White Enigma: Opacity, Perspective, and the Theological Formation of White Subjectivity

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WHITE ENIGMA:
OPACITY, PERSPECTIVE, AND THE THEOLOGICAL FORMATION OF WHITE SUBJECTIVITY

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BY
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To Ronke, who taught me to see differently.
To Bill Kuhn, who taught me to believe in myself.
For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood.

—1 Corinthians 13:12 (RSV)

When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened and they recognized him; and he vanished out of their sight.

—Luke 24:30-31 (RSV)
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INTRODUCTION

I had not seriously read a non-white scholar until I attended The University of Chicago Divinity School for graduate studies, after years of collegiate and seminary training in theology, Bible, and Christian ministry at Evangelical institutions. Dwight N. Hopkins introduced me to James Cone, J. Deotis Roberts, Delores Williams, and other Black, Womanist, and liberation theologians—and my intellectual and theological trajectory was radically disrupted. I was particularly haunted by M. Shawn Copeland’s words: “We Christian theologians in the United States work in a house haunted by the ghosts of slavery.”¹ This troubled me, confronting me with the need to reckon with the way in which my racial lens affected my own cultural, theological, spiritual, and intellectual formation and stance in the world. I knew I had to move forward differently in how I thought, how I related to others, and how I saw the world.

The change I underwent in this season was only gradual; it was easier to know the direction in which I had to go, than to do so with the whole of my embodied existence. A couple years prior, in seminary, I married a Nigerian immigrant in the throngs of her medical school training, and we had begun to raise our first Black son up in the world. Around this time Trayvon Martin was murdered and the trial of George Zimmerman ensued. Frankly, I was happy when he was acquitted: I thought the verdict was just. I could not see the pain in my wife’s countenance; I could not see Trayvon as an innocent Black boy robbed of life by an unjust world; I could not see that he could very well have been my own son. Despite my intellectual conviction and desire

¹ M. Shawn Copeland, Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 2.
for change—even the intimate opportunity to see the world through another’s viewpoint—I still had the same old eyes. But through the toil of listening and learning, some deeper change began to take root. Not too long after, when the dashcam video of the murder of Laquan McDonald was released (we were living in Chicago at the time), I was already seeing the world differently and felt a change had occurred. The overwhelmingly strong Evangelical support of Donald J. Trump in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, though, shook me to the core of my whiteness—almost like I was startled by a mirror being held up to the unsightly parts of my upbringing with which I had yet to fully realize, the complicity of my theology in the problem of racism. In a moment of great crisis, I experienced a kind of conversion, a reckoning with my racial formation; and I gained of a new set of eyes to see and ears to hear others. Still, what was I to do with the way my racial formation continued to hold onto me and work itself out, moving me to inhabit the privilege and power the world afforded me—even if I desired elsewise? What if, at times, I did desire to enjoy my whiteness? Was it something that I could fully turn from, or something that stained me? Was I to jettison my entire cultural, intellectual, and theological upbringing?

I had to figure out what to do with the fact that my racial formation fundamentally shaped my overall perspective: how my eyes, ears, and all my senses of perception operated in the world and shaped higher processes of cognition and conception. I heard the testimony of others: that in my whiteness, I did not see them. W.E.B Du Bois is well known for writing that the white world shut him out “by a vast veil.”2 Ralph Ellison, in his classic Invisible Man, writes of his protagonist that he is invisible “simply because [white] people refuse to see” him. The character laments: “When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of

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their imagination – indeed, everything and anything except me.” This is for no reason other than “the construction of their inner eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality.” The inner eyes of whiteness: that is with what I had to reckon.

Let us call the exercising of these inner eyes “white sight,” the phenomenon this text will seek to define and describe. White sight, I argue, is an historically developed and socially inculcated symbolic intentional activity, one that depends on the self-concealing, learned ability to associate moral and ontological meaning with color, particularly as such meaning is framed within a deeper symbolism of evil. I will wrestle with such a phenomenon in order to put the white experience—and particularly the way white people see and construct the world, especially with the help of theological discourses—under radical critique. The experience of seeing, and the tension between physical sight and immaterial or “spiritual” sight, is a central theological matter for Christianity, understood through wrestling with notions like the beatific vision or the visio Dei (vision of God). Particularly, in the words of Bernard McGinn, “the problem of seeing God is central to Christian mysticism.” The mystical question of sight arises specifically from the tension in the biblical tradition of desiring to see—and at times apparently seeing—a God whom one cannot see. Anchoring myself in this theological problem, I ask what it would mean

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4 As I will explain, when I refer to “white” and “whiteness,” I approach it phenomenologically: I do not firstly mean biologically or phenotypically white, but how those with skin that is symbolized as “white” are engaged in an experience crafted in a broader symbolism as a response to opacity and the consequences thereof.


6 Cf. e.g., how God tells Moses (Exodus 33:20), “You cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live,” with Jacob’s claim, “I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved” (Genesis 32:30). Cf. Exod. 24:10; Num. 12:8; Isa. 6:5; Isa 45:15; Matt. 5:8; John 1:18; 1 Tim. 6:16; among other verses. For discussion, see McGinn, *The Harvest of Mysticism*, 456-457.
to take the central Christian assertion that we see through a mirror “enigmatically,” “darkly,” or, we might say, “opaquely” (δι’ ἐσόπτρου ἐν αἰνίγματι, 1 Corinthians 13:12) as the starting point for a theological philosophy of seeing that is concerned with *how the perception of white people specifically becomes a matter of racial seeing*. Here, we are taken by the demand to understand how it is the case that our perspective, as a *seeing in the face of darkness or the unknown*, has unfolded human sensual reality toward symbolic-cum-material commitments in response to blackness. Modern rationality, forged through a powerful monocular perspective apparatus, has been crafted to see nothing here, or to intentionally *see right through* the problem. A phenomenology of whiteness (that is, an examination of how white people approach and experience the lived world) will hold the key to critically examining this way that whiteness gives sight. The notion of *opacity* will be key, for me, in putting white sight under a critical lens to understand the formation of white subjectivity, the shaping of a racialized world, and, ultimately, the nature of and importance of *perspective*.

**Paul Ricoeur and Charles Long: Opacity and a Symbolism of Evil**

Let me center my approach more specifically. Early in my doctoral training, I discovered a conversation between Paul Ricoeur and Charles H. Long from which point I saw *the symbol and its opacity* as important in critically examining the problem of whiteness. For both Ricoeur and Long, the symbol (a notion I will soon discuss) is key to meaning-making, as it is at the basis of thought—indeed, “the symbol gives rise to thought.” For both, too, the symbol is essentially

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opaque, this opacity constituting the inexhaustibility of the symbol and its possibility for meaning-making. Moreover, Ricoeur and Long agree about the significance of opacity and the symbol in relation to the experience of evil. Yet, Long goes a different direction, discussing the symbolism of evil in terms of the significance of racial color. While Ricoeur would write in *The Symbolism of Evil* that opacity is that profundity and depth of the symbol which enriches genuine thought, Long in his *Significations* would explain race and the problem of colonialism in terms of the racialization of the symbol’s opacity within a symbolism of evil. Long’s approach, which picks up Ricoeur’s thought on evil yet thinks beyond him about race, is a starting point and catalyst for my own argument on whiteness.

**Long on Opacity and Race**

Long sought to explore black consciousness and religion in view of an “archaic modality.” With his “archeological” approach, Long utilizes the notion of *arche*, which embraces ideas such as the starting point or principle, the original, even the indigenous and primitive; it also carries ideas like rule and order. Long is interested in how the “beginning” and “order” of black religion emerges with the development of the trans-Atlantic slave economy that engenders

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8 Some of what follows closely reflects my earlier effort to explore this conversation and its importance: see Nathan D. Pederson, “The Symbol Gives Rise to Race” in *A Companion to Ricoeur’s The Symbolism of Evil*, ed. Scott Davidson (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books: 2020), 153-168. Long’s *Signification* is a collection and re-publishing of a number of his works under one title. The main points of interaction I will highlight come from chapters representing two published articles from 1967 and one from 1983. The 1967 article, only the same year the first English translation of *Symbolism* was published, is actually drawing on Paul Ricoeur, “The Hermeneutics of Symbols and Philosophical Reflection.” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 2, no. 2: 191-218. In this article, Ricoeur summarizes key pieces of his argument in *Symbolism*.

9 See J. Kameron Carter, “Anarchē; or, the Matter of Charles Long and Black Feminism.” *American Religion* 2, no. 2 (Spring 2021), 106 for helpful summary. An associate of Mircea Eliade at the University of Chicago, Long was at the forefront of the developing *Religionswissenschaft* which called into question how modernity’s discipline of history of religions views religion and its symbols, specifically how it deals with the religious other. See J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 201. For Long’s general approach, see especially Long, *Significations*, 3-9, 14-23.
modernity, and how African flesh and religion came to be seen and constituted in this process; more broadly, in fact, how notions of the “imagination of matter” were (re)constituted upon black flesh.¹⁰ A significant part of what is at stake here is how blackness of skin color was interpreted or understood—how it was symbolized. Long specifically connects Ricoeur’s thought on the symbol of defilement to race (or, more specifically, blackness). Long writes that “nonwhite color” is symbolized as, and

its significations have been acted upon with the modern Western world as signs of defilement and uncleanness. Paul Ricoeur's analysis of the originary form of the primary symbolism of evil would aptly apply to the historical-cultural formation of the symbolism of blackness in the history of the modern West. The significations of stain, pollution, and guilt accompany the archaic level of the modern Western consciousness in its confrontation with the 'meaninglessness' and neutrality of color.¹¹

Long quotes directly from Ricoeur's Symbolism where Ricoeur discusses the nature of defilement: how “impurity was never literally filthiness, dirtiness” and then finishes quoting Ricoeur about the “representation of defilement” dwelling “in the half-light of a quasi-physical infection that points towards a quasi-moral unworthiness.” Commenting on this passage, Long parenthetically notes that “we might add that black was never literally dirty or unclean.” Like defilement, comments Long, that “thing” of blackness “must be suppressed, but the very act of suppression introduces the thing suppressed into the symbolic universe that it stakes out.”¹²

Thus, while for Ricoeur opacity relates fundamentally to the symbol’s meaning and openness for interpretation, Long argues that through colonialism opacity comes to relate to a purely first-order negative value statement: over against the transparency of whiteness, black

¹⁰ See Carter, “Anarché,” 107. I will continue to describe this central dynamic, later in this chapter and in Ch. 4 with Long’s notion of the fetish.

¹¹ Long, Significations, 189.

¹² Long, Significations, 190. Long here is quoting from Ricoeur, The Symbolism of Evil, 35.
“opaqueness” is associated with “impurity” and “defilement.” Thus (after again quoting directly from Symbolism) Long writes that “blacks” and “the colored races” were caught up into this net of the imaginary and symbolic consciousness of the West, rendered mute through the words of military, economic, and intellectual power, assimilated as if by osmosis structures of this consciousness of oppression. ... But even in these symbolic structures there remained the inexhaustibility of the opaqueness of this symbol for those who constituted the ‘things’ upon which the significations of the West deployed its meanings. This doubleness of consciousness, this existence in half-lights and within the quasi fields of human infection, is the context for the communities of color, the opaque ones of the modern world. These twilight zones of half-light and quasi-physical infection were inhabited by the semirealities of the modern world.13

In this discussion of opacity and the symbolism of evil, Long goes beyond Ricoeur, and indeed provides a challenge to his thought. Long, one could say, attempts to think out how the fundamental indeterminacy at the heart of the symbol’s opacity can take on a life of its own in a pathologization that spins out economies of evil through modern logics of race and colonialism.

It is still true that for Long, opacity represents a kind of surplus of meaning that is productive: “These bodies of opacity, these loci of meaninglessness ... were paradoxically loci of a surplus of meaning. ... These opaque ones were centers from which gods were made.”14 But this is negative because, first, opacity (and the dark body) is a kind of obscurity or wholly otherness, a “Somewhat,” in opposition against which meaning is made in symbol and myth by the whiteness that encounters it. In this, Long is drawing on Gerardus van der Leeuw and his central understanding of religion as encounter with power.15 The intricacies of the symbol of blackness, as racially constructed, are such that blackness becomes the nontransparent semireality through which America and the West encounters itself, knows itself, and becomes

13 Long, Significations, 190. Emphasis mine
14 Long, Significations, 197.
15 Carter, Race, 215-218.
“another reality;” it is also the byproduct—the experiencing oneself as opaque—that is engendered in black existence as one encounters the dominant culture. The opaque, black symbol, on Long’s account, functions in this way as both the mysterious silence engendering the Western conversation and the self-stilling of one’s (black) voice from the quasi-moral weight of this arrangement.

Yet, in the midst of this encounter of black life with the dominant culture, there is, by virtue of the opaque symbol, a possibility for resistance and critique of Western logic and reason. Here, *arche* is also an-archic: amidst “the opacities of black existence and black religion, … [are] processes and practices of counter creative or improvisational way-making” when there is no way.16 Reflecting on van der Leeuw, Long writes of the “soul-stuff” upon which black religion draws in the face of slavery: “From this primordium of soul-stuff another order of modernity has grown from the complex ambiguity of the Atlantic world. It expresses itself in resistance, prayer, and the ability to survive. It opens the community to the appreciation of the inviolable dignity of other persons and provides for an alternative meaning of the human as a free person.”17 This overall dynamic is especially seen in the phenomenon of the cargo cult—that is, mystical politico-economic movements characterized by non-Europeans engaging in spiritual rites and ceremonies to try to take control of European goods and possessions—which Long highlights not to describe primitive religion, but to designate it as *arche*, as “paradigmatic basis for the ‘origin’ of a modern meaning of religion.”18 Opaque ways-of-being (communities and theologies) arise out of the hardness of life, giving voice to those who were in fact always


involved in the West’s body politic and memory, but only by marginalization: “The oppressed long for or imagine the meaning of their existence as human beings prior to the definitions imputed to them … through the hegemony of Western languages.” Long invites us to question the construction of contemporary thought and modern rationality, pushing back, for example, against Ricoeur’s notion of the West’s encounter-memory as a Greek-Jewish encounter that grows according to a near/far, center/periphery logic. With Long we begin to awaken to the discovery of the ways in which the near/far, center/periphery logic of Western thought has dealt with opacity according to a symbolism of evil. Long invites us to examine Western thought and its memory on a deeper level to discover other voices—not ones that are “far” or “peripheral,” but the “other” within, those truly near though silenced.

On a Symbolism of Evil

In view of Long, by exploring a symbolism of color within a symbolism of evil, I mean to show how whiteness was and is constructed by tying color to value and meaning in theological discourse through a network of meaning-making symbols and myths concerned with the role of evil in human subjectivity and community. Ricoeur specifically discusses defilement,

19 Long, Significations, 110.


21 Long, Significations, 99. I will draw on Long’s thoughts on opacity as racialized within a symbolism of evil but also think beyond Long. For one, I am thinking primarily about whiteness, not blackness; but I also have in mind a certain critique of Long by way of Carter, although I will not center this critique in the present work. Carter argues Long gets opacity wrong in trying to contradistinguish it from an iconic or incarnational framework when Long configures opacity as a kind of immanence of blackness to itself. Carter’s critique generally centers on how Long’s project “unwittingly” continues to understand blackness problematically in terms of its interlocking with whiteness, as Long’s opacity does not speak of genuine otherness but of the (Kantian) sublime “which triggers the reflexive capacities of the self in the depths of the self’s own opacity.” Carter, Race, 198-199. There should be a kind of otherness or uncapturable horizon to black subjectivity, Carter argues; and so the theme of divine transcendence is fundamentally important as a way to describe how blackness can be constructed other than as “ontological blackness.” In the end, there might be in Long, as Carter writes elsewhere, “a residual or faint obeisance to a discourse of the human.” Carter, “Anarchê,” 108.
guilt, and sin as the primary symbols of evil; Long especially focuses on the symbol of defilement. This direction is not without merit. As early as the second-century Christian *Epistle of Barnabas*, the devil was referred to as “the black one,” and soon in early Christian literature “[t]he devil or demons begin to appear as black figures, sometimes with specific ethnic identities that were seen to involve black skin.” As the modern age unfolds, this symbolism blossoms:

> Racist accounts, widely accepted in the time of European colonization …, present the African continent as the metaphor *par excellence* for physical ugliness and moral decay. According to these accounts, ugliness and decay were particularly visible in the black body, which was nothing more than a mass of organs lacking form and self-awareness.

Not without reason, then, writing in the late 1960s, the sociologist Roger Bastide argued that Christianity “has been accompanied by a symbolism of color” that has pervaded society more broadly beyond its religious roots, a symbolism which sees notions of sin through ideas of stain, pollution, and contagion in terms of whiteness and blackness, a symbolism that would consequentially shape and enforce a racial color line. Frantz Fanon, whose thought we will explore in the next chapter, writes of what he hears under the white gaze: “‘Dirty nigger!’ or simply ‘Look! A Negro!’” Darkness of his skin is intertwined with the notion of dirtiness; a symbolism of evil riddles his racial being-in-the-world. Today this shows up in our everyday life when we symbolize what is evil or dangerous as dark, black, or unclean. The mundane nature of such symbolism perniciously hides the logic that perpetuates the power of racialization.

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Ricoeur is centrally valuable for Long in not only putting the symbolism of evil at the center of the human experience, but specifically in how he discusses the symbol of defilement. What is at stake is a *double intentionality* engendered in the symbol’s opacity, where, for example, a *material stain* indicates not a physical spot but an *inmaterial defilement*. The idea here is of “a quasi-material something which contaminates from the outside, which harms by means of invisible properties.” Ricoeur even connects this to “contamination by … racism … [wherein] we have not completely abandoned the symbolism of the pure and impure.” Such symbolism of stain or spot is so fundamental and powerful because *from the beginning* it is “already symbolic of something else. … Stain has never literally signified a spot, impurity has never literally signified filth; it is located in the chiaroscuro of a quasi-physical infection and a quasi-moral unworthiness.”  

26 This is the matrix in which Long himself wants to think out the dynamics of racialization: racial logics tap into how *from the beginning* darkness is symbolized.

While Long frames his broader project and symbology with reference to Ricoeur, another interlocuter is Mircea Eliade, from whom Long finds a partner in critiquing Western logic. Long argues that Ricoeur too quickly makes rationality “the tool that will unlock the enigma of the symbol;” Eliade’s procedure, however, “is more radical” in that he allows for other ways besides “Greek philosophical thought” to engage thought from the symbol. So Long appreciates in Eliade the realization that the thought the symbols invite “must not be restricted to the categories of the West. It may be that the symbols by their very nature invite different and varying types of thought.” 27 What is at stake here is how Long takes up the puzzle of the symbol’s double

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intentionality and points to the way in which, drawing on Eliade’s notion of the “imagination of matter,” the production of race is the concurrence of ideational construct and material effect, the “materializing” of moralized blackness upon black flesh. Long explains that for Eliade the intuition of the (religious) mind is always “correlated with an a priori … universality of matter itself in all of its several forms, rather than simply the inner working of the human consciousness.”28 As Long explores the productive tension between matter and idea, nature and technology, he particularly highlights Eliade’s work on connecting alchemy to archaic understandings of metallurgy in The Forge and the Crucible: the notion of working within the womb of Mother Earth to bring forth the precious ores, out from embryonic stage to maturity.29 Eliade speaks of how the alchemist works to pass matter through various stages of different colors, where the color black represents a descent into matter and is symbolized as death, the alchemist (as Eliade explains) working to bring matter into this death and suffering so that it can be reborn as a new type of matter.30 Carter highlights how Eliade speaks of the alchemist himself as partaking in a mysterious “transmutation” through “a descent into the death and resurrection of matter, into and out of the Earth-Mother (terra mater).”31 This symbolization of blackened matter as descent and death is significant, showing something of the premodern roots of racial symbolism that we will continue to explore. But more generally, Long draws on Eliade on this matter of alchemy to make a broader point of the “imagination of matter” of even historical and

28 Long, Ellipsis, 119.

29 Long, Ellipsis 121-125.


31 Carter “Anarchē,” 119
technological humanity. So the symbol transcends the sign and “mere imitation” as it is “granted the power to invoke and create the world, right before our eyes.” What is at stake in light of Long is how this productive opacity of the symbol, promising to connect transcendent idea and material reality in human meaning-making, is used—pathologized and transmogrified—toward racialization.

**Ricoeur and the Question of Evil**

My task is to unfold this dynamic of thinking out race within a *symbolics of evil* that symbolizes color through the racialization of opacity. My interest in the question of evil will not be to explore in-depth the philosophy of evil or doctrine of sin as it relates to whiteness. Considering evil on the level of its symbolism will not itself even be a matter of ethics, even though it will prepare us for such a conversation. But as, in a sense, pre-rational, it will focus on the dynamics of evil that give rise to the more constructive thought that shapes how we understand evil as it pertains to racialization—*specifically how evil intersects with a quasi-materiality*. Yet, I argue that this overall approach actually brings us to the heart of the matter of evil, which is shrouded in the enigmatic. We can explore how racialization and racism hides itself and garners power by working at this center or blind spot of rationality and subjectivity. Indeed, I will be concerned with how whiteness shows up through hiding itself as it plays upon logics of finitude and infinitude, visibility and invisibility. In Ricoeur’s words, this has to do with

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34 For Ricoeur, there are a number of levels to think about evil, from myth with notions of the sacred and profane, to the stage of wisdom, to speculation, to the theodicy. See Paul Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, trans. David Pellauer and ed. Mark I. Wallace (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 251-256.

35 Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, 249-251.
discovering the primary symbols of evil fundamentally in the “language of avowal.” This phenomenon, Ricoeur writes, “has appeared more and more as one of the most astonishing enigmas of self-consciousness.”36

What is ultimately at stake in the language of avowal is how evil is experienced both negatively and positively. There is a certain radicality of evil that has to do with how our will is encumbered by a fundamental incapability.37 Evil is fundamentally experienced in the “riddle of the slave-will, that is, of a free will that is bound and always finds itself already bound.” In this way, the experience of evil and the experience of freedom are initially thought closely together. Even if evil comes from somewhere else, Ricoeur says, it is accessible as it affects us: “evil manifests itself in man’s humanity.” Avowal, then, means we take responsibility for evil in some way.38 But this means that, as Ricoeur writes, “avowal of fault is, at the same time, the discovery of freedom.” In this regard, the language of avowal speaks of and calls for an ethical vision of the world in which we take responsibility for evil to gain consciousness of our freedom.39 This is the great ethical realization that evil is not a positive substance but a negative, engendered in my action. We find ourselves a free agent as we confess: “I am the author of evil.”40

But this confession unfolds from itself its own enigma as the ethical vision of the world which connects evil to freedom is challenged by a tragic aspect of evil: “reflection discovers, as

36 Paul Ricoeur, Fallible Man, trans. Charles A. Kelbley (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986), xliii. While here I am describing key aspects of Ricoeur’s philosophy of evil, in the next chapter I will describe how Ricoeur gets to this symbolism and therein what precisely it has to do with opacity.


38 Ricoeur, Fallible Man, xlv-xlvii.

39 Ricoeur, Fallible Man, xlvii-xlviii.

40 Ricoeur, The Conflict of Interpretation, 431-433.
a fact, that freedom has already chosen in an evil way. This evil is already there. It is in this sense that it is radical, that is anterior (in a nontemporal way) to every evil intention, to every evil action.” Herein is the nonpower of power, the nonfreedom of freedom. So evil embraces notions as different as blame and lament, the one in which we are culprit and the other in which we are victim. Even in guilt there can be a sense of passivity: “the feeling of having been seduced by overwhelming powers and, consequently, our feeling of belonging to a history of evil, which is always already there for everyone.” Ricoeur explains that even the myth of the fall, which seems to sharpen the connection between freedom and evil, recognizes that “evil comes into the world insofar as man posits it, but man posits it only because he yields to the siege of the Adversary.” Overall, the ethical vision of the world is limited: we are in some way both guilty and victim, entrapped in a situation of “the conflict of the good and the right” and unable to fully reconcile moral conflicts.

Ricoeur notes, though, that this intervening of the tragic upon the ethical vision of the world has a key importance: “this failure of reflection … succeeds in giving a proper character to a philosophy of limit and in distinguishing it from a philosophy of system, such as that of Hegel.” This danger of false syntheses between finite/particular and infinite/universal will be exactly my concern regarding the overall symbolization of race. Ricoeur discusses, indeed, the evilest evil as an improper synthesis of this dialectic: “The true evil, the evil of evil, shows itself

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41 Ricoeur, The Conflict of Interpretation, 435-436.
42 Ricoeur, Figuring the Sacred, 250.
43 Ricoeur, Fallible Man, xlix.
44 Wall, “The Economy of the Gift,” 248-249. I will return in my conclusion to draw out the importance of this notion of tragic evil for our study.
45 Ricoeur, The Conflict of Interpretation, 435.
in false syntheses, i.e., in the contemporary falsifications of the great undertakings of totalization of cultural experience.”

This making “the tragic and the logical coincide at every stage” overlooks the “scandal of suffering” as a cunning rationality disengages the question of human flourishing from the question of history: “The more the system flourishes, the more its victims are marginalized.”

With a symbolism of evil, then, I will not only be concerned with the ways that white sight deals with the quasi-materiality of defilement, but how in its symbolizing function it (falsely) synthesizes material realities in view of the infinite.

Ricoeur’s answer to evil, especially his turn to superabundant logic of hope and love, will be important in my concluding chapter. This is part of Ricoeur’s turn from theory to practice in view of the failure of speculation on evil. Part of this work is lament and mourning: “The first way of making the intellectual aporia productive is to integrate the ignorance it gives rise to, the *docta ignorantia*, into the work of mourning.” This practical work of mourning and working against evil is normed by the superabundant logic of “in spite of.”

The notion of hope is key here; but not a cheap hope. Still, there is the possibility that the “irrationality of hope” might be a way to engage a different kind of rationality that answers the problem of evil.

I will argue that although we will have to hold back on a hopefulness that is too-quick, the logic of superabundance promises to re-engage and re-use the symbol and its opacity for the good. If opacity is at the center of human meaning-making and also the problem of racialization, this is

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47 Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, 256-57.

48 Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, 258-260. Ricoeur does not cite Nicholas of Cusa on this point of *docta ignorantia* or “learned ignorance,” but I certainly wonder if he has him in mind. As we will see, this notion is central to Cusa.

49 Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, 207.
an opportunity to see how opacity can remain a coherent concept even as it gives both productive thought and great evil. In this way, opacity for me becomes the key to understanding the complex dynamics of whiteness from a phenomenological, hermeneutical, and theological angle.

**Toward a Hermeneutical Phenomenology of Whiteness**

I bring these insights from this Ricoeurian-Longian conversation into a larger critical philosophy of race focused on opacity as I enter the contemporary conversation of a phenomenology of whiteness. Phenomenology, in the words of Martin Heidegger, “does not characterize the “what” of the objects of philosophical research in terms of their content but the “how” of that research.” As I will explain in the next chapter, there is potential in focusing on this phenomenological “how” in order to unearth the hidden dimensions not readily apparent in the phenomenon of white sight. Early on, a phenomenological approach was engaged this way with the works of Frantz Fanon and Jean-Paul Sartre. In a contemporary revival, Linda Martín Alcoff (among others) proposes that a phenomenological approach is able to weave through the modern paradox of race, between a *nominalism* (race as a purely flexible social construct) and an *essentialism* (race as a fixed biological identity) in order to avoid reifying whiteness while still speaking of the real effects of racialization in lived experience, thus taking seriously the

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51 See Robert Bernasconi, “Critical Philosophy of Race” in *The Routledge Companion to Phenomenology*, ed Sebastian Luft and Soren Overgaard (New York: Routledge, 2012). Such a phenomenological approach is distinct from but related to other approaches to race and whiteness that seek to expose more hidden racial logics. There is some conceptual overlap, for example, with critical race theory or critical whiteness studies, but they are different disciplines and separate trajectories are engaged. But see Kimberlé Crenshaw, *et al.*, *Seeing Race Again: Countering Colorblindness Across the Disciplines* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2019), which presents a critique of “colorblindness” as a post-racial theory. Colorblindness conceives of person according to an already racialized perspective, which transcends color on the (hidden) nexus point of an absolute but negative freedom.
materiality of race without re-enacting the ideological logic of race.52 Through a critical “bracketing,” this approach attempts to discern how whiteness manifests as experience; as such, phenomenology “can render our tacit knowledge about racial embodiment explicit.”53

I argue that the concept of opacity can hold together a growing tension in this contemporary conversation: on the one hand, an insistence that whiteness is subjective and habitual; and on the other, the insistence that whiteness is also an active, objective world horizon or ontologizing force that shapes the subject. If currently in phenomenological thought on whiteness, whiteness has been explained primarily as a subjective habit or orientation in the world, I argue that for a broader and more accurate account of the construction and maintenance of whiteness we must explore the ways in which it hides itself as benign through utilizing a symbolism of evil within theological discourse. In this way, whiteness (now more objective, taking on a life of its own) can come to function more concretely in the world as an evil force as it is embodied through a network of moral and symbolic discourses.

And yet, to “see” how race functions vis-à-vis opacity, I need to take a hermeneutical turn. I explain how the notion of opacity shapes a hermeneutical phenomenology of whiteness. As hermeneutical, I move away from a mere eidetic phenomenology. Contemporary phenomenological thought on whiteness has sought, similarly, to move forward a critique of eidetic phenomenology in light of lived racial experience. In large part, this movement develops out of reflection on Frantz Fanon’s claim in Black Skin, White Masks of the need to move


53 Alcoff continues: “Despite the fact that, at least until recently, it appears generally to be the case that most whites did not consciously ‘feel white’, there were gestural and perceptual practices correlated to racial identity and a tacit but substantive racialized subjectivity.” Alcoff, “Towards a phenomenology,” 19.
phenomenologically from a mere “corporeal” or “bodily” schema to a “historico-racial” or “racial epidermal” schema. My own hermeneutical trajectory examines the lived experience of white racial being vis-a-vis a history of interpretation within various texts and symbols that develops a color symbolism through a symbolism of evil upon theological discourse pertaining to mystical darkness. Exploring how this happens is the very substance of my argument.

Before getting to this, allow me to make a final methodological point on my use of Ricoeur as a key interlocutor alongside Long. I admit, with Davidson, that, especially in light of the prolific writings of Ricoeur, “it is astonishing that Ricoeur only engages the issue of race in a couple of brief and apparently reluctant remarks about the politics of multiculturalism.” Still, there is a growing body of literature on Ricoeur and race which, despite the lacuna in Ricoeur’s work, takes up his intellectual framework to think about race in key directions, especially drawing on Ricoeur’s central and productive notion of the “capable human.” My use of Ricoeur in this way is buttressed by a broader contemporary effort in the critical philosophy of race toward “creolization” of traditional thinkers and topics in view of philosophizing about race.

54 Scott Davidson, “The Long Road to Recognition: Paul Ricoeur and Bell Hooks on the Development of Self-Esteem” in From Ricoeur to Action: The Socio-Political Significance of Ricoeur’s Thinking, eds. Todd S. Mei and David Lewin (Continuum, 2012), 98.

55 The following texts comprise this growing conversation on Ricoeur and race: Davidson, “The Long Road to Recognition;” Maria del Guadalupe Davidson and Scott Davidson, “Ricoeur and African and African American Studies: Convergences with Black Feminist Thought” in Ricoeur Across the Disciplines, ed. Scott Davidson (Bloomsbury: 2010); L. Sebastian Purcell, “The Course of Racial Recognition: A Ricoeurian Approach to Critical Race Theory” in From Ricoeur to Action: The Socio-Political Significance of Ricoeur’s Thinking, eds. Todd S. Mei and David Lewin. Continuum, 2012; Nathan D. Pederson, “The Symbol Gives Rise to Race.” Davidson and Davidson’s effort is particularly helpful in establishing the broad strokes of the dialogue, explaining how Ricoeur’s work, despite not treating race explicitly, “addresses themes that are vitally important in race scholarship, such as voice, agency, personal identity, narrative, and justice.” Such themes are part of the larger nesting of Ricoeur’s thought in his overall central project of “the capable human being” who “exercises the power to carry out projects in the face of the involuntary conditions of their realization.” Davidson and Davidson, “Ricoeur and African and African American Studies,” 166. My own article, which is a preview of my argument in this current text, applies Ricoeurian thought on the symbol to the question of race.
Ricoeur is important for me in several ways: he will guide us in systematically setting out crucial points for the nature of opacity in its various dimensions in the hermeneutical tradition; he will focus intently on opacity and a symbolism of evil at the very transition from phenomenology to hermeneutics; he will open up our exploration toward a number of key discourses. But Ricoeur does not get us to Long’s point about connecting a symbolism of evil to logics of racialization. With the help of thinkers like Fanon, Long’s direct involvement with Ricoeur presents a unique opportunity to carry forth this creolizing work in philosophy of race.

In the end, I show that reflection on opacity interrupts a “pure” phenomenology of race and directs reflection on race towards a theological examination of the symbolism of evil. Darkness in general is already a problem in phenomenology, but not immediately racial. Yet phenomenology inherits an intellectual trajectory that constructs a symbol of perspective which configures darkness within a symbol of color enmeshed in a symbolism of evil. To see this, we must extend the phenomenological discussion on whiteness to a phenomenological-hermeneutical discussion, which, through this hermeneutical route, also becomes a theological discussion (which Ricoeurian and Longian thought prepares us for). Here we are called to examine the development of perspective within theological texts and symbols that are interested in the notion of mystical darkness as a mode of being or subjectivity normed by the tension between the finite and the infinite as one wrestles with “darkness.” These important connections between theology, phenomenology, and hermeneutics lead to an understanding of whiteness as crafted in view of mystical darkness. This, as I will explain, leads us finally to the question of a

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Thinking with Ricoeur, we will not only be interested in the pathology of the symbol’s opacity, but also whether such opacity still offers any ethical teleological thrust toward a therapeutics which can decontaminate the symbol of race.

**Theological Opacity: From Mystical Darkness to Modern Rationality**

The lived experience of white racial seeing was constructed through a certain history of interpretation within texts and symbols of mystical theology. Specifically, I argue that the processes of racialization at stake in symbolizing color within a symbolism of evil are paths laid through Christian discourse on *mystical darkness* as it wrestles with the question of evil amidst the tension of finitude and the infinite. The notion of *opacity* continues to help me here, becoming a way to hold together the different and sometimes conflicting ways in which “darkness” is configured in this tangled process, both as positive and as negative. I argue, specifically, that the connection between mystical darkness and modern racialization is *the development of modern perspective as a product of this symbolism*.

The two main figures of my study, Gregory of Nyssa (335-394) and Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464), bring us to the heart of this question of seeing into divine darkness, and especially Cusa focuses this matter directly on modern perspective. 58 In my approach to mystical

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57 As I will show, Ricoeur gets me to this point. But this is also reflective of a growing contemporary conversation on race and psychoanalysis, especially in dialogue with Lacan. I will explore this in Ch. 4.

58 With this focus on darkness in mysticism, there will always be alongside it the question of light, especially since they are often interlocked in an overall light-dark aesthetics. See especially here Andrew Prevot, “Divine Opacity: Mystical Theology, Black Theology, and the Problem of Light-Dark Aesthetics.” *Spiritus* 16 (2016): 166-188. While I will occasionally explicitly discuss light throughout, it will always be *in the background*. I intentionally focus on darkness, which centers how materiality is treated, and less so (in light mysticism) notions of transcendence. I also must mention that this focus on mystical darkness with Nyssa and Cusa is to examine a certain strain of Christian mystical discourse on darkness that relates to Dionysius: Nyssa is a precursor to Dionysius, and Cusa draws heavily on Dionysius. I go a different direction than much contemporary interest in mysticism intersects with broader concepts such as contemporary negative thought, postmodern deconstruction, secularism, and nihilism, which often focuses on Dionysius. Although my project might bear some similarities and parallels, it is not in my purview to interact with this wide-ranging conversation. I primarily engage in a critical examination regarding race,
subjectivity here, as hermeneutical and phenomenological, I try to discern the anthropogenetical horizon in which we can unearth our own subjective archeology. I approach history as the shards from the past that we can piece together to understand ourselves and the story we are weaving. In taking such an approach, I must dismiss from the outset the accusation that mysticism or an “apophatic” spirituality is a “self-absorbed, solitary, narcissistic, and world-renouncing” mode of being—thinking paradigmatically of that Plotinian notion of the “flight of the alone to the Alone.” If this were true, mysticism would have little to do with broader social and historical patterns and formations. It is better, however, to think of such mystical “aloneness” as the claim to a radical availability and universal intimacy that gives existence to and awakens the unique identity of all things. Indeed, at its core, the tradition of Christian mystical darkness has sought a sense of “solitary” identity that seeks a broader, cosmic unity.

Engaging a phenomenology toward this direction of Christian mysticism and medieval thought has historical precedent (for example, in Heidegger and Husserl), but also contemporary promise in the work of Emmanuel Falque, among others. While recognizing key methodological challenges in such a conversation, Falque writes that both phenomenology and

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60 Corrigan, ““Solitary” Mysticism,” 33, 36-7.

61 Corrigan, ““Solitary” Mysticism,” 40.

62 On the point of Husserl and Heidegger, see Emmanuel Falque, God, the Flesh, and the Other: From Irenaeus to Duns Scotus, trans. William Christian Hackett (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2014), 12. On this more general point, see, esp. Falque God, the Flesh, and the Other, 6. Falque also draws on Olivier Boulnois, Jean-François Courtine, Rémi Brague and Emmanuel Martineua.
medieval philosophy are primarily concerned with the themes of God, the flesh, and the other.\textsuperscript{63} By seeing “the same things in a new way” through this intertextual dialogue, phenomenology itself “open[s] its horizon to \textit{kinds of experience} that it has itself not yet described or even suspected.”\textsuperscript{64} Falque writes of the need of deploying the “potentialities” of medieval philosophy that are “not yet actualized (\textit{actualitas}).” He writes: “Few fields are so replete with texts, gestures and attitudes than medieval philosophy, which phenomenology would associate with ways of being in the world,” indeed, such way of being that are “there to be rediscovered for our time.”\textsuperscript{65} Directly relevant to this present work, Jean-Luc Marion claims Cusan perspective has a certain phenomenological rigor that allows us “to take up the classic phenomenological aporias not so much of the vision of God, but of the other in general. And perhaps to indicate the conditions for their solution.”\textsuperscript{66} If I am correct that the symbolization of race takes root here through the pathologization of opacity as a symbol of color within a symbolism of evil, then we can in this view discover in these texts the sedimentation of our own understandings, to further interrogate this problem of genuinely seeing the (racial) other. Phenomenology has a certain fecundity in granting one to reconstruct from the shadows the inner life or intuitions of an experience, to bring an experience to life.\textsuperscript{67} Now (surely), we do not want whiteness to “live

\textsuperscript{63} Falque, \textit{God, the Flesh, and the Other}, 5, 8. On the point of the challenge of this conversation, Falque discusses how there can seem to be a kind of transgression of the phenomenological rule of bracketing or “methodological atheism.” Bracketing God in medieval philosophy is impossible “and exceeds the bounds of the immanence to consciousness assigned to every phenomenon in order for them to appear.” See Falque 4-5. Falque has his own explanation through this challenge, arguing that in many ways, proof is in the doing.

\textsuperscript{64} Falque, \textit{God, the Flesh, and the Other}, 6-7, 10-12.

\textsuperscript{65} Falque, \textit{God, the Flesh, and the Other}, 5.


\textsuperscript{67} Falque, \textit{God, the Flesh, and the Other}, 26.
again,” but want to become aware of its mode of life (that is, a claim regarding how to see the other, which it continually obscures), and to make an ethical decision from there.

What I offer to the theological conversation is a unique account regarding a theological construction of seeing that modernity inherits and is fundamentally shaped by—and which is key to how modernity constructs race. To trace in this way how theological discourse intersects with racialization is to think closely with J. Kameron Carter who, not unlike other scholars examining the intersection of theology and race, argues that theology “aided and abetted” the racialization of the modern self and traces how race develops from the effort to mark and banish otherness from Christian identity. But while Carter attempts to recover genuinely Black theological discourse, I approach the question of race from the side of explaining the symbolic and lived reality of whiteness. While my work could be thought alongside other ventures that focus on the intersection of race and theology, especially those that attempt to sketch the whiteness of theology itself (for example, James W. Perkinson’s White Theology), my argument is unique in showing the essential connections between theology, phenomenology, and hermeneutics in the construction of whiteness within a symbolism of evil. Such a focused account is yet to be given and could strengthen critical reflection on whiteness by providing broader philosophical and theological explanatory power. Indeed, a central claim of my work is that a theological exploration shows how modern rationality is fascinated with but hides the (eventually racialized)

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68 Carter, Race, 3.

69 Other Black and Womanist theologies take a similar approach as Carter; my work on whiteness and theology would be a compliment to these projects. I focus, as much as possible, specifically on white subjectivity (but, as I reflect on the testimony of these texts.)

70 Perkinson provides for an interesting interlocuter alongside the many others I take up, but does not approach the question in view of the symbolism of color and of evil. See James W. Perkinson, White Theology: Outing Supremacy in Modernity (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).
darkness upon which it crafts itself. This reveals the way in which modern reason is committed to racialization. Here, the facticity of the racialization of opacity questions more anteriorly the ways in which the phenomenological—and theological—project might already be caught up in the logics of racialization that poison otherwise potentially productive projects therein.

Because the theological phenomenology of whiteness I take up explores a visual problem—like a cataract—at the very heart of seeing itself, such an exploration must involve a hermeneutical-historical detour around the immediacy of sight, which explores the historical development of the symbol of perspective. The core chapters of my argument on the development of the notion of mystical darkness and its place in the development of modern reason (Chapters 2-4) represent such an hermeneutical-historical detour in order to understand how modern perspective develops as white sight. In these chapters, I will examine the development of modern perspective and its implication for racial logics as I compare and contrast the notion of seeing within the “darkness of God” as it shows up first within Nyssa’s concept of epektasis and then within Cusa’s visio Dei, especially noticing continuities and discontinuities in the treatment and use of opacity in these apophatic thinkers. This doctrinal locus gives me an opportunity to explore how, as Long argues, opacity itself was racialized through a symbolism of evil as embodied “darkness” interrupts and is captured by the desire to see God, world, and self clearly within perceptual “darkness.” An examination of Nyssa’s epektasis in Chapter Two will establish the ambiguous way in which darkness is treated at the beginning of this Christian trajectory, both in symbolizing darkness of skin as evil (setting into motion the symbolization of race toward historical manifestation) and as symbolizing darkness as hopeful symbol of how our finite bodies can be transformed toward the infinite. In Chapter Three, I will focus on how Cusa (especially in On the Vision of God), on the threshold of modernity, rethinks perspective—both
positively and negatively—and I will explain how perspective develops as a symbol that shapes whiteness. We will come to see, after our work with Cusa, how modern perspective, *obsessed with its own origin and universal extension*, comes to have so much power to form a colonial world. The modern shift in thinking opacity as *depth in terms of perspective* in this way opens up the transition from discourses on the symbolic-enigmatic to discourses on opaque racial identities; in and through this very transition opacity obtains as the darkness of the other that is rejected for the clarity of one’s perspective which manifests in the colonial project of whiteness. In Chapter Four, particularly in view of Kant’s thought, I will conclude that modern perspective is a symbol that “created” the Atlantic as *point of origin* of new humanity, fashioning upon the mirror/water/black flesh an edifice—or abyss—of a “free” and “rational” society. While still a part of the hermeneutical detour, this chapter moves out from the close analysis of perspective and toward the question of *desire* in modern perspective. It also explores the way in which modern thought is indebted to a mystical foundation.

Through this overall historical-hermeneutical detour, I will center the theological motif of the *icon*. Marion argues that Cusa’s text brings an iconic phenomenology to life, arguing that “every real icon puts into play an all-seeing gaze … [and so] Nicholas of Cusa here describes the very essence of every icon.” 71 Focusing on a phenomenology and theology of sight in terms of the icon will allow us both to examine Cusa’s thought and reach the contemporary conversation about gazes and otherness that will lead us coherently to the problem of the contemporary discourse of opaque *identity*. Through tracing notions such as the changing way in which the

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71 Marion, “Seeing, or Seeing Oneself Seen,” 315. Moreover, he adds here: “Nicholas of Cusa not only raises the notion of the icon to the level of its concept, but, by thus granting it a universal meaning, justifies in advance its approach by contemporary phenomenology.” 317
mirror functions in theological sight and the different ways theological vision relates to sensibility and materiality, I will specifically be interested in how an iconic framework transmogrifies into a fetishizing framework.

Exploring this, I consider issues of filiation and spatialization, specifically how filiation shapes a moral geography. In terms of filiation, this is for me the question of how the body is included by exclusion in a subjective regime of (transcendent) seeing (to infinity), and how this migrates from mysticism to modern racial logics. This process, this reaching toward the immaterial and infinite, affects the spatiality of the world. In the end I will explore this notion through thirdspatiality as developed by Ed Soja in light of the work of Henry Lefebvre. Lefebvre stressed the spatiality of life, often missed in emphasizing social or historical dimensions of life. Soja extends this project with the notion of thirdspace: “There are no aspatial social processes. Even in the realm of pure abstraction, ideology, and representation, there is a pervasive and pertinent, if often hidden, spatial dimension.” But there is the need to distinguish various spaces: 1) perceived space or spatial practice (Firstspace); 2) conceived space or

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72 As I discuss both the process of fetishization but more so the entire process of the pathologization of opacity, I will focus on how the body is involved in the modern perspective apparatus and at times use the language of it being included through exclusion. This language I take especially from Giorgio Agamben, Homo Sacer IV, 2 The Use of Bodies, trans. Adam Kotsko, in The Omnibus Homo Sacer (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017). Without ascribing to or taking upon my own thought his framework of homo sacer, I do think he articulates well a certain process of archaeology. Key is Agamben’s idea of an archeology of exception: “The strategy [of the exception] is always the same: something is divided, excluded, and pushed to the bottom, and precisely through this exclusion, it is includes as arche and foundation.” In other words: “the arché is constituted by dividing the factual experience and pushing down to the origin—that is, excluding—one half of it in order then to rearticulate it to the other by including it as foundation.” Agamben’s deconstructive project to show this is also a constructive project of the “letting be” of potentiality. Particularly important is the idea of potential destituent which “exhibits the nullity of the bond that pretended to hold” bipolarities and lets be for itself “what has been divided from itself and captured in the exception—life, anomic, anarchic potential.”


74 Soja, Thirdspace, 46.
representations of space (Secondspace); and 3) spaces of representation (Thirdspace). This schematic will help me think about how the icon as a figure of representation focused on opacity comes to shape concrete materiality through spatialization. Thirdspatiality, indeed, will be a way to theorize the kind of space at stake in what the icon (and mystical darkness) gives. We can imagine here the thirdspatiality of the icon released from its fetishization by returning to the radical alterity at stake in the project of mystical darkness.

Before commencing my hermeneutical exploration, in Chapter One I want to give an initial, broad account of white sight and how it seeks to hide itself by escaping detection. I ask how the experience of white sight shaped the notion and use of opacity, including its metaphysical or ontological status and function, and its historical status in the theological desire to see God, world, and self clearly as Christian mystical discourse wrestles with the relation between finitude and the question of evil. I hope to bring clarity to the several contexts at play here—theological, phenomenological, and hermeneutical—as I seek to develop a heuristic framework for understanding opacity that will guide the ensuing exploration through Nyssen and Cusan thought. I will explore how a contemporary phenomenology of whiteness moves toward a hermeneutical phenomenology of whiteness. I will also explore some preliminary thoughts about connecting mystical subjectivity to the construction of perspective. This chapter, in a sense, centers opacity and perspective in a way that opens up the need for and direction of the “long route” of a hermeneutical critique of white sight.

After this long route of my hermeneutical-historical detour (Chapters 2-4), I will conclude by explaining the ways in which it is accurate to speak of a certain retrieval of

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75 Soja, Thirdspace, 66-67.
theological sight—even in view of its pathologization—as I hope to point toward an ethical way forward for white people. Such a new way of seeing and constructing the world would have to re-orient perspective. This process first will involve a kind of psychoanalysis, trying to forge proper comportment to the opaque by, so to speak, removing the opacified cataract from the eye. And I will offer a certain theological tool of a theological reading of scripture to properly re-engage mystical subjectivity and productive symbolic opacity. Such a healing would engender a new kind of spatiality that can engender new ways of seeing for white people. Inhabiting a new mode of spatiality (“zones of opacity”) can enable white people to embrace a “mysticism” for today that is focused on the theological problem of sight and race. But a certain tragedy is at stake here, as an ethical re-symbolization only occurs after exiting from its theological symbolism of perspective, color, and evil that define its very constitution. Embracing a kind of tragic-critical thought then opens up the expectation for the gift of mutual recognition.
CHAPTER ONE

OPACITY, MYSTICISM, AND THE QUESTION OF EVIL

If the linear perspective experiment of Filippo Brunelleschi in fifteenth century Florence provided the *origin point* of modern vision (as I will argue), around the same time Nicholas of Cusa invites a group of monks in Tegernsee, Germany to discover the hidden foundation of this modern vision: sending to them, along with his *De visione Dei*, an image of an all-seeing face, he invites them into a theological sight which grasps at perspicuity from within the cloud of mystical darkness. Cusa asks the monks to semi-circularly walk around the image and testify to each other to the simultaneous moving and fixing of divine vision; out of such a mystical experience they would grasp both the perspectival nature of their vision—a radically new way to see!—and also the transcending of their particular vision through a leaping toward an absolute divine sight. Characteristic of modern vision more broadly, this *synthetic grasping* (upon the opaque mystical center) of the particularity of perspective into a whole, continuous perspective reveals how the racialization of vision through modern perspective is built upon a symbolic dealing with darkness.

As we explore how it matters for us that we see “in a mirror darkly,” I argue that we are set on a path to discover the theological construction of white sight which centers us on the notion of opacity. White sight is the racialization of vision that combines color and value on the basis of a modern process of perceptual understanding, forged within the apparatus of modern perspective upon the logic of mystical darkness and its symbolism of evil. The notion of opacity
in the history of thought and human experience first becomes a way to symbolically connect darkness-as-depth to meaning-making, which prepares the way for giving value and meaning to the darkness of color. The result is that “depth-perception” is made a tool of human control capable of being utilized by other modern configurations like colonialism, specifically as white sight connects depth to race by projecting depth and a new understanding of infinity upon the black body to control the “darkness” experienced by the infinite expansion of space.

