembered by his choice of bad faith. Bad faith can only leave a void in the existence of the racist. It is a decision that is up to the racist, though. If the aware/blatant and aware/covert racist so chooses, respect and love for others can go a long way toward filling the “void” caused by the bad faith of racism.

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