I argue that the processes of racialization at stake in such symbolizations of modern sight are paths constructed through various texts and symbols of mystical theology that develop a color symbolism through a symbolism of evil; particularly I focus on how mystical darkness inherited from Gregory of Nyssa in early Christianity is handled and passed on to modernity in the medieval thought of Cusanus. The Christian theological notion of mystical darkness, being a key place of wrestling with the question of evil and the good amidst the tension of finitude and infinitude, is engaged by modern thought through marking and banishing its notion of darkness. But this mystical darkness also functions to disrupt and deny possessive knowledge and cognitive dominion, subverting the modern project—even as this resistance seems only to add fuel to the modern drive for clarity of vision and absolute perspective. Thus, the notion of opacity—folded into this doctrinal center so as to be unfolded toward symbolizing race—for me becomes a way to hold together the different and sometimes conflicting ways in which “darkness” is configured in this tangled process. Untangling the notion of opacity at this intersection, then, allows us to see with fresh eyes the ways of being that construct our own sedimented subjectivity and understanding.

I will explain how the experience of white sight shaped the notion and use of opacity in the theological desire to see God, world, and self clearly. The symbolic meaning that constitutes
whiteness in this way bonds itself with larger social structures and actions and thus gains a kind of agency and intentionality. What is most significant in my argument is how whiteness seizes upon opaqueness in such a way as to paradoxically utilize logics of transparency to hide how it uses a symbolics of color to build a racialized world through perspective. Opacity comes to be the topos whereupon the “cultural production of evil” perpetuated by and giving life to the western colonial institutions and practices developed out of white sight obscures and conceals its own intentionality and, thus, the investment of whiteness in a broader symbolics of evil.¹ In view of this, while it is true that a phenomenological examination of whiteness promises to “bracket” whiteness so as to “see” its mode of experience that often goes unthought, we can only interrogate the phenomenon of white sight with a critical hermeneutics. By this I mean an ideology critique and psychoanalysis that regards the hermeneutical center as a place that not only is productive of meaning making but also one that provides for the covering-up of such meaning through pathologization and the power of domination.² The structural ways in which the logic of opacity is put to use in white sight ultimately evade phenomenological analysis because they anteriorly shape modern perception and sight. A critical hermeneutics recognizes the ambiguity of opacity and can interrogate how the fuel of the meaningfulness of the symbol is also the fuel for its deep pathologization, particularly as centered around the problem of evil. This is why, in fact, an examination of white sight must involve a hermeneutical-historical detour around the immediacy of sight. Critically thinking about whiteness under the notion of opacity is

¹ This notion of the “cultural production of evil,” which will explored later in my argument, comes from Emilie M. Townes, Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

² Paul Ricoeur, From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II, trans. Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 148-150. That such an ideology critique is key for Ricoeur is part of the reason his thought can endure the kind of pushback Long brings to his project on this issue of race.
not simply to say that whiteness perpetuates itself by hiding itself (a rather ubiquitous claim), but that an examination of opacity helps us understand how mystical darkness connects to racial darkness through a symbolism of evil and exposes the labyrinthine process of modern racialization with the hope of pointing out the specific path forward.

In this first chapter, which functions to center the matter of white sight, I explain how to shape a contemporary theological phenomenology of whiteness around opacity and how this moves us toward the question of mystical subjectivity and perspective. I will first show that the contemporary phenomenological conversation on whiteness opens up toward a hermeneutical phenomenology, even one that focuses on opacity. Second, I explain how this move toward a robust hermeneutical phenomenology of whiteness focused on opacity decisively comes to focus on the question of evil and its symbolism, and thus meets up with the thought of Long. Here I dig deeply into the Ricoeurian claim of opacity and the symbolism of evil. These first and second points establish the importance of opacity for a contemporary phenomenology of whiteness. Third, I set out touchpoints for how logics of race are rooted in how Christian mystical discourse on darkness navigates questions of images, subjectivity, and identity. Tracing how darkness is navigated in this theological discourse opens the way, fourth, for how modern perspective develops upon the locus of mystical darkness as a transcendental claim to sight forged upon logics of negating finitude. This leads me to the concern of my broader study: a theologically-conscious hermeneutical phenomenology of whiteness is one that fundamentally interrogates perspective as shaped by a color symbolism forged within mystical discourse, which represents the “long route” necessary to understand how white racial formation and subjectivity shapes white sight in the world as it brings from symbol to rational thought its reflections on evil.
Phenomenology of Whiteness: toward a Hermeneutics

Phenomenology seeks to get to the “thing itself” through its critical focus on lived experience, making visible what might not otherwise be in a given phenomenon. This critical function is so radical that phenomenology itself yields to the power of this clearing away. Such has been the case in phenomenological consideration of whiteness with the transition from a more “classical” or eidetic phenomenology to a hermeneutical phenomenology which can pay better attention to the dynamics of racialization. In large part, this develops out of reflection on Frantz Fanon’s claim in Black Skin, White Masks of the need to move phenomenological reflection from a mere “corporeal” or “bodily” schema to a “historico-racial” or “racial epidermal” schema. The conversation today seeks to move forward his critique. I argue that the trajectory of contemporary reflection focuses on the matter of opacity, and even a symbolism of evil. This conversation shows how we can hold together, through the lens of opacity, a growing tension in the contemporary conversation on race: on the one hand, an insistence that whiteness is subjective and habitual; and on the other, the insistence that whiteness is an active, objective world horizon or ontologizing force that shapes the subject.

Initial Points on Classical Phenomenology and Color

My phenomenological approach by way of the matter of perspective is not without warrant. As I will show, modern perspective from its origin was concerned with how things appear, how we see and experience the world—so much so that Karsten Harries writes: “the theory of perspective is phenomenology.”3 More specifically, Marion and Falque both argue that in De visione Dei Cusa anticipates phenomenology in how he describes the experience of the all-

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Indeed, Cusa’s experiment of understanding sight through the varying of perspectives around a central object resonates with a key passage of Husserl’s *Ideas* as he discusses “the real nature of perception and its transcendent object” (§41). Husserl is arguing that perception is not of the “physical thing” which is “radically transcendent;” phenomenology is concerned with “a deeper insight into the relation of the transcendent to the Consciousness that knows it, and to see how this mutual connexion, which has its own riddles, is to be understood.”

Here, intuition and that which is intuited, perception and that which is perceived “though essentially related to each other, are in principle and of necessity *not really (reell) and essentially one and united.*” To illustrate, Husserl describes perceiving a table as one walks around it:

Keeping this table steadily in view as I go round it, changing my position in space all the time, I have continually the consciousness of the bodily presence out there of this one and self-same table, which in itself remains unchanged throughout. But the perception of the table is one that changes continuously, it is a continuum of changing perceptions. … The perceived thing in general, and all its parts, aspects, and phases, whether the quality be primary or secondary, are necessarily transcendent to the perception, and on the same grounds everywhere.

Husserl specifically discusses the matter of the color of the table: just as with every sensory quality, the color of the thing seen “is not in principle a real phase of the consciousness of colour; it appears, but even while it is appearing the appearance can and *must* be continually

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6 Husserl, *Ideas*, §41 p. 76.

changing, as experience shows. The same colour appears ‘in’ continuously varying patterns of 

*perspective colour-variations.*”\(^8\) Husserl sums up the key takeaway:

> An empirical consciousness of a self-same thing that looks ‘all-round’ its object, and in so doing is continually confirming the unity of its own nature, essentially and necessarily possesses a manifold system of continuous patterns of appearances and perspective variations, in and through which all objective phases of the bodily self-given which appear in perception manifest themselves perspective in definite continua. Every determinate feature has its own system of perspective variations; and for each of these features, as for the thing as a whole, the following holds good, namely, that it remains one and the same for the consciousness that in grasping it unites recollection and fresh perception synthetically together, despite interruption in the continuity of the course of actual perception.\(^9\)

The perception of a thing includes “the continuously ordered flow of perceptual patterns as they pass off the one into the other,” or what Husserl refers to as “perspective variations” of various sensory data that reflect the “definite descriptive nature” we perceive; the perspective variations of the sense data derived from the things descriptive nature is correlated with the unity of that self-identical thing we intend in our consciousness.

The key point for us is that there is a split or distance between the “perspective variation” and the “perspected variable.” Through the process of “apprehension” we perceive things as they exhibit themselves in their unified appearing, a synthetic process of perception in which our consciousness of a thing is grounded in “the essential Being of the apprehensions unified.”\(^10\) So Husserl clarifies the relation between perspective variation and perspected variables:

> the sensory data which exercise the function of presenting colour, smoothness, shape, and so forth perspectivally (the function of ‘exhibiting’) differ wholly and in principle from colour, smoothness, shape *simpliciter*, in short from all the generic aspect which a thing can show. *The perspective variation* (the ‘Abschattung’), though verbally similar to the *perspected variable* (the ‘Abgeschattetes’), differs from it generically and in principle.

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\(^8\) Husserl, *Ideas*, §41 p. 77.


\(^10\) Husserl, *Ideas*, §41 p. 77-78.
The perspective variation is an experience. But experience is possible only as experience, and not something spatial. The perspected variable, however, is in principle possible only as spatial (it is indeed spatial in its essence), but not possible as experience.\textsuperscript{11}

This is an astonishing statement considering our path ahead. For one, Cusa inextricably linked experience and spatiality in the phenomenality of perspective. More immediately, Fanon argued directly against the separating of experience and spatiality in view of racial experience. Because of the hermeneutical sedimentation of race, focused as it is on the materiality of skin color brought to life (we might say) by an “imagination of matter,” experience and consciousness is spatial. In any case, Husserl’s argument here centers the issue of perspective around how color and particularity are symbolized in the synthetic, transcendental grasping of a unified viewpoint.

Before examining Fanon’s claim in detail, I briefly want to argue that this type of constitutional problem does not entirely disqualify phenomenology as a method to understand racialization and whiteness. Similar to Husserl, Heidegger faces a problem of reckoning with the experience of color and darkness in racialization, as he emphasizes that phenomenology focuses on a making visible or manifest, a bringing in the light. Phenomenology is “to let that which shows itself be seen from itself in the very way in which it shows itself from itself”—but darkness, by definition, cannot be brought to light.\textsuperscript{12} Still, Heidegger allows for consideration of darkness and hiddenness as he intently focuses on how there is an element in the explicit showing of something that indicates yet a hidden part. Things can be hidden in several ways: egregiously or intentionally, or by, in the course of time, “gett[ing] covered up again” and forgotten, or that something shows itself only “in disguise.” This last kind of hiding of things is

\textsuperscript{11} Husserl, Ideas, §41 p. 78.

\textsuperscript{12} Heidegger, Being and Time, Int. II, §7, p. 25-30.
particularly interesting for our own study of whiteness; Heidegger notes that this “disguising” kind of covering up of phenomenon is “the most frequent and the most dangerous, for here the possibilities of deceiving and misleading are especially stubborn.” In this case, a kind of veiling happens where a phenomenon, placed into a “system,” claims a kind of clarity and transparency. Phenomenology, then, can put us on guard for this covering up. It can even prepare us for the possibility that “what has been primordially ‘within our grasp’ may become hardened so that we can no longer grasp it.”¹³ For us, whiteness may be a thing so hardened we can no longer see what it actually is, hidden by virtue of the very constitution of our perception, thought, and sight. Phenomenology can be put to use, then, especially as hermeneutical, in trying to see “the thing” of whiteness which often disappears as it functions.

For Heidegger, getting “back to the things themselves” is never naïve or haphazard, but a critical digging. Emphasizing such things, Heidegger links phenomenology to a hermeneutics, not merely as a process of interpretation but the possibility of opening up “the horizon for any further ontological study of those entities which do not have the character of Dasein, … [thus] working out the conditions on which the possibility of any ontological investigation depends.”¹⁴ In this way, though a more eidetic phenomenology within the very process of synthesizing perspective variations can transcendentalize past—and therefore fail to see—the intricacies of the symbolizing of color (and thus the matter of race as an existential experience), still the phenomenological method can work beyond the strictures of its historical employment. To wrestle with whiteness as a fundamental problem, a problem that concerns being itself, we will


have to move deeper into the power of a hermeneutics, willing to suspend the structural limitations of traditional phenomenology and move forward into the phenomenality of whiteness.

**Fanon and Critique of Classical Phenomenology**

For Fanon, conscious experience is explicitly spatial, realized in the hermeneutics of racialization. As Fanon reflects on the lived experience of racialization, he uncovers the “already racialized” nature of classical phenomenology and its body schema as “race does not just interrupt such a schema but structures its mode of operation.” 15 Reflecting on his experience as he reaches across the table for cigarettes, Fanon writes:

> And then we were given the occasion to confront the white gaze. An unusual weight descended on us. The real world robbed us of our share. In the white world, the man of color encounters difficulties in elaborating his body schema. The image of one’s body is solely negating. It’s an image in the third person. All around the body reigns an atmosphere of certain uncertainty. I know that if I want to smoke, I shall have to stretch out my right arm and grab the pack of cigarettes lying at the other end of the table. As for the matches, they are in the left drawer, and I shall have to move back a little. And I make all these moves, not out of habit, but by implicit knowledge. A slow construction of my self as a body in a spatial and temporal world—such seems to be the schema. It is not imposed on me; it is rather a definitive structuring of my self and the world—definitive because it creates a genuine dialectic between my body and the world. 16

Fanon continues: “Beneath the body schema I had created a historical-racial schema”—a schema developed not out of the integrity of bodily perception but “by the Other, the white man, who had woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, and stories.” Assailed at various points by “legends, stories, history, and especially … historicity,” Fanon writes, “the body schema, attacked in several places, collapsed, giving way to an epidermal racial schema.” In the white gaze he became aware of his body “in triple [person].” Besides occupying physical space and

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16 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 90-91.
being in relation (“approach[ing]”) the other, the third space is a kind of modal or relational space, one of “nausea” in the wake of “the Other, evasive, hostile, but not opaque, transparent and absent, vanished.” The “discovery” of Fanon’s blackness came with a sense of responsibility for his body, race, and ancestors and as he “cast an objective gaze over [himself].”

This hermeneutical racial epidermal schema is key to understanding the objectifying gaze of whiteness upon racial blackness, one of the more significant themes in phenomenology of whiteness (and one that we ourselves will explore). According to Fanon’s testimony, this gaze is built on the logics of a symbolism of evil. Throughout Fanon’s testimony, he mentions notions of stain, defilement and disgrace. Referencing the white gaze—“‘Dirty nigger!’ Or simply ‘Look! A Negro!’” (thus, in intertwining dirt and darkness of skin, a gaze already and fundamentally symbolizing color as evil)—Fanon writes that he was “an object among other objects.” He continues: “Locked in this suffocating reification, I appealed to the Other. … But … I stumble, and the Other fixes me with his gaze, his gestures and attitude, the same way you fix a preparation with a dye.” The gaze creates ontological problems as blackness is defined against whiteness, and so the look of the white man dislocates Fanon and imprisons him: “I transported myself on that particular day far, very far, from my self, and gave myself up as an object. What did this mean to me? Peeling, stripping my skin, causing a hemorrhage that left congealed black blood all over my body.” While wanting to be “a man among men” instead he is fit away in a pre-determined system. Fanon sums up his racial experience as not one of a feeling of inferiority but “a feeling of not existing” as, in Fanon’s words, “Sin is black as virtue is white.

17 Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, 91-92.
18 Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, 89
19 Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, 92-93.
All those white men, fingerling their guns, can’t be wrong. I am guilty. I don’t know what of, but I know I’m a wretch.”

Getting in the way of authentic identity is a gaze built out of a hermeneutical layer of a symbolism of color woven into a symbolism of evil.

It is specifically in reflecting on this symbolics of evil, in fact, that Fanon critiques Jean-Paul Sartre’s classical phenomenology. Sartre had written _Orphée Noir_ as the preface to Léopold Sédar Senghor’s _Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache_, a work of the Negritude movement. Here, Sartre had described blackness as a “moment of negativity” in a Hegelian dialectic that works to transcend race in the interest of the greater economic struggle. Sartre had written that the negritude movement was only transitionary and not an end in itself. Fanon could not be stronger in his critique, writing that he felt as if he had been “robbed” of his “last chance” as an apparent “friend of the colored peoples” had found “nothing better to do than demonstrate the relativity of their action.” The Hegelian, as Fanon puts it, “had forgotten that consciousness needs to get lost in the night of the absolute, the only condition for attaining self-consciousness.”

Thus, testifies Fanon: Sartre “reminded me that my negritude was nothing but a weak stage.” He continues:

> Without a black past, without a black future, it was impossible for me to live my blackness. Not yet white, no longer completely black, I was damned. Jean-Paul Sartre forgets that _the black man suffers in his body quite differently from the white man_. Between the white man and me there is irremediably a relationship of transcendence.

In making blackness of race relative and non-essential to existential being, to take its consciousness as only a moment in a broader transcendental struggle for freedom, Fanon writes

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20 Fanon, _Black Skin, White Masks_, 118. Emphasis mine.

21 Fanon, _Black Skin, White Masks_, 112. Emphasis mine.

22 Fanon, _Black Skin, White Masks_, 116-117. Emphasis mine.
that Sartre’s mistake was to downplay the source of black racial being. Sartre symbolized Fanon’s blackness such that his racial particularity was dense and weighing him down; Fanon was not freed but immobilized by the transcendental approach.²³

**Toward a contemporary hermeneutical phenomenology of whiteness**

Fanon’s testimony remains central to contemporary phenomenological reflection on whiteness. Even as contemporary phenomenology seeks to rediscover the body (especially through a retrieval of Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s work on habit, perception, and the body), Fanon’s testimony urges the conversation evermore beyond the superficial to reflect on the hermeneutical schema present “below” the typical, eidetic schema of the body, thereby putting into question an entire paradigm traditionally focused on ability and intentionality.²⁴ I argue that as the contemporary phenomenology of whiteness has developed from and beyond Fanon, we can summarize some of its key conclusions and themes around the notion of opacity.

I am greatly indebted to the thought of George Yancy, who focuses his phenomenology of whiteness explicitly on the matter of opacity as he discusses the “opaque white racist self.” Yancy writes: “white racism is embedded within one’s embodied perceptual engagement with the social world and … is woven into, etched into, the white psyche, forming an opaque white

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²³ Lastly, Fanon opens up an additional horizon of a hermeneutics of opacity: how blackness or opacity is “romanticized.” Here, the Black man has something—some kind of connection to nature—that the White man knows he can never have; thus the Black man is probed and interrogated for this secret. Fanon shows how blackness in this mode is often connected to “rhythm” and poetry, but also fundamentally to beastly irrationalism, primitivism, black magic and sacrifice, fetishism and animism. In this way Fanon indicates how amidst a pathologization of opacity through racialization a certain ontological transition can occur as the mystery and intrigue inherent in the enigmatic dimensions of opacity is solidified ontically and placed upon those with Black skin.

²⁴ Commenting on this, Sara Ahmed writes: “If classical phenomenology is about ‘motility’, expressed in the hopefulness of the utterance ‘I can’, Fanon’s phenomenology of the black body would be better described in terms of the bodily and social experience of restriction, uncertainty and blockage, or perhaps even in terms of the despair of the utterance ‘I cannot.’” Ahmed, “A phenomenology of whiteness,” 161.
racist self that influences (and often overshadows) everyday mundane transactions.” The opacity of the white self takes on several interrelated meanings. Fundamentally, Yancy argues that white people undergo a formation of social racial bonding which they cannot easily see. Yancy argues that for whites “bodily orientations are unreflected expressions of the background lived orientations of whiteness, white ways of being, white modes of racial and racist practice.”

White racial formation is unconscious because the white body is unmarked, blending into the racial background, while in the white gaze that develops from this racialization “black people are always already marked as different/deviant/dangerous.” A second aspect of this opacity is that the white self is constructed with the belief it is autonomous, epistemologically-secured, and transparent to itself, thus refusing to admit self-opacity. Recognizing this, Yancy engages in the project of trying to “flip the script” by emboldening a “black counter-graze” to “perhaps create a moment of uptake that induces a form of white identity crisis, a jolt that awakens a sudden and startling sense of having been seen.” Such a project seeks to break-up the transcendent synthesis of perception, to disrupt the logics of the white gaze. Yancy writes:

The act of marking whiteness, then, is itself an act of historicizing whiteness, an act of situating whiteness within the context of material forces and raced interest-laden values that reinforce whiteness as a site of privilege and hegemony. Marking whiteness is about exposing the ways in which whites have created a form of ‘humanism’ that obfuscates their hegemonic efforts to treat their experiences as universal and representative.


26 Yancy, Look, a White!, 3-4.

27 Yancy, Look, a White!, 6-8, 154.

28 Yancy, Look, a White!, 7.
Whiteness gives a self that claims to know itself and be in charge of itself; to see the social and racial formation it undergoes would be to undercut the stability of the white psyche. In this sense, the white self is opaque not only because it is unmarked, (passively) blending into the background, but because it takes upon itself (actively) a sense of universality. Whiteness hides itself in obscurity by claiming a transparency, transcendence, and openness to inspection.\(^{29}\)

Moreover—and this is especially key for us—when the white self is marked and looked at, it resists, doubling down on logics transparency by claiming a transcendental \textit{purity}.

Whiteness evades being seen by claiming a kind of epistemic purity wherein one is at a remove from the messy racial problem. Much of this is at stake in the so-called “good-white.”\(^{30}\) This also has to do with the way in which white racial privilege protects the inability of whiteness to see itself by reinforcing a sense of transparency and freedom through a deeper moral symbolism. Applebaum writes that in addition to the spatial freedom it grants, white privilege “also consists in the presumption of white moral integrity that is, in the larger picture, contingent upon the co-construction of Black as morally suspect. … White privilege protects and supports white moral standing and this proactive shield depends on there being an ‘abject other’ that constitutes white as ‘good.’”\(^{31}\) Indeed, bell hooks, drawing on Richard Dryer’s essay “White,” notes that there is a fantasy and myth constructed that “makes whiteness synonymous with goodness.”\(^{32}\) Yancy is

\(^{29}\) Yancy, \textit{Look, a White!}, 168.

\(^{30}\) Yancy, \textit{Look, a White!}, 156-157.


\(^{32}\) bell hooks, \textit{Black Looks: Race and Representation}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed. (New York: Routledge, 2015), 169. She draws from Dryer a point about whiteness and blackness being symbolized according to a symbolism of color as white and black within a symbolism of evil, reflective of the overall argument I am making in this text.
pushing back against this insipient moral symbolism: “there is no ahistorical material ‘white’ vulnerable body that is the starting point of the white self.”

Yancy insists that for a white person to receive the counter-gaze is to experience the racial state of whiteness not as a kind of possession but as a kind of dispossession. Drawing on Judith Butler’s work on opacity in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Yancy writes that the “white embodied self is always already constituted through its connectivity to discursive and material practices that are fundamentally racist … [and] has already been given over, as it were, to embedded and embodied white others.” It is not extraordinary that the self—any self—is constituted in the opacity of relationality and interdependence; but the white self (intentionally) fails to see this. The kind of disposposessive opacity at stake in selfhood is covered up by the white self as it utilizes primordial logics of opacity to obscure its own particular and raced origins, to weaponize opacity through a façade of universality and introspective omnipotence. Yet, Yancy argues, one is unable to give a full account of one’s racism: “Rather, the reality of the sheer depth of white racialization is far too opaque.” Self-reflection is impeded for white people as it is not about what one might know “to be true through self-reflection … [but rather] about formative racist dynamics that exceed the site of an epistemic subject possessed of so-called full self-knowledge.” The white person experiences themselves as an enigma, unable to see the nature and depth of their whiteness.

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33 Yancy, *Look, a White!*, 166.

34 Yancy, *Look, a White!*, 165. Yancy continues: “The embedded and embodied white self is already the product of an anterior multitude of white epistemic assumptions, privileges or immunities, perceptual practices, and forms of white bonding that are experienced as unextraordinary.” 166


36 Yancy, *Look, a White!*, 173.
In light of this dispossession in the wake of the self’s opacity, properly understood, Yancy speaks of the need to indefinitely tarry with one’s whiteness and recognize one can never escape their whiteness and the privilege and power it brings. He calls white people to “dwell” in places of uncomfortability, to “delay,” and “postpone” the quick rush past the uncomfortability. Yancy writes: “The unfinished present is where I want whites to tarry (though not permanently remain), to listen, to recognize the complexity and weight of the current existence of white racism.” Rushing too quickly out of this space can itself be a form of obfuscation of “the specific power and privilege of the historical uniqueness of white racism.”37 There is an element of the embrace of tragedy here. I will return to Yancy’s thought on this matter in my conclusion.

From Yancy’s most helpful orientation, I want to highlight three points that flesh out this theme of the opacity of the white self as I interact with the fuller conversation.38 First, a phenomenology of whiteness moves toward a hermeneutics focused on opacity because the perceiving body is enmeshed in a milieu of symbolic, under-the-surface discourses. This quality whiteness has of hiding itself relates to a key dialectic: though perception of race operates by making visible, just how such perception makes race visible is itself hidden from view, nestled in a learned process. Racial logic fundamentally makes visible that which can otherwise create “fear and consternation.” Moreover, the process of connecting race to specific markings or features of the body is an effort to naturalize or solidify racial identity. Alcoff writes: “This is why race must work through the visible markers on the body, even if those markers are made visible through learned processes. Visible difference, which is materially present even if its

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37 Yancy, Look, a White!, 158-160.

38 The themes that follow are rather ubiquitous in the conversation. I particularly develop them from a key conversation pertaining to seminal articles in the contemporary phenomenology of whiteness.
meanings are not, can be used to signify or provide purported access to a subjectivity through observable, ‘natural’ attributes, to provide a window on the interiority of the self.” Marking an apparent invisible as a visible, a secret knowledge of (inner) essences is divined and naturalized.

But such visible markers only gain signification or meaning through an anterior formation or habituation: the perceptive mode that sees and marks race is itself “a learned ability.” On this point, Alcoff and others have stressed the importance of thinking with Merleau-Ponty about the importance of “habit” and the “habit body,” which indicates how our perception is “attenuated” as it “skip[s] the stage of conscious interpretation and intent.” What at first is experienced as a kind of bareness or immediacy of perceiving is, upon reflection, the product of an interpretive or hermeneutical process occurring beneath the consciously experienced body. Alcoff writes that the habit body is “a default position the body assumes in various commonly experienced circumstances that integrates and unifies our movements.” This habitual perception happens in the background or behind the scenes and thus remains unreflected in our experience. Merleau-Ponty writes in this regard: “Perception is not … an act, a deliberate taking up of a position; it is the background from which all acts stand out, and is presupposed by them.” Thus perception is habitual, a kind of milieu out of which one is formed to see. This accounts for the difficulty of discerning, let alone changing, racializing patterns.

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40 Alcoff, “Toward a Phenomenology,” 20.
42 Alcoff, “Toward a Phenomenology,” 18.
be a way forward, as through recognizing this hermeneutical intervention in our phenomenology one can begin to uncover one’s own hidden perceptual interpretation.

Second, a phenomenology of whiteness moves toward a hermeneutics of opacity because the intentionality of habituated perception builds a world, a habit world, but one in which “whiteness as a category of experience … disappears as a category through experience” by becoming “worldly.”45 Drawing on Husserl’s illustration of perceiving the table, Ahmed argues that perception happens as nestled in an orientation from which the world “unfolds” through this perception and its gaze.46 Public spaces and places come to be shaped by habituated bodies which—now become habit worlds—can then reinforce the shaping of habituated bodies.47 This ultimately speaks of a certain “at-homeness” the body obtains in perception in classical phenomenology. Consider Merleau-Ponty’s illustration in *Phenomenology of Perception*:

> my body appears to me as an attitude directed towards a certain existing or possible task. And indeed its spatiality is not, like that of external objects or like that of ‘spatial sensations’, a *spatiality of position*, but a *spatiality of situation*. If I stand in front of my desk and lean on it with both hands, only my hands are stressed and my whole body trails behind them like the tail of a comet. It is not that I am unaware of the whereabouts of my shoulders or back, but these are simply swallowed up in the position of my hands, and my whole posture can be read so to speak in the pressure they exert on the table.48

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Perception happens *when the body disappears as the world appears*. Agency, motility and ability in this schema are less about capacity and habits and more about “the ways in which the world is available as a space for action, a space where things ‘have a certain place’ or are ‘in place.’”

Ahmed argues that the at-homeness of the body in this schema has to do with transparency and not commanding attention as the habitual body “does not pose ‘a problem’ or an obstacle to the action, or is not ‘stressed’ by ‘what’ the action encounters” because the habit world matches up with the body for which it has been constructed. Ahmed, in fact, argues that it is a *white body* that is “at-home” in the world, which “trails behind,” having created a concrete social and physical space (a world) so as not to experience itself as stressed on any surface or materiality; to be, in a sense, *transparent, not opaque*. In this regard whiteness “is an orientation that puts certain things within reach” and “*holds’ through habits.*” The white subject’s gaze builds a world (now more objective and substantial) around one’s perception (already in this way racialized), and seeks to further socialize reality into that world. The legacy of colonialism, which is not just a historical fact but a present world-shaping force makes the world “ready” for certain bodies in this way. This means, Ahmed argues, that it is “moments when the body appears ‘out of place’ [that] are moments of political and personal trouble.”

*Third*—and crucial to my own argument—a phenomenology of whiteness moves toward a hermeneutics to try to understand how whiteness, *utilizing opacity*, constructs itself and hides

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52 Ahmed, “A phenomenology of whiteness,” 153-154. Ahmed writes: “Race then does become a social as well as bodily given, or what we *receive* from others as an inheritance of history.” 154.

itself through *a symbolics of evil*. Yancy writes, “The importance of whiteness as a structural evil should not be reduced to a set of troublesome habits.” We need to seriously examine whiteness as a phenomenon that intentionality hides itself through subversion and redirection upon examination. Nathan Eckstrand particularly highlights how whiteness is complicit in a symbolics of evil in this way. Arguing the need to focus less on the subjective habitual body and more on how whiteness congeals into the world and beckons to the subject, Eckstrand draws on Merleau-Ponty’s thought regarding the function of the world horizon to complete perception. Eckstrand argues that whiteness is not just an orientation of the subjective body but also pertains to “congealed habits” as a construction within the world that meets up with the habit body in producing perceptions. This world horizon is just as important in the phenomenological experience as the subjective habit body: “there must be schemas of whiteness implicit in the world that compare with the body schemas found in the subject, and the experience of whiteness must be a collaborative encounter between the two of them.” Thus whiteness has an ontological quality to it, as a kind of force congealing into a world that “beckons to the subject.”

This objective-like aspect of whiteness particularly brings “a wickedness to whiteness.” Part of the maliciousness of whiteness is in how it “normally completes the world such that it

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54 Yancy, *Look a White!*, 29.


does not appear to itself.” Eckstrand explains its “occlusive” and “subverting” nature which defines its resiliency:

Whiteness does not just lag behind, remaining just out of view, but leaps ahead too; it actively subverts attempts to grasp it, recognize it, or name it. There is a whole machinery at work in whiteness dedicated to the production of elisions, subversions, and inoculations to prevent the discovery of whiteness.60

There is an “autoimmunity” at work here as whiteness attacks and deconstructs that which works toward making it visible. This is what is at stake in the horizon of the white world, seeking to remain out of view, and yet functioning with a malevolency “that strives for control and oppression.”61 Whiteness here is more objective, taking on a life of its own through a symbolism of evil, hiding itself even as it beckons the subject toward a way of being in the world.

Opacity and Evil: Phenomenology and Hermeneutics at the Intersection

In view of the contemporary phenomenology of whiteness opening toward an exploration of opacity, I further interrogate the significance of opacity. We come to examine more closely how the notion of opacity specifically moves phenomenology toward hermeneutics. Opacity, in fact, is key in transitioning from an eidetic to a hermeneutical phenomenology. Ricoeur is especially helpful here (seeing as how he focuses on the nature of this very transition). I will exegete how he employs the notion of opacity and how it is crucial to moving toward a hermeneutics on the very basis of discovering a symbolism of evil it must wrestle with. Pressing into Ricoeur’s work in this way is a wager that will pay off in understanding Long. At this point, indeed, we will find ourselves meeting back up with Long’s assertion that opacity has to do with a symbolism of evil that can deal with race. I will begin to think out toward the broader ways in

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which opacity is caught in these processes of racialization and colonialism. This will indicate for us a key consideration moving forward: an aesthetics that uses opacity to construct a colonial world through perspective.

**Moving from an eidetic to a hermeneutic phenomenology**

Opacity is itself constitutive of, as Paul Ricoeur puts it, the “mutual belonging” of phenomenology and hermeneutics. Before any use of it toward evil or any pathologization toward racialization, opacity is a *potentiality* that indicates a “surplus of meaning.” That any phenomenon is opaque means that lived experience deepens and thickens, both exposing sedimented layers of enfolded meanings and possible horizons of unfolding meanings. Understanding always surpasses itself toward a greater plurality of discourses and new horizons (such that, for example, to understand the phenomenon of white sight we will have to traverse theories of vision and of color, different conceptions of perspective, understandings of space and form, aesthetic theories, and so on). In this way, opacity enters into our experience first and originally through the *enigma* and *symbol*. Opacity is the very structure of the tension of the symbol or enigma: the fact that, as essentially *representative*, a symbol both is “like” and “unlike” at the same time, it hints and it hides what it indicates. As such, opacity is the condition for the possibility of symbolic meaning, the logic upon which reflection and interpretation reckon with the materiality and hereness of the sign (its first intentionality) and how it connects to the thereness of its transcendent meaning (or second intentionality). Ricoeur specifically connects this hermeneutical aspect of phenomenology to *Auslegung* or explication.  

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The opaque, enigmatic symbol, then, connects to an immediacy of experience and yet invites interpretation. So Ricoeur clarifies that hermeneutics does not so much conflict with phenomenology itself (interested, as it is, in our conscious experience) but more so ruins its idealistic interpretation, like Husserl’s goal to seek an ultimate foundation of knowledge in phenomenology.64 But Ricoeur writes that while “phenomenology remains the unsurpassable presupposition of hermeneutics … phenomenology cannot constitute itself without a hermeneutical presupposition.”65 This mutual belonging, this space of opacity is, as Ricoeur puts it, a kind of “virtual event” or virtual space of negativity and criticism out of which meaning emerges; in hermeneutics this is spoken of as distanciation and in phenomenology as the *epoché*.66 Moreover, argues Ricoeur, the explication (*Auslegung*) at stake here calls for the “long route” of grafting hermeneutics onto phenomenology, as opposed to a “short route” directly toward ontology. This means understanding is achieved by preceding little by little, traversing numerous linguistic genres of explanation (like exegesis or psychoanalysis) and their methodologies. The “short route” (like with Heidegger’s analytic of *Dasein*) claims understanding by “a sudden reversal of the question” from a method of knowledge to a mode of being.67 The long route, clarifies Ricoeur, is also interested in ontology, but by degrees: he doubts the possibility of a direct ontology “free at the outset from any methodological requirements and consequently outside the circle of interpretation whose theory this ontology formulates.” Still, there is the desire and horizon of such an ontology which “animates” the long

66 Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 40-41.
route, revealing an ever-vaster horizon of the world and life antecedent to knowledge, in which being exists. Insofar as opacity, then, is turned out toward the vastness of being and understanding, in its hermeneutical thickness it is also turned toward the materiality, particularity, and contingency—the finitude—of language itself. All understanding, as Ricoeur argues, “places the interpreter in medias res and never at the beginning or the end. We suddenly arrive, as it were, in the middle of a conversation which has already begun and in which we try to orientate ourselves in order to be able to contribute to it.” In this light, eidetic phenomenology must claim some kind of Hegelian absolute knowledge. Instead, hermeneutics prohibits appropriation of knowledge in which is “the secret return of the sovereign subject”—that subject which is able to hide its particularity and function as a universal or transcendental seer.

This point of opacity and the “long route” is crucial for my own argument and approach, and it means something for the kind of phenomenology I am taking up. Falque, however, disagrees with Ricoeur’s argument on this point, which is significant since he takes up a (related) project that focuses on phenomenologically encountering medieval theology and mysticism. Falque, one could say, emphasizes the phenomenologization of hermeneutics because in the mysticism of the Middle Ages “the spiritual aim is always the source of its texts, writings, and dictations.” Reading (of the self and of the world) is a “mode of spiritual life” in medieval life and thought. As such, the “grafting” of hermeneutics onto phenomenology makes possible a

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70 Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 33.
71 Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 33.
72 Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 34-35, 37.
textual struggle, but one, Falque argues, which “finds its first source in a conflict of lived experiences.” The lived experience at the heart of mystical subjectivity, indeed, overflows language and sometimes includes silence—thus the lived life has primacy over the signs and readings of texts. So Falque explicitly calls for the “short route” over the “long route:”

one does not pass to the world except through the self, albeit in and through a community of lived experiences out of which is born a conflict of interpretations, and never the inverse. The “grafting” of hermeneutics and analytic philosophy, occurs only on the “living body” of phenomenology, not in the sense that the latter wields supreme power over the others, but rather in the sense that the unspeakable aspect of the carnal dimension of man (descriptive phenomenology) always has primacy over the verbal interpretation of its meaning (hermeneutics) and over the grammatical formulation of its propositions (logic).

Ricoeur’s point, however, is that that the depths of lived experience are themselves not immediately given, not given to consciousness without interpretation.

The long route to understanding means that this opaque place of hermeneutical distanciation or phenomenological bracketing should engender a dispossession or apophasis of the immediate self. Such an approach, which (as indirect) respects the enigma of understanding, allows for the critique of immediate consciousness, which proves, in fact, to be a false consciousness, a false cogito. Such a cogito, such a claim to immediate consciousness, does not merely eschew the moment of opacity in the process of understanding—more strongly, it must obscure or hide the way in which its own understanding is brought to life through the detours of language and symbol. Ricoeur’s reflection on such a false consciousness in light of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud shows the ways in which this hiding of opacity can take place in the economic, psychic, and cultural realms. As we engage, for example, in critique of ideology and

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73 Falque, God, the Flesh, and the Other, 14.

74 Falque, God, the Flesh, and the Other, 15.
in psychoanalysis, Ricoeur argues that we reveal how the self empties itself and then finds itself through the detour of its construction in symbols, language, and cultural artifacts. Thus the cogito is both, in Ricoeur’s words, “exploded” and “deepened” as “the cogito can be recovered only by the detour of a decipherment of the documents of its life.” Hermeneutics, in this way, shifts “the axis of interpretation from the problem of subjectivity to that of the world” to counter the perennial danger for phenomenology of “reducing itself to a transcendental subjectivism.” Any understanding or mode of being, in view of this indirect procession by degrees, can only be “a horizon, an aim rather than a given fact. A separate ontology is beyond our grasp: it is only within the movement of interpretation that we apperceive the being we interpret.” Through archeological work, especially of psychoanalysis, a pathology can be untangled; an understanding can still be recovered, even out of the same depths from which misunderstanding is forged. So Ricoeur writes: “Subjectivity must be lost as radical origin if it is to be recovered in a more modest role.”

Lastly, this potentiality of opacity that is the condition for the possibility of meaning-making is, when transposed to a subjective plane, also the condition for the possibility of self-reflection amidst the tension of self and otherness. Selves are constructed through the


76 Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 36.


78 This is a key direction that Ricoeur goes; I pick up his thought later (Ch. 4) as it becomes apparent that it is quite necessary to engage in a psychoanalysis in view of the nature of perspective. See Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretation*, 20-22.

79 Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 37. Ricoeur says something key here, which will gain significance after our examination of Cusa: “This final and radical form of distanciation is the ruin of the ego’s pretension to constitute itself as ultimate origin. The ego must assume for itself the ‘imaginative variations’ by which it could respond to the ‘imaginative variations’ on reality that literature and poetry, more than any other form of discourse, engender.”
interpretative strategies engendered by the symbol’s poetic surplus. On this subjective level, the very limit of transcendental phenomenology is met: “the status of the alter ego and, through it, of the very otherness of the world become entirely problematic.”

This raises the stakes for how opacity is configured in meaning-making and self-understanding: opacity does not just mark the “otherness” called for in the surplus of a textual-linguistic symbol, but it marks the “otherness” that encroaches upon our own immediate understanding of self and world, found in the mirror of the ego to itself. Herein is the problem, phenomenologically:

on the one hand, the reduction of all meaning to the intentional life of the concrete ego implies that the other is constituted ‘in me’ and ‘from me’; on the other hand, phenomenology must account for the originality of the other’s experience, precisely insofar as it is the experience of someone other than me.

The enigma or opacity on this level is how others in the world (and the world itself) can have their own transcendent life (and, when it comes to other egos, their own intentionality) if I discover the other primarily through my own intentional experience. Ricoeur notes that it is “this enigma, this paradox, indeed this latent conflict between two projects—a project of describing transcendence and a project of constituting in immanence—that the recourse to Auslegung may be able to resolve.” How can it be the case that I discover the world through intentional, critical consciousness and yet the other as truly other is transcendental to my consciousness? If we connect Ricoeur’s thought on explication or Auslegung to this matter of opacity, clues are given for how this subjective tension becomes productive instead of merely problematic. Here, as Ricoeur argues, “The other is included, not in my existence as given, but in the latter insofar as it

80 Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 48.
81 Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 49.
82 Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 50.
is characterized by an ‘open and infinite horizon’ … a potentiality of meaning that I cannot master in a glance.” The potentiality of the symbol opens up the self for the other; symbol constitutes the self in relation to the other, not by immediacy but by the long interpretive detour.

**Ricoeur on Opacity and the Symbolism of Evil**

I have already surfaced how a key conversation between Ricoeur and Long on opacity brings specificity and facticity to our understanding of opacity, presenting it in a particular lens to show the eventual *racialization* of opacity as we reflect on a symbolism of evil. As we have seen, Long connects Ricoeur’s thought on the symbol of defilement to blackness. Exploring in detail how Ricoeur himself discusses opacity and then connects it to the hermeneutical heart of a symbolism of evil will be key to moving Long’s own insights forward. Moreover, here we can see how opacity can remain a *coherent* concept even as it *can be both what gives productive thought and what produces great evil*—key to understanding how race is constructed through the *pathologization* or *use* of opacity, even as racial logic is troubled by opacity (as we will see).

For Ricoeur, opacity first has to do with a tension inherent in the meaning of a textual-linguistic symbol that then gives thought. He especially focuses on cosmic, oneiric, and poetic symbols, and how these are connected to a second level symbolism of myth. Ricoeur understands what is at stake here by opting for a narrower definition of the symbol than, for example, Cassirer: for Ricoeur, the symbol is “a region of language that presents itself as the locus of complex significations where another meaning is both *given* and *hidden* in an immediate meaning.” In this giving-and-hiding is the symbol’s opacity, not merely as one of its qualities,

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83 Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 52.

84 Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 10-18. One could say a third level of symbol is “speculative.”
but essential to its very composition: “[C]ontrary to perfectly transparent technical signs, which say only what they want to say in positing that which they signify,” writes Ricoeur, “symbolic signs are opaque, because the first, literal, obvious meaning itself points analogically to a second meaning which is not given otherwise than in it.”

Holding in tension its irreducible double discourse, the symbol is a type of enigma which “does not block understanding but provokes it” through an “architecture of meaning” that “mov[es] toward interpretation by virtue of that transgression of meaning by meaning.”

To affect this, in fact, symbols invite a participation in their reality, through which they lead to another intentionality; Ricoeur describes this as “an existential assimilation, according to the movement of analogy, of my being to being.” In this way, the symbol is ultimately normed by a double binding as a nodule point between finitude and infinitude:

On the one hand, the sacred is bound to its primary, literal, sensible meanings; this is what constitutes the opacity of symbols. On the other hand, the literal meaning is bound by the symbolic meaning that resides in it; this is what I have called the revealing power of symbols, which gives them their force in spite of their opacity.

Significantly, then, the symbol’s opacity is not only about its representative nature, but is weighted toward the issue of the symbol’s link to finitude and materiality. Ricoeur writes:

the sensible sign is bound by the symbolic meaning that dwells in it and gives it transparency and lightness; the symbolic meaning is in turn bound to its sensible vehicle,

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85 Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale, 1970), 7. Emphasis mine. I mention Cassirer in anticipation of Ch. 4. Ricoeur explicitly says he narrows his understanding of the symbol from Cassirer, though he is opting for a broader understanding of the symbol than those who reduce it to analogy. Here, for Ricoeur the symbol fundamentally is about a “shown-yet-concealed” logic. See Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretation*, 12. See also Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 10-11, 16-17.


87 Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 18-19.


89 Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 31.
which gives it weight and opacity. One might add that this is also the way symbols bind us, viz. by giving thought a content, a flesh, a density.\footnote{Ricoeur, \textit{Freud and Philosophy}, 49.}

In this way, symbols “\textit{give what they say.}”\footnote{Ricoeur, \textit{Freud and Philosophy}, 31.} Fundamentally for Ricoeur a symbol’s opaqueness “is the symbol’s very profundity, an inexhaustible depth.”\footnote{Ricoeur, “The Hermeneutics of Symbols and Philosophical Reflection,” 194.}

But—and this is key—opacity goes yet further, beyond a textual-linguistic tension to a more primordial, immediate tension in the understanding and making of the self. This tension inherent in the symbol reflects a more existential “\textit{pathétique} of misery,” a tension or \textit{fault} inherent in the holding together of infinity and finitude in the human experience. This \textit{pathos}, this experiential realization that humans are “intermediary” beings, found first through the transcendental reduction, necessarily includes a precomprehensive, prephilosophical understanding of the totality of the human, a totality which recognizes the mediation of the finite and infinite in the human experience.\footnote{Ricoeur, \textit{Fallible Man}, 1-5.} Ricoeur forefronts the nature of the soul’s journey (as “aporia” and “quest”) in this regard, describing the soul as neither Idea nor as perishable thing but “the very movement from the sensible toward the intelligible; it is \textit{anabasis}, the rising toward being; its misery is shown in that it is at first perplexed and searches.” This \textit{pathos} is told of, writes Ricoeur, not “in the language of Science, i.e., in the immutable discourse on immutable Being,” but in “the language of allegory, and then in the language of myth.”\footnote{Ricoeur, \textit{Fallible Man}, 7.} Thus this pathos, a
“strange becoming” without a “place” in philosophy, shows up in our thought only after it feeds on the “substantial richness” of our symbols, allegory, and myths.95

A transcendental method is not adequate to uncover these depths of the symbol which testify most fully to human fallibility: “[t]he transcendental stage furnishes only the first stage of a philosophical anthropology,” only revealing the pathos. But, writes Ricoeur, “[t]here is a surplus that a merely transcendental reflection does not allow us to elevate to the plane of reason.”96 This residue, a “wealth of meaning” unavailable to transcendental reflection, is found best in and philosophically recovered through “an exegesis of the fundamental symbols in which man avows the servitude of his free will.”97 Thus the price of being able to talk about evil in a philosophical framework is that of taking the “long route,” changing to the method of hermeneutics, “that is, to rules of deciphering applied to a world of symbols,” specifically the symbolics of evil. In this transition to hermeneutics, Ricoeur comes to focus on the “language of avowal” (as I have mentioned in the previous chapter) which, through its mythics such as fall, chaos, and divine blinding, speaks of being bound yet free (the “servile will”).98 The language of avowal yields primary symbols of evil such as stain, sin, and guilt; but because these are symbolic language, and thus bear a double intentionality (as I have just explained), there needs to be a hermeneutics of deciphering. So the philosophy of evil gives way to a pathos which yields a language of avowal with primary symbols that must be approached hermeneutically.

95 Ricoeur, Fallible Man, 6-7.

96 Ricoeur, Fallible Man, 5, 46.

97 Ricoeur, Fallible Man, 5-6.

98 Ricoeur, Fallible Man, xli-xliv. In this shift, Ricoeur removes the brackets around “man’s most fundamental possibilities” because of “the opaque and absurd nature of fault.” He continues: “For fault is not a feature of fundamental ontology … Fault remains a foreign body in the eidetics of man.” Thus the need for a passage through a “concrete mythics” of a bad will which unfolds “into a symbolics of evil.” xli-xliv.
In the end, the symbolism of evil furnishes thought with that which cannot be bound by thought. While the transcendental stage is the necessary foundation of all human knowing, what is at stake here is to move beyond the subject-object synthesis found in the transcendental reduction toward the deeper reality of incarnate freedom. It is only through the further mediatory syntheses of the “practical” and “affective” that the symbolic is able to deal with life’s actual difficulties: in the practical through the ethical dilemmas in the realm of human responsibility to the other (which centers on the fragility of the notion of respect), and in the affective the truest revelation of human fragility, the mediatory nature of the “heart” or Feeling (Gemüt). Thus, while it is “upon the thing” that disproportion and the “power of synthesis” is first discovered, there is a certain inherent blind spot in the “luminous vision” that is the transcendental imagination: “this mediating term,” writes Ricoeur, “has no intelligibility of its own.” This synthesis “between understanding and sensibility” achieved in the transcendental imagination “is consciousness but … it is not self-consciousness” as the “I” of transcendental thinking is a no one. Thus, a symbolism of evil with its language of avowal also functions as a critique of thought itself:

All symbols invite thought, but the symbols of evil demonstrate in an exemplary manner that there is always something more in myths and symbols than in all of our philosophy and that, hence, a philosophical interpretation of symbols will never become absolute knowledge. The symbols of evil, in which we can read the limits of our own existence, announce at the very same time the limits of all systems of thought which would try to incorporate these symbols in an absolute knowledge.

99 Ricoeur, Fallible Man, 18.
100 Ricoeur, Fallible Man, 50.
101 Ricoeur, Fallible Man, 81-82.
102 Ricoeur, Fallible Man, 18, 41-42.
103 Ricoeur, Fallible Man, 45-46.
A symbolism of evil is able to explore these processes of synthesis that a transcendent-alizing mode of thought only presupposes as foundational and thus cannot see into.

For Ricoeur, notions of testimony and confession open the final frontier to which opacity speaks, the tension between history and memory. In Memory, History, and Forgetting, Ricoeur connects opacity to Freud’s Unheimlichkeit (the uncanny) which inhabits the dialectic between memory and history.\(^\text{105}\) The question for Ricoeur is how memory or history can do justice to the opacity of a limit event like the Shoah. Auschwitz, Ricoeur notes, is unspeakable, unrepresentable, unreasonable.\(^\text{106}\) So Ricoeur writes, “The event ‘at the limits’ brings its own opacity along with its morally ‘unacceptable’ character … [and thus] reveals and denounces that [opacity] of language.”\(^\text{107}\) He surfaces the uncanny at this point of his work in order to discuss the way in which history and memory may reach their limit because they come up against the question and matter of evil, and the place that testimony or critical attestation might have here as such is able to situate itself productively within the tenuous place of representation that is “the enigma of a present representation of the absent past.”\(^\text{108}\)

Beyond Long: Opacity, Aesthetics and Postcoloniality

While Ricoeur points to the fact that opacity has do with the formation of subjectivity and the building of the world, he does not go far enough in tracing out how it “goes wrong”—indeed

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\(^{104}\) Ricoeur, The Conflict of Interpretation, 332.


\(^{106}\) Ricoeur, Memory, History, Forgetting, 255-257.

\(^{107}\) Ricoeur, Memory, History, Forgetting, 255.

\(^{108}\) Ricoeur, Memory, History, Forgetting, 392-3. On testimony, see also 260, 278. I will return to this discussion of Ricoeur on this type of opacity in Ch. 4.
the ways in which evil utilizes logics of opacity toward its perpetuation in modern logics of race. I want to take up the main thrust of Long’s argument and connect a symbolism of evil to logics of racialization; but I also want to think beyond him because I am specifically thinking about whiteness and the deeper theological conditions for its emergence in mystical darkness and perspective. While opacity (as connected to the symbol and enigma) fundamentally has to do with the nature of representation, it also has to do with ideology—in which we see the broader (perhaps insidious) ways in which opacity comes to shape discourses of subjectivity and identity. Here, opacity does not engender productive meaning-making but is used to hide finitude within logics of the infinite in building internal and external worlds; this is the result of a certain collapsing of the logic of representation, a banishment of the materiality and “hereness” of symbolic understanding that the enigma originally represents. This asks questions about the “hardening” of symbolic opacity. Such is manifested in the transition, as Yancy discusses, from “blackness as evil” to “blackness is evil.”109 Tracing the pathologization of opacity in this trajectory brings us toward the plane of multiple discourses that show how blackness is perceived in relation to the good and the beautiful and how symbolic meaning bonds itself to larger social structures and actions in building a world. Thus we come to the vistas of aesthetics and colonialism, especially coming to focus on the sublime and the fetish.

By connecting color to aesthetics, I am concerned less with the fine details of art history (say, with tracing shifts in how blackness or Black people are depicted in art), though my argument will touch upon such things in part. More broadly, I am interested in how aesthetic formation manifests in aesthetic judgment: that is, how we reckon our taste with the beautiful or

the good in building a culture. Often this kind of judgment is spoken of as bridging a great divide; we have seen this already in Ricoeur’s *pathos*, and this is also clear in Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*, where the “here” to “there” that aesthetic judgement bridges is the divide between nature and freedom.\(^{110}\) The tension here is that, while we can *recognize* a beautiful object, such is not something we can fully *grasp*. Elaine Scarry, in her *On Beauty and Being Just*, explains it this way: “beautiful things … always carry greetings from other worlds within them.”\(^{111}\) There is a sacredness and aliveness that beauty holds for us; when we come to perceive beauty, it is as if we are being greeted or welcomed.\(^{112}\) And in this greeting and welcoming there is something that “incites deliberation”: “Something beautiful fills the mind yet invites the search for something beyond itself, something larger or something of the same scale with which it needs to be brought into relation.”\(^{113}\) In this welcoming of distance and deliberation of genuine otherness, we come to see the essence of aesthetics.

But often the question of beauty and the good has been worked out in tension with the otherness and foreignness of the *sublime*. Some theorists have argued that sublimity can free beauty from taste, “opening it to new ways of thinking about itself and in understanding the limits of beauty.”\(^{114}\) But there is a history of thinking about blackness through the sublime, evoking notions of terror and horror and ugliness.\(^{115}\) This is part of a larger discourse in which


\(^{113}\) Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just*, 29.


“the hermeneutic machine of the West has long relied on Africa’s otherness to stage its grandest and most exclusive theatres of the self.” In the sublime, the opacity (of beauty) that should be welcomed and should open up the self to the other is used to mark otherness and reject it.

Consider Copeland’s critique: “within a white supremacist horizon, depictions of beauty erase different and dark bodies; such bodies cannot be beautiful. In this horizon, different and dark bodies are repulsive, hideous; these bodies encode negativity, even evil.” If aesthetic judgment—in view of Kant—involves a kind of sensus communis or an abstracted logic that can be generalized, Copeland asks the key question: Whose “common sense”? Whose taste?

Aesthetics, as it extends itself through colonial reach, comes to present a claim about beauty and the good that twists and distorts blackness through a symbolics of color as a symbolics of evil.

A key claim in my argument is that the “common sense” or general aesthetic frame is in fact the white, male particular perspective functioning—no, masquerading—as a universal perspective. Citing Walter Mignolo, Crenshaw discusses the construction of “humanitas” through Renaissance thought, a model of “the bourgeois Western subject—the self-possessed individual uniquely capable of logic, rationality, and contemplation.” This “universal man,” incubated and constructed out of Renaissance Europe, is set against “anthropos,” defined against

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118 See Kant, CJ §22, 5.239 (p. 123) and §40, 5:293-4 (p. 173-4). As Hannah Arendt points out, Kant in fact believed all reasoning was in no way private nor meant for an isolated community. By being a public space of free and open examination, Kant expressed a desire for the thinking community to be as large as possible. See Hannah Arendt, Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy, ed. Ronald Beiner (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1982), 39. Arendt explains: “Critical thinking is possible only where the standpoints of all others are open to inspection…. [B]y the force of imagination [critical thinking] makes the others present and thus moves in a space that is potentially public, open to all sides.” 43 This is only possible as one is, in the words of Arendt, “abstract[ed] from the limitations which contingently attach to [their] own judgment”, having disregarded private and subjective interpretations. 43, 64.
those “embodied in the range of colonized peoples alleged to stand outside of modern history and whose labor, land, and bodies become resources for the advancement of civilization itself.” In this way, Crenshaw points out the inability of Western thought to see race or to see itself as racialized.\textsuperscript{119} Africa, in particular, is set against Western identity through notions of negativity, strangeness, difference, and “absolute otherness.”\textsuperscript{120} In this hermeneutical process, opacity as sublime is marked as a kind of solidity, density, or refuse against which a self forges a transcendentality through a claim of immediacy to itself.\textsuperscript{121} We must explore how this happens specifically upon theological discourses, how theology “aided and abetted” the racialization of the self (in the words of Carter). The development of perspective upon the discourse of mystical darkness helps to explain just how opacity becomes racialized in white sight. Tracing out this historically constructed and socially inculcated genealogy through a hermeneutics can yield suggestions for possible retrieval of opacity as a concept for understanding modern subjectivity.

\textbf{Opacity and Theology: Mystical Subjectivity and the Question of Evil}

To open up the “long route” of exploring the pathologization of opacity toward the rise of modern perspective, I first must establish the formation of mystical subjectivity as the horizon which engenders it. A phenomenological account of the mystical self takes up everything we have explored concerning opacity and places it on a historical and subjective plane. Mystical subjectivity, anxious about perspective in view of the infinite—is given over to the question of opacity as a question of evil. Moreover, mystical subjectivity helps in part to shape modern

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{119} Crenshaw, Harris, HoSang, and Lipsitz, \textit{Seeing Race Again}, 8-9.
  \item \textsuperscript{120} Achille Mbembe, \textit{On the Postcolony} (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001), 1-2.
  \item \textsuperscript{121} While my project, in focusing on whiteness as constructed through the pathology of opacity, is itself a more deconstructive project, amidst this will be the concern for a possible hopeful retrieval of a productive opacity. I indicate in my conclusion that this is the case, and a possible way forward in light of this for an ethical racial future.
\end{itemize}
subjectivity through this focus on perspective and the way in which perspective can build worlds by spatializing or externalizing conceptions of opaque depth (or infinity). In this way, mysticism not only engendered the modern subject but the modern world. Just how this is the case (that is, ultimately, how infinity is graphed upon black skin) is the substance of my overall inquiry.

In approaching mysticism and medieval philosophy phenomenologically, I am centering on “texts, gestures and attitudes” or “ways of being” that can be “rediscovered for our time.”122 This rediscovering is less about looking back to see “what they say (quid) than the way they say it (quomodo)—the elucidation of ‘meaning’ through the exposition of ‘acts.’”123 By reading anew these texts, we are able to see things in a new way as various “kinds of experience” are unearthed: particularly for me, just how racial logics came to have subjective and objective power. Denise Buell’s work on race and ethnicity in early Christianity cautions us in connecting too quickly the modern concept of race with early Christian conceptions, as skin color was not decisive in organizing identity so much as other aspects like language or geography.124 My approach is not to force the authors to respond to our question of race, but “to see how and with what they have responded to their own [questions as it relates to this matter], in order to learn from them how to respond to ours;” to explore how questions of vision and aesthetic formation were configured (especially as upon the question of evil) in order to understand our own modern racial logics.125 I intend, as I have mentioned, to closely examine a particular trajectory of

122 Falque, God, the Flesh, and the Other, 5.
123 Falque, God, the Flesh, and the Other, 8-9
125 Falque, God, the Flesh, and the Other, 11.
mystical darkness from Nyssa at the dawn of the Middle Ages to Cusa at the dawn of the Modern Age. In this trajectory, the mystical self engenders a symbology of color within a symbolism of evil, which is the condition for the possibility of modern perspective as racialized sight. Before approaching this study, I want to orientate us to key aspects of this experience of wrestling with mystical darkness. In mystical reflection on darkness, opacity is brought from notions of enigma toward self-reflection and constitution of subjectivity and then, eventually, toward ideology or cultural-aesthetic formation. In this last aspect, as perspective develops out of and upon mystical discourse, the mystical self is transposed, transformed, and transmogrified into the modern self.

**Opacity and Seeing the Image: Apophasis and the Icon**

At a fundamental level, mystical theology is focused on vision, *seeing the divine*, but as understood within a productive tension between the created and uncreated, the particular and the universal. Thus, as McGinn writes, we might say about the mystical (as theology and as a form of life), that it is concerned with “how contact between God and human transforms the awareness of the human subject—from the data of external and internal perception, through the subject’s attempt to understand and evaluate what these mean in terms of affirmation of truth and commitment to action.” Mysticism thus is not restricted to experientialism but “a total commitment to contemplating and loving the supreme and unknowable mystery that is God.”

In this way, one could say, “[t]hough God’s connection to the soul is transhistorical, the soul’s connection to God is temporal or historical in so far as history … is the affair between the finite

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and the infinite.” There is a sense of holding together (and yet apart) the soul and communion with God, and to insist on this as somehow timeless and foundational.

This happens within the “apophatic gesture.” It is not a matter of what one can see visibly and substantially, but a matter of the invisible and unknown which is “beyond being;” it is a matter of the “inner eyes” as contradistinguished from the eyes of the flesh. In this view, mysticism is not primarily about an experience, but about a posture or gesture described as a “negation of negation.” Denys Turner explains that we must “make out clearly the distinction between two levels at which the negativity of the apophatic dialectic operates – that is to say, between the cataphatic employment of conflicting negative-and-affirmative images at the first-order level and the apophatic negation of the negation between those first-order descriptions at the second-order level.” The negation of negation is about removing experience of the divine from the realm of concepts and being. Yet this is externalized through language and speech-acts, which comes to a head focusing on the nature of signs and symbols. This is the tension between a meaningful speech-act and the silent face of the infinite deep to which it is supposed to testify: the drive to see and experience God from out of our particular, creaturely reality and its material and bodily sensuality.

The imagistic concern at the heart of the mystical self is not subdued by the infinite intentionality or pursuit of God: images, bodies, and materiality must be included. What is

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128 Sloterdijk, Bubbles, 556-559.

129 Turner, The Darkness of God, 252.

decisive is the necessarily apophatic nature of imagistic representation. The productive tension between the material and the immaterial sets a kind of theological framework for the notion (already seen in Ricoeur) of the importance of opacity and the image with its power of revealing through the enigma of a concealed-revealed dialectic. The mystic at their heart wrestles with this symbolic tension and its problematics. The finite and the infinite are admitted into experience only as they are bound up in a certain relation of tension. In the apophatic gesture, there is a double intentionality, two levels of discourse. The first-level discourse (the symbol’s “sign” aspect) is bound to a literal, obvious, sign-to-signified meaning; but a second-level discourse occurs, vectoring out from the rigor of the first-level discourse but following it so as to surpass it to that which is not not-literal, not not-obvious, not not-analogical. The negative language at this second-level discourse works back to critique the distinction(s) made by the negative in the first-order discourse, therefore betraying language’s own self-subverting, self-overcoming nature.

This hinges on a relation of opacity between the first- and second-level discourses in the symbol. Within this inner void, analogy surpasses itself only as it forms within one the comportment to make meaning out of this passing over. Decisive, then, to the mystical question is how opacity is dealt with, that human knowing happens within the inexhaustible profundity of the symbol and not the obvious reading of the sign.

This is just what is at stake in the question of the icon and the idol—that is, the way in which the finite should properly relate to the infinite. The enigmatic nature of the icon lies in the fact that it opens up to the transcendent even while being anchored to the material; though here there is always the possibility that materiality can close in upon itself as an idol. In mystical unknowing, this tension between the icon/idol and the resistance to concepts often is anchored to an aesthetics (even ontology) of light in which, all too easily, light represents a final solution to
darkness.\textsuperscript{131} The image here is caught in the problematic of being \textit{merely} an image; of being a shadow of the immaterial, disconnected from eternal absolutes. So Dionysius writes that in this life: “We use whatever appropriate symbols we can for the things of God. With these analogies we are raised upward toward the truth of the mind’s vision, a truth which is simple and one.”\textsuperscript{132} Still, the ineffable God beyond being can yet be spoken of and represented through “mysterious language of divine symbols” that not only point to God but through “anagogic power” lift us up to divine contemplation.\textsuperscript{133} Thus the symbolic, mystical wager is that \textit{human- and meaning-making happens as one is tau(gh)t by a pedagogy of opacity}. This lived consciousness of the double intentionality of materiality, of the image, of the word, is what gives birth to the “self” in pursuit of the other, and, in my view, begets the mystical journey.

\textbf{Opacity and the Self: Transcendence, Immanence, and Freedom}

If one theological vista of opacity that relates to evil in the mystical self is the more ontological question of the representative nature of images as an expression of the tension between finitude/created and the infinite/uncreated, the second vista transforms the question of representation into the existential question about freedom and agency. Here, the negation at the heart of imagistic representation is transposed into the discourse of the making of the self, and the question of the ontological tension between the particular and the universal now becomes a moral tension between the goodness or the evilness of one’s moral trajectory. Moreover, the concern over the word in its opaque relation (as symbol with its double intentionality of material

\textsuperscript{131} See Prevot, “Divine Opacity,” 172.


\textsuperscript{133} See Struck, \textit{Birth of the Symbol}, 257-264.
and immaterial) now becomes a concern over finding oneself situated as a free agent in the face (or abyss) of the transcendent. Whereas in the last point anxiety over darkness is key to opening up one to the unknown, here it becomes a question whether (historico-social) anxiety over darkness is the threshold of openness or of closure of the self to the other. The opacity of the word is now materialized in the discourse that weaves into and interrupts the self.\textsuperscript{134}

The mystic forms the self through “speech as performance”—which is to say, when the opacity of language is put on display by claiming for particular words and experiences a representation of the divine. Such linguistic performance or textuality is the generative power and posture of mysticism, the mechanism it has to keep its abyssal tension as productive and not as ruptured—and, when it is ruptured, to restore the tension (even by extreme performances of speech-acts, those epiphenomenal stereotypes of mystical behavior). As such, mysticism is the making-meaning of a particular experience, the infusing of immanent experience with transcendence; it is “the search for a common language, after language has been shattered.”\textsuperscript{135} And in this grasping or synthesizing posture (apophatic, though it is) the very making of the self is engaged. Michel de Certeau notes that in mystical texts there is “the necessary relation between the subject and the messages.”\textsuperscript{136} Both early in Augustine’s \textit{Confessions} and later in Marguerite Porete’s thirteenth century \textit{The Mirror of Simple Souls}, speech served a performative, creational purpose.\textsuperscript{137} What does speech perform? Somehow, \textit{the self}. For example, in the case of

\textsuperscript{134} This intimately connects to the point above from Ricoeur about “a project of describing transcendence and a project of constituting in immanence” and how “phenomenology always makes sure to “draw the linguistic order back to the structure of experience.” Ricoeur, \textit{From Text to Action}, 42-43, 47.


\textsuperscript{136} de Certeau, “Mystic Speech,” 89.

\textsuperscript{137} Sloterdijk, \textit{Bubbles}, 550-551, 565-566.
Marguerite: “instead of reaching the inside of God through a silent withdrawal, the de-selfed subject plunges into the most daring of performances, as if the unutterable one somehow needed to be uttered through it.” In view of this, I argue that the mystical self/text/speech just is the creation of the space in which the “I” can be (re)established as a performer and speaker within a broader—indeed, infinite—discourse. The mystical self continually constructs and reconstructs the tension between unity/relationality (thing and word) as the very phenomenality of its appearance. This very focus on the nature of language and its power in creating the self is mysticism’s secret for surviving (what will become) its apparent dissolution in modernity. In the mystical posture, language is oriented towards its self-bursting, toward its generative potency. Thus, what mysticism holds out is both a recognition of language’s self-limiting, self-overcoming, abyssal quality, and yet its productive potency to re-make the self when it is threatened and thinned as an economic subject, de-moored from its transcendent orientation. As such, the mystical self is a sharpened expression of the human pathos, this enigma of being caught between the particular and the universal. At the same time, the mystical self in this very quality anticipates (even shapes) a trajectory toward modern subjectivity.

Indeed, historically, the mystic seeks a unity of language when such a unity has been shattered. Discussing the general socio-political context of many mystics, de Certeau notes how mysticism often grew out of “areas of particular instability or forms of social disinheritance.” This kind of marginalization and separation from authority left a kind of wound or agony and a “turn to the exegesis of ‘wild’ voices.” Thus: “The project of constructing an order amid the

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138 Sloterdijk, *Bubbles*, 566.
139 de Certeau, “Mystic Speech,” 84-85.
140 de Certeau, “Mystic Speech,” 87.
contingencies of history … and the quest to discern in our earthly, fallen language the now inaudible Word of God … arose simultaneously from the dissociation of cosmic language and the Divine Speaker.”¹⁴¹ The mystical particularly flowers not just within the productive angst of the pathos of the human situation generally, but also in the specific historical sense of the loosening of the tension between the particular and the universal; amidst the pain and lack of the growing division, one all the more seeks eros. At this precipice there is a flourishing of the mystical right on the edge of its threatening.

This is particularly the case at the dawn of the modern age when—I follow Michel de Certeau here—the mystical tension that keeps unity and relation together eventually bursts, giving way to the making of the modern self as “[t]he economic subject replaces the mystic subject.”¹⁴² The economic or modern self seeks to separate and suture back together the finite and the infinite on a merely economic basis.¹⁴³ This, as we will see, has much to do with nominalism, and this slackening of the tension is reflected in Cusa’s thought. In the eventual severing of the productive tension between the finite and the infinite in modernity, opacity no longer represents the tension itself between finitude and infinitude but becomes associated with finitude and qualities of finitude (like the body). Having severed the construct that made the mystical self possible by removing the opaque relation between the finite and infinite, modern subjectivity then objectified this opacity and set it over against the finite-economic in the place of the infinite. In the making of the modern self, opacity is treated as an obstacle to overcome.

¹⁴¹ de Certeau, “Mystic Speech,” 87.

¹⁴² de Certeau, “Mystic Speech,” 96.

The birth of the modern subject is a desire for certainty that is threatened by opacity and “otherizes” it. This coincides with the emergence of racial blackness and whiteness. At stake here is the very shape of modern rationality as it relates to mystical darkness. Mysticism and modern rationality are not opposed; we must interrogate their connection. Falque argues that mysticism “nourishes [rationality] and is nourished by it in a criss-crossing of intuition and concept.” Mystical excess “not only indicates the negation of the concept, but also the entrance into a new type of rationality” as the human being is “elevated beyond himself in being penetrated by God.”

In this vein, Jean Baruzi speaks of “a mystical intuition” (l’intuition mystique) which reveals “that which, interior to metaphysical systems, evades scientific verification and yet exists for us in the world of thought in the form of a vivifying element.”

But in this interaction between mysticism and rationality, what is decisive for us is just how the body, the letter, or materiality—that is, finitude—is dealt with, even hidden, in the transcendence toward the infinite ideal. This becomes a question of whether the self achieves modern freedom only as the body is eschewed. What is at stake in this apparent crafting of the self’s identity and of its transformation upon the face of the immaterial abyss? Such a concern moves us from being interested merely in how ideality writes transcendence over our finitude in crafting subjectivity, to being interested in the “facticity” of how such claims to transcendence build a colonial world.

**Opacity and the Other: (Auto-)poetic Production and the Ethiopian Demon**

Let me fold back one more layer of this complicated transition between the mystical and the modern self. If we have followed how the question of mystical darkness traverses through

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144 Falque, *God, the Flesh, and the Other*, 18.

challenges in representation and in self-formation, we now come to the question of *praxis* and the material world. This is the question of how mystical contemplation seeks to impact and shape the world through action (even if in the mode of *negation*) from out of its wrestling with the enigma. My concern is how an ontology built on opaque images is thickened through its intersection with the subjective plane—and thus with ideas of morality, of intentionality, of agency—as an *ontologizing force* now objectively in the world which acts back upon subjectivity. What I want to explore is how the matter of mystical darkness becomes the matter of racial blackness amidst the passing over of the mystical self to the modern self: now it is *darkness of skin* that is limit-threshold to a broader, patri-religious, identity. Modern perspective racializes the world as a kind of ontologizing force, but only because it is rooted in a deeper symbolism of evil which, taken up by actors and their pathologies, takes hold of opacity and utilizes it in its colonial reach.

To explore this, I follow David Brakke’s thought about the construction of the early Christian monastic self in the face of spiritual combat. Though for the most part “the monk’s conflict with the demons was invisible, for it was an internal struggle with thoughts and inclinations,” at times the demon or devil would appear visibly and would do so “as Ethiopians or with black skin”—something that would continue for Christian ascetics even into the Middle Ages.  

146 Exploring this in detail, Brakke highlights an overall threefold pattern in the construction of the monastic self which will be crucial for us: “(1) disruption or crisis in a monastic relationship (caused by temptation); (2) encounter with an Ethiopian; and (3) reconstitution of the relationship on a more advanced basis.” I argue that mystical darkness

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can be seen as an analogue of this process of subjectivity, one that theorizes it more generally for Christian identity beyond the earliest monks. In this pattern, darkness of skin color is constructed as an ambivalent image, one which is negated and rendered inoperative and yet one which works on the deepest level to secure the identity of the self—and, as such, affects a conflictual process of subjectification. With this in mind, Brakke asserts that stories of monks wrestling with demons in early Christian literature “invite a cultural analysis that does not eschew psychoanalytic concepts such as repression and projection.” I, too, will finally connect mystical subjectivity to psychoanalysis.

The Ethiopian demon is interesting indeed. Brakke writes: “The Ethiopian demon originated in the notion that the Ethiopian’s black skin symbolized evil, a seemingly obvious corollary to the use of light or whiteness to symbolize the good.” It was easy, from there, to identity the devil itself as black in Christian discourse. This symbolism went beyond Christian theology and was more broadly understood. Beyond monastic literature, Christian discussion of Ethiopians is exegetical, especially focusing on the bride figure in Song of Solomon (as we will see with Gregory of Nyssa), where “black skin symbolized the sin that Christian grace removed.” But the assertion, by Brakke and others (reminiscent of Buell), is that this was not yet racial but had to do with “the Romans’ more general ethnocentric reactions to foreignness in

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147 Brakke, Demons and the Making of the Monk, 170. This exploration is important, perhaps central, because “such stories exaggerate a process of externalization that characterizes many, but not all, such demonic encounters” as well as the fact that it demonstrates, as Brakke asserts, the “close, indeed inescapable, relationship between monk and demon.” 158

148 See Brakke, Demons and the Making of the Monk, 158. Brakke notes the work of Homi K. Bhabha.

149 Brakke, Demons and the Making of the Monk, 158.

150 Brakke, Demons and the Making of the Monk, 159.
bodies and cultures.” More particularly, the Ethiopian body quite visually deviated from the Roman ideal of somatic norm which included roughly being between dark and light in skin, eyes, and hair (with a midway texture between soft and coarse), and average in size of nose, lips and overall stature. Thus the claim is made that this was not racial but was “purely and simply a matter of the observer’s optical registration of somatic distance or of the somatic norm, uninfluenced by the facts of the observed person’s biological descent, and uncomplicated by any ideologically operative link with social role or social distance.” Undoubtedly this assertion obscures what is at stake here: the moral symbolism of dark skin, the visible marking of it within some kind of moral geography. Indeed, Brakke asserts that while it might be the case that there was not an ideological link with social distance this is not uncomplicated by an ideologically operative link with moral distance. The ancient pseudoscience of physiognomy claimed to be able to read quality of character from the appearance of the body. Not surprisingly, physical characteristics associated with the somatic norm were evaluated positively, while the attributes of the deviant Aethiops indicated moral flaws.

It is just this aspect of a moral symbolism at stake in black skin that is utilized in the monastic accounts of the Ethiopian demon. Indeed, in several cases the demon is black so as to “mark as clearly demonic an otherwise ambiguous or puzzling action or problem.”

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151 Brakke, *Demons and the Making of the Monk*, 158. This sense of foreignness with the Ethiopian took on the sense of a foreign military threat. Even in the monastic literature this is the case, where at times the Ethiopian signifies or implies some kind of foreign military threat). “While persons elsewhere in the Mediterranean may have been able to romanticize the mythic military power of the Ethiopian people, Egyptians had a more palpable sense of an “Ethiopian” threat and thus were more likely to scapegoat darker-skinned persons in their midst. And indeed the anti-ascetic Ethiopian demon appears to have been invented in Egypt and then exported literally to Syria, Palestine, and western Europe.” 163

152 Brakke, *Demons and the Making of the Monk*, 164.


What I want to focus on particularly is the connection between the Ethiopian and the issue of sexuality and filiation. In “the earliest datable appearance of a black or Ethiopian demon in extant monastic literature (ca. 357),” the devil appears in the *Life of Antony* as a feminized Black boy with erotic power: “It is I who am fornication’s lover,” the demon states, “and I am called the spirit of fornication.” Brakke comments: “The black demon externalizes the monk’s experience of a seemingly irresistible desire within himself.” Often *eros* was understood as a kind of demonic lure.\(^{156}\) In the account of Antony, the black demon is not yet the Ethiopian, but the symbolism was there and forming as “the black demon embodied an eroticized power.” Brakke writes that “[w]hen the visual form of the black demon gained more precise definition as Ethiopian, it acquired the stereotypical traits associated with the Ethiopian body type that circulated through Greco-Roman culture, especially hypersexuality. Because of this stereotypical hypersexuality, the Ethiopian demon was an effective way to represent erotic desire as something that could be renounced.”\(^{157}\) In this way the Ethiopian demon symbolized specifically *sexual* evil. At times, this included “reduc[ing] the Ethiopian form to the penis.”\(^{158}\) This was often thought alongside “Roman male anxieties about the legitimacy of their sons and thus about Roman identity, understood in patrilineal terms.” In this way, the issue of filiation crosses with that of blackness of skin: “The disturbing sexual power of the Ethiopian, located and visually marked in him or her as a body rather than as a member of a social group, threatened to disrupt

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\(^{155}\) Brakke, *Demons and the Making of the Monk*, 160.

\(^{156}\) Brakke, *Demons and the Making of the Monk*, 160-162.


genealogical order and yet had (anti-) demonic force.”¹⁵⁹ Such themes of concern over “eroticized power and filial identity” show up clearly in the monastic Ethiopian demon.¹⁶⁰

All of this comes to a head in the matter of “the resolution of anxieties both sexual and genealogical” upon the site of the Ethiopian.¹⁶¹ The Ethiopian encounter provides an opportunity to work out homosocial male bonding and filiation as communal, cultural and patri-religio generation is moored in overcoming darkness/blackness/alterity/woman. I quote Brakke at length here:

Several accounts of Ethiopian demons deploy the stereotypical hypersexuality and fleshliness of the Ethiopian in order to bring stability to a monastic identity in flux. The encounter with the Ethiopian demon, simultaneously attractive and frightening in its condensed visual representation of the self’s erotic desire, drives the monk to solidify his position as a monk, especially as a good father or son. By its disturbing yet therapeutic embodiment of alterity within the self, the Ethiopian demon provides some traction, as it were, for the monk in crisis to move to an improved ascetic state. Like all stereotypes, this deployment of the Ethiopian depends on the presumption of a fixed nature in that which is being stereotyped, the Ethiopian: he or she is always body—hypersexual, powerful, and/or macrophallic—while the monk is transformable into spirit, able to renounce the eroticism that sticks to the Ethiopian as closely as his or her skin.¹⁶²

The Ethiopian brings clarity to identity and relationship when it is ambivalent, and especially when it is threatened by the erotic. In one account, the monk is pulling away from his monastic father, is encountered by the Ethiopian demon, and, frightened, says, “I need you, Father”—this

¹⁵⁹ Brakke, Demons and the Making of the Monk, 164-165.

¹⁶⁰ Through connecting the Ethiopian demon to the temptation to fornication, but more generally discussing the Ethiopian exegetically as a figure of de-sexualization or as a chaste or washed convert, there is the element of colonial desire and power rooted in the “Ethiopian as foreign” motif. For example, for Didymus the Blind “biblical ‘Ethiopians’ represent pagans, potential Christians (specifically pagan idolaters), children of the devil who are eager to do his desires and are black from ignorance and sin, and flesh. In contrast, Didymus says, non-Ethiopians (‘we’) are Christians, children of Zion who are filled with the divine love and are white from divine washing, spirit.” See Brakke, Demons and the Making of the Monk, 165-166.

¹⁶¹ Brakke, Demons and the Making of the Monk, 166.

¹⁶² Brakke, Demons and the Making of the Monk, 175.
being the first time the monk designates as father the elder monk. Here “the unnerving alterity of the Ethiopian demon … effects the construction of the proper monastic identity.”¹⁶³ The anxiety over fornication threatens monastic sonship so deeply that it is psychically externalized in the image of the Ethiopian.

This configuring of monastic identity (like the alchemist’s identity, according to Eliade) upon the site of the black-body-symbolized-as-evil invites us to understand how the center of mystical darkness in the apophatic gesture becomes, for modern thought, the engine for racializing anthropogenesis. This leads us back to opacity in its anterior possibility of productive enigma. In its most ideal possibility, the mystical posture is that which empowers one to engage in a kind of self-formation intently focused on both the danger of finitude-closed-upon-itself and the possibility of the opening of the self toward a transcendent horizon; it seeks to orient the body specifically in view of the challenges that evil presents. (This shows the difficult balance of this monastic-cum-modern identity, crafted as it is upon an enigmatic center and thus given fuel by the very potentiality for the subversion of the modern self, always operating under the surface.) Still, we must consider the way in which mystical theology shapes the racialized world we in the modern age are thrown into. For it could be, in its determined effort to transform the body, the self, and society, that the mystical posture in its reflection on darkness comes to obscure the logics it enacts. In seeking to transform finitude in the face of the infinite, what is done to finitude slips out of view. And—this is key—once this operation of surpassing-suppressing finitude has been seized upon in modernity, it becomes impossible to see what has become of opacity, for now thought matures just as it claims a kind of transparency or

¹⁶³ Brakke, Demons and the Making of the Monk, 170-71. See Brakke’s compelling recounting of several key monastic narratives in this regard, 168-171.
enlightenment. Darkness is now not primarily the ontological thickness of materiality, so much as the vast horizon conquered by the light of the intellect. We come, then, to the matter of perspective as racial: enmeshed in a symbolics of color, vision builds a racialized world.

**Perspective as Symbolization of Opacity**

This brings me to my ultimate interest: *the historical development of a symbolism of color through the development of the symbol of perspective*. Not merely a particular *technique* of artistic representation, perspective as phenomenological or symbolic is fundamentally that which shapes perception through the organization of space. Traversing the development of perspective upon discourses of mystical reflection on darkness represents the long route of hermeneutics necessary to understanding how white racial formation and subjectivity shapes white sight. The “negation of negation” that roots mystical subjectivity catalyzes a new mode of negation at the heart of modern perspective and the subjectivity it engenders: modern perspective constructs itself through anxiety over opacity, organizing spatiality through constructing a virtual depth by negation of darkness. In linear perspective “a single network of lines can create an effect of depth that implies the negation, or— as the phenomenologists would put it—the ‘néantization,’ of the plane onto which it is projected, to the gain of the image inscribed there.”

Perspective now becomes the condition for the possibility of seeing depth and engendering a virtual spatiality *just through this negation*, this artifice of depth and the regime of subjectivity that arises from it.

Modern perspective is wrapped up in the “crossing of gazes,” as we will see. Upon the theological discourse of mystical darkness, opacity traverses enigma toward self-reflection in the making of the self (especially as upon the logic of the mirror), issuing forth in a perspective

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which crafts ideology upon the logic of the darkness of opacity. In this way, perspective functions itself as a symbol constitutive of the modern age, one fundamental to the genesis and maintenance of whiteness. Opacity here is useful in that it is utilized now as a kind of intentionally (in a moral gesture) set on disguising what is being done with opacity through a logic of transparency, as particular vision masquerading as a universal vision. If eventually the notion of perspective particularly manifests as a central aspect in art history, Damisch argues, it is that in painting “perspective … provides a means of staging this capture [of the crossing of the gazes] and of playing it out in a reflective mode.” And now our task is a critical reflection of the operation at play here as a racial operation. Here I set in more general, conceptual terms what I will soon unpack historically.

Jean-Luc Marion: Perspective, Icon, Idol

Theologically, the matter of perspective, for Marion, is discussed in terms of the difference between the icon and the idol, spoken of in terms of two different ways the mirror functions. Initially heuristically helpful, in this frame, the divine vision granted through the icon is separated from the operation of modern perspective. Marion notes that the difference between an icon and an idol is the matter of how “beings” signal differently, that is, “two manners of being for beings” or “two modes of apprehension of the divine in visibility.” The idol is a matter of gazing or seeing, whereas the icon is a matter of the crossing of the gazes or seeing being seen. An idol fills up the whole of the gaze; it stops the gaze and allows it to rest on a particular being. As such, an idol, argues Marion, is an “invisible mirror” in that it mirrors back …

165 Damisch, The Origin of Perspective, 46

the gaze and its aim, though it obscures this fact because it dazzles and ravishes the viewer.\textsuperscript{167} As such, the idol “allows no invisible”: the advent of the divine here is measured by what the gaze can take in.\textsuperscript{168} The icon, on the other hand, represents the gaze of the infinite which provokes our vision and allows the visible to be rendered as truly visible; particularly, it is a face in which the viewer sees infinity gazing back. The visible mirror of the icon opens to a “face where the human gaze is engulfed, invited to see the invisible.”\textsuperscript{169} Thus, for Marion, what is decisive is the difference between the “invisible mirror” of the idol and the “visible mirror of the invisible” that is the face in the icon—a face which “allows itself to be traversed by an infinite depth.”\textsuperscript{170} Importantly, Marion distances what is at stake in the icon from what is at stake in modern perspective, discussing how the icon offers a kind of “counter” or “inverted” perspective.\textsuperscript{171} The icon is not caught up in the gaze and perspective but represents a being-gazed-at. I will make clear, however, that this notion of being-gazed-at is also at the heart of linear perspective. I find, therefore, his thought on perspective instructive to the whole of the matter of visibility.

Thinking about perspective fleshes out the dynamics of sight in terms of depth and surface, invisibility and visibility. For Marion, perspective “exercises a paradox” as an “intervention of the invisible in the visible” which shocks the gaze.\textsuperscript{172} It gives to the gaze the ability to “pierce through the visible”:

\textsuperscript{167} Marion, \textit{God without Being}, 10-12.

\textsuperscript{168} Marion, \textit{God without Being}, 13-14.

\textsuperscript{169} Marion, \textit{God without Being}, 17-19.

\textsuperscript{170} Marion, \textit{God without Being}, 20.


\textsuperscript{172} Marion, \textit{The Crossing of the Visible}, 1-2.
in perspective, the gaze pierces through what one would call, for lack of a better term, a middle ground [milieu], a milieu so transparent that it neither stops nor slows down the gaze but allows it to rush through, without any resistance, as if it were a vacuum [vide]. In the case of perspective, the gaze pierces the void [le vide], without any obstacle or limit other than its own exhaustion.\footnote{173}

This “piercing” through a transparent milieu is the essence of perspective for Marion, and it is how perspective builds a world, “open[ing] up the space of things.”\footnote{174} Piercing through the visible, the gaze of perspective “instills the invisible in the visible, not indeed to render it less visible but, on the contrary, to render it more visible: instead of experiencing chaotically informed impressions, we see there the very visibility of things.” Reflecting on this, Marion argues that perspective is not firstly a “historically situated pictorial theory” but should be understood “as a fundamental role of the gaze, without which we would never see a world.” Perspective organizes what we see, making the visible seen as such through the invisible.\footnote{175} In this way, perspective is correlated with interpretation as it “arrang[es] and display[s] the chaos of the visible as harmonious phenomena.”\footnote{176}

Perspective creates the world through the negation of (superficial) visibility, creating an artificial depth and virtual spatiality through the opacity of the gaze. Perspective here does not create or add to any real space but opens up an abstract space that makes things appear in our perception.\footnote{177} Through the gaze of perspective, then, “depth will always remain in front of me as that which I will never be able to traverse.”\footnote{178} In this way, perspective provokes “depth” as

\footnote{173} Marion, The Crossing of the Visible, 2.
\footnote{174} Marion, The Crossing of the Visible, 4.
\footnote{175} Marion, The Crossing of the Visible, 3-4.
\footnote{176} Marion, The Crossing of the Visible, 5.
\footnote{177} Marion, The Crossing of the Visible, 3.
darkness is overcome, conquered through ideality. This provides a kind of “relief” of the abyss and organization of the unknown:

The relief of the visible comes to it from the invisible, which lifts it by deepening and crossing it, to the point of uprooting it from the humus of flatness where one encounters only unidimensional perception. The invisible pierces in transparency the visible only in order to raise it, moreover to rehabilitate it, rather than to replace it (as in military “relief”) or appease it (“relief” in English). Perspective’s gaze ennobles the visible by the invisible and, thus, lifts it up.179

Perspectival interpretation—the granting of artificial depth and therein a virtual world—comes on the scene to rescue the visible from its uncanny humility.

In view of this operation, Marion notes two paradoxes of perspective. The first is that “the visible increases in direct proportion to the invisible. The more the invisible is increased, the more the visible is deepened.” Marion puts this in terms of the painting, where through perspective the “first” visible is only a flat surface, which then through perspective “nevertheless, deepens itself to a bottomless depth.”180 To this first paradox, Marion adds a second: “the space that places the visible on stage or in view is not, in itself, real, in such a way that the real visible increases in direct proportion to a space of emptiness.”181 Again, Marion turns to the painting: consider that the spatiality that opens and organizes a painting will never be able to be physically traversed itself, because it remains first and uniquely ideal: the flatness of the painting physically allows for only length and breadth, not depth; with my finger … I am able to actually run across the contours of the work, but I will never be able to initiate myself into the depths of the third dimension, which nevertheless, phenomenologically, I perceive first of all.182

In painting, perspective does not open a real dimension, as Marion puts it, but “removes a real dimension (the depth where I advance my steps) in order to … reinforce by the same gesture both the closure of its surface and the indefinite staging of its levels.”\(^{183}\) In all of this, an ideal depth has been virtually and artificially created through the clearing away of the first visible.

Now, it is the case that for Marion perspective is not merely a confirmation of “the gaze.” Perspective displods the gaze which makes the painting a flat color-covered surface, a mere “spatial object among others.” Perspective here resists tangible objectivity of materiality in order to see meaning (“a world within the world, a world sometimes more visible than the real world”) as it opens up “the flatness of the art-object onto and into a world: the invisible, in perspective, mundaneizes a real visible by an infinite number of irreal visible, and thereby renders the visible all the more apparent.”\(^{184}\) However, therein lies not only the potency of the gaze of perspective, but its very problem. When we move out from a mere eidetic phenomenology of perspective to a more hermeneutical one, we see the problem as that of how the dealing of perspective with the opacity of finitude by its negation through virtual depth becomes a matter of racializing logics.

Then the following statement can be seen in its problematic dimensions:

the real given and actually perceived has no form so long as the gaze does not find the conditions and the point of view from which it takes shape for the first time. The anamorphosis—this complicated perspective, this simplified anamorphosis—atteststo the fact that only the invisible makes possible the visible, by informing it: crossing over \([\text{traverser}]\) the flatness of the real painting, though without ever exiting, in view of the spectacle aimed by the invisible gaze.\(^{185}\)


\(^{184}\) Marion, *The Crossing of the Visible*, 11-12.

\(^{185}\) Marion, *The Crossing of the Visible*, 12.
While perspective has the transcendental function of organizing a world, the problem occurs when the relief and “raising up” of flatness short-circuits reflection on ethics and a history of power. In this case, perspective, through its gaze, is complicit in building a racialized world.

This concern, in my opinion, troubles Marion’s overall project of setting iconic vision on a different plane from perspective. Marion argues that the icon is the undoing of perspective, as the icon surpasses objectivity. Since perspective with its objectivity “organize[s] the gaze of the visible ordered according to the depth of the invisible,” the icon, escaping this, “implies the possibility of a new relation [jeu] between the visible and the invisible, where no longer is one or the other placed on stage, but both are placed there permanently. Or, we suggest, the invisible in the visible.” Fundamentally, for Marion, the icon is more a matter of being seen than of seeing (I will explore this in-depth in Chapter Three). In the icon “we have not exited from perspective because we still have not entered there;” perspective is “a particular case” of relating the visible and the invisible “and, despite its overabundant richness, has become otherwise exhausted.”

But is the liberation of vision only possible as a kind of radical vision that escapes perspective, contingency, and finitude? Marion is partially correct in claiming that the interplay between the visible and the invisible in the icon gives depth differently than (modern) perspective—the icon should give a “reverse” perspective. However, if we bypass the problems of human seeing through latching onto a pure theological sight, we will not be able to critically interrogate sight itself. A claim to an “immediate” vision cannot properly deal with the hermeneutical layers that

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186 Marion, The Crossing of the Visible, 19-20

187 Marion, The Crossing of the Visible, 22. See 17-19 for how Marion builds this assertion upon a conversation in which he connects minimalist art (a white square on a white base) and the icon.
have historically constructed the racial way we see. We need to go through the symbol and its opacity instead of a “leaping over” to some ultimate foundation or mode of being.

**The rise of a Symbol: the historizing of perspective toward linearity**

Decisively at stake, then, in the matter of perspective, I argue, is its *historical development*, that is, the nature of the relationship (and perhaps the historical progression, as we will trace with Erwin Panofsky) between reverse perspective and linear or modern perspective. I am not here interested in a mere history but how the development of perspective *in its symbolic function* reflects changes in subjective seeing and constructing of the world and its depth. What is significant is how modern perspective was constructed to correlate “right viewpoint” with truth and what this means for an entirely new regime of human knowing. Thus Damisch writes: “*Perspective designates it in the art of painting. But who designates it in truth and ethics?*”\(^{188}\)

The question is crucial for us. Who gives form to the visible through their gaze? Who organizes the world’s depth, and how? Whose perspective *counts* to build a world? These questions shape our own pivotal inquiry as we wrestle with how the perspective apparatus shapes a moral geography rooted in color symbolism. This fundamentally has to do with the social production of space as it comes to be marked by racial logics through perspective.

Damisch discusses certain difficulties to trying to uncover an exact history of perspective and also notes how much perspective was always wrapped up in broader questions of infinity, mathematization, and the nature of space. By discussing modern perspective as “paradigm,” Damisch better helps us to bridge the phenomenological and symbolic aspects of perspective with the historical, ethical, and political aspects, tracing out how the specifics of linear

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perspective construction gives birth to a certain legacy. As paradigm, perspective is not so important as a product but as something that is “productive of effects, insofar as its capacity, its power to inform extends well beyond the limits of the era in which it was born.” Indeed, in terms of modern perspective, Damisch notes how its “informing” much more shapes our own age “thanks to photography, film, and now video, than … the fifteenth century, which could boast of very few ‘correct’ perspective constructions.” This indicates the “heuristic power of the perspective configuration, and the value of it as a model for thought.” So I give here two paradigms of perspective, which stand in some historical relationship, though I am ultimately interested in how they produce subjectivity differently.

A large part of our hermeneutical-historical detour to follow will be to trace how the development of linear perspective relates to “reverse” perspective, a perspective paradigm that is “a defining feature of the icon” (as we have begun to see with Marion). I will avoid discussing reverse perspective in a way that assumes linear perspective as normative, but focus on reverse perspective as the viewing of simultaneous planes in light of the “spiritual-synthetic nature of visual images.” As Clemena Antonova points out, Pavel Florensky is key to contemporary thinking about reverse or iconic perspective, and especially is useful not because we need to accept his fundamental claim that reverse perspective matches more accurately the phenomenon of physical vision, but because his work puts into question the scientific and natural basis

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189 Damisch, The Origin of Perspective, xvii-xxiv.
190 Damisch, The Origin of Perspective, 28.
191 Damisch, The Origin of Perspective, xiii; see also 52.
193 Antonova, Space, Time, and Presence in the Icon, 35.
apparently at stake in linear perspective. Indeed, one of Florensky’s main contentions is that “human vision does not operate in accordance with a geometrical, Euclidean construction of space,” the kind of space operating in linear perspective. He argues against notions of the exclusive point of view of the beholder, monocularity, and the fixed position of the seer; he stresses the world is in constant movement, thus no view of the world can be fixed or centered around the beholder. He also points out how linear perspective excludes other processes involved in sight, such as memory. Instead of being fixed and perceiving a fixed world, “The viewer observes different sides of the objects and never only one.” Whether through memory or other affective processes, sight involves “the need to successively translate” the object onto the retina. Ultimately, there is a hermeneutical putting-together of vision for Florensky.

Just what is at stake in reverse perspective is mired by a history that tries to explain reverse perspective through the normativity and “accuracy” of linear perspective, especially focusing on various explanations of technical methods. Antonova dismisses these various technical claims about reverse perspective. She notes the general truth that in reverse perspective there is a kind of multiplicity or simultaneity of various viewpoints—and certainly a dislodging of a kind of viewpoint which grasps vision in a fixed manner. Thus a dynamic viewing position is at stake: “the form of reverse perspective is the result of the summarizing of the viewer’s perception under the conditions of a multiplicity of viewpoints, that are themselves the result of the dynamics of the viewing position.”

according to an abstract continuum of space, but images viewed in reverse perspective are composed according to a multiplicity of viewpoints at stake in the “dynamic view” or multiple viewpoints of any beholder of any given object.\textsuperscript{197}

Arising most prominently among the artists of Renaissance Italy, the new artistic technique of linear perspective was developed out of scientific discourses on optics, or \textit{perspectiva} (including that of Islamic scientist and philosopher Alhasen),\textsuperscript{198} especially out of the theory and use of the mirror in ancient optical theory (or catoptrics) and its concern with the similarity between the eye and the mirror regarding light and the dynamics of accuracy and distortion in representation.\textsuperscript{199} As we will see, Brunelleschi is a key figure to understand regarding his experiments as the origin point of linear perspective. Another important figure is Leon Battista Alberti, who in his \textit{De Pictura} (1435) codified and circulated this new perspective more broadly in Europe. Alberti discussed the “pyramid of sight” being intersected with a planar cross section, where then various visual “rays” are represented on this surface organized around the primacy of the “centric ray” perpendicular to the plane.\textsuperscript{200} In this way, what one saw from a particular viewpoint was translated to its pictorial representation on the coordinates of the painting’s surface; Alberti discussed this in terms of a plane of “transparent glass” or a “window” into nature meant to frame a world perfected and mastered by geometry.\textsuperscript{201} Thus, in

\textsuperscript{197}Antonova, \textit{Space, Time, and Presence in the Icon}, 39.

\textsuperscript{198}Taylor Knight, “In a Mirror and an Enigma: Nicholas of Cusa’s \textit{De Visione Dei} and the Milieu of Vision,” \textit{Sophia} 59 (2020): 115.


what becomes a new way of seeing the world as a whole, Renaissance perspective ultimately sought to represent space as ruled by mathematics, “a fully rational – that is, infinite, unchanging and homogeneous – space”202—one which “human beings attempt to master by projecting onto or into it poles and lines of their own construction.”203 This technique engendered a “new kind of picture [which] simulated a three-dimensional space that viewers then appropriated for themselves with their gaze.”204 The full force of this new technique was such that, as a kind of “disembodied eye,” the viewer “standing in front of a picture painted in linear perspective could feel—and wanted to feel—the same dominance toward it that people attributed to God’s relationship with the world.”205 Belting explains that in this way Alberti was attempting to usurp the theological symbol of the singular eye for his own vision instead of God’s. There is, markedly, a kind of “artificiality” here that elides the motion and shifting involved in everyday vision and also assumes this disembodied, monocular vision and a flat earth.206 Thus with its construction of homogenous space and task of mastery and human measure, many scholars argue Alberti prefigures Descartes.207


202 Panofsky, Perspective as Symbolic Form, 28–29.

203 Harries, Infinity and Perspective, 66.


205 Belting, Florence and Baghdad, 211–12.

206 Harries, Infinity and Perspective, 77.

Our own inquiry, then, will have to examine how perspective was constructed (the gritty historical details), and keep this in tension with its legacy—how it shapes thought and especially early modern racial logics. But, as I have argued intently so far, the difficulty of interrogating the nature of perspective lies in the way perspective is always already interpretive and shapes perception itself. Damisch writes how modern perspective has informed perception “so completely that it shed its polymorphic character to become ‘euclidean.’” In this way, linear or modern perspective paradigm has “shaped, informed, and programmed [our culture] at bedrock level … by [having] a bearing on the conditions determinant of all objectivity, of the perception of objects, from whatever angle or point view they might be considered.”\(^{208}\) Through this, modern perspective seeks to rule the question of perspective on objectivity and truth, Damisch argues, as well as the question of the “subject” itself. In this way “perspective is given to our thought not only as a ‘form’ bound up with an entire epistemological constellation, but … as a singular paradigmatic structure.” As such, the linear perspective paradigm escapes “historical contingency” and the specificity of Renaissance, humanist culture: “For it is a structural fact, if not a structural effect, that when man comes to terms with the symbolic order, his being is, from the very start, entirely absorbed in it, and produced by it, not as ‘man,’ but as subject.”\(^{209}\) If, as I will show, the very logic of modern perspective construction was crafted to negate darkness and depth in building a universal and infinite virtual world around a particular vantage point, then the problem of race is at the very center of the problem of modern subjectivity.

\(^{208}\) Damisch, *The Origin of Perspective*, 52.

Through perspective, I will show, upon the theological discourse of mystical darkness, opacity becomes *solidified through its ontologization and reification*. The one who was dark or unknown to the one whose viewpoint was authorized is now *marked as visibly dark*, the visible naturalization of this ideal viewpoint. This is a kind of doubling of opacity from a symbolic dimension to an ontic dimension; and it represents a certain psychological moment in the making of the modern subject, but one that, as pathological spins out tangible worlds of the fantastic. Now whiteness and blackness take on moral dimensions as boundaries which, when crossed or *transgressed*, betray their fundamentally *moral* archaeology. In the culmination of its pathologization, as *ideology*, opacity is utilized through the apparatus of perspective as a force for obscuring, for *making or keeping* unknown—through a kind of universal surveillance.

In this chapter, I have explained the complexity of seeing darkly and indicated the philosophical and theological route needing to be traversed if we are to take our Corinthian passage seriously. We must engage in a hermeneutics of discovering just how modern perspective was constructed as it dealt with existential questions of finitude and evil, how this actually happened within Christian mystical discourse on darkness. Akin to Ricoeur’s point about the need to lose and find the self in detour in the archeology of the subject by route of culture artifacts, Damisch writes:

> Perspective has become so completely integrated into our knowledge, at the most implicit or unconscious level, that today we must turn to another kind of knowledge, erudite knowledge, and embark on an anamnestic project designed to recover it from the technological oblivion into which it has been plunged by ideology.

Indeed, this will not merely be an anamnestic project but a psychoanalytic one for white people. Reaching back into our past, we might be able to unearth horizons for our future. As we re-trace

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our steps and unwind the pathologization of opacity, we discover, in its hidden recesses and folds, that potency (and indeterminacy) that—put to use to construct one kind of world—can be *re-used* to construct anew.

In this way, a hermeneutical phenomenology is able to “implant (new) eyes” in us, to see things covered over and disguised. In view of this, white sight—that historically developed and socially inculcated symbolic intentional activity that depends on the self-concealing, learned ability to associate moral and ontological meaning with color through a deeper symbolism of evil—is *marked* as the script is flipped, according to Yancy. The opacity of whiteness is gazed upon and interrogated, exposing the way in which it uses logics of opacity and transparency to obscure how it is built upon the rejection of opacity. What is at stake here is to expose the “opaque transparency” of whiteness, its particular evil. The way forward in shedding light on this background process of habituated perception is “to make visible the practices of visibility itself, to outline the background from which our knowledge of others and of ourselves appear in relief. From there we may be able to alter the associated meanings ascribed to visible difference.”

This process will involve a kind of critical therapeutics after I diagnose the problem. Part of this healing will be not only an internal journey but an ability to open up one’s senses in a new posture of genuinely listening to and seeing the other, engendering a new kind of spatiality.

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211 Alcoff, “Toward a Phenomenology,” 25.
CHAPTER TWO

GREGORY OF NYSSA, EPEKTASIS, AND EARLY CHRISTIAN THOUGHT
ON PERSPECTIVE AND AESTHETIC FORMATION

Gregory of Nyssa’s notion of *epektasis* is the first part of our hermeneutical-historical detour examining perspective forged within the mystical notion of the darkness of God. Generally, we can understand Nyssa’s *epektasis* as the perpetual yet finite journey of growing in purifying virtue toward the horizon of the infinite divine, spoken of under the figure of the “darkness of God.” Nyssa will be important for our study because the epektatic framework establishes the trajectory I will follow to Nicholas of Cusa and into modernity: darkness or opacity is limit-threshold that marks the divide between creator and creature; yet *the finite human being is transformed upon the darkness-figured-as-mirror to come into relation with and perhaps transcend to the infinite*. Thus, Nyssa will open our study on several fronts: darkness in the mystical experience is a threshold experience, but ambivalently configured such that it could be either positively or negatively symbolized; this experience with darkness can transform the self in the face of the infinite; and the importance of the *mirror* (and one’s vision upon it) as it functions to relate finitude and infinitude, and transform the body in so doing. The uniqueness of Nyssa’s thought will allow us to see the complex dynamics in which the body can be transformed in the interest of divine sight. Nyssa insists we seek after the “divine Nature” and the good and beautiful only through an intervening hermeneutical sieve crafted by the markings of materiality—because we are not merely immaterial and intelligible beings but also corporeal
and perceptible beings.¹ The density of one’s creatureliness and the rigor of its sense-perceptive nature is embraced as the point from which one journeys into divine darkness—so long as one “uses” the body and finitude to “anagogically” connect (as we will see) to its truest intentionality, the infinite “beyond being.”

In the larger scope of my task, I approach Nyssa in pursuit of a theologically-conscious hermeneutical phenomenology of whiteness focused on opacity, and I do so especially in view of Carter’s effort to connect blackness of race positively to opacity within a generally Nyssen framework. I argue that Nyssa does, in fact, explore a mystical darkness or opacity that grants a critical subjectivity that sees in such a way that subverts modern racial logics—one in which opacity or darkness guards alterity, defines the horizon as unconquerable, and positively catalyzes free human growth toward the good. However, while Nyssa shows the possibility of going another way with opacity in Christian vision, at the same time he explicitly develops a negative symbolism of darkness from out of this mystical center that reveals the symbolic substructure operating in the earliest Christian mystical discourse that symbolizes darkness of skin within a wider symbolism of evil, a symbolism that supports the historical turn toward racialization. This ambiguity of mystical darkness as both positive and negative is key to the eventual utilization of and pathologization of opacity in modern racial logics.

We will observe in Nyssa the importance of vision in the face of the infinite. We will see that for Nyssa, vision is interwoven with one’s aesthetic and spiritual formation and can fundamentally direct a person toward ultimate ends.² Human nature is fundamentally malleable,

¹ Gregory of Nyssa, Commentarius in Canticum canticorum (hereafter Cant), Eng. and pagination as Homilies on the Song of Songs, trans. Richard A Norris Jr. (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), Homily 3, p. 97; Homily 7, p. 231. All further citations will be parenthetical, giving homily and page.
driven by the free will to direct that nature toward whatever end one desires (Nyssa will argue), whether the good or the bad; within this frame, human nature is understood as a kind of “life-endued and choice-endowed mirror” which, having undergone a process of beautification through purification from “every material defilement,” can turn to the good and take its shape. I will argue not only that the mirror is decisive in Gregory’s account of vision and self-formation, but just how it operates—how it affects a transformation that is not merely spiritual but bodily. Fundamentally, I will argue how in this bodily transformation toward the infinite through the mirror’s operation both the body and color become situated in an overall symbolics that excludes and includes finitude in a tangled web—an entanglement that all too easily becomes unraveled in the path toward modernity that we will explore. We can take from Nyssa the hope of including the body in spiritual formation, but we cannot escape his symbolizing darkness as evil.

In what follows, especially looking at Nyssa’s Homilies on the Song of Songs, Life of Moses, and On the Making of Man, I will seek clarity regarding this juxtaposition of darkness as a symbol of evil with darkness as a hopeful symbol of God in Nyssa’s epektatic frame. Darkness or opacity here represents how the openness of the infinite and the rigor of materiality are meant to coincide in a dance of spiritual-aesthetic formation. This speaks of the very material and bodily transformation at stake here; I begin to make sense of this as I reflect on the importance of the mirror and enigma in Nyssen thought for transformation of the material towards the infinite. I argue that Nyssa’s configuration of the mirror’s operation and power of the enigma at the heart of human change and choice roots the spiritual senses deeply into the physical senses and

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2 Discussing vision, Nyssa notes that the eyes are “located above all the other organs of perception (Gk: aesthesis), positioned by nature to provide guidance for the whole body.” Cant 13, p. 417.

3 Nyssa, Cant 15, p. 440; Cant 4, p. 115. Emphasis mine.
genuine transformation of the body. But I also argue that the malleability and plasticity of human nature, and the way in which the body and materiality is configured within the ideal change toward the infinite, highlights significant problems with how opacity is handled in Nyssa’s anagogical aesthetics upon the logic of the mirror. To bring this to a contemporary and critical frame, I begin to develop a theology and phenomenology of the icon that respects opacity. We will have to continue to examine whether we can think a phenomenology of the icon—and thus get at the possible liberative potential of opacity—outside of the framework of the mirror. I argue that this has to do with what is fundamentally at stake in a detailed understanding of “reverse perspective.” This will be the basis for retrieving darkness or opacity as a positive concept. Finally, a certain ethics comes with epektasis, one which has to do with acceptance of one’s creatureliness and embracing of darkness.

Nyssa on Darkness and a Symbolics of Evil

Nyssa bequeaths to early Christian discourse two apparently diverging understandings of darkness. Often darkness in Nyssa means “the darkness of sin or ignorance that gives way to light.” Yet Nyssa also refers to a more positive, mystical darkness (especially in the notion of epektasis) where “darkness not only serves to safeguard the unknowability of the divine essence, but also indicates a divine encounter of considerable depth.” A puzzle, then, is before us. We must see how the general framework of epektasis is a conceptual map for how darkness is configured as a threshold concept that, in representing the difference between created and uncreated, marks the limit of the finite even as it opens up to the infinite. We can initially call this a “positive” understanding of darkness. But we also must observe a “negative”

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understanding of darkness as a symbol of moral decay or evil. We can see this especially in how Nyssa interprets the black skin of the Bride in his Homilies. This negative symbolization of black skin is not disconnected from the broader more “positive” way in which Nyssa symbolizes darkness in epektasis; even the epektatic journey is symbolized through themes of original beauty being defiled and needing purification, spoken of in terms of darkness as “bad coloring” and purity in terms of good coloring (as I will discuss). I will argue that the positive and negative ideas of darkness work together in Nyssa’s thought to show just how darkness of skin is interpreted negatively within a symbolism of color enmeshed within a symbolism of evil in the earliest Christian mystical discourse. Exploring what Nyssa is doing here reveals how the motif of darkness configures the relationship between ideas of finitude and materiality and ideas of infinitude and immateriality. Starting with Nyssa’s treatment of black skin will lead to the broader problem of the symbolization of darkness in epektasis.

**Darkness within a Symbolics of Evil**

Without anachronistically ascribing modern racial logics to Nyssa’s thought on darkness, we can observe how Nyssa in his Homilies discusses the dark color of the Bride’s skin in such a way that he symbolizes black skin as a symbol of evil, through his spiritual reading forging this very symbolization from literal skin color to moral symbol. Nyssa begins his second homily by discussing concepts of light and darkness alongside a discussion of the tension between outer appearance or adornment and inward beauty or an interior brightness. This is Nyssa’s way of likening the approach to the Song as modeled after the tent of witness of the book of Exodus. The Song of Songs is adorned with “erotic words and expressions that evince an orientation to an

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5 I have discussed in the previous chapter how Buell cautions us in connecting an early Christian thinker like Nyssa to modern problems of race
object of desire” but this points to a greater interior reality: a Person, Nyssa argues, connected to Light. In this way, what one encounters in the Song is that which is hidden in material-linguistic “figures” (ainigmaton) or enigmas whose ideas point to the heavenly and incorporeal (asomaton) way of life (Cant 2, p. 47-49). The condition, Nyssa states, for discerning how to move from the figures to the incorporeal ideas is that we take care
to prepare ourselves for entrance upon the holy of holies by washing off in the bath of reason all the filth of shameful thinking, lest as persons blinded we be excluded from the wonders within the tent because we have violated the law’s injunction by coming into contact with a corpse-like idea or by teaching some unclean notion. (Cant 2, p. 49)

At the outset of Nyssa’s approach to the “darkness” of materiality, finitude, and the body, we find that an overall light-dark aesthetic frames things according to a moral symbolism of evil.

Following this line of thinking, Nyssa specifically discusses the darkness of skin of the Bride as he comments on the Bride’s words, “I am dark but beautiful” (Melaina eimi kai kale, Song 1:5). Nyssa re-phrases the words of the Bride in view of his interpretation:

Do not marvel that Righteousness has loved me. Marvel rather that when I was dark with sin and at home in the dark [melainan ousan ex hamartias kai prosokeiomenen to zopho] because of my deeds, he by his love made me beautiful, exchanging his own beauty for my ugliness. For having transferred to himself the filth of my sins, he shared his own purity with me and constituted me a participant in his own beauty—he who first made something desirable out of one who had been repulsive and in this way acted lovingly. (Cant 2, p. 51)

Darkness of skin (melainan) in the letter of the text is an enigma that leads to a set of incorporeal ideas framed around a certain moral symbolism. Black skin is linked to physical, spiritual, and moral darkness (that is, to sin). Discussing how the Bride is beautiful now but used to be “not gleaming but dark [melainan],” Nyssa again ventriloquizes the Bride: “This dark and gloomy aspect [to skoteinon kai zophodes] that I bear is the work of my earlier life. … For the likeness of darkness [to homoioma tou skotous] was changed into the form of beauty” (Cant 2, p. 53).
Physical darkness of skin is symbolized as the gloom of night, again given spiritual and moral meaning—it is even connected to the “power of darkness.” Physical darkness of skin is “ugliness” which, in order to become beautiful, must be transformed, cleansed, and purged. Nyssa strengthens and expands his thinking through a reading of the theology of the Apostle Paul that focuses on the spiritual transformation or beautification from blackness of night to the salvific light of day where “there remains no trace of darkness in things that had before been obscured by the night” (Cant 2, p. 53). While we were first sinners in error and darkness, God transforms us into beings full of light and beauty.

As Nyssa continues his exegesis, he continues to ground this overall moral symbolism in reference to literal blackness of skin. Drawing on the image of the Ethiopian as black-skinned foreigner (which I explored in the previous chapter), Nyssa connects the idea of black skin not only to notions of sin and darkness but also the idea of foreignness. But as this dark foreigner is accepted into the “heavenly city,” the Ethiopian becomes “bright” (Cant 2, p. 55). Gregory pivots, exegeting the text, noting how the Bride was not dark by nature, but made dark by the “look” of the Sun. Specifically, Nyssa writes that the Bride, because of the look of this sun, is rendered “dark” (of skin, melan) through disobedience (Cant 2, p. 57). Nyssa eventually moves the conversation toward a larger point about the origin of evil and about moral formation within matters of darkness and finitude as it concerns freewill and choice toward good or evil (Cant 2, p. 61-63). Ultimately, notes Nyssa, the Bride fails to take care of her own vineyard, and thus is overcome by the weeds of the adversary—vices which defile the soul. This “cloth[ing] with darkness” is eventually connected to an “ignorance” which causes one to miss the mark and stray.

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6 From this, Nyssa develops the idea of “sunshades” which are “the relief from summer heat that comes to souls through self-control and purity.” Nyssa here also connects disfigurement to darkness.
(Cant 2, p. 65-67). Later in his Homilies, Nyssa again discusses the blackness of the Bride to explain how God, like a goldsmith working to clean and purify gold from “the treacherous admixture of some base material” which “obscures” its beauty, must “get rid of the bad coloring [duschroian] by smelting it down in fire.” Through this purification, the gold becomes “unadulterated” and “fair” (or “good colored” [euchrooteros]). God is restoring to original beauty and so purifying human nature which was originally “golden and gleaming because of its likeness to the undefiled Good” but then “by reason of the admixture of evil, it became discolored and dark,” being “darkened by vice” (Cant 4, p. 111).

This moral symbolization of darkness within a broader symbolics of evil (even when it comes to black skin) is not unique to Nyssa. I argue, though, that Nyssa takes up, transforms, and passes on this symbolism more widely through his important and influential notion of epektasis—perpetual desire for the infinite God framed in terms of entering into mystical darkness, which decisively shapes Christian mystical thought. Through exploring epektasis we can observe the broader symbolic structures that give meaning to the notion of darkness in Nyssa’s thought.

**Darkness within the Epektatic Framework**

*Epektasis* is “arguably Gregory’s most important contribution to Christian thought;” and it is “intimately tied to the essence of Gregory’s thought,” such that, as Jean Daniélou puts it, it is

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7 Origen exegetes the bride figure in a similar way. See Mark S. M. Scott, “Shades of Grace: Origen and Gregory of Nyssa’s Soteriological Exegesis of the ‘Black and Beautiful’ Bride in Song of Songs 1:5.” *Harvard Theological Review* 99, no. 1 (2006): 65-83. Consider, too, Clement of Alexandria, the teacher of Origen (upon whom Nyssa and the other Cappadocian Fathers would often draw): “Ignorance is darkness, for it makes us fall into sin and lose the ability to see the truth clearly. But knowledge is light, for it dispels the darkness of ignorance and endows us with keenness of vision.” From his *Paedagogus* 1.6.29; see Emily Cain, “Medically Modified Eyes: A Baptismal Cataract Surgery in Clement of Alexandria.” *Studies in Late Antiquity* 2, no. 4 (2018): 495. Regarding possible Platonic, Philonic, and Neo-platonic influences of this symbolism of light and darkness as moral, see Turner, *The Darkness of God*, 11-18.
the very “synthesis of Gregorian spirituality in its central theme.” Generally *epektasis* is the Nyssen claim of a person’s unending transformation in virtue through the beatific vision as one progresses deeper toward the good and knowledge of God. Such a journey is perpetual because God in God’s “nature” is inaccessible and our impurity is an obstacle; yet we can have a vision of God that is a non-seeing, and, having entered the path of purification, we can participate in God and the divine goodness through God’s “energies” and can come to see God in ourselves—though in a mirror. To examine the full extent of Nyssa’s thought here is beyond the scope of my study: I want to specifically explore the shape of the epektatic framework in order to show the ways in which concept of darkness is utilized to relate the finite and the infinite, whether positively or negatively. The relation between *epektasis* and mystical darkness is forged by Nyssa himself in the centering of the Moses narrative. And from our current vantage point, Daniélou’s interpretation is influential, which places darkness as the third and final point of Nyssa’s mystical ascent, a mystical and contemplative experience in which even then God is

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10 Hans Boersma explains that this notion has its place in Gregory’s larger concern for the beatific vision as *ever-increasing growth* and purity in union with Christ. See Hans Boersma, “Becoming Human in the Face of God: Gregory of Nyssa’s Unending Search for the Beatific Vision.” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 17, no. 2 (Apr 2015), 134. See Blowers for a key discussion of three major historical interpretations of epektasis: 1) Daniélou, with the sense of mystical ascent and spiritual advance amidst even frustration toward union; 2) Mühlenberg who argues Daniélou westernizes Nyssa’s mysticism: instead, it lies in the difference between finite and infinite, and thus the logical corollary of “diastemic gulf between infinite God and finite creatures”; 3) understanding it as rooted in criticism of Origen regarding his point that souls fell away because they were filled with satiety of the good. Blowers particularly favors and discusses the third, looking at how Maximus picks up on this emphasis of perpetual progress. See Paul M. Blowers, “Maximus the Confessor, Gregory of Nyssa, and the Concept of ‘Perpetual Progress.’” *Vigiliae Christianae* 46, no. 2 (1992): 151-153.


12 For an orientation to the larger literature, see Mateo-Seco, “Epektasis.”
incomprehensible. To navigate the conversation, I highlight Nyssa’s unique notion of human mutability and how *epektasis* holds together this mutability alongside the infinity of God.

Nyssa’s thought on the absolute infinity of God is part of a broader tradition of diverse religious and philosophical thinkers—Ilaria Ramelli notes a wide range such as Philo (Jewish), Plotinus (“pagan”), and Origen (Christian)—who share a Platonic notion of God as “inaccessible object of knowledge.” Though God is approached “apophatically” and thus unknowable in the divine “essence,” the divine could still be known through activities or energies. Thinkers like Philo, Origen and Nyssa believed that one cognitive path to God amidst this apophatic unknowability of the infinite is through allegoresis. And, developing as early as Philo, the life of Moses and particularly Exodus 33.20-23 served a core textual tradition on God’s unknowability cast in the sense of a “non-seeing” and thus in the theme of darkness. Gregory represents a tradition where God as infinite, incomprehensible, and ungraspable cannot be discursively known, yet is experienced and spoken of as manifest externally in the world.

Nyssa’s thought on infinity is particularly marked by a radical distinction between creator and creature and not primarily the Platonic distinction between matter and spirit. Yet, this

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15 Ramelli, “The Divine as Inaccessible Object of Knowledge,” 170-171. See 174: specifically Plotinus discusses the infinite One as “beyond being”, which is certainly picked up on by Nyssa and then Dionysius.


17 Ramelli, “The Divine as Inaccessible Object of Knowledge,” 188.

radical difference does not leave creator and creature at odds but instead in an intimate relationship. In this frame, Nyssa specifically discusses the distinction and relation between the “perceptible and material” (things we can perceive with the senses and which are, by definition, limited), and the “intelligible and nonmaterial” (things which are beyond observation and senses and which are, by definition, unlimited). The intelligible itself is divided into the uncreated and the created. The created intelligible

looks eternally upon the First Cause of the things that are and is preserved in every respect in the good by its participation in what transcends it. It is also, in a certain fashion, always being created as it is changed for the better by being enhanced in goodness. For this reason, no end point can be conceived for it either, and its growth toward the better is not confined by any limit, but the good that is given at any particular time is always a starting point for something more and better, even though it already appears to be as great and as complete as possible. (Cant 6, p.185-187).

Because of the radical distinction, a certain unknowing or darkness is at stake; not one that repels but one that cultivates the relation in the only way possible, through a productive and perpetual dialectic. In this way, the finite human being “searches for God and through her/his ignorance; through the darkness of mind concerning God, she/he can discover the divine truth.”

On the notion of perpetual spiritual progress itself, this too was a shared belief in this apophatic tradition, and so Nyssa’s own thought can be connected in certain ways to Platonic and Plotinian ideas. The uniqueness, however, of Nyssa’s epektasis lies in just how he configured the relationship of finite experience in the face of infinite darkness: the idea of human mutability

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as positive. Platonic (and Origenist) thought had considered human mutability and change as negative and evil, a sign of the degeneration of human finitude; but Nyssa “postulates instead a positive form of changeability, a perpetual choice of the Good leading to an eternal transformation of the person in assimilation to God.”21 As Richard Norris Jr. writes, Gregory is perhaps “the first Christian teacher to state a positive view of the mutability that was taken to be proper to human beings in virtue of their createdness.”22 In this radically unique dissociating of change from the notion of evil, Nyssa argues that human mutability is essential to human nature, the freedom of choice, and “potential to experience unceasing advance.”23 Change here itself takes on a kind of stability, since it was a change toward deeper depths of virtue—and thus, as Nyssa argued, would paradoxically secure “true ontological and eschatological stability” by being on this path of eternal moral transformation toward God.24 Even so, while human changeability and transformation was cased in a positive and redemptive light, there still was a tension between “divine transcendence and creaturely self-realization.”25 The figure of divine darkness, then, speaks all at once of the limit point of human creaturely reaching which is also the threshold for transformation toward the infinite.

21 Blowers, “Maximus the Confessor, Gregory of Nyssa,” 156.

22 Richard Norris Jr. (ed) in Nyssa, Homilies, p. 265, note 11. Norris continues here: “Origen seems to have pictured changeability simply as a perpetual liability to departure from the good. Gregory, by contrast, envisages it as empowering an unending process of approximation to the Divine, the limitless Good, with the result that changeability becomes, perhaps somewhat paradoxically, the mirror in human nature of God’s infinity.”

23 Robb-Dover, “Gregory of Nyssa’s ‘Perpetual Progress,’” 216.

24 Blowers, “Maximus the Confessor, Gregory of Nyssa,” 156. Also, 158: “Gregory had proposed at this point an absolute and infinite paradox. The eternal movement is the stasis. The purposive tension between human mutability and divine immutability, between created finitude and uncreated infinity, is everlasting.”

25 Blowers, “Maximus the Confessor, Gregory of Nyssa,” 165.
I want to flesh this out by examining the important motif of the life of Moses recounted in Exodus, a crucial influence on the tradition of mystical darkness. In Nyssa’s *The Life of Moses* the soul’s unending progression into the infinite is specifically discussed under the image of mystical darkness. Darkness is first negative and moralized (and so epiphany first happens in light), but as the mind progresses “to enter into the darkness where God is” and as such enters into a purification, including of the senses and sensual emotion, there is, as it were, a “luminous darkness.” The soul as it pursues virtue is “released from its earthly attachment” and becomes “light” and thus “rises ever higher” (*Vit Moys* 2.224-225, p. 113). So Moses, notes Nyssa, although lifted up through such lofty experiences, … is still unsatisfied in his desire for more. He still thirsts for that with which he constantly filled himself to capacity, and he asks to attain as if he had never partaken, beseeching God to appear to him, not according to his capacity to partake, but according to God’s true being. (*Vit Moys* 2.230, p. 114)

This is framed, importantly, in terms of unending desire toward the good. Against more fleshly desire which can move the body down by force, Nyssa argues, a spiritual desire ceaselessly beckons the soul upward toward the good. Nyssa writes:

> Such an experience seems to me to belong to the soul which loves what is beautiful. Hope always draws the soul from the beauty which is seen to what is beyond, always kindles the desire for the hidden through what is constantly perceived. Therefore, the ardent lover of beauty, although receiving what is always visible as an image of what he desires, yet longs to be filled with the very stamp of the archetype. (*Vit Moys* 2.231, p. 114)

The desirous path of virtue does not stop but stretches out with the limitless since “the one limit of virtue is the absence of a limit” and so the soul’s “desire itself necessarily has no stopping

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place but stretches out with the limitless” (*Vit Moys* 1.5-7, p. 30-31). This participation in the limitlessness of virtue is a participation in God’s infinity.

In this way Nyssa stretches out human desire alongside God’s infinity. Nyssa writes: “Certainly whoever pursues true virtue participates in nothing other than God, because he is himself absolute virtue” (*Vit Moys* 1.7, p. 31). This desire and pursuit carries one past “mirrors and reflections, but face to face” (*Vit Moys* 2.232, p. 114-115). And yet, to desire God in this way, to have “true sight of God” is to not stop desiring (*Vit Moys* 2.233, p 115). Though the divine itself has no boundary, one can see the good and the beautiful truly here and now:

This truly is the vision of God: never to be satisfied in the desire to see him. But one must always, by looking at what he can see, rekindle his desire to see more. Thus, no limit would interrupt growth in the ascent to God, since no limit to the Good can be found nor is the increasing of desire of the Good brought to an end because it is satisfied. (*Vit Moys* 2.239, p. 116).

Desire for the infinite is possible in our creaturehood, and everlastingly so. In our finite existence, one perceives the image before one’s eyes, and then moves to the hidden significance beyond.

There is thus a certain paradox at stake in *epektasis*. In one’s finitude, one may “discover their unlimited potential to become more like God” when they realize God is ungraspable in God’s infinity. While Daniélou has received criticism for “westernizing” Nyssa’s mystical darkness, I believe he describes well this paradox and the struggle in transformation it entails:

After learning all that can be known of God, the soul discovers the limits of this knowledge; and this discovery is an advance, because now there is an awareness of the divine transcendence and incomprehensibility. … For we have now an authentic experience, a true vision. And the darkness is a positive reality that helps us to know God—that is why it is called luminous. For it implies an awareness of God that

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28 Robb-Dover, “Gregory of Nyssa’s ‘Perpetual Progress,’” 220.

29 Robb-Dover, “Gregory of Nyssa’s ‘Perpetual Progress,’” 221.
transcends all determination, and thus it is far truer than any determined categorical knowledge. For here in this obscurity the soul experiences the transcendence of the divine nature, that infinite distance by which God surpasses all creation. Thus the soul finds itself as it were elevated above all created things and at the same time lost in an infinite darkness wherein it loses its contact with things, though it is aware of God despite the total incapacity of its knowledge. 30

In this experience, one can see God through faith, and only in obscurity grasp God in God’s transcendence. 31 And this, argues Daniélou, is not a merely negative experience but “truly an experience of the presence of God as He is in Himself, in such wise that this awareness is completely blinding for the mind, and all the more so, the closer it is to Him.” 32 From out of this place of darkness comes a certain ecstasy and experience of eros as one is overcome and overpowered in the senses by the divine presence of transcendence. 33 In this way, the overall shape of the epektatic journey is that darkness is both a limit point and threshold that opens up positively and transformatively the finite unto the infinite. So Nyssa writes how in this journey of ascent “the outer limit of what has been discovered becomes the starting point of a search after more exalted things. … [M]ounting upwards by way of one greater desire toward another that surpasses it, that soul is always journeying toward the infinite by way of higher things.” Tasting becomes an invitation to feast (Cant 8, p. 260-261). One embraces the hereness of one’s horizon of finitude just as it intersects with an infinite horizon. Epektatic darkness here represents the tension between the limit of our creaturely density and the openness of the unknown upon which

30 Daniélou, “Introduction,” in From Glory to Glory, 30.
31 Daniélou, “Introduction,” in From Glory to Glory, 31-32.
32 Daniélou, “Introduction,” in From Glory to Glory, 32.
33 Daniélou, “Introduction,” in From Glory to Glory, 33-46.
it indicates its significance. Darkness is embraced and traversed, though never overcome, as a quality of our creaturely depths as they intersect with the infinite.

Let me return to emphasize for the trajectory of my own argument, following Nyssa’s unique contribution, how human mutability in the face of mystical darkness is key. Kathryn Tanner gives helpful language to what is at stake here for our thought, as she discusses the essential plasticity of human nature. Humans, being in the image of God, have the unique capacity (even in a “weaker” sense) for “the opening for the divine image itself to become their own, present within them, in a way that reforms their humanity according to and in strong imitation of itself.”

Tanner indicates that what is at stake here is the kind of mystical openness that epektasis calls for: “human nature must be characterized by an expansive openness that allows for the presence of God within it. It must be the sort of nature that has or makes room for the divine within its basic operations.”

The will (which, as we will see, has to do with the operation of the soul as mirror) is important here because the exercise of our free will determines how our change in virtue toward the good can be acquired, lost, or transform our nature in its faculties and orientation. That which forms us toward virtue is not proper to us, but something we are not; our will directs us toward something different than our nature in which we must participate. The fundamental mutability of human nature is a good which represents an openness allowing for human transformation through reason and will toward the universal good.

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34 Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 37. Tanner discusses the difference and connection between strong participation and weak participation, which helps to explain the ultimate plasticity of human nature: strong participation (gratuitous presence of Word and Spirit) presupposes or envisions a weaker sense of participation in God in and of oneself (as image of God). 36-37.

35 Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 37.

36 Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 30.

37 Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 30-31.
and participation in God. This is the most fundamental thing about human nature, this “unusually plastic” and “unusually impressionable” nature setting them apart from other created beings. Plasticity, in fact, is so radically the case that human beings have the innate capability to be some other thing “beyond the limits of their own – or any – created nature.” For Tanner, this holds great hope because it says much about human potential and possibility for change. In this understanding, the threshold of mystical darkness catalyzes growth in virtue as one’s creatureliness and finitude endlessly advances into the ever-fleeting horizon of the infinitude.

A critical view: relation of finitude to infinitude in mystical darkness

Yet, there is still a tension here, I argue, in that the passageway this mystical darkness affords does mark the limit our finitude faces; thus it speaks of how the transformation engendered in mystical darkness includes and at the same time excludes material reality even as materiality and the body leave their enduring mark. Let me, then, begin to show how this kind of mutability and transformation in the face of darkness might become problematic, a critical analysis I will continue to open in various directions until bringing it to a focus near the close of this chapter. The first problematic aspect I want to highlight is that part of the epikhtatic journey consists of being deterred by the “animalization” of the soul. Commenting on a passage in the Song about the dangers of leopards and lions, Nyssa writes:

For humanity, once it had put off its divine aspect was brutalized and approached likeness to the irrational nature and through its evil habits became a leopard and a lion. … [T]he good Bridegroom effects intensity and superabundance of joy over good things in the soul that is climbing toward him, not only by showing the Bride her own beauty but also by recalling to her mind the awful image of wild beasts, so that she may the more exult in her present blessedness as she learns from the contrast what good things have taken the place of those evils. (Cant 8, p. 260-265)

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38 Tanner, Christ the Key, 38-39. Regarding the inclination toward the good, Tanner is drawing on Thomas Aquinas.

39 Tanner, Christ the Key, 40-41, 44.
Nyssa continues: “For the Word wishes us, mutable as we are by nature, not to decline into evil by our changing, but through unending growth for the better to make change cooperate in our ascent toward higher things.” This is the path toward “an incapacity for evil” and is spurred on by keeping in our memory “the wild beasts that once controlled us” as an aversion to evil (Cant 8, p. 264-267). The matter of human mutability is already enmeshed in a complex symbolism of evil: the greatest human possibility stares into the face of the potential of the greatest human monstrosity.

A second problematic aspect relates more directly to our overall inquire about a symbolism of color enmeshed in a symbolism of evil. While I have already pointed out how Nyssa deals with darkness of skin, we can notice a deeper, less startling (and, for that reason, perhaps more insidious) way in which color more generally is dealt with in an epektatic framework. In De hominis opificio, Nyssa discusses the tension (at the heart of epektasis) between created and uncreated, specifically how the created emerges in relation to the uncreated. Nyssa writes: “we suppose the power of the Divine will to be a sufficient cause to the things that are, for their coming into existence out of nothing.” He describes what material or finite reality must be then if it “has its existence from Him Who is intelligible and immaterial;” he continues: “For we shall find all matter to be composed of certain qualities, of which if it is divested it can, in itself, be by no means grasped by idea. Moreover, in idea each kind of quality is separated from the substratum; but idea is an intellectual and not a corporeal method of examination” (De hom 24.1). In other words, materiality as we know it is fundamentally known through its ideal

examination that gives it meaning or being. As we understand through our “mental discussion” the things “concerning the substratum,” our ideas are “clearly distinguished from the object we contemplate.” In fact, these ideas are neither connected with each other nor “with the body” but upon the material substratum they are occasioned to be thought together in various particular ways (De hom 24.1). Nyssa gives the implications of this:

If, then, colour is a thing intelligible … and so with quantity and the rest of the like properties, while if each of these should be withdrawn from the substratum, the whole idea of the body is dissolved; it would seem to follow that we may suppose the concurrence of those things, the absence of which we found to be a cause of the dissolution of the body, to produce the material nature: for as that is not a body which has not colour, and figure, and resistance, and extension, and weight, and the other properties, while each of these in its proper existence is found to be not the body but something else besides the body, so conversely, whenever the specified attributes concur they produce bodily existence. Yet if the perception of these properties is a matter of intellect, and the Divinity is also intellectual in nature, there is no incongruity in supposing that these intellectual occasions for the genesis of bodies have their existence from the incorporeal nature, the intellectual nature on the one hand giving being to the intellectual potentialities, and the mutual concurrence of these bringing to its genesis the material nature. (De hom 24.2)

Materiality and finitude “is” insofar as it comes into being through the “mutual concurrence” of intellectual ideas like color, quantity, extension, weight, and so on. Color, then, is first and finally an intellectual idea, and only then a specific material property (which is vacuous and “non-existent” apart from its transcendental dimension). As with how Nyssa configures color in the symbolization of black skin in his Homilies, here the way in which color is configured as a material property that comes into existence and gains meaning only as it is caught up in

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41 See Philip Thibodeau, “Ancient Optics: Theories and Problems of Vision,” in A Companion to Science, Technology, and Medicine in Ancient Greece and Rome, vol 1, ed. Georgia L. Irby (Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, 2016), 136-138 for how this relates to how color was understood in ancient thought. Color was often connected to various qualities of matter as they impact the one who senses the object. Connecting color to the realm of ideas instead of primarily as it relates to an atomic quality of the body seems to set apart Nyssa. It is interesting to observe, too, in certain ancient accounts the fundamental black-white system, connecting white to smoothness and easiness of shape/transfer of sensation and blackness to roughness of shape, contraction of atoms, muddledness of sensation.
transcendent, intellectual dimension foreshadows how modern racial logics will also interpret (skin) color within a transcendentalizing framework.

In Nyssa’s thought, darkness represents a complex operation: it describes the enigmatic topos upon which the relation between finitude and the infinite is configured because darkness can represent both the density and limitedness of creaturely reality that must be transcended (even if it is the genuine starting point of such an ascent) and the unknown openness of the desired mystical intentionality toward the divine. Gregory’s notion of epektasis is such that opacity is the place of fissure in humanity’s most fleshy finitude, represented by soul as mirror, where the openness of the infinite and the rigor of materiality are meant to coincide in a dance of spiritual-aesthetic formation. However, in light of the negative way in which darkness (especially darkness of skin) is configured toward a symbolics of evil, we will have to discern the way in which this aim towards the infinite makes a claim about the surpassing of the body. I will shortly explain the importance of the mirror and the enigma-symbol here: such a conceptuality will allow us to see how the opaque surface of creaturely existence both reveals and conceals the greater mirrored reality, in which one must look at the infinite through the finite, discerning the relation. This broadening of the epektatic framework we can refer to as the overall “anagogical” shape of Nyssa’s thought. Anagogy for Nyssa has to do with the intersecting of the eschatological in one’s finitude, both vertically in seeing in the letter of scripture higher realities and horizontally in seeing higher realities transform one’s material life. This centers us on spiritual process that focuses on the development of virtue. We can go “upward” and “forward”
in life (in both text and body) through participating in God through virtue. So an *anagogical aesthetics* that relates materiality to immateriality becomes increasingly key.

**Nyssa on the Symbol**

To understand fully what Gregory is doing with darkness within an epektatic or anagogical framework, we need to examine what Nyssa does with the *mirror and enigma* as it relates to his understanding of vision. It is ultimately upon the logic of the mirror that *epektasis* can be simultaneously this openness to the divine and rigor of one’s finitude; so what is at stake in the mirror is at stake in Nyssa’s ambiguous handling of darkness. There are two key points here: first, the connection of vision and the mirror as central human choice to freely relate the finite to the infinite; second, how Gregory uses the conceptuality of the mirror to explain his Stoic understanding of vision and aesthetics which is able to hold together the tension between passivity and activity in perception. As human vision is understood as it faces mystical darkness, an anagogical perspective is *both* a receptive comportment to the infinite depth represented in the inexhaustible surplus of enigmatic opacity *and* the active pursuit of seeking from the freedom of one’s creatureliness the “higher meaning” indicated in our finitude.

**Nyssa On Vision and the Stoic influence**

Vision and the eyes for Nyssa are of central importance. In his *Homilies*, Nyssa refers to the eyes as our “noblest members” whose “location above the other sense organs manifests the fact that their usefulness to us for the conduct of life is of the greatest worth.” He continues: “Through them we receive light, with their help we recognize friend and foe, by their means we distinguish what is native from what is alien.” It is leaders in the Church, themselves “eyes,”

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42 Boersma explains that anagogical exegesis captures for Nyssa the whole of the spiritual senses of scripture, as he does not differentiate allegorical, moral and anagogical like later thought. Boersma, *Embodiment and Virtue*, 1-3.
who “look undeviatingly upon the Sun or Righteousness and never dim their sight with the works of darkness” and who are able to distinguish and discern truth and light from the ephemeral and alien (Cant 7, p. 229). In this framework, vision is not merely a physical power of the senses but is already and always a spiritual and moral matter. Nyssa fundamentally configures vision as both physical and moral through connecting vision to the conceptuality of the mirror, specifically (as I will explain) in the framework of a Stoic aesthetics and perception of holding together the tension of reception and activity.

Noting how the mirror is important within his overall theory of vision, Nyssa writes in his seventh homily:

for since the images of all visible things, when they make contact with a pure pupil <of the eye>, bring about vision, it is necessary that one assume the form of that toward which one looks, receiving through the eye, in the fashion of a mirror, the form of the visible thing. (Cant 7, p. 229-231)

The mirror makes sense of how Nyssa’s understanding of vision is built on an aesthetic space of both reception and activity, of impression and interpretation. Seeing is not merely about physical vision and the senses, but about the free choice to see from the material to the transcendent and to transform the material in the direction of its transcendence. In this way, perception and vision connect the broader matter of the relation between the material and the immaterial. So the eyes, Gregory writes, are praised as a pair so that “the entire human being may be included in the praise—the phenomenal as well as the noumenal” (Cant 7, p. 231). With the conceptuality of the mirror norming his understanding of vision and perception, Nyssa wrestles with the tension of recognizing the importance of both the sensuous and the immaterial.

43 Nyssa continues: “When therefore one who has received this eyelike authority over the church gazes upon nothing material and corporeal, the spiritual and immaterial life is established within him. Hence the most perfect praise of eyes is that the form of their life is shaped in conformity with the grace of the Holy Spirit, of the Holy Spirit is a dove.” For commentary on this text see Karfíková, “The Metaphor of the Mirror,” 278.
To understand the mirror in this way, we must place Nyssa’s understanding of vision in its larger context. I argue that Nyssa’s understanding of vision was contrasted with two of the major basic theories of vision in ancient thought. Extramissionist theories held to some kind of ray or substance “which was released from the eye in the direction of the visual object” in order to discern what one saw. Intromissionist theories, largely atomistic, “held that a stream of material travels in the other direction, from the surface of each visible object toward the eye.”

In the intromissionist theory, for example, “every object emits tiny films”—as Epicurus called them, *eidola*—“that fly through the air and impress upon a person’s eyes.” A fusion theory tried to bring these two approaches together. Now, it is true that in his fourth homily Nyssa seems to advocate for an atomist or intromissionist account of vision, as he notes that certain “experts in physiology” discuss how “images [*eidolon*] fall[ing] into [the pupil of the eye] emanated from visible objects” (*Cant* 4, p. 117). Yet elsewhere Nyssa writes that in sight “the mind apprehends those things which are external to the body, and draws to itself the images of phenomena, marking in itself the impressions of the things which are seen” (*De hom* 10). In this we see how Nyssa specifically drew on the Stoic view of vision (and other Stoic thought on aesthetic perception) to shape key aspects of his theory. The Stoic view did not technically include *transfer* of material. In the Stoic theory of vision, the *pneuma* in the eye “was said to ‘prick’ and ‘tense’ a section of the surrounding air which was shaped like a cone, with its apex at the eye and its base on the surface of the visible object. The air within this cone united with the

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44 Thibodeau, “Ancient Optics,” 133.

45 Cain, “Medically Modified Eyes,” 496. Cain explains, “Both views [intromissionist and extramissionist] shared the assumption that sight, and the knowledge gleaned therefrom, occurs through tactile means.” 496.

46 For discussion of this passage, see Karfíková, “The Metaphor of the Mirror,” 279-80.
soul-*pneuma* in such a way that it became a sensitive extension of the soul into the environment." Nyssa’s Stoic understanding of vision was unique, though, in how the conceptuality of the mirror plays a decisive role to stress free will. In this way, Nyssa utilizes this Stoic framework of vision and aesthetics as a mix of reception and activity, and is able to build off of it (as a Christian thinker) to accept the immaterial dimensions of human subjectivity.

The mix of receptivity and activity was key to the Stoic model of vision. Indeed, this speaks not of passivity of perception (as in the atomist model) but, as Susan Wessel puts it, “an activity in which the mind participated in order to apprehend the object before it.” Arguing that Gregory was at least “partly dependent” upon the Stoic view, Wessel argues that he may have specifically been influenced by Galen’s reception of it “whereby a transformation of the outside *pneuma* was thought to take place especially in the ventricles of the brain and then extend from the eye as cerebral *pnuema* in order to bring about vision.” Generally in *De hominis opificio*, Nyssa engages in a theological anthropology which shows a key interest in Greek medical literature of his time. Nyssa’s concern is how a human functions in the image of God as an intelligible mind circumscribed in a physical body. Wessel argues that, by “carv[ing] out a

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47 Thibodeau, “Ancient Optics,” 135. Important here was the idea of *pneuma*: “an intelligent, mobile, and all-pervading substance which was said to govern all physical activity in the world, and of which each individual soul was composed.” 135.

48 For Nyssa, there is a mix of atomist, Stoic, and Platonic elements. Several scholars have noted that Gregory probably draws on an atomist theory by Alexander of Aphrodisias. Yet Alexander himself drew on both Aristotle (atomist thought) as well as Stoic and Platonic elements. See Karfíková, “The Metaphor of the Mirror,” 279-280. See also Susan Wessel, “The Reception of Greek Science in Gregory of Nyssa’s *De hominis opificio*.” *Vigiliae Christianae* 63, no. 1 (2009): 28.


middle position between the Platonism that he knew from reading Plotinus and Origen, and the materialism that he acquired from his acquaintance with Galen and the medical writers,” Nyssa was able to unifying the person as intelligible mind that necessarily interacted in the world through the corporeal body. Specifically in his text, Nyssa separates out certain states and conditions of the mind from the intelligible mind by linking them to physical conditions, all while insisting on the more-than-material unified person as the image of God. Nyssa is able to craft this position by insisting that the activity of apprehension took place in the body as the mind inscribes upon itself images through a “certain wax-like form,” as Nyssa puts it, which was soft in order to receive and perceive images (De hom 30). Nyssa perhaps relates this to a cerebral membrane of sorts as the foundation for the sense organs, related to Galen’s theory.

Placing Nyssa within this medical and Stoic context highlights the active nature of the mind in the apprehension of objects, which Nyssa builds from to both accept the material reality of the body while opening toward its immaterial trajectory. For the Stoics and for Gregory, aesthesis (generally, “aesthetics”) was both perception, or receiving sense data, and apprehension, interpretation and acceptance of sense data as “the implicit mental consequence of the physical process.” The Stoics indeed understood aesthesis in a number of ways; Rubarth summarizes how to hold these meanings together as “(1) the sensory apparatus; (2) the activity of the apparatus; (3) the culminating (successful) cognitive event identified as the assent” to a

52 Wessel, “The Reception of Greek Science,” 26-27; see 32-37 for a discussion of the influence of Galen on Nyssa’s thought and the distinctiveness of Nyssa’s thought. Wessel highlights how Nyssa’s understanding of the hegemonikon was decisive to his overall position and ability to mediate between various tensions.


certain impression (phantasia).\textsuperscript{55} This complex framework “emphasizes the structure and readiness of the part of the sensory apparatus that interfaces with the external world.”\textsuperscript{56} In speaking in aesthesis of both the sensory apparatus in its potentiality and also its activity (energeia), the “Stoics compared the perceptual acquisition to a king who sends out messengers who report back after receiving information.”\textsuperscript{57} The ability of the sense apparatuses to both receive and actively interpret is often spoken of in terms of an imprinting of the sense data in the commanding faculty (like a wax imprinting, as with Nyssa regarding the brain).\textsuperscript{58} This fundamental Stoic relation between passivity and activity in aesthesis allows Nyssa to weave into this materialist framework his immaterialist commitments, granting a tension between deriving knowledge from the material senses and deriving knowledge with intelligible mind. Human nature functioned, as imaging God, according to the exercise of its intelligibility, and in this way the human mind and its ability to intuitively apprehend the non-sensory was a reflection of the divine mind. But still, it was through the portals of sense perception and its organs that such activity happened. The mind could not actually perceive reality in an incorporeal mode, and so knowledge was connected intimately with aesthetic reception, receiving through the operation of the body the operation of its incorporeal, intelligible mind and its rationality.\textsuperscript{59} It is with the figure of the mirror that Nyssa can integrate into his overall theology certain Stoic commitments


\textsuperscript{56} Rubarth, “The Meaning(s) of αἰσθησίς,” 330-331.

\textsuperscript{57} Rubarth, “The Meaning(s) of αἰσθησίς,” 332.

\textsuperscript{58} Rubarth, “The Meaning(s) of αἰσθησίς,” 333.

\textsuperscript{59} Wessel, “The Reception of Greek Science,” 31-32. Wessel notes Gregory engages in a “reductive materialism.”
to accept the rigor, materiality, and sensuousness of the physical senses alongside the more Platonic elements, such as the drive for intelligible, synthetic meaning and interpretation.

**Nyssa and the Importance of the Mirror to Vision**

The operation of the mirror, lying at this complex intersection of the place of vision in forging the relation between finitude and infinitude, focusses the materiality of the body (in its plasticity) toward the question of the free will and the choice to turn toward the good. Once purified or polished, the soul as “life-endued and choice-endowed mirror” is key to genuine bodily transformation. Nyssa uniquely discusses the mirror as being connected to the transformation of the whole person which turns on the direction of the free will of the soul.60

It is as the human person is *like a mirror,* that Gregory can speak of the person’s free choice to turn toward the good so that it takes the shape of the good on the epektatic journey. Having lost its original beauty through “voluntary turning” to sensual things, the soul is “at the border” between spiritual and physical and can turn to both: in order to reclaim its participation in the divine beauty, it must turn to the good through its own free will. The soul as mirror illustrates this.61 Nyssa writes: “Human nature came into being as something capable of becoming whatever it determines upon, and to whatever goal the thrust of its choice leads it, it undergoes alteration in accord with what it seeks.” He continues: “Since, then, our choice is so constituted that we are disposed to take on the shape of whatever we want,

the Word rightly says to the Bride in her new glory, “You have drawn near to me as you have rejected the fellowship of evil, and in drawing near to the archetypal Beauty, you too have become beautiful, informed like a mirror by my appearance. … For in that it is transformed in accordance with the reflections of its choices, the human person is rightly

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60 Karfíková notes that some of Nyssa’s thought here can be connected to Plato and Plotinus, but not in the way that Nyssa emphasizes the turning of the soul through free choice. “The Metaphor of the Mirror,” 271, 280.

likened to a mirror. If it looks upon gold, gold it appears, and by way of reflection it gives off the beams of that substance; ... Having, then, put evil behind it, the soul purified by the Word has taken the sun’s orb within itself and has been gleaming in company with the light that appears within it. (Cant 4, p. 115)

In a similar passage, Nyssa moves from likening human nature to the mirror to discussing more explicitly “the mirror that is human nature” which “does not become beautiful until it has drawn close to the Beautiful and has been formed by its image” (Cant 5, p. 163). As with the sun, though, we can never gaze directly at the good and the beautiful; still, the soul “sees the sun within [itself] as in a mirror” as the “rays” of virtue, writes Nyssa, shine upon the purified life and “make the Invisible visible for us and the Incomprehensible comprehensible, because they portray the Sun in the mirror that we are” (Cant 3, p. 101). The point here, I argue, is less ontological and more ethical: emphasized is the choice to turn away from evil and to the good. Although we cannot gaze directly on the good, we are able to do so as much as possible because of the conceptuality of the mirror.

In this way, Nyssa’s thought on the mirror stands out against the wider context. For Platonic, Neo-Platonic, and Plotinian thought, the mirror illustrates less the productive, transformative relationship between the intelligible and the material and more so the distinction between the two. Matter is like a mirror in that, while it collects reflections of reality, it is itself illusory and not connected to the reality it passively reflects. In this way, the mirror also came to illustrate a key piece of the mythical understanding of the descent or fall of the soul into the body or, more generally, the drawing forth or even erotic relationship between light and darkness. In this vein, when connected to self-reflection and self-formation, the mirror was

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connected to a certain danger of the soul becoming attracted less to the good itself and more to its own reflection. Along these lines, the mirror was explicitly a part of the discourse on the symbolism of evil and sin. However, the mirror (and water in its mirroring quality) was also important to myths of creation along different models of emanation or transmission. In fact, “Plato explicitly mentions the mirror as a tool of the creation in the hands of the one turning it and therewith, in a sense, recreating what the mirror reflects.” Like a mirror receiving an image, the “clear and smooth surface” of the watery world was able to illustrate the openness of the universe to “receiving enlightenment from the Intellect and the soul.” Plotinus specifically moves from the Platonic emphasis on illusory imitation at stake in the mirror to an idea of transmission of images as the universe reflects the intelligible world. In this way, matter is able to participate in the intelligible reality, and darkness able to be illumined. Finally, in key mirror myths (such as that of Narcissus, Dionysius, and Hermaphroditus), the capture of the soul in the body can describe “violent and cunning merging,” through the deception of transparency or the passion of eros. So the mirror had a triple role: “to provide cognizance of the world, of God and of oneself”—and often “its cognitive and cosmological role could not always be separated.”

61 Especially, argues Weiss, as in the myth of capture of Dionysius by Titans (as he gazed at a mirror on the ground); but beyond this in other mythic frames, including Gnostic. Weiss, “The Motif of Self-Contemplation,” 81-82, 84.


Nyssa’s notion of images being reflected in the pupil of the eye-as-mirror has a certain resonance with a passage in the Platonic *Alcibiades*, but Nyssa does not merely discuss the pupil of the other being reflected in one’s own eye, but “anything to which it is turned at that moment.”\(^{70}\) Lenka Karfíková explains that this is “a kind of key to Gregory’s theological use of the metaphor of the mirror” as the mirror is less about ontological difference (as in Plato and Plotinus) and more about that “what is reflected is always that to which it is turned (just as an object that is looked at is reflected in the pupil of the eye).”\(^{71}\) Again, for Nyssa *the mirror represents the possibility to turn, in one’s free choice, toward any desired end for holistic transformation.*\(^ {72}\) This does not preclude—in fact, it requires—some of the other themes at stake in the mirror in the thinking of the time: “ontological dependence” of the material on the immaterial, the “continuing distance between the mirror and what is reflected” which draws the soul continually to its transcendence, and the incomprehensibility of the divine and divine beauty. And yet, amidst the difference, distance, and incomprehensibility, for Nyssa the mirror fundamentally points out the translation of the incomprehensible “*into a form that is accessible to created beings.*”\(^ {73}\) As “living mirror endowed with free choice” one was engaged not in mere reflection but animated attachment and direction, a kind of subjectivity with a focus on transformation in virtue. In other words, we “choose the image that will shine in the mirror of

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\(^{71}\) Karfíková, “The Metaphor of the Mirror,” 280.


\(^{73}\) Karfíková, “The Metaphor of the Mirror,” 283-284. Karfíková writes: “This motif of the infinite love of beauty that is continually escaping was also known to Plotinus, who is familiar with the idea of infinite love which relates to infinity. Gregory, however, lays much greater emphasis on it and also interprets the continuing distance in terms of an ontological difference between the created and the uncreated, which is missing in Plotinus.” 284
our lives.”74 I will address shortly the question of the nature of this transformation as a bodily transformation and how the mirror, emphasizing less the ontological and more the question of use, orientation, or relation, opens a connection between finitude and infinitude.

The mirror fundamentally has to do with the radical human freedom to shape oneself and one’s world. If human nature is especially plastic, as Tanner has argued, this emphasis on freewill “only adds to the plastic, shape-shifting character of human nature.”75 The plasticity of human nature is coupled with a project of self-reflection and self-oversight, which means freedom, will, and reason are powers to cultivate one’s drives toward great virtue or vice, reworking human nature amidst a space that opens up and reaches beyond one’s own nature.76 So Tanner concludes that freewill is less about “some vaunted power in a positive sense, an imitation of divine omnipotence” and more that the power of self-direction as “humans can rework what they are given by nature so as to imitate almost anything along the continuum of ontological ranks, from the bottom to the top.”77 In view of the nature of this space of a mirroring human nature amidst the vastness of infinite possibility, David Bentley Hart describes Nyssa as putting forth a “specular economy,” a life of mirroring fastened in the life of the trinity that folds out to all of creation.78 In this specular economy, the ability to see the invisible God is because God always mirrors Godself in (giving) visibility; this is a “circle of Glory” formed by the

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75 Tanner, Christ the Key, 45.
76 Tanner, Christ the Key, 45-48.
77 Tanner, Christ the Key, 50.
“inseparability of paternal depth from image and glory.”

There is advancement as we are refashioned by the Spirit “so that our ‘depths’ are ever more conformed to the brightening ‘surface’ of our natures, making our ‘return’ to ourselves at once a reflex of God’s return to himself within his circle of glory and also our ascent out of ourselves—out of our creaturely insubstantiality—into his infinity.”

The plasticity of human nature unifies the material with the immaterial; through their expansive flexibility and ability to include within themselves a variety of formations through fundamental openness, humans image in their own way the incomprehensible nature of the divine. But, again, such progress in this economy of reflectivity must embrace the darkness of our creaturely depths. Upon the mirror this simultaneous logic of darkness and light, material and immaterial is played out. This is the logic of enigma.

Connecting the Mirror with the Enigma

Thinking mirror and enigma together is gathered for Nyssa around 1 Corinthians 13:12. Nyssa discusses this passage in his Homilies, noting that “there is a place where [Paul] calls dimmer understanding and partial knowledge a ‘mirror’ and an ‘enigma’ (1 Cor 13:12),” which teaches us (Nyssa says) how one must move from the letter “to shift to an understanding that concerns the immaterial and intelligible, so that corporeal ideas may be transposed into intellect and thought when the fleshly sense of the words has been shaken off like dust” (Cant prol., p. 5).

This partial sight is a matter of seeing and knowing in the darkness. Discussing how the Bride of the Song is “surrounded by the divine night, in which the Bridegroom draws near but is not

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81 Tanner, Christ the Key, 50-54.
manifest,” Nyssa discusses a perception of presence that “escapes clear and distinct intellectual grasp in being concealed by the invisibility of its nature.” Truth, partial in nature, “knocks at the door of our understanding by way of certain hints and enigmas” through key words with meanings that open up the hidden matters (Cant 11, p. 343). With the enigma, we indicate how our finite condition is an obstacle to sight and also how this seeing-within-obstacle is the condition for the possibility of a seeing that leads to understanding of divine truths. Nyssa explains that “the divine Nature transcends the mind’s grasp;” thus:

Our thought concerning it is a likeness or image of what we seek, for it does not manifest the form of that which no one has seen or can see. Rather, it sketches darkly [skiagraphei], in a mirror and in an enigma, a reflection of what we seek that comes to birth in our souls on the basis of some conjecture. All speech, however, that refers to such intuitions has the function of some indivisible mark, being unable to make clear what the mind intends. Thus all our thinking is inferior to the divine understanding, and every explanatory word of speech [logon hermeneutikon] seems to be an abbreviated tracery mark [stigmen] that is unable to embrace the breadth of the act of understanding. (Cant 3, p. 97. Emphasis mine)

What is at stake in the enigma and mirror is the tension of tracing out from and in our finite condition a true understanding in the face of the infinite. The enigmatic expresses a relation between the material and the immaterial, where the material in the intentionality of its materiality “perjures” its finitudinal aspect by indicating some infinite intentionality. And especially for Nyssa, this has to do with how we secure virtue, as virtue is key to “this anagogical progression in the divine life.”

What is at stake here is the symbol’s hinting and hiding tension in its representative nature (as I mentioned in the previous chapter). As a symbol is both “like” and “unlike” at the same time, opacity expresses the nature of the symbol’s representation—that it only “hint[s]  

82 Boersma, Embodiment and Virtue, 4.
secretly” at (because it also hides) that which it represents; and “what is concealed is related to what is revealed by unseen correspondences.”\^{83} This tension of representation, this opacity, expresses what is at the core of the symbol as enigma. According to Peter T. Struck, a certain dialectic frames how the opacity of the symbol has been approached historically: a “poetics of enigma” by allegorists in contradistinction from the “poetics of clarity” by Aristotelian rhetors. At its earliest, this is a disagreement about the nature of language and its connection to a broader ontology, especially as it relates to the interpretation of Homer. We have here two competing visions of how to understand language and deal with its interpretation, especially related to the “fantastic” or “obscure” or some apparent “flaw” or strangeness in a text. In a poetics of clarity the opacity or enigma of language is considered an obstacle and a defect that must be avoided to reach understanding; there is no unseen ontological linkage between words and deeper realities (if anything, the apparent mirroring function of language would only produce phantasms and deceptive images).\^{84} In a poetics of enigma, while opacity is a kind of obstruction at first, ultimately it is a redirection that leads to truer understanding, a poetic surplus out of which we make meaning and selves. Herein lies the importance of “riddling” as the symbol and enigma and their cognates “form the central concepts of ancient allegorical reading.”\^{85} With the allegorists, poetry and words are connected to deeper philosophical and theological matters.\^{86} Obscurities in the text divert and challenge a literal reading and are a clue to a deeper meaning.\^{87}

\^{83} Coulter, The Literary Microcosm, 42-43.

\^{84} Struck, Birth of the Symbol, 23. Thus “art does not raise grand ontological questions” but is “a matter of rather simple mimesis, accurate or inaccurate, and in the best examples always clear.” The poet is the sovereign master, but not a secret seer. See 65-66, 70-71.

\^{85} Struck, Birth of the Symbol, 23.

\^{86} Struck, Birth of the Symbol, 11.
The skilled reader traces the hidden meaning in the word, encountered through this obscurity and poetic surplus, to its deeper more profound meaning. In the poetics of the enigma, of which Nyssa takes part, *the conceptuality of the mirror eventually becomes a place upon which to think out the possibility of connecting surface appearances to deeper meanings* through wise and learned perception. In his thinking of the symbol as opening up to the immaterial, Nyssa drew on Neoplatonic thought; but even drawing on a Neoplatonic symbology, he valued the importance of the material, emphasizing, we could say, the more *Stoic roots* of Neoplatonic thinking.

Struck traces five key phases in the history of the symbol, from non-literary to literary symbol, which becomes important to situate Nyssa’s symbology, especially as we seek to understand the Stoic and Neoplatonic symbol. *First*, up to 300 BCE, the symbol begins as material and concrete, as essentially half an object that is split to make an agreement and later reassembled to confirm it. Thus, the symbol begins as a force to materialize “social agreement and social commitment, in commercial, political, and personal spheres” and thus in its very origin is characterized by lack as *in its materiality it indicates a transcendent meaning*—the missing social agreement to be resolved. *Second*, from this concrete root a specialized (still non-literary) meaning eventually occurs: that of symbol as “ominous chance meeting.”

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87 Struck, *Birth of the Symbol*, 52.

88 Struck, *Birth of the Symbol*, 16.

89 Struck, *Birth of the Symbol*, 78. Struck argues the Greek verb behind the word symbol is to be taken more in terms of “agreement” than “put together.”

90 Struck, *Birth of the Symbol*, 79-80, 89. At the symbol’s core lies this quality of simultaneously revealing and concealing, functioning like a secret “calling card,” a discourse of exclusiveness. Struck, 81. Even here we should keep our eye on how the notion of opacity might manifest in its later literary symbol; but Struck notes that there are at least a couple difficulties with this transition: whereas the function of such a classical symbol is authentication and that by social consensus, literary symbols by contrast “tend to be understood as working … by means of hidden connections in nature that exist regardless of whether a group of language users agree on them or not.” Struck, 82.
might think, in a contemporary frame, of a black cat or black bird. Both in its earliest meaning as contract marker and here as omen “significance is pulled from the void of happenstance by looking to an intentionality [and secondary reference], social in the one case and divine in the other.”

The apparent material meaning at stake in the token or omen is itself normed by the conventionality of human or divine intentionality. (Herein, I argue, lies the seeds of the symbol’s inherent opacity and its connection to the enigma or riddle: still as only object yet representing an immaterial reality.)

Third, with the Pythagoreans the symbol shifts to a literary context. Here, the symbol begins to be particularly associated with the enigma, as the symbol here was a riddle or saying that functioned to “bind the group together and draw distinctions between them and the outside world.” The Pythagoreans in this way used obscure sayings as authentication tokens, not just to provide physical access to the community but to indicate entrance into a higher level of insight and understanding.

With the Stoics, the symbol emerges both as a key category for reading literature and as having an ontological purchase. The Stoics used the enigma-symbol for an allegoresis built on the specifics of Stoic ontology, especially in terms of the nature of the logos and pneuma as underlying all of reality. Introducing “detailed thinking into the linguistic aspects of a universalist ontology such as had never been seen,” with the logos/pneuma frame the Stoics built a bridge between surface appearance and ultimate reference. Indeed: “All existing things

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93 Struck, *Birth of the Symbol*, 101-102. We could spend more time on the importance of this transition through the Pythagoreans, but space does not allow. As a summary, Struck writes: “These symbolic visions form the ground of possibility of a new theory of poetic symbols, one that labels poetry as carrying a surplus of signification, a density of meaning reserved for the speech of ancient wise men and gods. *The power of the symbol is born out of the power of the secret.*” 102, emphasis mine.
manifest the pneuma dwelling within them, and all words, therefore, have always another referent.  And in this way, all things were connected and coordinated at the deepest level to all other things in the cosmos. Though materialist and immanentist in this way, in the Stoic frame words can gain an ambiguity because the material foundation does not guarantee social linguistic stability nor automatic access from word to deeper reference. In this framework, what Struck calls a “universalist materialism,” no single word could “lay bare the collective logos itself, that is, the collective language that is the divine pneuma itself.” Despite the connection between words and ontological stability, the ambiguity lies in shifts of meaning and growing ontological subcurrents. This basic sense of the polyvalence of language and need for interpretive schemas because of “some hint of ontological linkage between surface referent and underlying referent” only grows more prominent moving forward and especially toward Neoplatonic thought. The Stoics thus bring to the history of the symbol its key place in interpreting poetic language (allegoresis) as linked to broader claims of underlying ontological linkage between word and greater reference.

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94 Struck, Birth of the Symbol, 111-112.

95 Struck, Birth of the Symbol, 138. See 111 for a detailed explanation, and 116-122 for significance of the Stoic literary working with and upon the notion of the symbol.

96 Struck, Birth of the Symbol, 127-128.

97 In fact, a key point of the Stoic mentality, and something at the core of ethics, was to live in accordance with nature, knowing its logos, and thereby being connected to the core guiding principle, discovered in the deeper reference of any word. For these points, see Struck, Birth of the Symbol, 131-135.

98 Struck, Birth of the Symbol, 139-140.

99 Struck, Birth of the Symbol, 141.

100 Stuck, Birth of the Symbol, 143, 161. In this way, the general Stoic framework would come to represent a common sense amidst various and ongoing adaptations and modifications under other influences.
The Neoplatonic ontologization of the literary symbol magnifies what was at stake in the poetics of the enigma at it develops and gains prominence in Stoic thought, extending this belief in interpreting words according to a mysterious underlying hidden correspondences to an unseen world. Neoplatonic ideas of moving from surface to hidden meaning “rest on an ontological assertion that relationships exist, sometimes intuitive, often opaque, in the world of things.” Thus the Neoplatonists “advance such thinking by an order of magnitude.” It was particularly Iamblichus, on Struck’s account, who brings to the symbol its framework that carries through to key modern developments: “Iamblichus makes the ‘symbol’ the central link between the divine and human realms. The symbol makes the impossible happen; it becomes the node on which the transcendent can meet the mundane.” For Neoplatonists like Iamblichus “symbols translate between ourselves and our gods by giving us a language of signs that (somehow) allows us to talk about (and thus to worship) that which by definition is beyond all our puny words and conceptions.” At this point, the symbol, as it “embraces and contains the paradox” of transcendence (insisted on by Epicureans) and immanence (insisted on by Stoics), operates in a way “that mirrors the deep structures of the cosmos.” Herein is a certain kind of depth, so fundamental to opacity: the enigma or symbol in its very logic is able to function like a mirror, showing something on its surface that is an indication of a deeper—perhaps truer—reality.

In this rich milieu of thinking about the symbol, Gregory used the figure of the mirror to explain not only the relation between the material and immaterial, but how one could discern the

101 Struck, Birth of the Symbol, 164-165.
102 Struck, Birth of the Symbol, 187.
103 Struck, Birth of the Symbol, 213, emphasis mine. Struck refers to this as a “talismanic” symbol.
104 Struck, Birth of the Symbol, 220.
divine in the human reality. Indeed, for Nyssa, like other late allegorists, the word was symbol because the human mind needed a perceptible point from which to grasp immaterial meaning. Although Nyssa drew upon this poetics of the enigma and the fundamental gesture of tracing out from poetic surplus a primary deeper theological truth, as “foremost[ly] a Christian thinker,” Nyssa is able to take these Neoplatonic convictions and yet draw on the Stoic roots of the importance of materiality in constructing an anagogical or epektatic frame trying to hold together the finite and the infinite. Even this Stoic influence toward materiality is rooted deeper in the history of the symbol as first material object.

Bodily and Aesthetic Transformation: Moral Formation in the Face of Opacity

I have discussed how the notion of opacity (especially as it relates to the enigma and the mystical darkness therein) provides for understanding the complex way in which Nyssa configures creaturely vision in the face of the divine infinite. In this kind of anagogical aesthetics, darkness is presented as the obstacle in the way of sight (quickly being moralized within a symbolics of evil) and yet as the limit to creaturely sight which properly opens onto a view of the divine. The mirror represents this darkness or enigma for Nyssa as it emphasizes the ability in one’s free will to direct one’s attention toward any end for radical shaping of self and also emphasizes the unknown infinite, thus emphasizing (in a Stoic vein) aesthetics as both activity and reception. As I work my way toward the question of whether darkness for Nyssa can truly be retrieved as a positive concept that values materiality and finitude, I need to interrogate specifically the importance for Nyssa of the material and bodily in pursuit of the infinite. I have

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105 See Struck, Birth of the Symbol, 182.

106 Boersma, Embodiment and Virtue, 6.
already made the claim that in the epektatic journey it is not just openness toward the divine but also the rigor of one’s creatureliness that is formative toward transformation. Now I inquire just how the mirror logic at the heart of epektasis operates by engendering a genuinely material transformation—though it cannot escape the specter, at the same time, of surpassing the body.

Bodily Transformation in Nyssa’s Epektasis

The value of the body for an early Christian thinker like Nyssa is nuanced and complicated. While there has typically been a suspicion that Nyssa, like other early Christian thinkers, devalued the body, recent Nyssen scholarship has begun to emphasize how key bodily reality was for Nyssa. Sarah Coakley’s claim of the importance of the body for Nyssa even as the Christian progresses in the life of virtue has been influential: that Gregory’s works “from the time of his De anima on … set out a developing and systematic account of how ordinary perception and the gross physical sense are capable of a progressive transformation in this life into spiritual senses via a purgative process of ‘death’ and regeneration.” She argues that Nyssa moves beyond Origen’s Platonic disjunctive approach between flesh and spirit, beyond a discontinuity between the senses, and to a “transfiguration” of the bodily senses. The connection is rather radical: “our very acts of visual perceiving and sensual responses might be affected by our moral fibre, our spiritual maturity or our depths of scriptural engagement.” Spiritual formation is enabled as spiritual senses are inculcated through the transformation of bodily senses—resulting in physically changed bodily aesthetic comportment. Indeed, while

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Nyssa generally subscribes to the Stoic ideal of apatheia, he shifts the emphasis so that the passions are worked with and redirected toward some kind of paradoxical “passionate apatheia.” Thus Nyssa writes of the changing of human nature “into something more divine:”

For what could be more incredible than to make human nature itself the purifier of its own passions, teaching and legislating impassibility by words that are considered to be tinctured with passion? For he does not say that one must be outside the motions of the flesh and put to death one’s earthly members and have one’s mouth cleansed of the language of passion. On the contrary, he has so disposed the soul that she directs her gaze toward purity by means of instruments that seem inconsistent with it and by means of impassioned utterances communicates a meaning that is undefiled. (Cant 1, p. 31)

Nyssa does not devalue the body, I argue, but insists on a certain use of the body rooted in how the body and materiality should aim toward the good and ethical.

Gregory insists on the materiality of human existence. We can only pursue virtue through our embodied existence, the concrete realities of created space and time—our diastemic (διάστημα) condition. In fact, much scholarship has focused on how the fundamental distinction for Gregory is between created and uncreated, not between spirit and matter in Platonic thought; this gives Nyssa a way to value space and time and embodied existence in a more distinctly Christian way. Boersma writes: “anagogy (which is always his ultimate concern) is only possible because of and through the concrete realities of material existence … [and] thus for Nyssen embodiment is indispensable for the anagogical pursuit.”

109 Karfíková, “The Metaphor of the Mirror,” 267-268. The Song plays an important part of this, leading the soul, by passionate images, toward a passionlessness: “The strategy of the Scriptures is therefore first to arouse and intensify the bride’s desire, and then to turn her in the right direction, that is, from the sensual to the spiritual. This ‘leading’ to apatheia through the ‘passionate’ images … in the Song of Songs seems, even to Gregory, paradoxical: an erotic relation to the divine needs to be aroused in the soul … and therefore the divine is presented as ‘beauty,’” Karfíková, “The Metaphor of the Mirror,” 268.

110 Boersma, Embodiment and Virtue, 4-5.

111 Boersma, Embodiment and Virtue, 6.
In this process of taking the body and creaturely reality seriously in epektatic transformation, the mirror returns to importance, now not only a figure of the relationship between the finite and infinite but as also empowering the very transformation of the material. In *De hominis opificio*, Nyssa speaks of a set of interconnected mirrors. Similar to his idea of the soul as mirror, now Nyssa writes that the human mind, as an image of the archetypal beauty, partakes in beauty just as a mirror “receive[s] the figure of that which it expresses.” We have already seen this idea of the human interior turning to the good and taking its form, like a mirror does. But Nyssa now speaks of yet another mirror:

> we consider that the nature which is governed by [the mind] is attached to the mind in the same relation, and that it too is adorned by the beauty that the mind gives, being, so to say, a mirror of the mirror; and that by it is swayed and sustained the material element of that existence in which the nature is contemplated. Thus so long as one keeps in touch with the other, the communication of the true beauty extends proportionally through the whole series, beautifying by the superior nature that which comes next to it. (*De hom* 12.9-10. Emphasis mine)

The mind, itself a likeness to the archetypical beauty, functions like an archetype itself to human nature and materiality. Such a set of “interconnected mirrors,” argues Wessel, worked to bring “mind in conjunction with nature, and nature in conjunction with matter, thereby imbuing nature and matter with archetypal residue.”¹¹³ For Nyssa, human nature functions only as it is connected to the Good. He gives an illustration to this point: like a musician playing music as the “body” of a musical instrument functions properly, the mind can only perform if the body is functioning according to its nature (*De hom* 12). Moreover, Gregory argues that the mind makes its thoughts

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¹¹² Boersma, *Embodiment and Virtue*, 6-7. For evidence that Gregory occasionally acknowledges that also material realities participate in the life of God, see 7-8. But: “we should not so highlight Gregory’s positive appreciation of embodiment as to lose sight of the profoundly otherworldly cast of his overall theology. … Gregory consistently aims for anagogical progression in the divine life and that this almost always implies a turn away from the material toward the spiritual.” Boersma, *Embodiment and Virtue*, 9.

and perceptions known to the soul only through the bodily senses and their connection to the material world (*De hom* 9). He also illustrates the mind as a city, receiving visitors from the various senses (*De hom* 10). Reflecting on Nyssa’s thought here, Wessel concludes: “the mind, far from being autonomous, in fact depended upon the body for its full expression; and … nature was a mediating principle between mind and matter which made the unity of the organism a physical reality.”

Through this conceptuality of the body as a conduit between the sensory world and the intelligible mind, “Gregory constructed a model of the intelligible mind and its relationship to body that was deeply dependent upon the body’s interaction with the world.” The conceptuality of the mirror, by connecting materiality to the human mind, allows Gregory to speak of a transformation that has both spiritual and material dimensions. While Nyssa was dualistic in some sense, he intimately connected the physical body and the intelligible mind, thus “resolv[ing] the sort of mind-body dualism found in Platonism and Origen.” Through his drawing on Galen and Stoic thought (as I explained above), Nyssa was able to construct “a unified theory of the human person in which the intelligible activity of mind not only interacted freely with the physical body in its natural state, but depended upon the body functioning naturally for the complete expression of its divine rationality.” In this way the senses “establish the necessary association” between “the material and the immaterial” as the soul is “made known through its activity in conjunction with the body.”

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114 Wessel, “The Reception of Greek Science,” 42.


The body is important in this way for Nyssa because human diastemic nature—as material and bound to space, time, and measurement—contributes to, and to some extent makes possible, the life of virtue. This is because virtue for Nyssa has to do with measurement and timeliness. Such a physical transformation of the body toward virtue, though, is not a given. Stressing the ethical before the ontological, for Nyssa this is dependent upon the choice to set the mirror of oneself toward that which is beautiful. In the passage just discussed about the chain of mirrors, Nyssa discusses ugliness, noting it as “an interruption of this beneficent connection” upon which “is displayed the misshapen character of matter” which, by its “shapelessness” destroys the beauty supposed to be mirrored in the mind. Nyssa continues: “and so the transmission of the ugliness of matter reaches through the nature to the mind itself, so that the image of God is no longer seen” in it. In this case, notes Gregory, the mind has “set the idea of good like a mirror behind the back” (De hom 12.10). Isolated from nature and thus severed from the good and beautiful, matter “merely dissipated into formlessness. Through matter’s connection to nature, and the mirror relationship between nature and mind that remained, this formlessness was transmitted to mind whose beauty was thereby tarnished.” Thus the connection between matter and the immaterial upon the logic of the mirror betrays an ambiguity concerning the embrace of the opaque—similar to the ambiguity we have already seen with the concept of darkness. Gregory is convinced that one must embrace the body in its materiality—but insofar as one becomes w(e)ary to read opacity rightly toward virtue. At the end of the day, Nyssa “is nonetheless impatient with the diastemic character of time. Nyssen is an anagogical

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118 See Boersma, Embodiment and Virtue, 28-30.

theologian for whom the διάστημα of time is an obstacle that we are to surpass.”¹²⁰ As the body, like all materiality, exists insofar as it can be understood through the intelligible ideas that converge on it, the concern regarding the body pertains to its aesthetic-ethical direction. There is always the possibility the body could become something else and be set on a different trajectory. In this way for Gregory the body, like all materiality, is fundamentally “ontologically malleable.”¹²¹

A Remaining Challenge: Nyssa on Virtue and Purity

Still set in this ambiguity over darkness and “ugliness” upon the mirror, a contemporary phenomenological retrieval of Nyssa focused on a phenomenology of whiteness needs to take account of lingering problems of a symbolizing of darkness of color as a symbol of evil, including the danger of the body needing to be surpassed in an anagogical aesthetics. As Boersma argues: “The significance of temporality or historicity fades for Nyssen as he wants us to ascend to the purity and incorruptibility of the divine life. The upward character of the ascent of virtue implies that at every point in time one ought to take the opportunity to move yet higher.”¹²² Yet, Natalie Carnes’ argument on the importance of fittingness and gratuity in a Nyssen framework that can embrace “ugliness” presents us with an opportunity to positively retrieve a Nyssen framework for contemporary aesthetic problems. Most generally her claim is about how Nyssa’s epectatic framework continually opens one up to see beauty in the here and now. The notion of fittingness in Nyssa “allows us to invoke multiple levels of context” of

¹²⁰ Boersma, Embodiment and Virtue, 30.

¹²¹ Boersma, Embodiment and Virtue, 23.

beauty, even surprising ones, while that of gratuity retains for beauty a kind of formative rigor toward greater beauty. Thus: “An object’s fittingness draws the beholder to itself while its gratuity points her beyond it, to a new object and a new framework in which to understand an object’s fittingness” which itself will point to a greater beauty. As no object fully captures or exhausts beauty, this Nyssen framework engenders a posture receptive to otherness. Carnes particularly focuses on how Nyssa frames “ugliness” in a Christological framework, especially focusing on the humility of Christ and then those humbled and oppressed. In this way, the process of aesthetic formation for Nyssa hinges on an embrace of ugliness, not only in the contradiction of God’s glory veiled in the humility of human flesh but in the identity of the humble Christ with humbled and afflicted humanity.

Still, we cannot look past how Nyssa uses mirror imagery to discuss the need for a cleaning or purifying of the mirror, and a certain trajectory this will set us on past Cusa and into modern thought. In discussing the journey of virtue, Nyssa writes in his Homilies of the need for the bride to gaze directly into the bridegroom’s face (in light of the mirroring aspect of vision), and also of the need to “purify the surface of its mirror” (Cant 15, p. 467). Granted that a mirror “is put together with skill and in conformity with its function,” Nyssa writes,

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123 Natalie Carnes, Beauty: A Theological Engagement with Gregory of Nyssa (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), 56. Explaining these concepts, Carnes notes how Gregory uses the ladder image (which is comparable to the mountain of Moses’ ascent in the Life of Moses): “An object of beauty is as perfectly fitting and present as a rung is present to the foot and as perfectly gratuitous and future-pushing as the sides of a ladder, which beckon the climber ever upward, ever out of her present rung to the next, higher one. In other words, the sides of the ladder connect the lower rungs to the higher rungs as the gratuity of beauty connects the lower instances of beauty with the higher ones. The way the lower beauties led to the higher ones is in their perfect fittingness, which opens up onto gratuity.”

124 Carnes, Beauty, 88.

125 Carnes, Beauty, 140-148.

126 See Karfíková, “The Metaphor of the Mirror,” 281-282. She writes: “this procedure had fundamental significance for the metallic mirrors used in antiquity.”
it displays in itself on its clear surface the exact imprint of the face it reflects. In just this way, the soul, when she has put herself together in a way suited to her function and cast off every material defilement, has graven into herself the pure look of the inviolate beauty. *(Cant 15, p. 467)*

Nyssa then refers to this purified mirror as the “life-endued and choice-endowed mirror” that can focus entirely on the beauty of the form it sees in Christ and rid itself of “human and material passions” such as pleasure, anger, fear, envy, and love of money.

In another key passage in his *Homilies*, Nyssa discusses how the “eye” or leadership of the church “must wash away all the teary haze of vice with water, if he is to supervise, oversee, and inspect in purity.” This water is the purifying wells of virtue: Nyssa names temperance, humility, truth, justice, courage, desire for the good and alienation from evil *(Cant 13, p. 417).* This idea of cleansing of the eyes from haziness, darkness or obstruction is not unique to Gregory. Clement had similarly described sanctification in terms of washing one’s eyes, discussing “the physical act of baptism as a corresponding spiritual surgery for the *eye of the soul*”—specifically the uncommon and risky surgery of cataract removal.127 But Gregory uniquely discusses such purifying not merely in terms of the eyes themselves, but in the broader conceptuality of the mirror, keeping the mirror symbolism as central. This is especially interesting in that here the mirror shows a negative aspect. Gregory discusses this purification of eyesight in terms of a washing with milk because of the specific (non)mirroring qualities of milk:

> For it is truly observed of milk that of all fluids it alone has the property that in it no image or likeness appears. Things that are naturally liquid, as we know, behave like mirrors in that, because of their smooth surfaces, they cause the likeness of those who look into them to be reflected back; only milk has no such capacity for imaging. Hence the highest praise of the church’s eyes is this: that they do not mistakenly image anything unreal and counterfeit and empty that is contrary to what truly is but look upon what *is* in the full and proper sense of that word. They do not take in the deceitful sights and

127 Cain, “Medically Modified Eyes,” 507.
fantasies of the present life. For this reason, the perfect soul judges that it is the bath in milk that most surely purifies the eyes. (Cant 13, p. 417-419)

The emphasis here is specifically the danger of the mirror reflecting one’s image back to oneself. Upon the mirror, the symbolism of darkness has been transformed into the idea of haziness or obstruction of vision, which is connected to the uneasiness with the mirror in its merely self-reflective possibilities. What I mean is that Nyssa discusses the need to cleanse oneself from various vices lest “the beam of self-conceit, falling upon the pure pupil of the eye, become[s] an obstacle to sight” (Cant 13, p. 419). The end result of this cleansing is that “the eye may become beautiful” when it is “not confusedly forming images of the unreal for itself.” A similar passage sheds further light on this theme: Nyssa discusses the Church as a “clear mirror” showing the Sun of Righteousness. Here, he notes that the “soul’s work of seeing is twofold” where what is at stake is “pure eyes” as opposed to “perverse eyes”: “there are people who, by making wrong use of different eyes, have a clear vision of what is not real and divide the One into many natures because of the fantasies conjured by their perverse eyes.” These people “waste their time with images of things that have no reality” (Cant 8, p. 271-273).

Ultimately Nyssa’s notion of “clear sight” or one-eyed vision as opposed to many-eyed vision stresses not primarily an ontological danger of the mirror, but that one might use the mirror to solidify an ontological world of one’s own making. The mirror can radically transform the body and advance it toward that which it is directed, and so the admonition to turn it to the good and not towards evil. On this point, through the notion of “vain” and “empty” images, Nyssa speaks on the level of the idol. Nyssa discusses the effect of looking at idols: how “the changeable nature of human beings had been altered to conform to that of unchangeable idols” and thus has become “frozen stiff by the chill of idolatry.” Nyssa writes: “For just as those who
look upon the true Godhead take to themselves the characteristics of the divine nature, so too the person who is devoted to the vanity of idols is transformed into the stone he looks upon and becomes other than human” (*Cant* 5, p. 147). The purity at stake in the mirror is a purity of the intentionality of the subject and the *use* of finitude (and not necessarily a matter of ontological aspects drawn from the mirror). The mirror, for Nyssa, is a pedagogical tool teaching one how to properly relate oneself in one’s materiality to the infinite and move toward it. This question of ontology and idols brings us to the heart of theological vision. Like the epektatic journey, the icon is concerned with the transformative potential of human sight toward the divine in the tension between the sensible material and the transcendent intelligible. We will have to establish here how to discuss the icon, how important the mirror is to it, and whether we can go a different direction. A determined effort to discuss “reverse perspective” helps to get us there.

**A Contemporary Framework for Retrieval**

In the overall scope of my argument, I present Nyssa’s framework on vision within mystical darkness as an alternative account to white sight and one that, when retrieved in certain aspects, can provide a corrective—though a problematic symbolism of darkness remains. A shaping force for this effort is Carter’s claim about retrieving opacity within the horizon of the icon for ultimately re-thinking race. Clarifying this allows us to retrieve the hermeneutically productive enigmatic opacity at stake in divine darkness without the moral symbolism. In considering the icon, we are considering Nyssa’s fundamental distinction between created and uncreated and how the mirror links the one to the other. But I want to begin to critique the mirror here. Problematizing the way human plasticity and malleability is thought upon *the figure and logic of the mirror*, I want to explore how the icon can be first materiality-textuality before
having to do with the mirror.\textsuperscript{128} This brings us to what is hermeneutically at stake in “reverse perspective.” It also brings us to the question of what type of ethics might be at stake here.

**Carter: Thinking with Nyssa on Opacity and an Iconic Framework**

Carter brings Nyssa’s work on darkness toward a contemporary trajectory regarding race, discussing opacity in its connection to race within a generally Nyssen framework that focuses on the icon. We have seen with Marion, in the previous chapter, what is at stake in the icon as opposed to the idol. The concern regarding just how to apprehend the divine in visibility is Carter’s concern as well when it comes to the icon. Carter’s discussion of the significance of opacity as discussed in an iconic framework is first set in the context of a certain disagreement between Charles Long’s historical dialecticism and Albert Raboteau’s “iconic” reading of history. Carter argues that Raboteau’s iconic reading allows for a “theological engagement with history.”\textsuperscript{129} Ultimately, the significance Carter makes in thinking of opacity as connected to blackness in this way is as follows: “Black existence and black faith relate to the eternal Logos as an icon relates to that which it represents. In this way, the invisible becomes visible even as it retains its invisible depth, a depth rooted in a freedom (for God the Creator), which cannot be policed and thus enslaved.”\textsuperscript{130} Opacity, understood in this way as iconic, speaks of a blackness that is \textit{free}, that is a blackness that understands itself on its own terms and thus as it is open,

\textsuperscript{128} This will continue into the next chapter with Cusa’s work. Thinking \textit{epektasis} in the framework of a phenomenology of the icon will help us to thoroughly connect Nyssa to Cusa’s work on divine darkness, and to tie it into a contemporary phenomenological frame.

\textsuperscript{129} Carter, \textit{Race}, 152. Carter explains: “In Long’s view, notions of iconicity, which embrace a hermeneutic of transparency, are epistemologically inadmissible for oppositional theologies, because “iconic” theologies do not see existence as oppositionally structured through power: who has it, who does not, and how discourses participate in it. Opaque theologies, on the other hand, draw out these oppositional structures of power.” Carter, \textit{Race}, 218.

\textsuperscript{130} Carter, \textit{Race}, 152.
productively, toward otherness (as a consequence of not being bound to a prior dialectic of otherizing). On a larger scale, such opacity speaks of a relation of mutual freedom between materiality (or finitude) and transcendence (or infinitude). Highlighting the conceptuality of the mirror, Carter argues that what is at stake here is not a kind of dualistic representational “mirroring” of “Greek ocularity” that would be susceptible to various critiques of metaphysics. Carter writes:

For though the icon or image ... as a phenomenon of creation is to be rigorously distinguished from what it ‘represents,’ the icon’s representing capacity is not reducible to that of a passive or inert mirror. Understanding the representational capacity of the image in this way is precisely what gives rise to the need to theorize the correspondence between type and archetype, between mirror and what is mirrored.131

This point about how representation occurs in an iconic logic in contradistinction with Greek “ocular metaphysics” will be key to our own inquiry regarding how opacity is dealt with from pre-modern to modern perspective.

Carter’s main point about opacity in an iconic framework is that opacity in an icon (and, Carter argues, thus in Being itself) is in a dialectic with translucency. An icon, Carter writes, is translucent insofar as the historically and existentially constituted image of God or created Being is a reflection of divinity, albeit on the surface of creation. In this sense, to be a creature is to be sheer impressio and pure emphasis. It is to have one’s existence stamped somewhat like the imprint of a seal on a coin, to have one’s face or expression (phasis) imprinted into Being or drawn into the enduring effect of existing rather than not existing at all. In short, it is to be created, to be brought into the realization of creaturely and therefore contingent identity.132

And yet this being impressed by Being, this passive creation by impressio, is in tension with the creature’s expressio, that is, the creature’s “‘active’ and free participation in bringing itself to

131 Carter, Race, 153. Emphasis mine.
132 Carter, Race, 153.
appearance or visibility.” Carter writes: “As expression, image consciously and intentionally offers itself and in offering or presenting its face it discloses that face as the very surface of the Infinite.”\textsuperscript{133} Infinite Being itself is dynamic, not static, thus allowing the iconic connection or mediation with creaturely existence.\textsuperscript{134}

Opacity in this iconic framework, then, means “a transcending of the self precisely in being oneself.”\textsuperscript{135} In this way, opacity is the being-free-to-infinite-openness-in-one’s-own-self-same-being, so that creaturely existence can never be bound or captured within merely finite logics (though they may masquerade as infinite logics). Thus, to Carter’s main point:

creatures present themselves or are visible in such a way that their visibility cannot be captured or enslaved without a massive and violent distortion of their existence as creatures. In this respect, one might say that creaturely existence is opaque … But their opacity and, hence, their visibility as creatures, it must quickly be said, is of a particular sort: What it means ‘to be’ is to be visible but precisely as the visible icon of the invisible. Creaturely opacity must be understood within the horizon of the icon. That is, creatures in the particular forms in which they appear are opaque (there is something that is uncapturable about creatures without distortion of what it means to be a creature.). But their opacity is the opacity of the icon, whose opacity and translucency are not in binary relationship (as is the beautiful to the grotesque, or the rational to the irrational, or the civil is to the savage in Western metaphysics). To say the one—the opaque—is already to have said the other—the translucent. Black existence in bearing witness to the form of Christ displays just this theologically iconic nature of creation.\textsuperscript{136}

By defining opacity theologically within the framework of the icon, Carter positively connects opacity to blackness by claiming that creaturely density must be considered theologically in tension with its infinite openness. This gives Carter a framework to discuss how

\textsuperscript{133} Carter, \textit{Race}, 153.

\textsuperscript{134} Carter, \textit{Race}, 153. Carter writes, “It is a static vision of existence that in large part gives rise to the problem of Western ocular metaphysics.” 153


\textsuperscript{136} Carter, \textit{Race}, 154.
blackness can understand itself as part of a logic of flesh that, caught up in the freedom of transcendence, can escape cycles of violence to the flesh. In thinking about opacity and race with Nyssa in this way, Carter pushes our phenomenology of whiteness to consider how a phenomenology of the icon might allow us to think more carefully about the opaque tension between finitude and infinitude.

**The Challenge: slave-humannity and the plasticity of pure potentiality**

Zakiyyah Jackson connects the idea of human plasticity to the problem of racialized black flesh as pure plasticity. In pushing back against the issue of human plasticity in the frame of an anagogical aesthetics, I begin to highlight the condition for the possibility of the racial pathologization of opacity. Jackson focuses on how enslaved black flesh represents a limit-point for human transformation, in fact how, in the economy of the Trans-Atlantic slavocracy, the making-a-slave is not a denial of a slave’s humanity but goes beyond this to actually “producing a [new] kind of human.”

Jackson argues that “black(ened) humanity is understood, paradigmatically, as a state of abject human animality.” This happened through “coerced formlessness as a mode of domination and the Unheimlich existence that is its result.” This, Jackson argues, was an experiment in a newly constructed infinity: the “transmogrification of human form and personality, as an experiment in plasticity and its limits therein” made it such that black slaves in their humanity “could function as infinitely malleable lexical and biological

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139 Jackson, *Becoming Human*, 71. *Unheimlich*—uncanniness: I will return to the intimate connection between this and opacity in Ch. 4.
matter, at once sub/super/human.”

Two points are important to mention here. First, that this plasticization hinged on “the site of reproduction” and thus on the black woman as figure-materiality upon which the slavocracy and new economy was formed. Second, the ultimate concern of this pure plasticization of black flesh was to forge the distinction-in-relation between human and animal. Jackson argues that “blackness is the mode of ontological plasticity that stabilizes and gives form to ‘human’ and ‘animal’ as terms.” In this biopolitical arrangement, through an “inclusion that nevertheless masks itself as exclusion” black people are “selectively incorporated into the liberal humanist project.” In this arrangement, “animalization and humanization of the slave’s personhood are not mutually exclusive but mutually constitutive.”

In this way, black flesh as pure plasticity was the mirror which normed a “new” epektatic frame for modernity. Upon the creatureliness and materiality of black flesh was stretched a newly constructed infinity that would stretch black flesh not towards the divine infinite but internally toward its own (ever-deepening, self-surpassing) limits, as a kind of negative freedom. Black(ened) flesh, “enslaved humanity,” is a rendering of human beings as a plasticity that questions the whole mode of human transformation toward the good and infinite—potentiality “gone wrong,” humans rendered as pure potentiality: “In this act of transmogrification … the black(ened) body and mind are twisted and contorted in a manner indifferent to structures of

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140 Jackson, Becoming Human, 47-48. Jackson distinguishes her approach to plasticity from Malabou: “In contrast to Malabou’s approach, the plastic ontology described here is neither the thing-in-itself nor an immanent ontology of the real but representational or paradigmatic: an a posteriori virtual model of a dynamic, motile mode of antiblack arrangement.”

141 Jackson, Becoming Human, 4.

142 Jackson, Becoming Human, 59.

143 Jackson, Becoming Human, 46-47.
form, their integrity, and their limits.” A certain “imagination of matter” (thinking back to Long) is at play here: a newly racialized conception of form and space takes hold of newly crafted artificial infinity, and this imagination is played out upon the black body.

Despite the challenge Jackson brings to centering a notion like human plasticity in the face of an iconic aesthetics, she opens this very route in another direction. Even in this plasticization, blackness/matter/woman figures as “a central and ever present unsettling excess that nevertheless eludes representation.” Black, female flesh destabilizes the new project of infinity and its order; black matter “holds the potential to transform [and rewrite] the conditions of possibility of the empirical.” Jackson illustrates this, following a literary analysis of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, by focusing on how the “animal perspective” of Mister (the rooster) suspends or disengages the question of plasticity and its historical function. The poignant episode comes when the protagonist of the story, Paul D, “discovers” his abject human animality (notice he has a bit in his mouth) as caught in the rooster’s gaze:

He recounts, “[I]t wasn’t the bit— that wasn’t it. . . . The roosters. . . . Walking past the roosters looking at them look at me. . . . Must have been five of them perched up there, and at least fifty hens” (*Beloved* 85). It is seeing himself being seen in the gaze of a rooster named Mister. Reflected in Mister’s eyes, he sees for the first time the extent to which his being has been distorted by slavery. He is ashamed that Mister is witness to all of it.

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144 Jackson, *Becoming Human*, 71-72.
145 Carter, “Anarchē,” as a whole explores this very connection between Charles Long and Jackson’s thought.
We will come to see how this *seeing being seen* is precisely what is at stake in the iconic gaze. Through this opaque, animal perspective, before it is caught up in the ontological apparatus of the western project of modern perspective, there is a fissure or critical opening for a new way of seeing things and shaping human (and animal) subjectivity.\(^{149}\) So Jackson notes that the iconic perspective gaze, in its opacity, is able to reveal and critique problems with the plasticization of black flesh. It is in being caught in the gaze of the genuine other that a critical view is opened.

**An Icon’s Depth and Perspective that it gives: Reverse Perspective**

In critically interrogating how the plasticity and malleability of created being can “go wrong” upon black flesh in this way, I question whether we have to move beyond the created-uncreated dialectic of the icon to a more factical or historical angle focused on the question of the trouble with *filiation*, that is, how the body is included in spiritual transformation. This factical angle puts the question of configuring human plasticity within the frame of the icon-enigma on a social and historical (hermeneutical) plane. If the icon becomes the conceptual figure which allows us to see into the darkness of the infinite from our finite position, and if we take Nyssa seriously about the fundamental place the body has in this, we must explore how an iconic or epektatic vision can be crafted as a textual-material event, thus pausing the typical claim to a transcendent vision granted by the icon. Ouspensky writes that icons “impinge on our consciousness by means of the outer senses, presenting to us the same supra-sensible reality in ‘aesthetic’ expression” the intelligible element of divine truth.\(^{150}\) I am, however, trying to reframe the icon, emphasizing it as a textual-material event, not merely a transcendent or eidetic

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\(^{149}\) Jackson, *Becoming Human*, 60.

event. This exploration ultimately tries to open up the icon in the direction of how it might be a challenge to white sight, ultimately how the “synthetic vision” and thus reverse perspective at play might engender the development of a “new habit of seeing”—as long as, again, we take this in a different direction than a transcendental, eidetic vision. This approach focuses less on viewpoint and the radical autonomous foundations of the subject who sees; it focuses on the multiplicity of sight in community and on the formation of sight amidst the subject’s sociality.

As discussed in the previous chapter, reverse perspective is “a defining feature of the icon.” Here I want to work toward what is at stake in this reverse perspective, its hermeneutical-textual eventness. At its core, reverse or iconic perspective is about the turning back of or challenging of subjective seeing. Theologically, Antonova argues that reverse perspective is fundamentally “informed by a timeless conception of God’s eternity.” As God transcends space and time, divine vision is “simultaneous and thus ‘view-pointless’, i.e., things are not seen from a certain point of view but, potentially, from all possible viewpoints at once.” Thus an icon attempts to grasp and illustrate what something appears like to the divine vision, or to give us an experience of that vision. The construction of this vision or viewlessness of the icon decenters the viewer and knower as it challenges the particularity of human sight, which is partial. Another theological level furthers this decentering: the how of the icon’s method of representing is fundamentally an illustration of the “abasement” of the kenotic descent of the Son. Moreover, in the depiction of the abased God—the invisible made visible—the image itself is hypostatically

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151 See Antonova, *Space, Time, and Presence in the Icon*, 115-116; specifically, Florensky sought this very thing but linked it to the ability to see generic harmony and phenomenon “as a whole,” seeing the world in a unified way. I will continue to take up this problem with Cusa in the next chapter.


connected to the Person of Jesus Christ, though different in nature and essence. So there are a number of levels of decentering of sight that contrasts with what is at stake in other ways of seeing and perceiving.

Particularly, an iconic perspective resists the kind of perspective put forth in linear models of seeing. Since the icon gives “an image not the prototype” on the surface of the panel, iconic perspective is not about the illusion of “space or volume” though there is both space and depth in the icon. Ouspensky writes:

It expresses three dimensions, but these three dimensions never violate the plane of the panel. Any violation of this plane, however partial, damages the meaning of the icon. … Inverse perspective does not draw in the eye of the spectator; on the contrary it holds it back, precluding the possibility of its penetrating and entering into the image in depth; and it concentrates the attention on the image itself.

As such, the icon does not lead us to the “invented, fantastic world” of idealization with its illusionistic space and depth (at stake in linear perspective). Ouspensky asserts that such idealization “introduces a subjective, limiting element and so inevitably mutilates, or distorts truth to a greater or less extent. … This is quite intelligible for, from himself, a man can give an account only about himself.” Instead of giving an idealized space, the icon gives a “synthetic visibility,” as “the simultaneous representation of different planes of the same image on the picture surface, regardless of whether the corresponding planes in the represented objects could

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155 “In the icon space and volume are limited to the surface of the panel and must not create an artificial impression of going beyond it.” Ouspensky, *The Meaning of Icons*, 41.

156 Ouspensky, *The Meaning of Icons*, 41. Ouspensky’s comments on reverse or inverse perspective should be noted here. “The preservation of the reality of the plane is greatly assisted by so-called inverse perspective, the point of departure of which lies not in the depth of the image, but in front of the image, as it were in the spectator himself. A man stands, as it were, at the start of a pathway which is not concentrated on some point in depth, but which unfolds itself before him in all its immensity.”

be seen from a single viewpoint.” Here, even though a unified image is given, it shows how it is constructed from a number of disparate points, decentering monocularity.

Of course, even as I try to peel back the layers of idealization, in traditional understandings of the icon, there still remains a tension. On the one hand, the icon is meant to be a likeness of “deified prototype,” and image of “flesh transfigured, radiant with Divine light” which gives a beauty and glory contrary to “corruptible human flesh.” The icon, as such, “testifies to the immutability and fullness” of the Incarnation and testifies to the catching up of nature into God’s grace as art is caught up in Truth. The icon shows transfigured flesh, a glorified face, and spiritualization of senses (through, for example, showing a small nose and large eyes). The icon then calls forth an experience of transcendent vision. On the other hand, there is a radical materiality at stake in the icon. Though firstly about spiritual life and not artistry, still there is a detailed technique in iconography that involves radically mundane materials and processes (such as egg tempera and creation of pigments through earth materials). Icons are also concerned holistically with “vegetable, mineral and animal worlds.” Thus, while it is difficult to circumvent the ontological schema, we must press on to return the power of the enigmatic icon and an anagogic aesthetics in the vein of Nyssa back to its textual-linguistic roots.

**Ethics that the Icon gives: reception of otherness**

The icon can move us away from ontology, its opacity—as an expression of the openness to otherness through the double intentionality of the textual-material enigma—putting us within

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the realm of ethics in terms of the use of the material and the body. Carnes’ dialectic of fittingness and gratuity presents one way in which creaturely rigor can orient us in the face of the vastness of being. The key is that such rigor of materiality is not reified and made an impediment to sight. In fact, Carnes herself emphasizes that the rigor of materiality is the face of the poor and thus gives an ethical shape to life in this way: “In tending to the poor who bear Christ, those who give imitate the God who loves the poor.” The poor, according to Nyssa, are seen in beholding Christ, for they bear his face. Carnes writes:

The holiness and horror of the afflicted mingle with the holiness and horror of the Incarnation and Crucifixion. The rest of humanity is taken up in this horror and holiness through the afflicted with whom they share humanity and the poverty of humanity, and also through Christ who shared humanity with all humans and his face with the afflicted.

This understanding of ugliness, darkness, or opacity, in which the mirror of God’s face gives the face of the poor, can open up an aesthetics and theological vision which seeks to be attuned to the ethical reception of “darkness” or otherness, including that of the humble body. Carnes writes, in reflecting on Nyssa’s thought: “Perceiving the beauty of Christ requires right attention to the ugliness of affliction.” This presents an opportunity to re-examine moral interpretations of darkness, to reexamine how the body can be transformed as it is oriented toward ignorance and darkness, the rough and unseemly.

It is ultimately Nyssa’s theological context in which we can situate *epektasis* upon the path of a hopeful opacity, toward an ethics moored deeply in just relationships (both human and divine). Gregory’s argument is that the very *limitlessness* of human freedom itself *limits* human

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freedom through the ethical test-case of human ownership over another human. In fact, one of
the reasons Carter himself draws on Nyssa is for Nyssa’s abolitionist thought, that is, his
emphasis on the freeness and uncaptureability, of each human being. Ramelli explains how
Gregory pairs the epektatic pursuit of beauty with the quality of human freedom, which is most
central to human being. Although the life of virtue by its very nature admits of no master and
is voluntary and free from every necessity or coercion, virtue must be pursued within the context
of creaturely finiteness. The openness of virtue is limited by the limitless freedom of each human
being: thus, humans cannot enslave another human because of each human is absolutely free.
Nyssa’s argument against slavery ultimately concerns how the divine economy gives shape to
human economy: it is grounded “in human freedom as an image of God’s freedom, and in the
equality of all humans as an image of the equality of the Persons of the Trinity.” In an
epektatic framework, there is also a focus on the hereness and nowness of the infinite, in other
words an eschatological hereness. Reflecting on this, Carnes writes, “Seeing the eschatological
setting of the present life means not just that one inhabits one’s role lightly, but that one inhabits
it differently.” This life of justice for Gregory has to do with the ability to respond to the
humility of finitude and the body, to grant the importance of the body, not simply surpass it. But
this is not a turning inward to materiality in such a way that closes particularity into itself, but a

165 See Carter, Race, 229-240.

166 Ilaria L.E. Ramelli, Social Justice and the Legitimacy of Slavery: The Role of Philosophical Asceticism from
Ancient Judaism to Late Antiquity (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 183.


169 Carnes, Beauty, 141. Ramelli argues this is different from, say, Augustine: “in Gregory’s view the eschatological
situation, coinciding with God’s original plan for humanity, is normative for Christian moral life already now.”
Ramelli, Social Justice and the Legitimacy of Slavery, 189.
radical embrace of materiality and finitude in its integrity—that is, in its unique potential to present a passageway to the infinite. Nyssa ultimately presents us an opportunity to consider an “aesthetics of opacity” which opens up into an “aesthetics of reception” toward otherness.

What is ultimately at stake here is tracing out the face of God in the face of the poor. Nyssa passionately writes that one should “not allow your neighbour to be taken care of by someone else; may no one else take hold of the treasure that is prepared for you! Enfold the unfortunate as though he were gold.”170 Thus, _epektasis_ receives its ethical vector out of that which is symbolized in the ugly Christ. For Nyssa “Christ is always the object of our vision” who “fulfills the desire to see God face to face” and yet leaves a never-ending depth and _epektatic_ progression in the _visio dei._171 In this vision is both desire and despair at the same time. But this kind of “lover’s wound” is what gives shape and trajectory to human flourishing that hollows itself out by an endless well of insatiable desire for the good of oneself and of others.172

When one’s body is used properly for other bodies, the pedagogy of the symbol—a training in proper mirror-setting and -looking—has been engaged. This equips one to resist the temptation to turn the mirror back upon oneself in the “beam of self-conceit,” which represents the birth of an ontology that seeks to fundamentally grasp what it sees.

Our exploration of Nyssa, in light of our phenomenology of whiteness, yields a key challenge. We see in Nyssa the moral symbolization of darkness within a symbolism of evil which becomes the symbolic substructure making possible early modern logics of race. As I will argue, setting

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170 Quoted in Ramelli, _Social Justice and the Legitimacy of Slavery_, 200.

171 Boersma, “Becoming Human in the Face of God,” 144-147.

172 Boersma, “Becoming Human in the Face of God,” 149.
up the apparatus of the symbolization of darkness in this way is seized upon in early modernity, especially with Nicholas of Cusa thinking out these matters in a perspectival framework. The racialization of opacity occurs in modern perspective when both the “darkness” or density of one’s creatureliness and the “darkness” or alterity of the unknown horizon are rejected and conquered; mystical vision and perception, which claimed a sight of the transcendent within a creaturely particularity dispossessed by the infinite, is now repositioned as “white sight,” where a certain cultural (cum racial) particularity is codified as the access point to transcendent vision. And even that transcendent vision is no longer “participated in” in a dispossessive manner, but grasped and possessed (seen paradigmatically in the “new humanity” arising upon the transmogrification of black flesh). In the next chapter, we will see the logic of the mirror come to a place of final bankruptcy with Cusa and the rise of modern perspective. Thus we will have to suspend thinking out the logic of opacity upon the logic of the mirror just because the enigma was discovered there: in so doing, we return the enigma back to its social and linguistic roots.

Once we make this critique, Nyssa’s notion of *epektasis* will represent for us a horizon of hope, a way of thinking that insists that our bodies are inextricably bound up in any ideal or spiritual transformation toward the infinite—and hold within their nature radical possibilities for transformation toward the good. Returning to the root of the symbol, to the way in which the enigma is first a material, linguistic, and social dynamic put to use for the sake of human community, returns us toward how the symbol is implicated in “an economy of desire.” Struck explains: “The symbol itself, precisely in its being a symbol, generates a passion, an inquiry, an investigation, and an examination, or, to employ a term that embraces both lack and desire, the
symbol operates according to want.” Nyssa’s framework may indicate the route toward re-orienting the economies of desire that have malformed our own symbolic networks and identities—malformed as darkness has been symbolized as evil through colonialization and racialization. We have to deal with white sight in a way that goes deep down into the structural apparatuses that norm the use of the body and norm the crafting of modern sight. Only then can we seek to recover the promise of opacity as the infinite valuing of finitude in its integrity.

173 Struck, Birth of the Symbol, 79.
CHAPTER THREE

NICHOLAS OF CUSA, LINEAR PERSPECTIVE, AND THE RISE OF THE
TRANSCENDENTAL SUBJECT

Having examined how in Gregory of Nyssa perspective is forged upon the notion of
mystical darkness as it is tied the transformation of bodily perceptive senses through *epektasis*,
here I want to explore how in Nicholas of Cusa, a 15th century German theologian, mystical
darkness is approached within a framework of a “new perspective” rooted in an all-seeing gaze.
This is a key point in our study: we consider the rise of *perspectiva artificialis* or Renaissance
linear perspective, crucial to understanding the dawn of white sight, and examine how Cusa
reflects *theologically* upon perspective in a way that marks the very threshold of our modern age.
I will not adjudicate whether Cusa is the last medieval or first modern, as other scholars debate;
although I am sympathetic to Karsten Harries claim that he “straddles the threshold” of
modernity.1 Indeed, tying Cusa too closely to modern thinking (especially Descartes and Kant)
may have less to do with Cusa himself and more to do with his rediscovery by early twentieth-
century Neo-Kantians at Marburg and Heidelberg who were interested in concerns of the
“mathematization of nature” (incidentally, among the same networks to which Husserl

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1 Harries writes: “But precisely because Cusanus straddles the threshold, he has more to teach us as we try to
understand not only the legitimacy, but also the limits of modernity.” *Infinity and Perspective*, xi. Ernst Cassirer
notes Cusa as perhaps “the first modern thinker.” Ernst Cassirer, *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance
kind of consensus has emerged: “Nicholas is best viewed as an independent-minded late medieval author …
indebted to the Albertist school and Rhineland mysticism” who has “unmistakable ‘parallelisms’ with the succession
of modern German philosophers from Leibniz to Hegel.” David Albertson, *Mathematical Theologies: Nicholas of
belonged). This being said, I argue that Cusa does provide important insight into modernity through his thinking on perspective. I especially find Harries convincing, who writes that “the history of art, especially the history of the theory of perspective, provides helpful hints” regarding how “the destruction of the medieval cosmos follows from a changed self-understanding, bound up with a new sense of freedom … [and a] passionate interest in perspective and point of view. … That interest in perspective is in turn bound up with theological speculations centering on the infinity of God.”

Perspective, as I have already argued, is not a mere art technique, but a whole theory of seeing—and now, in a new way that shapes a new age. Heidegger makes the effect of this new perspective, in fact, decisive: “The fundamental event of modernity is the conquest of the world as picture …. Within this, man fights for the position in which he can be that being who gives to every being the measure and draws up the guidelines.” Yet Cusa, as a threshold figure, will help give us a more nuanced understanding of what is at stake in modern perspective. I challenge the modernist interpretation of Cusa—and yet still seek to explore his relation to the trajectory of modern thought toward Kant—through focusing on how Cusa articulates the apparatuses of modern perspective upon its theological foundation. Forging perspective upon the theological discourse of the “darkness” of the infinite divine, Cusa lays open the apparatus of modern perspective in a way where it shows itself—shows its fissures and allows for critique. Particularly, Cusa will lay open the apparatus of

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2 Albertson, Mathematical Theologies, 2-5.

3 Harries, Infinity and Perspective, 15, 19. Here Harries reflects on Koyré’s argument that “these changes can be subsumed under just one or perhaps two closely related developments: they can be understood as a result of the destruction of the finite world of the medievals and of the geometrization of space characteristic of modern science.” Harries, 19. For Koyré’s discussion of Cusa, see especially Alexandre Koyré, From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1958), 5-27.

perspective in its symbolic potency toward racialized anthropogenesis. In this way—again Harries—Cusa is “a thinker who can help us to open windows in the house modernity has built, windows to transcendence.” I am more interested, however, in how Cusa co-opts and captures finitude in the logic of transcendence to re-present it as masked in a purported infinite.

I focus on Cusa’s *On the Vision of God (De visione Dei)*, in which a picture or icon of an all-seeing face is central to what is at stake in Cusa’s perspectivism, an omnivoyant that engenders an experience in which Cusa, reflecting on God’s gaze, confesses “because you [God] regard me, I am.” Particularly, I am interested in how—played out upon the notion of the mirror, darkness, enigma, and cloud—the crossing of gazes re-orient s the notions of form and space through the discourse of a “color code” within perspective; better, for Cusa, a “color space” (thinking with Jeffrey Hamburger), which gives rise to a nascent racialized color symbolism. To this end, I focus on the development of modern perspective, wrestling with the relation between Cusa’s perspectivism and Renaissance linear perspective. From there, I offer an archeology of the subject that explores the phenomenological nature of aesthetic experience marking the turn to our own modern age. In Cusan perspective we see a laying bare of the conceptuality that makes possible the birth of the modern, transcendental subject. More specifically, we see how *through the rise of linear perspective, darkness comes to represent a negation of otherness or opacity at the center of modern subjectivity*. Modern perspective, this chapter argues, is articulated within and upon—though ultimately negates—the notion of mystical darkness, along with its themes of the mirror and enigma. Of particular interest,


phenomenologically and hermeneutically, is a disagreement between Jean-Luc Marion and Emmanuel Falque over the nature of perspective, specifically as it pertains to whether Cusa describes an icon (Marion) or a Renaissance picture (Falque). The question is how this Cusan confession of seeing oneself seen speaks of both genuine subjectivity and genuine sight of the other, whether it is about the immediacy of vision or the hermeneutical detour of vision. I show, however, that there need not be a sharp divide here, as a hidden relation is at play. This chapter allows for us to trace out how “darkness” theologically transforms with the emergence of modern perspective, through which is engendered an entirely new—eventually racialized—way of seeing, perceiving, and being as the colonial era unfolds.

**Cusan Perspective as Situated within Mystical Darkness**

Central to my analysis is a key point of Cusa’s thought: how, in Harries’ words, perspective “is used to undermine the traditional idea of a center” and (potentially) deconstruct hierarchies. While we have to examine the relation between Cusan and linear perspectives to see the extent to which this is truly the case, I first make clear how Cusa founds his perspectivism upon the notion of mystical darkness, mirror, and enigma, even while ultimately hiding—and negating through exclusive inclusion—such darkness within perspective’s apparatuses.

**The All-Seeing image as Similitude and Enigma**

An examination of De visione Dei, and specifically the “darkness of God,” brings us to “the focal point of Cusanus’ speculation.” Cusa writes this text in 1453 to the Tegernsee monks to show “the facility of mystical theology” and so to help them uncover mystical wonders

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“which are revealed beyond all sensible, rational, and intellectual sight.” Cusa writes that “by means of a very simple and commonplace method” he will “attempt to lead [them] experientially into the most sacred darkness (in sacratissimam obscuritatem)” (DVD Preface §1, p. 235. Emphasis mine). He explains to them: “to transport you to divine things by human means, I must use some kind of similitude”—the most suitable being, in his estimation, an omnivoyant image (one of which he sends to them with the letter) where “[t]hrough the painter’s subtle art its face is made to appear as if looking on all around it” (DVD Preface §2, p. 235). To enter this mystical darkness, Cusanus suggests a dramatic thought-exercise: the monks should hang on the wall this all-seeing picture or icon he has provided. Cusa tells the monks that each should move around the image separately in various directions (say, from East to West). Through this experiment, the monks each experience a gaze that is simultaneously unchanged and changeable as “the immobile face … is moved toward a single place in such a way that it is also moved simultaneously toward all places, and that it beholds a single movement in such a way that it beholds all movements simultaneously.” Each experiences what seems to be the face regarding them alone, giving them some kind of identity, in whatever place they look at it. They discern this as they hear each other’s testimony while crossing paths in their semicircular ambulation around the image. This, Cusa writes, will lead them to “marvel” because the “imagination will not be able to grasp” the simultaneous fixing and moving; each monk will come to believe his fellow monk, “but unless he believed him, he would not imagine this to be possible” (DVD Preface §3, p. 236). As Cusa would have it, at one and the same time the monks learn of the uniqueness of their perspective, of their perspective’s relativity in the face of other perspectives, and of its transcendence as they grasp the absolute power of sight. As I will trace out, the omnivoyant image, bearing a logic of coincidentia oppositorum (the “coincidence of opposites”), thus
facilitates an impossibility which catalyzes an experience of God’s absolute vision, a transcendental vision which is the essence of God’s love, providence, grace, and creative power.

At the core of this experiment in Cusan perspectivism is a reliance on the all-seeing face as similitude to contemplate infinity and absolute vision as if “in a mirror, in an icon, in an enigma” (DVD 4 §10, p. 240). The image becomes the face of God as, observing it “with the eyes of sense,” Cusa “attempt[s] with inward eyes to behold the truth that is designated in the picture” (DVD 10 §38, p. 252). The key here is the ability to behold God’s face in the painted figure through one’s spiritual vision:

But I see the invisible truth of your face, represented in this contracted shadow here, not with the eyes of flesh, which examine this icon of you, but with the eyes of the mind and the intellect. Your true face is absolute from every contraction. It has neither quality nor quantity, nor is it of time or place, for it is the absolute form, which is the face of faces. (DVD 6 §17, p. 243)

In a coincidence of opposites, God’s exemplary face (or “face of faces”) that precedes every face and form, and is beyond all particularity, measurement, or comparison, is yet seen in this particular image before the monks. In fact, Cusa writes, “In all faces the face of faces is seen veiled and in enigma” (DVD 6 §20-21, p. 244). Because God’s absolute face is “the exemplar and truth of all faces,” Cusa confesses: “Every face, therefore, which can behold your face sees nothing that is other or different from itself, because it sees there its own truth” (DVD 6 §18 p. 243). The implications of this are immense in terms of how perspective leads to subjectivity.

But decisive is just how this path is forged. Cusa argues that God’s face is not seen unveiled so long as one does not “leap beyond every knowledge and concept” to enter into the “cloud, mist, darkness, or ignorance,” into “a certain secret and hidden silence beyond all faces where there is no knowledge or concept of a face.” Without this leap beyond all forms and
figures (and, yes, “colors,” the colors here of the painted face), God’s face remains only veiled in visible faces; thus one seeking mystical ascent “must leap beyond every visible light” to enter into that which lacks visible light and thus is darkness to the eye. And while one is in that darkness, which is a cloud, if one then knows one is in a cloud, one knows one has come near the face of the sun. For that cloud in one’s eye originates from the exceeding brightness of the light of the sun. The denser, therefore, one knows the cloud to be the more one truly attains the invisible light in the cloud. I see, O Lord, that it is only in this way that the inaccessible light, the beauty, and the splendor of your face can be approached without veil. (DVD 6 §21, p. 244-245)

Issuing forth from this clouded place where—paradoxically—the denser the cloud the more there is of unveiling, comes a certain clarity: Cusa’s testimony of seeing oneself seen, his confession to and of God, “because you regard me, I am, and if you remove your face from me, I will cease to be” (DVD 4 §10, p. 240. Emphasis mine). While the mirror, by virtue of its enigmatic quality, should turn back or redirect vision, in Cusa’s mirror of mystical darkness, in this seeing being seen, the self achieves a certain clarity of vision. In the mirror of this mystical darkness, awakening to God’s gaze, one gains the vision of God and “sees all things openly and nothing remains hidden to this person” (DVD 7 §25, p. 246).

**Docta Ignorantia and the coincidence of opposites**

This experience reflects the broader Cusan notion of docta ignorantia or “learned ignorance,” a new mode of thought that reflects Cusa’s claim of the absolute disproportionality between the finite and the infinite, the human and God. In *De visione Dei*, reflecting on approaching the infinite God, Cusa writes:

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10 Harries explicitly connects learned ignorance to “the nature and power of perspective.” *Infinity and Perspective*, 32. And Falque argues that *De visione Dei* represents a “symbolic illustration of docta ignorantia such that the
Does not whoever ascends above the end enter into what is indeterminate and confused and thus, with respect to the intellect, into ignorance and obscurity, which belong to intellectual confusion? The intellect, therefore, must become ignorant and established in darkness if it wishes to see you. But what, my God, is intellect in ignorance if not learned ignorance? (DVD 13 §52, p. 258)

To attain learned ignorance is to attain completely the “desire to know that we do not know.” This is because, for Cusa, all human knowledge and inquiry “consists in a comparative proportion” but “[b]ecause the infinite escapes all proportion, the infinite as infinite is unknown.”11 At the same time, God, as the “absolute maximum,” is marked essentially by a oneness that includes within all opposites (where maximum and minimum coincide in coincidentia oppositorum). In making such claims that God is “above all affirmation and negation” and “above all oppositions” (DI 1.4 §12, p. 92), Cusa claims to be rooting his doctrine of learned ignorance in a faithful interpretation of Dionysius.12 “[T]he absolutely maximum,” Cusa writes, “transcends all our understanding, which is unable by the path of reason to combine contradictories in their source, for we proceed by means of the things made evident to us by nature, and reason, falling far short of this infinite power, cannot join together contradictories, which are infinitely distant” (DI 1.4 §12, p. 92). God here is like an infinite sphere which has its center everywhere and circumference nowhere such that center and circumference coincide.13 As such, God is equally immanent in all parts of the universe. This means something for our own pursuit of knowledge—not just of God but of the world as well, as Cusa then transfers this

11 Nicholas Cusanus, De docta ignorantia (hereafter DI), Eng. and pagination as On Learned Ignorance, in Nicholas of Cusa: Selected Spiritual Writings, 1.1 §3-4, p. 88-89. All following references are given parenthetically.

12 For discussion on this point, see McGinn, The Harvest of Mysticism, 441-444.

13 For the historical roots and context of this of key Cusan notion, see Harries, Infinity and Perspective, 59.
conceptuality to the cosmos or “world machine,” which then has its center nowhere and everywhere (DI 2.12 §162, p. 161). Still, the “precision of truth” shines out from the darkness of our admission of ignorance.”⁴ Beyond affirmation and denial, in learned ignorance we still can speak, try to make sense of the world, even name and praise God (though not absolutely).

It was, as Cusa claims, as he was contemplating rest and motion in the physical world—apparently when “returning by sea from Greece” from a papal mission—that, reflecting on the perception of a fixed-point perspective while actually in motion, the notion of learned ignorance came as “a celestial gift from the Father of Lights.” Thereupon, Cusa writes, he “was led to embrace incomprehensibles incomprehensibly in learned ignorance, by transcending those incorruptible truths that can be humanly known” (DI 3 §263-264, p. 205-206). In Cusa’s new cosmology, our own view only appears to be from a fixed point as all viewpoints, proportionality, distances, and, too, rest and motion themselves, are relativized in the infinite as a natural center (even a heliocentric one) is lost. Cusa makes clear that the ancients in their geocentrism mistook their fixed-point analysis for universal truth. Though our body gives us some kind of center or location it is not absolute, as one can imagine and inhabit other viewpoints. Instead, as Cusa would have it, “the nature of perspective will teach us that whatever presents itself to the eye, to perception, is no more than subjective appearance.”⁵ And this despite the (illusory) organization and centering of “the experiencing subject” around this point.⁶ Here, then, both a sense of subjectivity and a certain abyss coincide. To become learned

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⁴ McGinn, The Harvest of Mysticism, 443.

⁵ Harries, Infinity and Perspective, 33-34.

⁶ Harries, Infinity and Perspective, 38
about one’s ignorance is to become aware, in one and the same experience, of one’s perspective as uniquely authorized and yet as infinitely relativized by the perspectives of others.

Let me unpack the significance of this new theological way to approach the infinite by highlighting certain ways in which Cusa reinforced it in his own contemporary debates about the nature of mystical theology. First, Cusa had to defend docta ignorantia against the claim, launched by one of Cusa’s main opponents, John Wenck (especially in his On Unknown Learning), that the notion of learned ignorance and its underlying claim of coincidentia oppositorum was the same as the condemned Neoplatonic dialectical thinking of Eckhart and the beguines and beghards. Wenck attacked the notion that the mystical identity at stake in learned ignorance could lead to “attaining indistinction with God” as the abstraction of “divine unity” makes God formally everything.\(^\text{17}\) The concern is the blurring of the line between creator and creature, the notion that one could bring the “eschatological” to be manifestly present. Cusa insisted he was only faithfully interpreting Dionysius’ mystical notion of God as “beyond being.” This allowed Cusa to rest docta ignorantia on unquestionable theological authority.

In addition to the Dionysian issue of the “beyond being” of divine mystery, there had arisen a debate concerning the tension, as McGinn puts it, between “affective” and “intellective” Dionysianism (a matter, indeed, at the heart of the correspondence between Cusa and the Tegernsee monastery). Though not always easy to distinguish these two key aspects in Christian mystical thought, through Thomas Gallus, Hugh of Balma, and later Jean Gerson, there was in Cusa’s time a growing priority given to love or affection, such that love ultimately cuts off the intellect at the mystical summit.\(^\text{18}\) Kaspar Ayndorffer, the abbot of the Tegernsee monastery, had

\(^{17}\) For detailed discussion of the debate, see McGinn, The Harvest of Mysticism, 445-447.
written to Cusa asking this very question of whether one can ascend to God “without intellectual knowledge … by affectus alone.” Cusa wrote back in September, 1452 (before sending them De visione Dei) arguing the coincidence of love and knowledge in ascending to God. He would reinforce this in a second letter in September, 1453, and further stress that to do mystical theology one must go beyond negations themselves and “place [oneself] in the cloud beyond all reason and intellect, even leaving self behind.” As Cusa argues and demonstrates in De visione Dei, the significance of docta ignorantia was in the insistence that both love and knowledge would unite one to God in mystical ascent. Yet learned ignorance also shifts away from this dialectic to a new synthesis focused on the vision of God, a synthesis emphasizing the negation of negation and the coincidentia oppositorum. With this insistence is a twofold stress which comes to show up in De visione Dei. First, a stress on the concept of infinity. Cusa writes in the aforementioned 1453 letter,

> It seems to me that the whole of mystical theology is to enter Absolute Infinity itself, for infinite expresses the coincidence of contradictories, that is, the end without end, and no one can see God mystically save in the cloud of coincidence which is infinity.

And second: a stress on the image which can lead one to the vision of God—that experience which engenders a broader viewpoint that directs one past the tension between the affective and

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the intellective.\textsuperscript{24} The \textit{visio Dei} unites love and knowledge.\textsuperscript{25} With this idea of seeing God, Cusa begins to stress the simultaneous way in which God sees us: thus our sight taps into God’s very vision. The influence of Eckhart on Cusa’s thought is clear here. Eckhart had written, “The eye in which I see God is the same eye in which God sees me.”\textsuperscript{26} Cusa relied on Eckhart’s idea of the fusing of identity between God and self through a mutual gaze, through the \textit{visio Dei}.\textsuperscript{27}

In Cusa’s experience of \textit{visio Dei}, dispossessed of an absolute center, truth is just always out of reach; yet our perspective still finds value in the pursuit of precision toward the truth as it is oriented toward the infinite. “[T]he intellect, which is not truth,” Cusa writes, “never comprehends truth so precisely but that it could always be comprehended with infinitely more precision” (\textit{DI} 1.3 §10, p. 91). It is because “the precision of truth cannot be grasped,” in fact, that Cusa thinks it necessary to “use examples as guides in a transcendent way” (like the infinite circle or triangle) as one “abandon[s] sensible things” in ascending toward “simple intellectuality” (\textit{DI} 1.2 §8, p. 90). Cusa asks us to reason through the similitude \textit{in which we are able to grasp after infinite truth only by leaping over (even as we go through) the finite figure}. Leaping over (while going through) things “rooted in materiality, rationality, and the senses,” the figures and words themselves must be interpreted “transumptively” in order to be lifted “from the sign to the truth” (\textit{DI} 1.10 §27-29, p. 98-100). Perspective, then, opens up to a higher order insight which grounds or authorizes the “truthfulness” of one’s viewpoint despite its relativity.

\textsuperscript{24} McGinn, \textit{The Harvest of Mysticism}, 458.

\textsuperscript{25} McGinn, \textit{The Harvest of Mysticism}, 483.

\textsuperscript{26} See McGinn, \textit{The Harvest of Mysticism}, 461.

\textsuperscript{27} McGinn, \textit{The Harvest of Mysticism}, 461.
The “wall of coincidence” in *De visione Dei*

In significant ways, then, *seeing* is crucial for Cusa. Cusa closely links God and sight, noting an etymology of *theos* as that “God looks on all things” (*DVD* 1 §5, p. 237). God is “true uncontracted sight.” And this uncontracted or absolute vision exists in and engenders all sight as it “embraces all modes [of vision] in such a way as to embrace each, and it remains entirely absolute of every variety.” God’s seeing, in the end, is both universal and particular. It is in this way Cusa’s mirror-like, omnivoyant image grants absolute sight: “There is no doubt, therefore, that what appears to exist in the image exists more excellently in absolute sight” (*DVD* 1 §6-7, p. 237-238). Cusa explains:

You look on all and each together, even as does this painted image that I contemplate, and so I marvel, O Lord, at how in your visual faculty the universal coincides with the particular. But I am mindful that my imagination does not grasp how this may be so, for I seek your vision within my own faculty of sight. (*DVD* 9 §32, p. 249)

But the marvel here is not just the coincidence of God’s vision as both particular and universal, but what this can mean for our own particular vision—that our sight can, while being particular, take on a certain kind of universality. Cusa confesses to God that whoever comes to see God’s face in the particular “sees all things openly and nothing remains hidden to this person. Whoever has you, O Lord, knows all things and has all things, and whoever sees you has all things” (*DVD* 7 §25, p. 246). Human, contracted sight is a certain manifestation of the potentiality of God’s uncontracted vision (*DVD* 9 §34-35, p. 250).

Cusa gives us another image of explanation in this regard to complement the mirror imagery of the all-seer—that of the *wall*. Both the mirror and the wall are figures which, in learned ignorance, become “avenues that open the mind’s eye to see something other than what
seems literal.” The imagery of the wall not only holds together this dialectic of absolute and particular vision, but it also deepens the thickness of mystical darkness as it speaks of a certain liminality, a difficulty (yet ease) of progression into the clouded depths. As Cusa comes to approach the “wall of paradise,” he writes: “I experience how necessary it is for me to enter into the cloud and admit the coincidence of opposites, above all capacity of reason, and to seek there the truth where impossibility confronts me” (DVD 9 §36, p. 251). Indeed, God “cannot be seen elsewhere than where impossibility confronts and obstructs me,” as God is “found unveiled,” “girded about with the coincidence of contradictories” in this place where “impossibility coincides with necessity.” So Cusa confesses: “O Lord, you … have given me courage to do violence to myself.” This is because God resides on the other side of this wall:

The wall’s gate is guarded by the highest spirit of reason, and unless it is overpowered, the way in will not lie open. Thus, it is on the other side of the coincidence of contradictories that you will be able to be seen and nowhere on this side. (DVD 9 §37, p. 251-252)

This is a wall of coincidence that is at times described as a wall of absurdity and obstacle. In the end, this wall is less a wall of separation, and more threshold, a point of liminality for the mystical experience which marks the need for the Cusan leap (DVD 12 §49, p. 257).

As I transition away from the close exegesis of Cusa’s text, what I particularly want to make a point of is the generative nature of the experience that happens here within Cusan perspective, how it gives a certain subjectivity. Gazing into this mirror, now standing at this wall and peering into Paradise where God resides beyond opposites, where God’s seeing is God’s

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loving, Cusa confesses, “By no imagining, Lord, do you allow me to conceive that you love anything other than me more than me, for it is I alone that your gaze does not abandon. And since the eye is there where love is, I experience that you love me because your eyes rest most attentively on me” (DVD 4 §10, p. 239). From this loving crossing of the gazes springs the creation of the subject as a whole. Cusa notes that when he is “at the door of the coincidence of opposites,” in front of “the entrance of paradise,” he begins to see God. He confesses:

For you are there where speaking, seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, reasoning, knowing, and understanding are the same and where seeing coincides with being seen, hearing with being heard, tasting with being tasted, touching with being touched, speaking with hearing, and creating with speaking. ... You are visible by all creatures and you see all. In that you see all you are seen by all. For otherwise creatures cannot exist since they exist by your vision. If they did not see you who see, they would not receive being from you. The being of a creature is equally your seeing and your being seen. (DVD 10 §40, p. 252-253. Emphasis mine)

Here God’s seeing is God’s being. Hence the key confession, which I have already centered:

“And since your seeing is your being, therefore, because you regard me, I am, and if you remove your face from me, I will cease to be” (DVD 4 §10, p. 240). In seeing God, God gives Godself to be seen by me (DVD 5 §13, p. 241). And in this giving of Godself to be seen be me, wherein seeing coincides with being seen, the Lord, Cusa writes, says to our heart, “‘Be yourself and I too will be yours!’” as God “wait[s] for me to choose to be my own” (DVD 7 §25, p. 247).

Selfhood arises, transcendentally, from an abyss. As we awaken to the impossible-made-possible of God’s gaze upon us and upon all, forged upon the discourse of mirror, door and cloud (notions of darkness, enigma, liminality and threshold) we see—and as we see, we are. Falque therefore marks this as the “birth of egoity.”31 More generally, Peter Sloterdijk points out here Cusa’s influence upon the nascent modern age as it pictured God as “lender of eyesight.

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[... and] of subjectivity.”

This transition—or better, this disjunction—from perspective to selfhood by surpassing the enigma of the mirror through mystical darkness is the unexamined secret (perhaps we call it the “color code”) of modern subjectivity and the space it forges.

**The Relation of Cusan Perspective to Linear Perspective**

To understand what is at stake in placing the birth of the modern subject here upon this discourse of mystical darkness, we need to explore the relation between Cusan and linear perspective, since the latter is thought to be key to understanding modern subjectivity. The exact nature of this relation is disputed (even though Cusa was part of the same social circles as Renaissance perspectivists and himself writes of how the “art of perspective” has been discovered in order to “correct errors of vision”). On the one hand, Hans Belting, among others, argues that Cusan perspective “is the counter-position to the perspective picture, which is constructed to serve only one focal point and seeks to make that view absolute.” Similarly, Michel de Certeau argues in a detailed manner how Cusa’s perspectivism avoids linearity. In such a view, Cusan perspective is a type of non-linear or “reverse” perspective which resists the

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33 Marion comments: “It is because it dreads or is unaware of this radicality that contemporary thought strains to open access to the other as such.” Marion, “Seeing, or Seeing Oneself Seen,” 323.

34 Of Cusa and Alberti, Harries writes, “Circumstantial evidence suggests that they must have known each other. Again and again they were in the same places at the same time.” They read each other’s works, notes Harries, and both were friends with and dedicated works to Toscanelli (who was at the bedside of Cusa when he died). Brunelleschi was probably also in this friend group. See Harries, “Power and Poverty of Perspective,” 106-107. See also Damisch, *The Origin of Perspective*, 68-69.


monocular, controlling gaze of the subject (as I discussed in previous chapters). Again, common in such perspective is the simultaneous showing of multiple viewpoints or planes of vision (similar, the argument goes, to the experience of Cusa’s all-seer). On the other hand, scholars like Charles Carman find intimate similarity between linear and Cusan perspective in the ability to invoke “the presence of an infinite manifest to all viewers.”\(^{38}\) Undoubtedly, the juxtaposition in Cusa’s text of a de-centering of one’s perspective and a centralizing of subjectivity as one gains absolute vision argues for a complex relationship between Cusan and linear perspective. I argue that these two apparently contradictory aspects are just what hold Cusan and linear perspective together. Particularly, this happens through the use of the mirror at the center of both Cusan and linear perspective. Cusa’s theological conceptuality, which I have just traced, lays open in advance how modern perspective hides within itself or is built upon (and then negates) nonlinear perspective. This has to do with how it deals with the darkness at stake in the mirror.

**Linear Perspective and the Operation of the Mirror**

My interest here is to explore the relation between (as I described in Chapter One) the seeing-through “window” perspective of the Renaissance (and the transcendental subject it engenders) and the apparent “overturning” or reverse perspective of the enigmatic mirror-like all-seer in Cusan perspective. Both, I argue, are a perspective borne out of a seeing oneself seen forged upon and negating the matter of the mirror from which it arose. We can unravel this puzzle by focusing more directly on the constitutional origin point of linear perspective. Alberti himself dedicates his *De Pictura* to Filippo Brunelleschi, who in 1425 had, through linear

\(^{38}\) Carman, *Leon Battista Alberti and Nicholas Cusanus*, 95. There are, indeed, mediating positions that find both relation and difference, similar to what I myself offer. See, for example, Knight, “In a Mirror and an Enigma,” esp. 114 and 121.
perspective technique with an apparatus of a mirror and panel, created a precise picture of the Florence baptistry.\textsuperscript{39} Antonio di Tucci Manetti’s \textit{Vita di Filippo Brunelleschi}, written in the 1480s, provides the most complete account of how viewers were to use the mirror in Brunelleschi’s demonstration: the mirror operated in concert with a hole placed at the backside of the picture, the mirror held in one hand in front of them at a distance and the picture in the other hand held up against their face, though from its backside; this hole corresponded to the picture’s vanishing point on the frontside, a hole specifically carved so one could fit their eyeball in the backside of the picture as they gazed through the hole at the mirror they held in front of them to view the picture in its reflection. Standing in the right place, they could then remove the mirror, still looking through the hole, to compare the actual baptistry with the picture’s reflection.\textsuperscript{40} The key here is \textit{how within the apparatus enacting the experiment, subjectivity was shaped through the mirror’s operation}: first, to found the subject within the crossing of gazes as it engenders the coincidence of the viewpoint with the picture’s vanishing point toward infinity; but second, that it needed to “doubly” show the clouds and sky by an additional mirror—excluding by including that uncapturable element more associated with color than shape.

Damisch argues that the “essential thing” about the experiment, “the act organizing it as such” was the creation of a view-point (literally) through this “piercing of a hole in the panel’s

\textsuperscript{39} Damisch, \textit{The Origin of Perspective}, 59. Damisch notes that it was Filarete’s \textit{Treatise on Architecture} (1460–1464) that first associated Filippo Brunelleschi and his experiments with the discovery of linear perspective, a tradition echoed in Vasari’s “Life of Brunelleschi.” Damisch, \textit{The Origin of Perspective}, 61, 68-70. Damisch shows how Filarete, in particular, focuses on how the mirror had a key place in understanding linear perspective construction, both as demonstrative aid and to show its veracity, but also in providing a shortcut in seeing proper foreshortening. See Damisch, \textit{The Origin of Perspective} 63-67. While Brunelleschi is known for two experiments, I will only discuss the first. In general, the second experiment would have been an extension of the first, showing “its pertinence and efficacy under conditions closer to that of normal vision.” Damisch, \textit{The Origin of Perspective}, 146.

\textsuperscript{40} On Manetti’s text and its explanation, see Damisch, \textit{The Origin of Perspective}, 115-118; also Edgerton, \textit{The Mirror, the Window, and the Telescope}, 44-53; and Damisch, \textit{A Theory of [Cloud]}, 115.
This hole, moreover, was precisely positioned so that one’s vision reflected on the mirror would “pierce” the image most accurately, in terms of Alberti’s centric ray. The purpose, then, of the apparatus, argues Damisch, was “to satisfy a theoretical premise,” specifically “that the point we today call the ‘point of view’ coincides, in terms of projection, with the one we call the ‘vanishing point’ [toward infinity]: both are situated at the intersection of the perpendicular sight line and the picture plane—this perpendicular itself corresponding to” the centric ray. Within Brunelleschi’s perspective apparatus, Damisch writes, “the point of view and the vanishing point [of the picture] coincide on the plane of projection” and this is “due exclusively to an effect produced by the projection onto the mirror.” Infinity here, represented by the vanishing point in the perspective painting, is “behind our heads.” As such, infinity is constructed (anew) for the modern subject through the artifice of a virtual depth.

The force of perspective “is such that the only way for the [now modern] subject to obtain self-confirmation is for him to place himself behind the painting, to move behind it to look at it in the mirror, through the screen, pierced by a hole, of the same painting.” Through the operation of the mirror, we are caught in, and constituted by, the gaze of infinity as we see ourselves being seen. But this is only possible through “projection onto the mirror,” which allows one to place oneself “behind” or “in” the painting. Thus, as Margaret Iversen explains, Damisch shows (in a Lacanian vein) that in linear perspective the “vanishing point has the value

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42 Damisch, *The Origin of Perspective*, 120.
43 Damisch, *The Origin of Perspective*, 121.
44 Damisch, *The Origin of Perspective*, 121.
of a look of the Other [or Infinite]” a decentering look “that constitutes me as viewer.”

We should note the resonance with the decentering at stake in Cusan perspective, but a decentering that then constitutes the viewer for the first time. We could say that linear perspective had to re-introduce the mirror in trying to relate the finite to the infinite, trying to portray a finite vision as a vision into the infinite. In this way, as with Cusan perspective, the mirror affects the simultaneous magnification of infinite transcendence and subjective immanence.

Moreover, like with Cusa, in this reflexive moment something “analogous to that of the ‘I’” is crafted—a subjectivity caught in the gaze of the Infinite, in seeing being seen, even as it is fixed to a very narrow viewpoint, a peephole to peer into the mirror gazing back at one’s face.

The hole in Brunelleschi’s panel was shaped like a lentil to fit the eyeball up to its surface, reducing the subject to the eye and the eye to a point:

obliged to peer through a small hole at the image thrown back at it by the mirror, the subject in the experiment is reduced to the position of a voyeur. But a singular kind of voyeur, one who discovers that he is himself being looked at, and from the very spot from which he himself looks, subjected as he is from the start to a form of seeing that elides his body, reducing it to an eye, and soon enough to a point. For the image cast back at him by the mirror is not his own but that of the painting that screens out his body, only to substitute its own, which the eye captures solely as a reflection. Under the conditions governing the experiment, the eye, in the mirror, does not see itself seeing, nor seeing that which it sees: there is someone there who looks at it, and whom it does not see. What it does see, directly in front of it, on the spot supposed to correspond to the point of maximum clarity and distinction, is a hole blotting out the center of the image.

Caught in the crossing of gazes which grants view of infinity, one transcends to an absolute view through the elision of their particular vision. Like Cusa’s own “virtual” spatiality created through

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the experiment with the omnivoyant image, Brunelleschi, too, creates a “virtual” space via the image upon the mirror, wherein one makes the leap from their own viewpoint to an “objective” vision through the coincidence of viewpoint and infinite vanishing point on the plane of projection. This is a kind of “reduction” that excludes the real in order to extract one outside the unit of things—except what is “included” (as exclusion): the problematic sky and clouds.

Brunelleschi had left the space in the panel above the baptistry as polished reflective surface, thus functioning as a mirror itself which would provide a reflection of the reflection of the clouds in the hand-held mirror. While the entire apparatus, Manetti writes, “shows” the representational nature of the painting—such that “it seemed that one was seeing truth itself”—Manetti explains the need for a “double showing” (dimostrare) for the sky and clouds. Of course, we must inquire just why Brunelleschi would treat the clouds this way, needing this “cloud mirror” to (doubly) show them in his experiment. We can note, with Damisch, that the historical challenge with clouds in terms of representation in painting was their vaporous nature that resisted form, shape, and outline: “Linear perspective only needs to ‘know’ things that it can reduce to its own order, things that occupy a place and the contour of which can be defined by lines.” But clouds were more associated with color than with shape. Aristotle discusses clouds as composed of a mass of tiny mirrors that reflect colors but, being so small they are incapable of subdivision, cannot reflect shape. Since painting was first a matter of drawing and thus of

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49 Thus, notes Damisch, the mirror apparatus enacts a “phenomenological reduction” as the subject’s “body is elided from the beginning, and reduced … to a point—the one that would be inscribed, along with Descartes, at the beginning of modern science.” Damisch, *The Origin of Perspective*, 151.


outlines of shapes, “color played no more than a secondary role, as a kind of extra” and thus color and other things which resisted form, shape, and outline, like clouds, were marginalized, even suspect.  

But the clouds are, in the end, included within Brunelleschi’s perspective apparatus through the cloud mirror. This means ultimately that to leave the clouds unmeasured by linear perspective’s showing (but captured by a double showing), Brunelleschi “resorted to a subterfuge that introduces into the representational circuit a direct reference to external reality.” The enigmatic mirror already functions at the very heart of linear perspective, but must end up showing itself explicitly in this demonstration. Damisch explains in detail:

The new idea of the painting at the center of perspective’s origin myth called for inclusion in the demonstration—on its margins, it would seem, and in the form of a reflection—of this unmastered, unmasterable background element. … Thus the cloud mirror functioned as the index (narrowly construed) of a discontinuity between the order of that susceptible to representation by the means of perspectiva artificialis, and another element which, admitting of no term and no limit, seems to escape capture, demanding to be presented ‘in its natural form.’

The cloud mirror, akin to some kind of foreign body, reveals perspective “as a structure of exclusion, the coherence of which is founded upon a series of rejects, and yet which has to make room for the very things that it excludes from its order.”  

*Lines and points rule the logic of perspective in its quest for the illusion or artifice of depth, subordinating color (and cloud) to only supplemental function—negating through exclusive inclusion that which is shapeless.* The

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52 Damisch, A Theory of [Cloud], 35.
53 Damisch, A Theory of [Cloud], 123.
54 Damisch, The Origin of Perspective, 94.
perspective code, in crafting the artifice of depth through capturing and making inoperative the
enigmatic mirror of mystical darkness, brings with itself a “color code subordinated to it.”

Ultimately, the effect of pressing one’s eye up against the panel, as Damisch explains,
was to create a lens or “the origin or principle around which a construction was deployed” that,
in an effort to reinscribe the infinitude of “the vanishing point as the external point of view,”
excluded by inclusion the observer’s “exteriority in relation to a closed-circuit configuration.”
Thus Samuel Edgerton is right that Brunelleschi’s effort is not primarily through the mirror to
capture in painting what was captured in the eye, but that his demonstration “permitted viewers
to believe that they had penetrated the very ‘enigma’ of the mirror”—that is, its connection to
spiritual realities and the vision of God. This technique engendered, through this gaze into the
deep mystery of reality, the forging of modern subjectivity by co-opting the potentiality and
potency of the mirror’s enigmatic darkness—that ultimately uncaptrurable, evasive depth of the
unknown. Subjectivity finds itself only as it hides its own opacity. The self is now that which
maps out onto a plane and surface the unknowns of the universe through transcendent vision.

Returning to Cusa: the Centrality of Seeing Being Seen

What is fundamentally at stake in linear perspective and in Cusan perspective is that in
both an apparatus of perspectival vision is configured in which one sees oneself seen as one
gazes into the infinite configured according to the gaze of the mirror. I have sought already to
show how the all-seer at the heart of De visione Dei is a type of mirror. It is also true that Cusa
discusses how God’s sight is like a “living mirror” as God’s eye as mirror takes in “all things

56 Damisch, A Theory of [Cloud], 128.
57 Damisch, The Origin of Perspective, 378.
without turning” because God’s angle of vision is infinite (DVD 8 §30, p. 249). And elsewhere in
his corpus, in an illustration wrestling with how God is as form of all forms, Cusa connects sight
not only to mirrors but also faces, explaining how a face is reflected in a mirror but does not
become composite with it, remaining singular even as it “manifests itself in different ways.”59
But it is not just that perspective itself is found in this place of the crossing of gazes upon the
logic of the mirror, but that in Cusan perspective, as we have already seen in linear perspective,
subjectivity is founded precisely in this seeing oneself seen. Creaturehood and being itself, for
Cusa, is simultaneously seeing and being seen by God. In this lies the authorization of one’s
particular perspective.

We have already seen how this is enacted with Brunelleschi’s experiment, but how is this
so within the Cusan experiment? In part, this has to do with how Cusa is seeking to re-orient
form and space upon the logic of the mirror (the details of which I will discuss shortly). Drawing
on the workings of the mirror, Cusa discusses the reflective dynamics of God as form of forms:

Therefore, my God, when you confront me as if formable prime matter, because you
receive the form of whoever behold you, then you lift me up that I may see how one
looking on you does not give you form, but rather one sees oneself in you, for one
receives from you that which one is. Thus, what you seem to receive from one who looks
on you is your gift, as if you were the living mirror of eternity, which is the form of
forms. While anyone looks into this mirror, one sees one’s own form in the form of
forms, which is the mirror. And one judges the form which one sees in the mirror to be
the image of one’s own form since this is the case with a polished material mirror. Yet
the contrary is true. For that which one sees in this mirror of eternity is not an image but
what one sees is the truth of which one who sees is an image. Therefore, in you my God
the image is the truth and the exemplar of all things and of each one of them that exists or
can exist. (DVD 15 §63, p. 263-264)

God is image of all insofar as God is exemplar of all. I find my face to be true because it is an
image of the true face of God. Yet, Cusa continues: “My face is also an image because it is not

59 Cusanus, Compendium 8.24, p. 1399.
the truth itself but an image of absolute truth. In my thought I enfold the truth and the image of my face, and I see that in my face the image coincides with facial truth so that insomuch as my face is image it is true” (*DVD* 15 §64, p. 264). *Creaturehood is fastened in this seeing oneself seen upon the mirror as truth and image, self and Other coincide.*

Cusa here reveals the radically *theological* nature of this nascent modern subjectivity. Because of the conceptuality of the mirror—that though God’s absolute face as truth remains unchangeable and yet changes with my changing face—God offers Godself, Cusa confesses, “to any of us looking on you, as though you receive being from us, and you conform yourself to us so that we will love you more the more you seem like us.” He continues, noting that we “embrace our likeness because we are shown ourselves in an image and we love ourselves in it” (*DVD* 15 §65, p. 264-265). More radical:

> Out of the humility of your infinite goodness, O God, you present yourself as though you were our creature that thus you may draw us to you. ... In you, O God, being created coincides with creating. For the likeness that seems to be created by me is the Truth that creates me, so that in this way at least I may grasp how greatly I should be bound to you, since in you being loved coincides with loving. For if I ought to love myself in you, my likeness, then I am greatly constrained to do this when I see that you love me as your creature and your image. (*DVD* 15 §66, p. 265)

In the kind of subjectivity given out of the profound depths of the crossing of gazes, creaturehood itself seems to lose its distinction with Creator-hood.

In view of this historical recounting, we have in linear perspective, as in Cusan perspective, the juxtaposition of two seemingly opposed logics, namely, of an enigmatized observer who gains subjectivity through absolute vision. But the fact and nature of this relationship is obscured in linear perspective in the flight toward transcendentality, and the dark spot of the modern subject’s vision—that is, its foundation in the enigmatic—is left un-reflected. The more revealing, specifically *theological*, conceptuality of Cusan perspective lays open how
Renaissance linear perspective is built upon but hides within itself notions of the mystical darkness of the infinite. What follows in the remaining course of this chapter, then, is two tasks: first, to explore how this seeing being seen is tied to fundamental changes in form, space, and the symbolism of color as modern perspective gains trajectory toward its racialization; and second, to establish how it is that what Cusa does marks our very own perception with a certain sedimentation of significance—that we are not mere spectators here to some history.

**Cusan Perspective as Symbol: The Operation of the Mirror**

I want to focus on several ways in which the symbol of perspective, forged upon and yet negating the mirror’s enigmatic potential, shaped key developments in modernity. Even if one could argue that Cusan perspective is more nuanced in its operation upon the mirror (in that it shows its theological reliance on the notion of mystical darkness), we cannot escape its similarity to linear perspective and thus its connection to a whole history regarding how, upon the mirror, opacity and darkness is brought toward racialization. Working toward this, I will discuss three transformations undertaken within Cusan perspective (as especially shown in *De visione Dei*), which bear resemblance to broader transformations amidst the rise of Renaissance perspective: re-orientation of form, space, and color upon the logic of the mirror. While the first two aspects are much-discussed, I propose to only briefly define what is at stake so as to situate them vis-à-vis the rise of a nascent symbolism of color. I argue that all three changes are forged within Cusan perspective upon the logic of the mirror at the heart of mystical darkness, where what is most interesting to me is how therein a nascent color symbolism emerges as “darkness” is enmeshed in certain moral, spiritual, and social discourses. Thinking such changes in form and space through concurrent changes in color symbolism can shed new light on how Cusan perspective might connect to logics of race developing at the threshold of modernity. One
underlaying key here—which makes sense in terms of my argument of the hiding of the center of mystical darkness—is that such changes are a result of Cusa’s apophatic perspectivism. Cusan changes in form, space, and color essentially affect a new way to craft infinity upon the mirror, to see the infinite from the finite.

**The Symbol of Perspective and Re-orientation of “Form:” the birth of the mind**

Within the new perspective is a re-orientation of form amidst the ascendency of the creative power of the mind. Cusa’s thought becomes illustrative of what Giorgio Agamben refers to as the “‘artistic machine’ of modernity,” where, beginning in the Renaissance, there was a transition from the “working” (energeia) of artwork as being outside of the artist and within the art produced, to the artist who now “possesses his energeia in himself and can thus affirm his superiority over the work.”\(^{60}\) Instead of the artist showing form in displaying the interconnectedness of being through the exercise of “habit,” there was now a collapse of form into mere efficient causality. This represented a move away from ontology toward the power of subjectivity, away from being informed by being to informing being itself. This transition had to do more broadly with the rise of Nominalism at the end of the Middle Ages, which affected, in the words of Louis Dupré, the disintegration of the “ontotheological synthesis.” As form lost the ontological function of mediating the between the finite and the infinite, it eventually became associated with the expressions of the human mind.\(^{61}\) Indeed, for Cusa not only is the mind


important, but the mind itself functions like a mirror as “[t]hrough its capacity for measuring, numbering, and representing, [it] accomplishes everything” as an image of the divine mind.62

Seeking a new immanence for God in the wake of nominalism—which had “effectively removed God from creation,” as Dupré writes63—Cusa insisted on the direct and absolute immanence of God in all the universe. While in Neoplatonism, forms mediate between God and immanence in creation, for Cusa there is “no realm of forms independent of their individualized existence in time.”64 Thus Cusa writes in De beryllo: “specific form—one of which is distinct from another—is not other than the subject but has within itself its own essential principles, by means of which it is determined substantially.”65 Unlike Plato, for Cusa forms are not reified, existing in a separate realm; forms are experienced—even constructed—through the power of the human mind to see “generic harmony” of forms differentiated but still essential in their specification (DB §62, p. 821-822).66 It is through the mind’s power in measuring and mathematics that this leap of insight can be made from specific to absolute.

Key to this re-orientation of form around the power of the mind is Cusa’s retrieval of Protagoras’ notion of “man is the measure of things.” Noting that Protagoras was correct, Cusa writes: “Because man knows—by reference to the nature of his perceptual [cognition]—that perceptible objects exist for the sake of that cognition, he measures perceptible objects in order


63 Dupré, Passage to Modernity, 3.

64 Dupré, Passage to Modernity, 60.


to be able to apprehend, perceptually, the glory of the Divine Intellect” (DB §69, p. 825). For Cusa “to know is to measure” (DB §71, p. 827). Thus Harries: “It is precisely because of this that Cusanus, like Alberti, calls man a second God, that is, a creator of conceptual forms in which he mirrors or unfolds himself and by means of which he reconstructs or recreates in his own image the manifold presented to his senses.”67 All of our understanding and experience is thus already also “the interpreting activity of the human mind,” our own perspective. And yet this response, this unifying function of the mind, is a response to the logos or divine art unfolding in the world. The measuring of the mind fits with what it is measuring in representation: this is its mirroring function.68 Here de Certeau highlights within this notion the Cusan tension between “observation” and “intuition” and how this takes place upon the mirror: “These two forms of ‘seeing’ constantly intersect …. Their point of coincidence lies in the visible figure in which the gaze grasps the invisible element active within the figure. This instrument for the passing (transsumptio) from one ‘seeing’ to the other is the mirror.”69 Through the mirror the mind makes the mystical transition from the “visible places” and “‘perceptible image’ offered to ‘the eye’” to the vision of “formal relations and their possible developments.”70 Finite reason eventually gives way to a flash of infinite insight, bringing clarity to the coincidence of the infinite here in the midst of our finitude.

Cusa also puts forward the figure of “intellectual beryl” here. For Cusa, the beryl stone is a figure—functioning with the same conceptuality of the mirror, cloud, or door—that gives us

67 Harries, “Power and Poverty of Perspective,” 118.
68 Harries, “Power and Poverty of Perspective,” 121.
insight into the coincidence of opposites: “I will adduce a mirror and a symbolism by which each reader’s frail intellect may be aided and guided at the outer limits of the knowable” (*DB* §1, p. 792). Cusa notes just what the beryl stone is:

> Beryl stones are bright, white, and clear. To them are given both concave and convex forms. And someone who looks out through them apprehends that which previously was invisible. If an intellectual beryl that had both a maximum and a minimum form were fitted to our intellectual eyes, then through the intermediateness of this beryl the indivisible Beginning of all things would be attained. (*DB* §3, p. 792-793)

Similar to the mathematical figures of learned ignorance like the infinite triangle or circle, in the beryl, Cusa writes, “you see the maximal and the minimal” and thus “through a mirror and by means of a symbolism you may see the absolute First Beginning” (*DB* §9, p. 795). Specifically, the beryl “makes us see more acutely, so that, in the Uniting Beginning, we see opposites prior to duality, i.e., before they are two contradictories” (*DB* §41, p. 810). Through its mirroring, the beryl gives a vision in this way of the Indivisible that actually goes beyond all knowledge and clarity (*DB* §53, p. 816). The mirroring operation here does not so much mark a limit of vision (even though that is indeed at stake), but it indicates more so the possibility to leap in one’s vision toward a transcendental vision or infinite sight.

That this re-orientation of form is configured upon the conceptuality of the mirror is clear in *De visione Dei*. In explaining how to see simultaneously one’s face and God’s face in the mirror of the omnivoyant, Cusa explains how, as immanent, God is not mediated by forms but is the “power or principle from which all things come.” Giving an illustration of a nut-tree, Cusa writes: “with the eyes of the mind I perceive that this tree existed in the seed, not as I look at it

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71 This phrase is used throughout, and he connects it here and elsewhere to 1 Cor 13; see also p. 798.

72 For further explanation, see Falque, “The All-Seeing,” 778.
now, but virtually.” But ultimately, to see the desired “absolute power of all such seminal powers,” one must, again, “leap beyond” the notion of seminal power of nut to tree and “enter into that ignorance in which nothing at all remains of seminal power or energy” (DVD 7 §22-23, p. 245). Cusa continues: “Hence, I see this tree as a certain unfolding of the power of the seed and the seed as a certain unfolding of omnipotent power. … And thus in you my God the tree is you yourself, and in you it is the truth and exemplar of itself.” Once one grasps God’s “absolute face to be the natural face of all nature,” is that moment in which—as I have already discussed—one “sees all things openly and nothing remains hidden to this person” (DVD 7 §24-25, p. 246).

**The Symbol of Perspective and the Re-orientation of Space**

This re-orientation of form is closely related to a re-orientation of space. In Cusa, the developing theory of linear perspective with its new understanding of sight fundamentally re-orient Christian thinking on the nature of space. One theorist straightforwardly argues the point:

> The conception of space which conditions the construction of perspective in the Renaissance differs from that of the Greeks. For the latter, space is discontinuous and heterogeneous …, whereas with Nicholas of Cusa will be born a conception of space formed by the relation between elements which are equally near and distant from the ‘source of all life.’ In addition, the pictorial construction of the Greeks corresponded to the organization of their stage, based on a multiplicity of points of view, whereas the painting of the Renaissance will elaborate a centered space.

This question of the fixed point, or reference point, was of incredible interest to ancient thought, and often involved pairing conceptual notions like finitude with central point and infinitude with decentering. In Cusa, then, the major issue is how a homogenous and infinite space coexists alongside a centered subject.

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Classically, Erwin Panofsky’s *Perspective as Symbolic Form* speaks of this change in spatiality as the transition away from so-called “antique optics” to Renaissance perspective. Panofsky argues that antique optics “fit its theory more snugly to the factual structure of the subjective optical impression … [b]ecause it conceived of the field of vision as a sphere” which related objects and spatiality through “degrees of angle or arc, and not in simple measures of length.”  

There is a kind of “tangibility” here, notes Panofsky, as visible objects represented in art “were not merged in painterly fashion into spatial [and systematic] unity, but rather were affixed to each other in a kind of tectonic or plastic cluster.”  

Thus, according to Cassirer (whom Panofsky draws on for the language of “symbolic form”), in such a “mythic” understanding of space, “each place has its own mode and its own value” as space is “both anisotropic and unhomogeneous in contrast to the metric space of Euclidean geometry.”  

That is to say, in antique optics, space—like a piece of wood which is easier to cut along the grain—manifests different properties when traversed in different directions. But in modern perspective, Panofsky argues—and we have already seen this—an abstraction of space is produced. The puzzling thing about modern perspective, then, is that such a homogenous and infinite space is created, and yet one can be master over it in the power of the gaze.  

Similarly with Cusa, there is the juxtaposition of an infinite space leading to infinite perspectives with the coexisting nascent subject whose viewpoint is authorized (even though in

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75 Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, 35.

76 Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, 41.


78 See Knight, “In a Mirror and Enigma,” 116.
such spatiality the subject should be *decentered*). The contradiction, notes Damisch, is only
abated if “that depolarized space is infinitely saturated with centers.” He continues:

But for us to conceive the notion of an analytic space whose center is everywhere and
nowhere, allowing of no origin save one that is arbitrary and peremptory, we must have
nothing less than a revolution in the mathematical armature of knowledge; the infinitist
geometry of Desargues must supplant the finite geometry of the Greeks, while
computation of infinitely small quantities must become ubiquitous. Ahead of his time, Cusa’s conceptuality (and that of modern perspective as a whole) comes to
make sense in the transition from elementary Euclidean geometry to projective geometry
influenced by Desargues’ reflection on perspective art. This new geometry “posits a space
organized in relation to a point of view through which order is imposed” back on that space
which first was and fundamentally is random. Here “the point encompasses space and space
encompasses the point.”

So the key aspect of the new spatiality emerging here in this time, and
certainly in Cusa, is a positing of an infinite space *simultaneously* with a centered space around a
certain viewpoint, the way in which things appear—ruled by a linear rationality—to the
emerging subject. As Michel Serres notes: “‘Infinity carried the center off from us, yet seemed
to restore it to us in a new guise.’” The new power of the mind and transformations in form
allow one to take up a centered position through the intellect or reason.

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79 I have already mentioned how in Cusan perspective there is a move away from an Aristotelian, hierarchical
cosmos to an understanding that the world has no natural center; and I have indicated how this manifests in *De
visione Dei* through, as de Certeau puts it, “the strange boldness of replacing the liturgy by a geometrical ordering.”

80 Damisch, *The Origin of Perspective*, 49.

81 Damisch, *The Origin of Perspective*, 49.

universitaires de France, 1990), 657.
One more point: this is not only a re-centered space, but (at least hypothetically in Cusa’s framework) a space re-centered around a plurality of viewpoints; even if my own subjecthood is engendered in the moment constituted by my point of view, this is the case ad infinitum for others. This is made possible in the ideational nature of space granted through its projection and virtualization in modern perspective. As Harries writes:

To recognize the limits imposed on what I see by my location here and now, I have to be in some sense already beyond these limits, capable of imagining and conceiving other locations. … Not only am I able to move, but in imagination and thought I am able to transcend these limitations even without moving. This ability of the self to raise itself above the perspectives that first bind it leads to demands for more adequate—that is less perspective-bound, and ideally truly objective—descriptions; it thus leads to demands also for a conception of space that allows us to go beyond all merely perspectival descriptions. \(^{83}\)

In this way Cusan perspective calls us, in recognizing the limitations of our own perspective, beyond our particular viewpoint itself, to become in fact “aware of the conditions that rule our seeing.”\(^{84}\) As Harries indicates above, the eventual unease with the partiality of perspectival knowledge calls forth the desire for a more objective space that itself would fit well with an infinite homogenous space: the way is made for a new science and a new (Cartesian) rationality.\(^{85}\) Cusa, admittedly, does not quite get us that far, even if he begins to open the way toward it by “link[ing] the infinity of space to the infinity of each individual and to the infinity of God.”\(^{86}\) Once one is able to grasp or see God’s “absolute face to be the natural face of all nature,” is that moment of insight in which one “sees all things openly”—this absolute vision I

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\(^{83}\) Harries, *Infinity and Perspective*, 43.

\(^{84}\) Harries, *Infinity and Perspective*, 42.

\(^{85}\) Harries, *Infinity and Perspective*, 45, 77-78.

\(^{86}\) Harries, *Infinity and Perspective*, 62. For further discussion of the link between Cusa and early modern and scientific thought, see Ch. 4.
have discussed (DVD 7 §24-25, p. 246). The dance around the absolute truth intensely grants to my partiality a truthful center; in a coincidence of opposites, I am both dispossessed of and authorized for the centering of my space around myself.

Such re-orientation of form and space is configured upon the conceptuality of the mirror, specifically as the mind takes upon itself the operation of the mirror as screen, which I will finally argue. This leap toward the infinite through the traversal of the finite is made possible in the ideational nature of space and form granted through the fundamental notions of projection and virtualization in modern perspective. The infinite now envelops the finite as a “virtual reality” of sorts; such virtual reality “is a middle in which we are already participating, which envelops to such an extent that it exceeds every grasp.” Amidst the milieu of Cusa’s virtual reality, the mind is raised to a new, creative power as it is able to forge the abstraction of form (and space) necessary to transcend finitude. But in this re-orientation, Cusa hides finitude and then re-presents finitude as related to the infinite, superseding finitude for a higher transfinitude or infinite logic. Herein is engendered a thought birthed out of recognition of one’s perspective that, at the same time, reveals a higher logic through which one overcomes one’s perspective as one leaps toward the infinite. The opacity of mystical darkness now tends toward becoming a void that is sought to be overcome—not by the passageway of finitude (in its self-integrity) as perpetual progress toward the asymptotic infinity—but by a leaping over finitude, into a (purportedly) “bodiless” panopticon where one comes back to see all. Cusa relativizes the “hereness” of my particularity, the strength of my orientation to finitude, in such a way that abrogates the tension inherent in the mystical self.

87 Knight, “In a Mirror and an Enigma,” 136; see also 126–28.
We have seen how this leaping over finitude happens more concretely in modern perspective upon the apparatus of Brunelleschi; Cusa installs this theoretically within the (theo)logic(s) of enigmatic mystical darkness, co-opting (and negating) the potentiality of its depth and darkness in an effort to project a virtual reality. Cusa writes how we come to see more correctly and accurately “as we labor in the dark of enigma” (DI 1.12 §33, p. 102). Discovering one’s perspective in the crucible of the mirror of mystical darkness, only to then hide one’s perspective in order to overcome it, the secret center of modern thought is forged. In this ideational “leaping over” motif, we have departed from Nyssa’s conception of perspective as grounded in the very transformation of the bodily senses. In Cusa, (bodily) space, itself, is negated as it is impregnated with the infinite. Having experienced the vision of God, forged upon the logic of the mirror, “the eye-subject . . . becomes absorbed in, ‘elevated’ to a vaster function, proportional to the movement which it can perform” through the measuring mind as it spans and expands the abstract and homogenous world created through the symbol of perspective—a world “constituted not only by this eye but for it.” In this virtualization (or, we could say, linearization) of the new world, the imagination, fueled by the eye’s infinitely-expanding reach, affects a figuration or “phantasmatization of objective reality” including that of color.88 This, however, is not a simple process but a complex moral symbolism.

**Emergence of a Nascent Racial Color Symbolism**

By focusing on color, initially I mean to focus on the significance and fate of the omnivoyant image in *De visione Dei qua painted face*. Although Albertson argues that, in a progression of Cusa’s thought on images and icons, what Cusa does with the color of the icon in

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our text “adds” to the experience of the invisible, I try to take seriously the overall conceptuality of perspective, how even color is leaped over toward the infinite colorless. Cusan thought on color will bear this out. I argue for the emergence of a nascent color symbolism in Cusa alongside of the re-orientation of form and space, a color symbolism imbuing such changes with moral and spiritual discourses. This, if you will, sheds more light on the potency of the “color code,” as Damisch had discussed it in terms of the cloud mirror—but now, with Cusa, a more robust “color space” develops. I will show in Cusa’s thought on color that a thickness or dimensionality emerges which begins to move a symbolism of color toward affecting materiality and spatiality. We begin to discern this in the very language Cusa uses in reference to mystical darkness. While Cusa often speaks of mystical darkness in terms of a fog, mist, or cloud (caligo), he also uses the notion of shadow (tenebra); this term, as well as another kind of darkness (obscura, which Cusa uses to describe mystical darkness in De visione Dei) are occasionally paralleled with the physical color black (nigrum). Thus, what I want to press on is a kind of semantico-logical cluster around darkness of color that reveals for us a certain archaeology important to modernity’s developing racial logics.

In Cusa’s time, there was a larger shift in aesthetics, with Alberti’s move away from the Cennini color system as he sought a more naturalistic representation of color. Alberti enacted, as he put it, “a more sensate wisdom” (la più grassa Minerva), a desire to better relate the intellect to the sensual in painting through depicting things the way they are visualized more

89 See Albertson, “Before the Icon,” 284.

“naturally.”\textsuperscript{91} Still, color is situated in a larger apparatus as this “sensuous wisdom” involved the ability to move from mental ideas and representations of what appears to one’s vision toward the translation of these to a plane; and this fundamentally involved discrimination in how to use \textit{lines and points}, shapes and thresholds, to bring depth, body, and texture to these representations. It did, yes, involve skill in “organization of tonally differentiated pigment” and “the manipulation and organization of sensuous plastic substances” needed in the making and preserving of colors, but hidden in this utilization of color through sensate wisdom is an entire method of how to see in the first place, how to give aesthetic attention.\textsuperscript{92} This is generally what is at stake in, as we have seen from Damisch, the “color code” of modern perspective, that is, the subordination of the shapeless (color and clouds) to shape (lines and points).\textsuperscript{93} The painter, Damisch argues, knows only of figures (surfaces) that stand out against a background (a plane). To delineate the area within which they are inscribed, he is guided by the contour that is circumscribed or signified by a line. An illusion of depth depends upon a division, the correct adjustment of the plane of projection. In other words, strictly speaking, a perspective construction implies, in the first instance, the elimination of depth—primarily in the form of color—and the representation’s reduction to the graphic dimensions of Euclidean geometry.\textsuperscript{94}

In Christian thought, this was magnified by the concern over images. As Jeffrey Hamburger writes: “Outline drawing was perceived as purer, less contaminated by matter and sensory perception, than painting in pigments.”\textsuperscript{95}

\textsuperscript{91} Carolyn Wilde, “Painting, Alberti and the Wisdom of Minerva.” \textit{British Journal of Aesthetics} 34, no. 1 (Jan 1994), 48-51.

\textsuperscript{92} Wilde, “Painting, Alberti and the Wisdom of Minerva,” 52-58.

\textsuperscript{93} Damisch, \textit{A Theory of Cloud}, 128. Damisch adds: “All that Alberti says … about color and the light and shade that confer relief upon figures is part of a rhetoric designed to compensate for the reduction, the flattening and linearity that are fundamental to signifying representation, representation based on signs and their operations.” 120.

\textsuperscript{94} Damisch, \textit{A Theory of Cloud}, 119-120.

\textsuperscript{95} Jeffrey F. Hamburger, \textit{Color in Cusanus} (Stuttgart, Germany: Hiersemann Verlag, 2021), 47.
More specifically, Hamburger’s recent work on Cusa and color highlights how Cusa himself utilized color in his thought, influenced by theologian Heymeric of Campo (1395-1460), John Pecham (1230-1292), and Robert Grosseteste (1175-1253), specifically as Cusa utilizes their thought toward the construction of his “color space.” Heymeric, a follower of Albertus Magnus and influenced by the mystic Ramon Llull, believed that the very interaction between line and color was instructive: the play between lines and color was akin to a mirror, as it relates visible and invisible, corporeal and intellect, capturing what can be seen (color) and what is hidden and fades toward invisibility (outline). Thus color in its sensuousness can lead the mind toward truth. In this way he influenced Cusa toward the theological use of diagrams for theological instruction.\(^\text{96}\) For Heymeric, the function of the diagram is that “its uncanny ability both to mimic and to model the process of ratiocination, served as a means and method of cultivating an especially self-conscious form of contemplation.”\(^\text{97}\) But, argues Hamburger, Cusa goes further in stressing the importance of color in view of his belief that color was essentially a “contracted” form of divine light (which itself remains imperceptible): color, especially in its qualities of value, hue, and saturation—over the practice of the time of “blocks of unmodulated color”—is used epistemologically to engage the dialect between light and color in his apophatic frame.\(^\text{98}\) Particularly important here was Robert Grosseteste. In his *De colore* (c.1225-1230), Grosseteste wrote:

> Light—bright, copious and in a pure diaphanous medium—is whiteness; and light—scarce, dim and in an impure diaphanous medium—is blackness [*Lux igitur clara multa in perspicuo puro albedo est; lux pauc a obscura in perspicuo impuro nigredo est.*] This


\(^{97}\) Hamburger, *Color in Cusanus*, 25; also 11-12.

\(^{98}\) Hamburger, *Color in Cusanus*, 60.
statement explains the statement of Aristotle and Averroes who posit that blackness is privation and whiteness is property or form.99 This definition of color through these three bipolar qualities (*muta/pauca; clara/obscura;* and *purum/impurum*) gives shape to “a color space permitting continuous and infinite gradations.”100 Hamburger argues that Cusa’s diagrams and how they would utilize color takes up this kind of color space laid out by Grosseteste as a crucial factor in their epistemological purpose and objective. Instead of being colored with blocks, as shaded and dimensional color space, color in Cusa “complements line just as cataphatic complements the apophatic … [as] color provides the very embodiment of materiality.”101

The epistemological value and purpose of color in Cusa’s diagrams lies in the relation-in-distinction between light and color. John Pecham, through his *Perspectiva communis* on perspective (as optics), was one influence here for Cusa in this regard.102 For Cusa, color was specifically a contraction of divine light.103 Divine *Lux* is contrasted with creaturely *lumina*, a distinction rooted in Plotinus; here, light is not of interest for its own sake but as it relates to divine unity and simplicity: “Corporeal light – the light that humans see and through which they perceive – stands in an anagogical relationship to intellectual light.”104 Divine light is invisible

99 See Hamburger, *Color in Cusanus*, 77. Cusa had recommended Grosseteste as a commentator on Dionysius’ *Mystical Theology in De docta ignorantia*.

100 Hamburger, *Color in Cusanus*, 77-78. Emphasis mine.


102 Hamburger, *Color in Cusanus*, 74.


104 Hamburger, *Color in Cusanus*, 75. See Nicholas Cusanus, *De quaerendo Deum*, 1.20; Eng. as “On Seeking God” in Nicholas of Cusa: *Selected Spiritual Writings*, p. 218.
and “does not belong to the region of colors,” but makes possible corporeal and visible light, through which color is seen. But in this configuration (like form and space in their re-orientation according to a transcendentalizing framework), color—since it is manifest in corporeal light—is marginalized within the quest for transcendental, absolute luminosity. Thus color (and corporeal sight and light) is situated within a certain ontological apparatus, from which it gains its meaning or significance. Discussing the specifics of his theory of vision, Cusa writes: “Our sight is produced both from a certain lucid and clear spirit that descends from the summit of the brain into the organ of the eye and also, along with the concurrence of external light, from a colored object that reproduces in the eye an appearance like itself.” Color, then, is crucial to visibility, as contracted divine light: “apart from color the visible world does not attain anything but judges that everything not colored is not something.” In this process, however, Cusa asserts that what brings discernment of visible objects through color is not the spirit “that descends from the brain through the optic channels into the eye” which sees the object but “the spirit that is present in sense accomplishes its work by means of a higher light, namely, that of reason.” So Cusa concludes: “When, therefore, the eye says that this is ‘red’ and that is ‘blue,’ it

105 Cusa, De quaerendo Deum, 2.35-37, p. 224-225. See also Cusa, De apice theoriae, 8; Eng. as “Concerning the Loftiest Level of Contemplative Reflection” in Nicholas of Cusa: Metaphysical Speculations, p. 1426-1427.

106 Cusa’s thought on color is enmeshed in his thought on vision, which have a scientific air but is enmeshed in a broader ontological and moral framework: Cusa writes, “we enlarge the nature of sensible vision in the presence of the eye of intellectual vision and from this nature construct a ladder of ascent.” De quaerendo Deum 1.19, p. 218. Here, connecting theos to theoro, which Cusa argues, means “I see” and “I run”, Cusa writes: “Therefore, seeing bears a likeness to the path on which the seeker has to proceed [in mystical ascent].”


108 Cusa, De quaerendo Deum 1.22, p. 219. Cusa writes: “For example, if the transparent medium through which the otherness of light ascends unto sight is altered by the color red or by some other color, then the thing seen appears to be of that color. For the thing seen is attained not in simple oneness (i.e. in pure light) but in light that has been altered in the transparent medium (e.g., altered by a beryl-stone or by a piece of glass or by a flame or by a colored, or an altered ray).” Cusa, De coniecturis 2.16 §170; Eng and pagination as “On Surmises” in Nicholas of Cusa: Metaphysical Speculations, Vol. 2, trans. Jasper Hopkins (Minneapolis: Arthur J. Banning Press, 2000), p. 250.
is not the eye speaking but rather the spirit of its parent speaking in it, namely, that sensitive spirit whose eye this is.”

In this way, “it is necessary that color be made visible by a second light, from what illuminates the visible. For in darkness and shadow the visible has no aptitude to be seen.” So Hamburger writes: “A manifestation that does not show itself, a showing that remains invisible: Cusa’s definition of divine light places it beyond and outside the realm of color.” And yet, the very purpose of color in Cusa’s “geometrical mysticism” is to mark “the boundary between the invisible objects of the intellect and the perceptible realm of material things.” In this way, Hamburger argues, color in Cusa’s diagram serve the epistemological purpose of teaching the coincidence of opposites and the play between the cataphatic and apophatic in Cusa’s broader thought.

But what is interesting for us—working toward how this “color space” works to symbolize color within a moral symbolism of evil—is how Cusa more specifically explains the manifestation of color through the work of light as connected to the property of reception of the material or object. Discussing the nature of the “divine ray” of light as it is likened to the sun’s ray, Cusa writes that the sun’s ray is received by the air and “penetrates the air deeply and illumines it thoroughly.” He continues:

Thereafter, it is received on a surface by material objects, which are end-points. There it causes different colors, in accordance with the different dispositions-[to-receive-it. It

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109 Cusa, De quaerendo Deum, 2.33, p. 223-224.

110 Cusa, De quaerendo Deum, 2.34, p. 224.

111 Hamburger, Color in Cusanus, 76.

112 Hamburger, Color in Cusanus, 47.

113 Hamburger, Color in Cusanus, 78. Cusa writes: “In order that you may be helped by means of a visible illustration, imagine light to be the very simple incontractible oneness of our visible world; by means of the otherness of participation in incontractible light all visible things are that which they are. Therefore, color is an altered partaking of this light.” De coniecturis 2.17 §172, p. 251-252.
It is not just that color is marginalized and negated through the overriding divine light, but color is tied to certain qualities of objects themselves. Brightness (in the passage, specifically “a bright white color”) is favored; Cusa adds in another place: “material objects actually or by tendency emit brightness: [they do so] actually insofar as they are things lucid; [they do so] by tendency insofar as they are things colored … Now, brightness is projected quickly, and from very distant objects, along a straight line; our sense of sight is naturally adapted for perceiving it.”

Transparency is stressed over obduracy. Brightness and clarity are elevated, and so the objects that would produce such things. In fact, sight itself is in a somewhat tensive relationship with color as it relates in this way to material surfaces: “sight is deceived by a colored medium, such as glass or a transparent stone or some other thing. Sight, therefore, is so pure, without every blemish of visible things, that by comparison with it all visible things are only a certain shadow (tenebra), and, in contrast to the spirit of vision, are a certain corporeal density (corporalis ...
Ultimately “color can ascend to its rest and to its end only in the light of its principle,” just as “our intellectual nature can attain to the happiness of its rest only in the light of its intellectual principle,” illuminated as it is “by the divine light of its principle in accord with its aptitude for the light to be able to enter.”

I want to highlight two examples of how a nascent racial color symbolism is emerging here on the threshold of modernity. First, an examination of a set of key diagrams for Cusa: Cusa’s Diagram P (Paradigmatic Diagram) and his Diagram U (Universal Diagram), through which Cusa (as I want to show) moralizes blackness of skin in a symbolics of evil. Diagram P “serves as an illustration of how the infinite (God) participates in the finite (his creation) and how, in a reciprocal process … the mind in turn can come to know the divine.” Specifically, Diagram P shows “the interlocking and proportional relationship of Oneness to Otherness in terms of the interpenetration of light and dark.” In this diagram, “there is no point at which light is completely separated from darkness or darkness from light, each increases as the other diminishes.” This integration of light and darkness represents also the integration of other qualities like maleness and femaleness, and actuality and potentiality. Importantly, there is a moral symbolism at stake:

Moreover, if you wish to view in terms of its differences a life, for example, of form or of spirit or of anything else, then first of all analyze it in terms of the Diagram P in accordance with the oneness of light and the otherness of darkness. In this way you will behold that noble life in the brightness of whose oneness all otherness is absorbed. And,

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117 Cusa, *De quaerendo Deum*, 1.21, p. 218.
118 Cusa, *De quaerendo Deum* 3.38, p. 226 See also, *De quaerendo Deum* 1.30-31, p. 222.
119 Hamburger, *Color in Cusanus*, 88-89. See *De coniecturis*, 1.10 §48, p. 185.
120 Hamburger, *Color in Cusanus*, 90.
121 Hamburger, *Color in Cusanus*, 86. See *De coniecturis* 2.8 §112, p. 220.
on the other hand, you will behold another life, whose oneness is enveloped in the otherness of fleeting and inconstant darkness.\textsuperscript{122}

Through this diagram, Cusa begins to weave a thicker web between light and darkness, white and black, amidst moral and ontological significations.

Cusa broadens his thought “with the purpose of extending the diagram’s purview to all things” by intersecting Diagram P with Diagram U: “As a summa of medieval cosmology predicated on complementary quaternities, Cusa’s calculus of color also comprehends differences defined in terms of the four points of the compass, as well as distinctions of gender, age, climate, and complexion, the latter related to the mix of humors in the body.”\textsuperscript{123} Cusa specifically uses this diagram to tie skin color to an overall moral symbolism. Cusa initially intersects the two diagrams in this way:\textsuperscript{124}

If you are inquiring about the color of men, construe the northern point as oneness of light and the southern point as [otherness] of darkness; and you will see that the northerners are of the white region, that the southerners are of the black region, and that those in the middle have inbetween shades.

This is framed alongside a more global application of the two diagrams. Such that, for example, one can map the “temperament, shapes, vices and morals, subtlety and grossness” where

the ascent of the human species is from north to south; and the descent of the human species is from south to north. Thus, all men who partake of the horizon in the highest heaven are more lively in intellect; those of the middle heaven who partake thereof are more lively with regard to reason; those of the lowest heaven who partake thereof are more lively with regard to the senses.

In this schematic, “inhabitants of the middle region are better tempered, since in that region the extremes are more harmoniously and concordantly brought into a certain combination of

\textsuperscript{122} Cusa, \textit{De coniecturis} 2.11 §129, p. 228-229.

\textsuperscript{123} Hamburger, \textit{Color in Cusanus}, 92.

\textsuperscript{124} Quoted passages that follow are from Cusa, \textit{De coniecturis} 2.15 §150-154, p. 240-241.
oneness.” Northern and Southern inhabits have excess and defect. Similarly, in terms of vices and virtues, “humanity, making at the arctic pole a beginning of its ascent toward the antarctic pole, reaches at the equator its altitude and the end of its ascent.” Thus those occupying “the first third of the world’s ascent” are like infants still growing, and “the more southern peoples … are between old age and decrepitude.” By configuring light and darkness according to Diagram P and expanding the symbolism at stake in it by crossing with Diagram U, darkness of skin specifically is mapped not only according to a moral symbolism (of evil) but a moral geography.

Let me expand on what is at stake in the moral symbolism of color by exploring a second example of this nascent racial symbolism, turning to a couple passages from Cusa’s sermons. First, from Cusa’s sermon *Obsecro Vos tamquam Advenas* (sermon 281), from May 8, 1457. Discussing 1 Peter 2, where the apostle beseeches his listeners to abstain from bodily passions and desires, Cusa comes to discuss the phenomenon of seeing, both physical seeing and intellectual sight. Eventually discussing this alongside the advent of joy at the sight of Christ and being seen by Christ, he moves to the analogy of a woman giving birth, explaining that threshold of moving from suffering to immense joy, but more significantly the various transitions the fetus illustrates (spatially from vegetative womb to perceptible light at birth, and in its own constitution from vegetative uterus to animal life to rational power itself). Cusa writes:

> Therefore, an offspring goes out from the womb-of-the-sensory-life (which is a shadow of reason), so that, once freed from the shadow of bedarkened ignorance (*umbra tenebrosae ignorantiae*), it may be present in its living and lucid intellectual region. Similarly, an animal-[life] goes out from the darkness of the maternal womb (*opacitate materni uteri*), from the vegetative region, into the perceptible light, wherein, in its own way, it makes progress and is delighted.\(^{125}\)

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This maternal uterus, described as “opaque” (*opacitate*) is parallelly referred to as “the place of darkness (*loco tenebrae*).” Cusa continues by noting that this “separation from the mother,” from the opaque, dark uterus is akin to the joy the soul comes to have after coming out the other side of suffering: such a soul is

more similar to Christ than gold is found to be bright as the sun and incorruptible—[gold] that was conceived in a black mine and hidden (*in minera nigra occultatum*) from the influence of the sun and which when purged by fire leaves behind its slag of blackness (*scoriam nigredinis*).\(^{126}\)

What we should notice here is that the uterine place of darkness and opacity (*opacitate materni uteri ... loco Tenebrae*) is negatively paralleled with the color black (*nigredo*).

We also observe in Cusa’s sermons the theme between opacity and the need for purgation. In Sermon 153, Cusa discusses how faith gives the soul “the strength of clearing itself (*purgandi*) and expelling the density (*pellendi densitatem*).” Connecting this also to how love “covers a multitude of sins,” Cusa employs the metaphor of removing a dark spot from a parchment by using a drop of oil: “just as a drop of oil poured into papyrus or a thick parchment is effected, because the opacity (*opacitas*) is removed and the brightness (*claritas*) rises.” He continues, noting how “we ought now to tend to the fact that the soul is purged of opaqueness (*purgetur anima de opacitate*), so that under the influence of the sun of righteousness we may be able to receive the food of life on Passover.”\(^{127}\)

Darkness of color for Cusa is set in a broader ontological and moral framework. Opacity, mystical darkness, shadow, and the color of black are poetically working together to carry the weight of a complex color symbolism, one caught up in moral discourses with an interest in

\(^{126}\) Cusa, *Obsecro Vos tamquam Advenas*, II. 24

purgation and cleansing (and, interestingly, one co-articulating femaleness, sensuousness, potentiality—that is, lack, and blackness (of skin) within a moral symbolism). In discussing color within a light-darkness aesthetic, and especially as it is overridden by an absolute and colorless vision, certain qualities like brightness, lucidity and undifferentiation work towards the favoring of the color of white when color in its finitude ultimately has to be accounted for in the mystical ascent toward the Infinite (and this is everything in terms of the racializing of the colonial world). The function of hiding non-linearity within linearity just is the function of racializing, color-based colonialism, as form and space are caught in the same logic as color symbolism. Our modern world has been built through this hiding and negating of darkness, for the sake of the lucidity of reason and of the building of the self. Cusa exposes the archeology of the modern subject, especially once we adopt a new key—now revealed—of tracing this in terms of race.

The Phenomenological Stakes of Cusan Perspective

Now, the mirror’s operation and its color code at the core of modern perspective is primarily something that concerns us in our own subjectivity. Jean-Luc Marion and Emmanuel Falque’s debate surrounding Cusa’s De visione Dei can facilitate this examination. Their disagreement about the nature of the omnivoyant is well-known; what is significant, for us, is the phenomenological claims that follow from their argument regarding whether a subjectivity moored in seeing oneself seen is a matter of immediacy or of a hermeneutics of intersubjectivity. In other words, whether a theological, iconic vision is transcendent and “pure” (that is, unmediated), or if it is complex and hermeneutically constructed. Now, both are clear this conceptuality of perspective is fundamentally concerned with genuine sight of the other. Marion helpfully discerns the transcendental dimensions to seeing the other in Cusan perspective; but he misses how this is complicated by the operation of the mirror. Falque indeed brings us to the
mirror, but he misses how its potency is compromised by Cusa’s trajectory toward the infinite. While Marion and Falque claim to show two possible (and diverging) paths of modern perspective’s trajectory toward subjectivity, I argue we can navigate this sharp dispute by applying our insight into how modern perspective relates nonlinear and linear perspective upon the mirror in ambiguous ways.

**Cusan Perspective and Iconic Subjectivity**

In Chapter One, I discussed the kind of iconic phenomenology that Marion advocates, and its relevance to this matter of opacity and the mirror in our overall inquiry. Instead of rehearsing this here, I want to center on his commentary on *De visione Dei*, from which I want to draw out the promise and difficulty of transcendentality in seeing the other. Marion finds Cusa’s text and work on the icon rather important, particularly taking up the text to focus on connecting the phenomenon of the icon to the “possibility of seeing the other” expressed in Cusa’s focus on *seeing oneself seen*; this is a matter of the icon because it is the matter of the genuine crossing of gazes granted by the icon’s double gaze. Marion stresses, interpreting Cusa, that human sight is derived from God’s absolute sight; moreover, human sight of the other as truly other is only possible in light of God’s anterior absolute sight, represented in the icon’s gaze. When this anterior and transcendent—and fundamentally loving—gaze crosses ours, we gain genuine vision to see the other, as we are seen. To see the other as truly other, there must be a crossing of the gazes, given through the icon.

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128 Marion, “Seeing, or Seeing Oneself Seen,” 305.
Cusan perspective, for Marion, is fundamentally an overturning of vision, specifically as the all-seeing image is an actual icon of the face of Christ. In the case of the icon’s “double gaze,” as with Cusa’s omnivoyant, the viewer’s own gaze is overturned because the icon “sees so originarily and so completely the one who looks at it that [the icon] overturns the order of intentionality and makes itself felt precisely through the experience of receiving a gaze that is absolutely concentrated on each of the spectators. To see an icon amounts to seeing oneself seen by it.” Ultimately, Marion is concerned about “the other” not being merely another object in our sight, and thus not truly seen as other. The other becomes visible as other and not merely as object “to the precise extent that, with his invisible gaze, he sees me;” this is precisely the transition Marion makes from Cusa’s conceptuality of God’s iconic gaze to a model of an iconic gaze of the other.

This crossing of gazes, this seeing oneself seen, though, is difficult, Marion argues: the other “does not show himself as a visible object in the world” but must be discerned; and yet it is difficult to discern this seeing oneself seen because the gaze itself gives “nothing to be seen directly: that which exerts the gaze, the eyes and more precisely the pupils, show nothing and express nothing, consisting only in a black point, or even less—a black hole, empty of the visible

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129 For Marion’s particular argument about how Cusa is putting forth an icon of Christ here and not merely a painting (in disagreement with Falque): “Thus, precisely because an all-seeing figure remains relatively common … the establishment of the figura cuncta videntis is not enough to define the proper goal of De visione Dei (the experience of theologia mystica). We must specify this figura as that which bears the universal gaze of God—in this case, the gaze of Christ as an all-seeing face.” Marion, “Seeing, or Seeing Oneself Seen,” 310. See also 311-312. Marion elsewhere in his writings does discuss the importance of the mirror in painting and its ability to let a painting open itself “onto another space that precedes” it, though not in distinguishing linear and non-linear perspective. See Marion, The Crossing of the Visible, 7.


131 Marion, “Seeing, or Seeing Oneself Seen,” 317.
and thus of meaning.”

There is even a resistance to being seen, the fear of being naked and exposed. In order to tolerate this being seen, then, there needs to be two conditions: “that there be *alter egos* and that they love me.” But such conditions are not easily fulfilled. Ultimately, Marion is concerned about the impossibility of being seen—“as such, not as an object, an empirical me”—by the other, if the other is caught in the objectifying vision of the subject.

Explaining the promise of Cusan, iconic perspective, Marion finally asks: “How do we get past this objectification, which conceals the other from me at the very moment of presenting him to me … ? How do we avoid objectifying that which is subject to vision (whether it is me or an other than me)?” Some kind of leap or break—an escape from the “linearity” of the idolizing, objectifying gaze which traps one within the horizon of the object and prohibits genuine sight of the other—is necessary to properly see the other; for Marion, an iconic phenomenology like Cusan perspective provides just this very thing.

In order to be able to see oneself seen as such, and not make oneself seen as an object, it would thus be necessary to change horizons, which means, exit from the horizon of objectivity, and thus escape from the necessarily objectifying gaze. But what evasion will allow for such an exodus? For, if nothing less than changing horizons is necessary, it will have to happen right away, at once, without transition or mediation. It is because it dreads or is unaware of this radicality that contemporary thought strains to open access to the other as such.

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133 Marion, “Seeing, or Seeing Oneself Seen,” 319. Indeed, instead we “desire to become a *voyeur.*”

134 Marion, “Seeing, or Seeing Oneself Seen,” 319.

135 Marion, “Seeing, or Seeing Oneself Seen,” 322. I should note here that Marion draws heavily on Jean-Paul Sartre, for whom experience of a genuine other is this *seeing being seen*, but for whom the objectivity of the other is not easily overcome.

136 Marion, “Seeing, or Seeing Oneself Seen,” 322-323.

137 Marion, “Seeing, or Seeing Oneself Seen,” 323.
At stake in the icon is a kind of “unmediated” mystical leap in exiting the realm of objectifying. Thus, Marion makes the transition from “vision of God” to “vision of other” through the same kind of “leaping over” logic of docta ignorantia of mystical darkness we have traced with Cusa.

Marion makes three points about the gaze of the icon (as face of Christ) here from Cusa, as through it is unfolded the *visio Dei*: God’s gaze is non-objectifying, individualizing, and loving. As such, God’s absolute sight “is freed from the horizon of objectivity and no one can or should be able, strictly speaking, to idolize it.” The fundamentally transcendent dimension of the mysterious opacity of the Infinite opens us up to embrace otherness. In this way, Marion’s stress on the iconic, absolute dimension seems to preserve the ungraspable, uncapturable aspects of perspective expressed theologically in Cusa through the motif of mystical darkness—which, through its opacity-as-potential (as fund or fount) opens up all particularity of vision toward otherness. And yet, I have shown that linear perspective itself similarly lays claim to a perspective in which one sees oneself seen; this troubles the possibility of understanding vision only through an iconic phenomenology as it puts in play the (eventually realized) possibility of “the vision of God” being lent to the modern self.

Indeed, while Marion’s phenomenology of the icon, with its infinite dimension of vision, puts the possibilities for transcendental subjectivity in the light of their productive capacity toward acceptance of otherness, the problem is whether this configuration of the icon negates the enigmatic mirror that gives it power to grant genuine vision. By linking the icon so closely with

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138 Marion, “Seeing, or Seeing Oneself Seen,” 323-324. On this last point, Marion draws out from Cusa this implication: “while the gaze of the natural attitude (ours) occupies itself first with seeing without any concern for loving, at the risk of not loving in order better to possess …, God sees insofar as he loves, and to the extent that he loves—that is to say, he sees universally, because he loves infinitely.” 324. This kind of mode of seeing should be contrasted with the mode of seeing borne out of the libido vivendi I will discuss in the last section of this chapter.

139 Marion, “Seeing, or Seeing Oneself Seen,” 325.
God’s absolute vision and with an experience of immediacy, Marion (reflecting a broader operation in modern perspective as a whole) hides the hermeneutical moment within the phenomenological moment, the interpretation of perception within the immediacy of sight. A whole history and operation—which I have traced above archaeologically within the operation of Renaissance perspective in terms of the mirror, and which is fundamentally concerned with overcoming the mediation of darkness and enigma—haunts any claim to immediacy of sight that modern perspective and its subjectivity claims for itself. These considerations make the opacity that marks the divide between seeing the other as object or as other as a divide that is already (in its potentiality) a racial problem. Any absolute gaze, in its factical manifestation, is an authoritarian panopticon, one perspective masquerading as the universal perspective. Such transcendental vision does not untie the enigma that marks the divide between seeing the other as object or as truly other, but only reinscribes the aporia on a higher plane. This calls for not an anchoring of perception in absolute sight but a paying attention to facticity, to particularity and to the categorical—that is, a paying attention to the hermeneutical suspension of the immediacy of vision. This is where Falque in particular troubles Marion’s iconic phenomenology—precisely (as we have traced) in terms of the working of the mirror.

**Cusan Perspective and Communitarian Subjectivity**

Emmanuel Falque rightly moves us to understand what Cusa is doing in light of the mirror and Renaissance perspective. Like Marion, he centers on this central confession of “because you regard me, I am” and considers the problem of genuine sight of the other to be central to Cusan perspective. Falque, however, problematizes Marion’s iconic conceptuality and its claim to immediacy of vision as he focuses on the hermeneutical and intersubjective nature of sight as forged upon the mirror. Reflecting on this notion of seeing oneself seen, Falque writes:
In short, it is a ‘reversability’ of the looking and the looked-at, which, in giving itself in the darkness of the impossibility of seeing oneself, deepens that which still remains overall translucent in the duplicity of the touching-touched. I cannot see-myself-seeing, although I am able to touch-myself-touching. In this discrepancy—or better, in this enigma of the emergence of seeing—there is the entire history of thought. From ideation (idein) to intuition (intuere), no one sees himself or thinks himself outside of the pupil of the other.\footnote{Falque, “The All-Seeing,” 761.}

Reflecting on Cusa’s all-seer, Falque argues that what Cusa is doing here is to make “the intention of seeing in the counter-intention of the seen the ordinary mode of all true vision”; thus, argues Falque: “the subjectivity of the seen in its self-perception or apperception requires the intersubjectivity of seeing in order to be constituted precisely as vision.”\footnote{Falque, “The All-Seeing,” 762.} Vision is only counter-vision, and the self is born only in the sight of the other.

Falque correctly notes the importance of Renaissance perspective for Cusa, and this becomes decisive for his difference with Marion. Referencing Jan van Eyck’s Giovanni Arnolfini and his Wife (1434), Falque writes of the rise of the all-seeing gaze in the “new perspective” of Renaissance paintings, specifically connecting this motif to the “new use of ‘mirror’ . . . as it is attested in the aesthetics of the fifteenth century and as it is also in use by Nicholas of Cusa in his theology,” which, Falque claims, \textit{marks the rupture that overturns the order of vision}. He continues: “a world takes place in the mirror, which, far from merely reflecting, attracts us to it, to the point of containing another reality that I do not see.”\footnote{Falque, “The All-Seeing,” 769–770.} Falque continues:

\begin{quote}
I am taken and seen in my own space of seeing, in the very place of my spectacle, rather than taken and transported into the unseen where I am lost because of my not being sighted. Where the ‘icon,’ in the Byzantine and philosophical sense of the word, has drawn me into a ‘depth’ of that which is not me, the ‘image’ or the ‘painting,’ in the
Renaissance and aesthetic sense of the concept, refers me to a me or self captured by the gaze of another rather than engulfed in it. \footnote{Falque, “The All-Seeing,” 770.} Whereas the icon engulfs the observer, the Renaissance mirror “allows for the ‘including the one looking with the represented space.’” \footnote{Falque, “The All-Seeing,” 770.}

This new “inclusive” space created by the Renaissance perspective painting with its conceptuality of the mirror is already and necessarily communal and intersubjective, as it engenders the birth of the self as one is seen by others in filial community. It is not just that “[t]he inverted mirror of the One who truly sees me in him constitutes me as subject,” \footnote{Falque, “The All-Seeing,” 771.} but that this happens for Cusa, argues Falque, upon the “‘non-place’ of God who can dwell everywhere at once;” this binds the community “by a common vision not just ‘one to another’ one by one but between ‘one and another’ together in the Third of a ‘common world’ which is the perception of God himself, or rather the possibility of always being perceived and received by him.” \footnote{Falque, “The All-Seeing,” 779.} In stressing this intersubjectivity to Cusan perspective, Falque interrupts the icon’s transcendent vision by the anterior situation of being seen by another (brother), thus creating a network of various perspectives in the “third” of a common vision—without (supposedly) recourse to securing this transcendentally. Here Falque pays better attention to the hermeneutical sedimentation of modern perspective. Indeed, noting how for Cusa “seeing is … reading” (DVD 8 §29, p. 248), Falque writes: “No phenomenology without hermeneutics, then, nor presentation of the image without speech or interpretation of the image.” \footnote{Falque, “The All-Seeing,” 763.} This space for an “intervening”
critical hermeneutics amidst the immediacy of sight opens up the importance of other senses, especially that of listening, which are less prone to being co-opted by a transcendental light-darkness schematic.

This interruption of immediate vision and experience of God is decisive. Accordingly, the crux of Cusa’s experiment, argues Falque, is the hearing of the “revelation of the witness” who “reveals the validity of the revealed to me,” because otherwise the reality of the All-See would have been impossible. 148 Indeed, as I have already recounted, Cusa writes that “unless the first brother believed [his neighbor], he would not imagine this [all-see] to be possible” (DVD 3, p. 236). Still, Falque goes so far as to argue that here the filial “gives way to the fraternal in the vision of God.” 149 An aesthetics of reception intervenes amidst the apparent immediacy of sight, replacing the ontic with the modal:

Advising a monk to ‘ask’ another brother if my real vision (of being followed everywhere by the gaze wherever I go) could be his as well amounts to relativizing my real in his possible, and making out of his possible my truly real. And it is the only measure in which he also verifies his real by what was my real, even though I have always held his as ‘im-possible’ …, our respective reals encounter one another and become attuned to one another, thereby creating something like another and new possible world. 150

The Cusan experience is less about God’s absoluteness and more about my neighbor in whose perspective I have to trust. Perspective awaits verification—not by God, but by the testimony of my neighbor who alone can reveal what God has to say: that while seeing me, God also simultaneously sees the other. 151

149 Falque, “The All-Seeing,” 781.
The danger here is whether all verticality (or the infinite) has collapsed into a horizontality with its own kind of linearity, whether finitude has taken upon itself a certain transcendence that obscures the hermeneutics of the mirror from which it arises. Relating his interpretation to the broader Quattrocento spirit regarding faith in humanity, Falque writes that the vertical transcendence at stake in Cusan perspective is revealed heuristically in the horizontality of this Painting hung on the northern wall, … where man is not so much taken up in the verticality of the Wholly Other as he is confirmed in the horizontality of this Other who gives himself to man, to all of them together and each one at the same time, in one same place and with one same gaze which is enough to diversify Him in a community constituted by Him.\textsuperscript{152}

In making this point, however, Falque comes close to having the same problem I have discussed in critiquing Marion. Instead of, one could say, horizontality being hidden in verticality (for Marion), here a certain verticality remains hidden in the horizontality. In both cases, finitude can come to be negated. In fact, I believe that Falque looks past the dangers of the emergence of “Man” here (with the immediate vision “Man” actually does claim) and, in fact, shows the very roots of the transition from opacity-as-enigmatic-potentiality to opacity-as-racialized—the collapsing of opacity, in modern thought, into the immanent plane along with a banishment of translucency at stake in the iconic dialectic.

These two thinkers, in the end, highlight both the complexity of Cusan perspective (in its nonlinear and linear aspects) and its phenomenological importance—certain phenomenological considerations that help begin to shape my eventual constructive move toward a contemporary hermeneutical phenomenology of whiteness. On the threshold of modernity, Cusan perspective carefully reveals the conceptuality of the apparatus of modern perspective in its \textit{theological} foundations upon the notion of mystical darkness, but provides a certain nuance and therefore

\textsuperscript{152} Falque, “The All-Seeing,” 784.
critique of the trajectory of modern perspective since it does not yet commit to the trajectory of the racialization of modern perspective through the development of whiteness. But the question then becomes: Is it at all possible for the perspective that we have inherited—even if exposed in this way—to generate a subjectivity able to genuinely see the other? Falque shows us a way forward with Cusa’s conceptuality. It must become our concern to wrestle with how, as our phenomenological exploration has shown, an all-too-immediate phenomenological vision is tied up in, but seeks to negate, a hermeneutics of the mirror that is at stake in the intersubjectivity of seeing oneself seen. Until we first release any non-linear perspective from its linear strictures, its full potential is not easily activated. As we have closely examined how Cusan perspective lays open the apparatus that modern, transcendental subjectivity founds itself upon, we can understand how linear perspective co-opts the power of the mirror. To understand the obscuring of the negation of the enigma is to begin to understand racialization.

**Mirror as Screen: phenomenological genesis of modern subjectivity**

In the end, for Cusa, opposed to Nyssa, the mirror represents or engenders the *disjunction* between the senses and rationality, and thus represents a negative center in the midst of human freedom. Gregory’s epektatic synthesis is stretched to a breaking point as a human infinite is crafted anew alongside the divine infinite. The mirror comes to function *as a type of screen* in Cusa, which brings together the seemingly contradictory ideas in modern perspective of a “looking through” (of a window) and of a turning back of vision (in the mirror). Even Alberti’s “window” turned out to be more of a screen, since it was a “rectilinear frame gridded with a network of strings” (which he called a “veil,” *velum* in Latin). The veiling nature of Alberti’s

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window-grid already anticipates (or impinges upon) the enigmatic quality of the mirror in non-linear perspectives. The screen, then, brings both ideas together in the dialectic of transparency and opacity—yet not the same kind of dialectic at stake in the icon’s dialectic of opacity and translucency. Through its straining, obstructing, or (re-)directing function, a screen only secondarily serves the transparency and openness of the window. As the screen or veil grows in opacity (almost toward solidification, maximizing this obstructing function), it transmogrifies its seeing-through visibility into the “virtual” visibility of projection (as with a movie screen). It saturates finitude with pure idea. In terms of Cusan perspective and the trajectory it enlivens, the enigma of the mirror absorbs into itself, under the dense veil of mystical darkness, a kind of substantive opacity and becomes a solid screen. While purporting to retain its transparent seeing-through and world-opening qualities, the Cusan mirror operates according to a kind of transparency saturated with mental ideation, capturing the nuance of depth and variability into its fair and flat surface and re-arranging it according to the transcendental logic which befits a homogeneous and rational conception of space.

Cusa’s effort to loosen and indeed to sever the participatory relation between the finite and the infinite through the notion of perspective affected no less than the now more technical suturing of the rift through the formation of a new center of transperspectival subjectivism. This engendered a kind of techno-artificing of the subjective perspective of the finite in order to reach the infinite by way of mere causal link. Such a re-orientation of the relationship between finitude and infinitude, crafted upon the discourse of the mirror-as-screen, empowered a desire to unriddle the enigma, to capture the unknown through what one can measure.¹⁵⁴ Ultimately the

¹⁵⁴ In DVD, Cusa writes of God: “you will to be grasped and possessed by me and yet to remain incomprehensible and infinite. … unless you remained infinite, you would not be the end of desire.” DVD 16 §68, p. 266. Desire, on
newly freed mind “is moved to measure by the desire to measure itself and its own capacity.”\textsuperscript{155} A new world is engendered in the virtual reality created by the screen as the transcendental subject projects externally its imagination fueled by the eye’s infinitely-expanding reach.\textsuperscript{156} But claiming to have screened out our finitude (including the material body and the realm of colors) by virtue of the disembodied seeing subject, linearity only carries within itself the hidden—now repressed—presence of finitude as it advances into a virtual infinity.\textsuperscript{157} What Cusa does with his perspectivism—this hiding of enigma within an omnivoyant or transcendental frame—engenders a larger history of modernity and forms a new world in which one’s particular vantage point is given over to a symbolism of color.

As Belting notes, the subject’s “impulse to see—his visual drive—leads into uncertain territory.”\textsuperscript{158} Marion refers to such “uncertain territory” as a “counter-world” that the screen creates. While a mirror can, ideally, open a world, Marion argues a screen does not represent an “opening of a world but rather an (en)closure of it.” He continues: “the screen substitutes for the things of the world an idol constantly repeated for viewers, an idol multiplied without spatial or temporal limits, in order to attain the cosmic scope of a counter-world.” Such a counter-world is normed by the desire to see (\textit{libido vivendi}), “which satisfies itself with the solitary pleasure of the screen, [and] does away with love by forbidding sight of the other face—invisible and

\textsuperscript{155} Vescovini, “Nicholas of Cusa, Alberti and the Architectectonics of the Mind,” 165.

\textsuperscript{156} Baudry, “Ideological Effects of the Basic,” 292.

\textsuperscript{157} I will say more about this “desiring subject” in the next chapter.

\textsuperscript{158} Belting, \textit{Florence and Baghdad}, 214.
real.”  

Everything is filled up merely as the product of what one wants to see and comes to form an economy of commerce, distribution, and commodification. While linear perspective and its disembodied seeing subject claims to open a world in screening out any kind of mediation (desires, finitude, body, colors, and so on), instead it encloses our subjectivity back upon itself, engendering a (virtual) counter-world fueled by the repression of otherness. The screen might open a view for the first time, but only as the finite, material world is first broken by framing it.

Yet an actual, material world, our modern world, does come to birth in linear perspective. This “conquest of the world as picture”—in Heidegger’s words—is already a colonial world because it is a world constitutionally normed by both the mirror-turned-screen and the libido vivendi. As such, it is crafted through the negation of darkness, now not just of mystical darkness but of unknown lands and dark-skinned people. This is not merely a philosophical line of thought. Cusa and his close friend Paolo Toscanelli, as well as Alberti, shared a great interest in geography and accurate cartography. In fact, as Harries explains, Toscanelli “is rumored to have been the author of the chart that first encouraged Columbus to seek the East by going west.”

And Cusa, in his Compendium, explicitly paints a picture of humankind as a geographer who, having “five gateways of the five senses” receives messengers “from all over the world [to] enter [these gateways of the senses] and report on the entire condition of the world.” Continuing to receive the messengers to gain more accuracy, once “he has made in his city a complete delineation of the perceptible world, then in order not to lose it, he reduces it to a well-ordered and proportionally measured map.” In this, there is ultimately an

159 Marion, The Crossing of the Visible, 53–54.

160 Harries, Infinity and Perspective, 68–69.
analogy to God as a geographer. My examination fundamentally puts into question what was at stake in this exercise of trying to clarify the horizon and seek a new world: whether or not this seeking to unriddle the enigma (of unknown, dark lands) was a matter of hiding “alternative” perspectives (that is, native ordering of space) within linearity. Walter Mignolo, for example, writes that “the process of putting the Americas on the map . . . was at the same time a process of concealing the Amerindian’s representation of space.”

One could, however, argue with Cary Nederman, reflecting on Cusa’s De Concordantia Catholica, that Cusa himself did not envision such an “imperial reach;” that, in fact, “Cusanus’s emphasis on the ‘historicity’ of secular political life, and hence of the inescapable diversity of systems of rule, may indeed be viewed as a recurring theme in his social thought.” There is even an ethnic rootedness to his insistence of various systems of consent of governance. In a similar vein, de Certeau argues that Cusa was trying to articulate “dispersion without being able to reduce it to unity.” Nevertheless, Cusa’s “one religion in a variety of rites” envisions “a decidedly Christian unity of belief in matters of salvation.” In yet another register, then, we observe the hiding and negating of unknown, unseen, “dark” particularities within a unifying linearity. The uneasiness with darkness and the unknown in the phenomenological and perceptive domain inevitably finds its way to the ethical and political domain. In a “new world”

161 Cusa, Compendium, 8.22–23, p. 1398.
of cultural contact, a symbolism of color is at play as the *libido vivendi* seeks to master darkness and the unknown as art, aesthetics, and theology meet at the very point of color, of light, of darkness and shadow within the discourse of the “darkness of God.”

What I have accomplished in this chapter is to show how the mirror and mystical darkness were decisive for the making of the self. And it was decisive in this way: that the very constitution of the modern self was as the self sought to hide and make inoperative its own darkness. Modern perspective—as it is shaped by both *perspectiva artificialis* and Cusan’s theological perspective—fundamentally is marked by a manifold “cleavage”: between knowledge achieving greater precision of the indivisible; between a “vision” of some ultimately unknowable truth. And the subject, here, too, is marked by a cleavage, as a being in history with a certain perspective and yet as one able to verify or authorize this perspective. The notion of *opacity* marks and defines these cleavages, perhaps because it marks the (a)topos upon which these cleavages are forged: the enigma or mirror which is already essentially opaque. And yet the significance of Cusa—as threshold figure, caught between mystic and modern, a figure who conceptualizes the apparatus of modern perspective but does not fully seize on it—is that he exposes and shows these very cleavages (and thus reveals fissures to recover a perspectival thinking that might come to critique modernity’s hubris). We can witness in Cusa’s work the secret concordance (not yet entirely a *discordance*) between interpretation and intuition, hermeneutics and phenomenology, the enigma and the *ego*. Consider how Cusa ends his *De

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167 On this point see Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 50–51.
visione Dei, where he writes: “each intellectual spirit sees in you, my God, something which must be revealed to the others if they would attain to you, their God, in the best possible way,” as each “reveal[s] their secrets to one another” (DVD 25 §117, p. 288). With such a promise, Cusa’s “virtual reality” created within the forging of this secret concordance between enigma and selfhood could be recovered as a type of distanciation or *epoché* necessary to recover subjectivity not as foundation but as task.168 In my conclusion, then, Emmanuel Falque’s argument will be further explored regarding how Cusa develops perspective in order to build a public space *found only through the multiplicity of perspectives*. Here, enigmatic opacity is the potentiality that fundamentally dispossesses us, even while shaping our selfhood; a darkness or thickness in its anteriority before being pathologized, like a horizon never reached: this is mystical darkness in its promise.

In the next chapter, I want to pick back up Panofsky’s claim regarding the “symbol of perspective” and especially its connection to Kant and modern thought, and how the darkness at stake in the enigma and the mirror becomes ontologized, so to speak, in contributing to the construction of race as a social construct. This will be, in part, to revisit the link between Cusan perspective and the modern rationality of Descartes and Kant. Particularly, I will explore how the notion of “moral geographies” explains how modern perspective’s “color code” and “color space” continue to shape how notions of form and space perceive and create the modern and racialized world.

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168 See Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 40, for the phenomenological *epoché* as a “virtual event.”
CHAPTER FOUR

THE PATHOLOGIZATION OF MODERN PERSPECTIVE TOWARD

COLONIALISM AND A SYMBOLISM OF EVIL

In January 1455, seven years after Pope Nicholas V elevated Cusanus as cardinal, the Pope, through the bull Romanus Pontifex, would cast space as racialized and colonized as he granted the known world at the time to King Alfonso V of Portugal. After referencing in narrative account how “many Guineamen and other negroes, taken by force, and some by barter of unprohibited articles, or by other lawful contracts of purchase, have been sent to the said kingdoms,” papal permission is given King Alfonso (and Prince Henry) to:

invade, search out, capture, vanquish, and subdue all Saracens and pagans whatsoever, … and the kingdoms, dukedoms, principalities, dominions, possessions, and all movable and immovable goods whatsoever held and possessed by them and to reduce their persons to perpetual slavery, and to apply and appropriate to himself and his successors the kingdom, dukedoms, counties, principalities, dominions, possessions, and goods, and to convert them to his and their use and profit.1

Reflecting on this racial grasping of “geographic authority over all peoples and all lands,” Willie Jennings writes: “From the beginning of the colonialist moment, being white placed one at the center of the symbolic and real reordering of space. In a real sense, whiteness comes into being as a form of landscape with all its facilitating realities.”2 This begins to answer Damisch’s

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question that has been before us: “Perspective designates it in the art of painting. But who
designates it in truth and ethics?” That is to say, though the perspectival viewpoint gives an
apparatus that engenders that point from which the picture of reality is truthfully constituted, we
are left to ask who the one is whose viewpoint organizes the world and its space that comes to be.
Considering our examination of Cusa, this is now the question of how the “color space” of
modern perspective is manifest racially in the new world. While Cusan perspective only begins
to show the problematic overcoming of the enigmatic power of reverse perspective by linear
perspective, modern perspective closes the theological tension that Cusa tried to keep open: the
theological crafting of a new experience of human transcendence simultaneous with a
magnification of divine infinity gives way to the modern crafting of a merely human infinite, as
the depth of opacity is seized upon and used in the colonialist racialization of the new world.

So I ask in this chapter what happens to this mystical center of divine darkness and its
opacity as the threshold is crossed into modernity. If Cusa’s “learned ignorance” represents the
unique theological foundation of modern perspective at its emergence, this chapter inquires how
this mystical “unknowing” becomes in modernity a kind of epistemic “ignorance” that, through a
secret evil, creates and perpetuates the racialization of space. I show that this is not coincidental
but constitutional to modern reason. Consider, for example, Kant’s confession of the hidden
center at stake in his transcendental schematic that relates sensibility to intelligibility:

This schematism of our understanding, in its application to appearances and their mere
form, is an art concealed in the depths of the human soul [ist eine verborgene Kunst in
den Tiefen der menschlichen Seele] whose real modes of activity nature is hardly likely
ever to allow us to discover, and to have open to our gaze.4

3 Damisch, The Origin of Perspective, 53.

This hidden (mystical) center of unknowing in modern reason, I assert, emboldens white sight as it gains ascendency by using the “unknowing” engendered by opacity, now not as productive toward meaning-making but as cultivating the *solidification* of meaning by claiming an absoluteness that latches on to logics of transparency and lucidity. Tracing the development of white sight in this way ultimately highlights the production of space: how a symbolism of color enmeshed in a symbolism of evil leads to a *moral geography* in which geographical space is produced out of and in service to these symbolic commitments.

In this chapter, I will *first* seek to understand the connection between Cusan perspective and modern perspective by highlighting how perspective functions *as a symbol*, drawing on Erwin Panofsky and Ernst Cassirer. I will closely examine how Cusa’s perspectivism shapes modern reason, highlighting what is at stake in the mystical unknowing of Cusa which is inherited by modern reason. In light of this, I will trace out how “learned ignorance” is utilized as a colonial logic toward a “white ignorance.” I will, *second*, examine how Kant’s views on freedom and reason are built on a hidden mystical foundation, not to argue Cusa was a modern (even a proto-Kantian, as some have done), but to argue that Kant himself is indebted to mystical thought in shaping modern reason. I will especially focus on how Kant deals with the problem of evil in light of the mystical center, and how this issues in the pathologization of opacity in the fetish. *Third*, to understand how the fetish relates to the (ab)use of opacity, I will trace a certain pathologization of opacity toward the fetish by way of the sublime and uncanny. Understanding this modern (ab)use of opacity, will be key for us in getting to the question of how race is symbolized as a symbol of evil within modernity’s moral geography. The fetishization of opacity shows how anxiety over filiation and generation fundamentally shapes and obscures modern—and theological—vision. *Finally*, this brings to a head our exploration of the “desiring subject,”
the modern subject who desires after the genuine infinite but displaces this desire by forging a material world through moral geography. Such a move toward a psychoanalysis of whiteness highlights the dissimulation of symbolic meaning and the need to therapeutically work through this. This is not meant to overcome a broader picture of the productive and teleological dimension to mystical darkness (and the possibility of embracing it in the undoing of white sight)—a point I will highlight in my closing chapter.

From Cusa to Colonial Perspective

The connection between Cusa and modernity is a debated topic, but I want to forge a new path in focusing on how Cusan perspective intersects with growing racial logics through modern reason: that is, how mystical darkness becomes the unthought, racialized foundation of modern reason. Drawing on Ernst Cassirer and Erwin Panofsky, I discuss how perspective comes to operate symbolically, and how this angle can explore a nuanced way in which Cusa’s mystical center impacts modern thought. I focus on how Cusan mysticism is carried into and affects modernity in a complex way focused on the crafting of a new sense of transcendence. I then show the ways in which mystical unknowing begins to take on a new dimension as it is racialized. In the rise of colonial reason, there is the concerted effort to render inoperative “myth” or other enigmatic and “unreasonable” elements. But mystical darkness is still utilized under the surface—though now in a new way that empowers a “white ignorance” which enables the quiet violence catalyzing colonial evil.

On Linear Perspective as Symbol

Through the notion of docta ignorantia, Cusanus brings mysticism across the threshold of modernity. We must understand how perspective functions symbolically to see how this is the case. Erwin Panofsky, drawing on Ernst Cassirer, refers to linear perspective in this way, writing
that perspective may “be characterized as (to extend Ernst Cassirer’s felicitous term to the history of art) one of those ‘symbolic forms’ in which ‘spiritual meaning is attached to a concrete, material sign and intrinsically given to this sign.’”\(^5\) Perspective is not merely an art technique but a way of seeing or new subjectivity related to and rooted in the concrete world. My examination of the founding apparatus of linear perspective in the previous chapter has already prepared us to realize how perspective affects subjectivity through its symbolic nature. As Damisch argues: “In the art of painting the impact of perspective is not limited to the register of the imaginary; it not only facilitates the construction of images, it assumes a role, a function that we may properly designate as symbolic.”\(^6\) That is to say (here Damisch is using a Lacanian framework), the perspective apparatus does not just shape the images issuing from one’s imagination but shapes the very imagination that produces images. The question is how the symbolic apparatus of perspective engenders subjectivity in this way and what kind of shape this subject takes. And for me, specifically: how, in this, the modern self hides its indebtedness to the mystical center and power of the enigma upon which it is forged. From this unthought center, modern notions of race emerge as the production of racialized space takes hold in the world.

Panofsky argues that linear perspective is symbolically effectual in that it represents not just an aesthetic experience, but the experience of the world as infinite. Working out of the school of Alois Riegl, who sought to connect the \textit{Kunstwollen} or spirit in art with the broader “will” (\textit{Wollen}) of the epoch and its “worldview” (\textit{Weltanschauung}), Panofsky utilized Cassirer’s notion of “symbolic form” (which I will soon explore) to strengthen Riegel’s idea of art as

\(^5\) Panofsky, \textit{Perspective as Symbolic Form}, 40-41. Damisch makes clear that to examine perspective today, one must interact with Panofsky and his claim: one “must negotiate territory that remains under the jurisdiction of a text that has attained classic status.” Damisch, \textit{The Origin of Perspective}, 4.

\(^6\) Damisch, \textit{The Origin of Perspective}, 53.
expression of Wollen, seeking to analyze it according to formal categories. In this way, Panofsky approached Renaissance linear perspective in terms of its transcendental structure, moving away from the questions of style and aesthetics of Riegel’s historical relativism. I myself have already shown how Panofsky argues that Renaissance perspective seeks to create a rational, infinite, homogenous, and mathematical space by complete abstraction from the apparently psychophysiological processes that engendered antique notions of space. For Panofsky, the development of perspective technique decisively moves toward that point when “‘aesthetic space’ and ‘theoretical space’ recast perceptual space in the guise of one and the same sensation: in one case that sensation is visually symbolized, in the other it appears in logical form.” In this way the perspective technique refashions the world itself into “a substantial and measurable world” in the face of an infinite continuum forged by way of art and science. Panofsky traces the development of linear perspective up to Lorenzetti’s Annunciation of 1344, where orthogonals on the ground plane are all oriented toward a single point; he writes: “the discovery of the vanishing point, as ‘the image of the infinitely distant points of all the orthogonals,’ is, in a sense, the concrete symbol for the discovery of the infinite itself.” And yet “the concept of infinity is still in the making” (as well as the specifics of linear technique, which

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7 Christopher S. Wood “Introduction” in Panofsky, Perspective as Symbolic Form, 11-12. Wood writes that Panofsky “reinterpreted the Kuntswollen as the immanent Sinn or meaning of a sequence of artistic phenomena, and then insisted that this Sinn was accessible only through analysis of those phenomena according to a priori formal categories.”


9 Panofsky, Perspective as Symbolic Form, 28-30.

10 Panofsky, Perspective as Symbolic Form, 45.

11 Panofsky, Perspective as Symbolic Form, 49.

12 Panofsky, Perspective as Symbolic Form, 57.
were approached differently in different regions of Europe). Finally, around Jan van Eyck there was a “fully unified orientation of the entire plane.”\textsuperscript{13} The symbol of perspective in this way functions to open a new infinite world. Panofsky writes: “[t]he picture has become a mere ‘slice’ of reality, to the extent and in the sense that imagined space now reaches out in all directions beyond represented space, that precisely the finiteness of the picture makes perceptible the infiniteness and continuity of the space.”\textsuperscript{14} In this way, explains Panofsky, the Renaissance succeeded in mathematically fully rationalizing an image of space which had already earlier been aesthetically unified. This, as we have seen, involved extensive abstraction from the psychophysiological structure of space, and repudiation of the antique authorities. But, on the other hand, it was now possible to construct an unambiguous and consistent spatial structure of (within the limits of the ‘line of sight’) infinite extension, where bodies and the intervals of empty space between them were merged in a regular fashion into a corpus generaliter sumptum.\textsuperscript{15}

In this way, perspective concretely expressed and carried forth all the larger scientific and epistemological understandings regarding changes in spatiality. Art rose to science. Moreover, “the subjective visual impression was indeed so far rationalized that this very impression could itself become the foundation for a solidly grounded and yet, in an entirely modern sense, ‘infinite’ experiential world.”\textsuperscript{16} A certain symbolization comes back upon the world to (re)interpret the world (and its materiality) itself.

Before assessing how Cusan perspective relates to this, let me turn to Cassirer, since Panofsky builds his argument by drawing on Cassirer’s notion of “symbolic form.” Cassirer’s neo-Kantian project attempts “to renew the project of critical philosophy … within a framework

\textsuperscript{13} Panofsky, \textit{Perspective as Symbolic Form}, 58-59.

\textsuperscript{14} Panofsky, \textit{Perspective as Symbolic Form}, 60-61.

\textsuperscript{15} Panofsky, \textit{Perspective as Symbolic Form}, 63-65.

\textsuperscript{16} Panofsky, \textit{Perspective as Symbolic Form}, 66.
no longer delimited by the power of reason alone” and thus on the level of a broader cultural critique. Cassirer was concerned with “how the universal in the form of the concept can combine with the sense impression of the particular” beyond the confines of mere reason. In his general notion of symbolization, he thought he had found this critical “all-embracing medium in which the most diverse cultural forms meet,” this “grammar of the symbolic function as such” which gave him a universal way to understand cultural forms. Kant’s own answer here had been in the “third thing,” in some way both intellectual and sensible, which he called the “transcendental schema.” This transcendental schema is that “art concealed” in the soul that cannot be discovered (which I mentioned at the opening of the chapter), though we are conscious of a “synthesis” at stake. Cassirer connects his own understanding of the symbol and symbolic form to this central notion of Kant’s transcendental schema. For Cassirer the symbol is “the constant intermediary of all human consciousness and activity.” As such, the symbol, through the power of the mind, is able to transform human sensuousness into intelligible, meaningful human existence.

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20 “Obviously there must be some third thing, which is homogeneous on the one hand with the category, and on the other hand with the appearance, and which thus makes the application of the former to the latter possible.” Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A138/B177. See Verene, *The Origins of the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, 3-4.

21 See Verene, *The Origins of the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, 4-5. Below on my work on Kant’s thought I will trace out various planes where this mysterious relation or synthesis takes place.


constitutional putting-together of various spheres of human culture (language, logic, art, and so on) that moves them forward. Functioning in this way, the symbol is very broad (much broader than that of Ricoeur which we have explored), covering the way in which culture in its vastness builds itself and moves forward.\textsuperscript{24} Especially interesting for us is the relation between myth, language, and logic in Cassirer’s notion of symbolic form.

It is important to understand key forms and their relation to each other. Language has a particularly central place, for it is \textit{fundamentally and essentially symbolic} more than other symbolic forms.\textsuperscript{25} Language also points toward the growth from myth to logic. In speaking of this transition from myth to language to logic, Cassirer focuses on the sensory origins of language (like pointing and mimicking) and how this is surpassed in the ascension to ideality. Cassirer writes: “Sensory-physical grasping becomes sensory interpretation which in turn conceals within it the first impulse toward the higher functions of signification manifested in language and thought.”\textsuperscript{26} In this way, “the coordinations and classifications of language contain a certain \textit{ideality}, a tendency toward the objective unity of the ‘idea.’”\textsuperscript{27} \textit{The symbolic trajectory is a movement from the mythic level to language and then to logic.}

Myth, for Cassirer, is the beginning of all forms, though it is eventually overcome.\textsuperscript{28} Instead of placing language (and thereby logic) in productive dialectic with myth, Cassirer seeks


\textsuperscript{25} Cassirer’s first volume is specifically on language. See Verene, \textit{The Origins of the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms}, 20-21.

\textsuperscript{26} Cassirer, \textit{Philosophy of Symbolic Forms}, vol. 1, 181.

\textsuperscript{27} Cassirer, \textit{Philosophy of Symbolic Forms}, vol. 1, 295. Verene comments: “Language, as it develops its own symbolic power to form the world and the I in terms of presentational immediacy of myth, becomes the basis of logic.” 25
to cull that excess to get to abstraction and concept, stressing logic of clarity over the logic of
enigma: “If language is to grow into a vehicle of thought, an expression of concepts and
judgments, this evolution can be achieved only at the price of forgoing the wealth and fullness of
immediate experience. In the end, what is left of the concrete sense and feeling content it once
possessed is little more than a bare skeleton.” In this move from mythic thought to reason
“language becomes liberated from the immediacy of the stream of sensory impressions.”
Although originally grounding itself in the power of the myth, language liberates itself toward a
new spiritual power through art. This “progression” in symbolic form towards transcendental
schematism is key. Cassirer writes:

In this function language casts off, as it were, the sensuous covering in which it has
hitherto appeared: mimetic or analogical expression gives way to purely symbolic
expression which, precisely in and by virtue of its otherness, becomes the vehicle of a
new and deeper spiritual content.

Unlike Ricoeur, where the symbol fundamentally maintains connection with its sensuous, mythic
element, for Cassirer there is a doing away with it as logic gives us “our most comprehensive
grasp of experience.”

All of this is quite relevant for us in that Cassirer connects myth to a symbolism of evil
since it is normed by notions of the sacred and profane. Drawing on Rudolph Otto’s notion of the

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31 Cassirer, Language and Myth, 98.

32 Cassirer, Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, vol. 1, 197.

33 Verene, The Origins of the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, 24-25.
sacred in *The Idea of the Holy*, Cassirer distinguishes mythic thought from logic by the fact that myth is immediate and possessive instead of reflective and objective; instead of the universality of logic and law, it relies on the intensity and uniqueness of personal experience. This later aspect of myth yields the counterpart of universal objectivity in the idea of “transcendence” and with this the notion of the “sacred.”

Mythical symbolization affects the following according to Cassirer: “All reality and all events are projected into the fundamental opposition of the sacred and the profane, and in this projection they assume a new meaning, one which they do not simply have from the very beginning but which they acquire in this form of contemplation, one might say in this mythical ‘illumination.’”

The symbolics of evil of this mythic space—that is, notions of sacred and profane which divide and organize experience—is effective in grasping together the notion of the world in a unified and transcendent consciousness. But, Cassirer argues, this is fundamentally different than the logical synthesis that emerges in the scientific mindset. Thus, myth and its symbolism of evil is overtaken and overcome by the abstraction of space produced in logic, as one grows from (primitive) mythology to rationality and civilization.

As symbol, then, modern perspective is the forging of an idealized space upon the destruction of a mythical center. Thus, the symbolic form, in Damisch’s reflection, is “the conquest of the world as representation.” This discussion of Panofsky and Cassirer opens a horizon in which we understand modern perspective as a symbol and can interrogate how as such it affects modern subjectivity and rationality. For Cassirer, symbolization moves myth and

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language toward ideality and logic. Panofsky capitalizes on this notion of “symbolic form” and applies it to perspective. Now, what is ultimately at stake in this idea of perspective as “symbolic form” is whether perspective betrays merely a regional history of a certain artistic style, or whether it is a part of the very way subjectivity is engendered in the apprehending of the world (the symbolic formation of subjectivity, a claim which is at the heart of my own project as a whole). Damisch himself doubts that Panofsky properly proves the truly symbolic nature of perspective (Damisch himself claims to do so by discussing perspective in a Lacanian frame). In the end, Damisch argues that Panofsky’s work is difficult to “debunk” from an historical standpoint and can complement Cassirer in some ways. Panofsky’s analysis and historical work “demonstrates, makes tangible, how art was able, in its own way, to serve as both site and instrument of an intellectual project casting doubt” on certain Aristotelian frameworks that held back thought on the infinite universe.

From Cusa to Modern Rationality

Thinking of linear perspective in terms of how sight relates the mythical or mystical imagination to the materiality of the world and thereby affects a new material reality can grant us a nuanced view of the relation between Cusa and modernity. Cusa’s docta ignorantia represents a distinctly theological and mystical project that critiques (that is, shows the limits of) modern rationality, even as it encapsulates an early form of such modern thinking. The versatility of Cusa’s thought in this regard particularly hinges on a new understanding of transcendence. I have already noted key changes in form, space, and color reflected in Cusa’s thought—but here I

38 Damisch, The Origin of Perspective, 23.

39 Damisch, The Origin of Perspective, 10.

40 Damisch, The Origin of Perspective, 4-6, 11-16.
ask how it is that Cusan perspective, as symbol, specifically shapes modern thought going forward. I argue that Cusa’s *docta ignorantia*, rooted as it is in the notion of mystical darkness, not only shapes modern reason but does so in such a way as to indebt modern reason to an enigmatic center (which modern reason then must continually negate and hide). Thus, I want to focus less on how Cusa’s learned ignorance might have shaped aspects of modern reason more positively, and more on how learned ignorance, as a form of early modern thought, betrays the complicated mystical center of the rational project.

There is scholarly consensus that Cusa’s thought had implications for, influenced, or prefigured scientific developments and modern reason, though the specifics of just how are disagreed upon. In the previous chapter, I discussed how Cusa’s knowing is perspectival and yet seeks objectivity. In a significant way, perspectivism itself (especially with Alberti) can be linked to the rise of the new scientific paradigm and even “offers itself as a figure of the Cartesian method” with the perceiving subject as its center and measure.41 As Harries describes:

Yet even as reflections on the distorting power of perspective reveal the world to be a theater of appearances, they also open the way toward a more adequate understanding. … Through our reason we can transcend the limitation of the here and now and arrive at a more objective mode of representing the world. As we represent the world we initially perceive as a collection of objects moving in an endless homogeneous space, the perspective-bound form of representation characteristic of painting is transformed into the transperspectival form of representation characteristic of science. … Perspective-bound everyday experience gives way to the descriptions of science.42

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41 Harries, *Infinity and Perspective*, 77. Harries continues: “Alberti’s perspective construction offers the painter a spatial matrix in which whatever objects he chooses to represent can be located. That matrix offers the perspectival projection of Euclidean space, which is also the infinite space of the new science. It, too, thus knows of no absolute centers or measures, though as we have seen, the human body (and specifically the position of the eye) does provide something like a natural measure, center, and point of view and enables the painter to escape from arbitrariness.” 78. See too Harries, “On the Power and Poverty of Perspective,” 109.

42 Harries, *Infinity and Perspective*, 118.
Cusa’s learned ignorance certainly resembles this new scientific outlook which grants a “higher order” perspective to access reality. But Harries points out that, unlike his contemporaries, Cusa de-centers human knowledge so radically that it “does not seem capable of giving such an account [of Truth]: it suffers shipwreck on the infinity of space.” Dupré similarly highlights how Cusa’s doctrine of docta ignorantia holds him back from a totalizing claim of “an exhaustive knowledge of God through the infinite cosmos” as Giordano Bruno does.

This puzzle is complicated by Cusa’s relation to nominalism and, therein, the rise of the mind. Dupré writes that nominalism “prepared the scientific revolution” by “conveying to concepts and terms an exclusively mental status” that could be built into a system of the mind’s creativity and independence. Cusa’s re-orientation of form, space, and color did indeed have to do with this rise of the mind. The mind constructed for itself a world as it stopped being a passive contemplator of the cosmos, and instead made the modern world intelligible. Now “the human subject assumed the part of sole form-giving principle while reducing nature’s given meaning to a subordinate, increasingly instrumental, position.” As an answer to the erasure of form, nature could be studied in and of itself but also manipulated and mastered through

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44 Harries, *Infinity and Perspective*, 118.


46 Dupré, *Passage to Modernity*, 41. Others have traced the line from Ockham and nominalism to modernity; see for example Michael Allen Gillespie, *Nihilism before Nietzsche* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). See Dupré 38–39 for discussion of the place of Scotus and Ockham in dissolving the ontotheological synthesis. This resonated with Cusa’s notion of an infinite, de-centered universe with the human being in their “spiritual nature” standing at its center. Dupré, 97.

I want to highlight this theme of the mind again, now under a new emphasis. What I want to explore is the tension Cusa ventures on to hold together, in the unfolding power of the mind, *a simultaneous magnification of transcendence and immanence as he reflects upon infinity*. Cusa, in holding together the infinity of God and of the human, brings out this theme of mastery of nature which comes to a head in his notion of filiation, the telos of seeing God.

Cusan perspective holds together a growing tension within the emerging understanding of transcendence. Through learned ignorance, Cusa uniquely and competently holds together the integrity, “indeed intensification,” of divine transcendence *even as* he enfolds this into “the advancement both of man and the cosmos toward the qualities of this transcendence.”

The “world” emerges as an unlimited object that could be interrogated, now with man as infinitely able to construct it. Hans Blumenberg’s exploration of Cusa’s relation to modernity as threshold figure, in light of Blumenberg’s overall claim that modern subjectivity “reoccupies” the kind of questions the mystic self was asking (though tries to obscure this in fighting for legitimacy), draws out the significance of the mystical aspect of Cusan perspective for which I want to argue. Particularly on this point about a new understanding of infinity and

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48 Harries writes: “Alberti, as we shall see, also promises something like a mastery of nature through mathematical representation. Theory plays an important part in his treatise, but what matters far more is a new desire to put theory to work…. *This embrace of mathematical speculation by a world pursuing worldly interest hints at the social changes presupposed by the shift from a contemplative science to one aiming at mastery of what is.*” *Infinity and Perspective*, 16. Emphasis mine. In terms of the promise of science and technology filling this void emptied by the erasure of form, Harries writes of the sentiment of modernity: “Artifice will gain us back that clarity of vision Adam lost. Technology will help us undo the results of the Fall.” Harries, *Infinity and Perspective*, 106.


50 Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, 485-487.

51 Blumenberg interprets Cusa as threshold figure, especially related to Copernicus (478-479). He writes: “The question of the Cusan’s ‘modernity’ promises to open up access to the problem of the legitimacy of the modern age as well. The solution that suggests itself is, with the help of this early ancestor, to find in the wrong the consciousness of the modern age, which arose from the will to break with tradition and formed itself in opposition to
transcendence, Cusa holds together the idea of systemization and consistency from the medieval system of thought, but in recognition of its decline and an openness to the future of new knowledge.\(^{52}\) This was an expression of Cusa attempting to occupy, in the words of McGinn, “the broad middle ground of varying attempts in the Middle Ages to do justice to both faith and reason in the pursuit of God.”\(^{53}\) The relation between Cusa’s theological *docta ignorantia* and the more scientific ideas of rational grasping of infinity lies in the fact that for Cusa “revelation completes the search for wisdom rather than canceling or overriding it.”\(^{54}\) Cusa can be seen to be wrestling in a theological frame with the generally emerging new ideas of infinity.

I should point out that Panofsky writes of Cusa that he shows especially clearly the “transition from the basic cosmological vision of the Middle Ages to that of modernity.” Although Panofsky adds that for Cusa “the world was not yet truly ‘infinite’ (*infinitus*), but nevertheless ‘unlimited’ (*indefinitus*).”\(^{55}\) Whether understanding the world as “truly” infinite or not, Cusa is in the midst of constructing a new understanding of infinity which is overall connected to an unfolding and enfolding connecting God, self, and world in the matter of

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\(^{52}\) Blumenberg explains that Cusa “actualizes for the last time the basic feature of the medieval system”—a system of speculative, systematic construction—“no longer, however, with the full confidence of Scholasticism but rather with concern about its decline.” *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, 476. Cusa’s “endeavor to hold together a threatened structure leads directly to this ‘systematic’ consistency, unknown to the ancient world and the Middle Ages.” Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, 484.


\(^{55}\) Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, 139.
transcendence—“retranslating” transcendence in the direction of anthropology and cosmology.\textsuperscript{56} Learned ignorance, indeed, becomes the Cusan way of “clasping together [immanence and transcendence] by means of the image idea” through their mutual intensification.\textsuperscript{57} This mutual intensification of transcendence and immanence upon the doctrine of learned ignorance as mystical center is crafted upon a use of language toward its own limits and self-suspension in reaching for the infinite:

In this process, language is a medium that can only be brought into relation to the truth by taking itself as provisional and tending continually toward the point of its self-suspension. Imagination and language reflect one another from the point of view of the limiting case of their self-suspension; but this is no longer an act of medieval humility, no longer the \textit{sacrificium intellectus} [sacrifice of the intellect] in view of the mysteries of faith, but rather a quasi-experimental procedure of continually renewed testing of the boundary of transcendence.\textsuperscript{58}

Through using language (and all of sensible reality) in this way, one “experiences” transcendence even as they only reach toward it.\textsuperscript{59} With the notion of \textit{docta ignorantia} “there begins a recollection of the unknown, no longer only in order to reject the presumptuousness of the pretension to knowledge but also at the same time to refer to the still unknown scope for the expansion of knowledge.”\textsuperscript{60} This “capacity to reflect on the surpassibility of the state of

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\textsuperscript{56} Blumenberg, \textit{The Legitimacy of the Modern Age}, 492. Cusa writes: “Man is God, but not absolutely, since he is also man; he is therefore a human God. Man is also the world, but he is not all things in a contracted fashion, since he is also man. Man is therefore a microcosm and a human world…. All things exist in their own way within the power of human nature.” \textit{De coniecturis}, 2.14 §143, p. 236.

\textsuperscript{57} Blumenberg, \textit{The Legitimacy of the Modern Age}, 487-488.

\textsuperscript{58} Blumenberg, \textit{The Legitimacy of the Modern Age}, 490. Blumenberg further writes: “Transcendence withdraws the concept from definability.” 489. Because learned ignorance is moored in the coincidence of opposites, Cusa does not subscribe to an entirely negative language scheme.

\textsuperscript{59} Blumenberg, \textit{The Legitimacy of the Modern Age}, 491. At work here also, in Blumenberg’s words, is Cusa’s “transmysticism” of God as \textit{Non-aliud} (the Not-Other). Cusa does not so much oppose this to the Neoplatonic or Platonic idea of the otherness of God, as Cusa, claims Blumenberg, “sets the one upon the other.” Cusa “opposes to \textit{and} superimposes upon the plunge into the all-extinguishing obscurity of the mystical experience of God the ‘method’ of \textit{docta ignorantia}.” \textit{The Legitimacy of the Modern Age}, 487.
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knowledge at any time,” however, does not turn into “the resignation of definite finitude” but, bringing a certain kind of “unrest” to the modern age, “allows one to see systematic stabilization as a possible exhaustion of the will to know.”

How is Cusa’s mystical center functioning here in this project of “retranslating” transcendence simultaneously in the direction of the divine and the human? In his own day, the objection to Cusa’s notion of coincidentia oppositorum was concerned with the blurring of the line between creator and creature, the notion that one could apparently bring “eschatological” fullness to the here and now. But Cusa himself does not (quite) claim eschatological clarity of vision: figures and finitude can only “lead one to the limit of this visual clarity.” I argue, though, that this problem of “eschatological” intrusion in human knowledge is just where Cusa’s thought becomes decisive to the unstable foundation of modern rationality. McGinn writes how Cusa brought together many key tensions in the debates of his time into a synthesis that fundamentally had to do with unitive vision as filiation. It is precisely this point, this sharing of absolute vision (of God), which gathers up the promise and problem of the mystical center for modernity and its rationality. The wrapping of human vision into God’s vision (and vice versa) becomes the first step to the ascendency of a sovereign seer who inhabits a merely human

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60 Blumenberg, The Legitimacy of the Modern Age, 493.

61 Blumenberg, The Legitimacy of the Modern Age, 494.

62 Blumenberg, The Legitimacy of the Modern Age, 495. I explored this earlier (Ch. 3) with Wenck’s objection to Cusa’s docta ignorantia. Blumenberg continues here: “The idea of infinite progress is not the ‘secularization’ of Christian eschatology; vice versa, when this conception became possible, when its preconditions came into view, temporal transcendence—the eschatological future—ceased to be The Promise.”

63 Blumenberg, The Legitimacy of the Modern Age, 498.

64 McGinn, The Harvest of Mysticism, 483.
infinite and thus must engage in an indefatigable effort to obscure the mystical basis of this new human power—a base always threatening the deconstruction of this universal vision.

Cusa’s *De Filiatione Dei*, highlights this dilemma.65 Filiation, Cusa writes, is about the “perfection of the intellect,” which consists in “the apprehension of truth, not as truth is bedarkened in figurativeness and symbolisms and various degrees of otherness in this sensible world but rather as truth is intellectually visible in itself” (1.53, p. 341-342). Cusa writes that sonship is not achieved fully on this side of life but only when “we are free from this world,” that is when our intellect intuits the absolute truth “without the contracted bedarkened images of the sensible world.” Still, we can participate in the Absolute Sonship of Christ through a modal participation now (1.54, p. 342-343).

One of the main motifs that Cusa uses to discuss filiation is that of *mastery*. Connecting sonship to intellectual power which draws on “light’s continual influences,” Cusa discusses the passage from boyhood to perfect manhood, which is also the transition from servant to master (2.56, p. 343). Here we learn particular things by the senses, but in the mastery that is filiation “[w]e pass from the sensible world of particulars unto a universal knowledge, which is present in the intellectual world” (2.57, p. 343-4). The intellect then must “use,” Cusa argues, “temporal shadows of the sensible world” in its service (2.60, p. 345). In this way “we will contemplate intellectual things in and through sensible things; and we will ascend [contemplatively], by means of a certain disproportional parallelism, from transitory and insubstantial temporal things, whose being is in constant flux, unto eternal things” (2.61, p. 345). Drawing on the fundamental notion of *coincidentia oppositorum*, Cusa writes of being able to see the unattainable God “Face-

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"Face-to-face" through the pure intellect (3.62, p. 346). At such a point our intellect “is divine universal-knowledge in which and through which all things exist” (2.58, p. 344).

To give an illustration of how God can be seen with a “Face-to-face” vision even though God transcends the intellect, Cusa discusses how a gaze is affected by whether a mirror is straight or curved (3.62, p. 346). Cusa asks his readers to imagine a beginning Reflection “in which God Himself appears” as “a Mirror-of-truth that is without blemish, completely straight, most perfect, and without bounds.” Cusa continues: “And let all creatures be mirrors with different degrees of contraction and differently curved.” Intellectual natures are like relatively straight living mirrors, “alive and intellectual and free,” such mirrors that (reminiscent of Nyssa’s claim of purifying the mirror of one’s soul) “can curve themselves, straighten themselves, and clean themselves” (3.65, p. 347). These straight mirrors not only reflect and show the original brightness, but they reflect each other as they are faced toward one another. Curved mirrors, however, “appear not as they themselves are but in accordance with the condition of the receiving mirror, i.e., with some diminishment because of the receiving mirror’s deviation from straightness” (3.66, p. 347). Thus, it is the straight intellectual mirror, like a “living eye,” that reflects in itself the first Mirror-of-truth; and in reflecting in itself this first Mirror, it thus “ beholds (within itself) all the mirrors in its own [conditioning] manner.” Cusa writes: “For the more simple and less contracted and more bright, clean, straight, just, and true [the intellectual mirror] is, the more clearly, joyously, and truly it will behold within itself God’s glory and all mirrors.” This is sonship, when the intellectual mirror is “all things in all things, and … all things are in it” (3.67, p. 347-348). In view of this, Cusa calls on his readers to [mentally] remove the quantitative contractions of the sensible mirrors, and free your conception from place and time and all things sensible, elevating yourself unto the rational reflected-brightnesses, where in clear reason our mind beholds truth. (For we
seek out the hidden recesses of uncertain matters with the clear light of rational reflection; and we know to be true that which reason teaches us.) Hereupon, transfer the foregoing paradigm unto the intellectual realm so that by means of such guidance you can elevate yourself more closely unto mentally viewing divine sonship. For by means of a certain bedarkened intuition you will be able to relish, in advance, the fact that sonship is nothing other than our being conducted from the shadowy traces of mere representations unto union with Infinite Reason, in which and through which our [intellectual] spirit lives and understands that it lives. (3.68 p 348)

In this way the intellect sees everything living within itself and nothing living outside itself such that it knows that “in it itself all other things live eternally in such way that they do not maintain its life but, rather, it is the life of [all other] living things” (3.68 p 348). In this “oneness” there is a cleansing or purifying process. What is at stake in filiation “is the removal of all otherness and all difference” as filiation involves being elevated “above all contrarieties, figures, places, times, images, and contradictions, above [all] alterities, disjunctions, conjunctions, affirmations, and negations” (3.70-71, 349-350).

Thus, all “sensible objects” are unfolded from God so that, Cusa argues, they might be mastered in the ascent of the intellect back to God (4.76, p. 352). This sheds light on the theme of transcendence simultaneously toward God and toward the human mind. Cusa writes:

Therefore, in the possibility of an intellectual spirit’s power there is enfolded all the power of the heavens and of the things subordinate to the intellectual spirit, so that all the power in them is a certain unfolding of the intellectual spirit’s power. Now, this present sensible world participates—in various sensible ways—in the one power in which the intellectual [world] participates in various intellectual ways. Therefore, the absolute power of the intellectual world is contracted by the sensible [world] by various modes of participation. (5.81, p. 354)

The path of filiation, set in the “school of the sensible world” seeks mastery to come to know the One and all things (6.85, p. 356). The intellect is “a living likeness of God” and, as such, also “a likeness of all things.” In this way, “the intellect’s knowing all things is nothing other than its seeing itself as a likeness-of-God—something that is sonship. Hence, by means of a single,
cognitive intuition it sees all things” (6.86, p. 356-57). Filiation, for Cusa, is coming to inhabit the absolute visio Dei. As I drive my argument to its close, I want to interrogate the “howness” or facticity of this filiation—how it has manifested historically as the shaping of a moral geography, driven by the beautification and (cultural) purity of human nature.

**From Learned Ignorance to “White Ignorance”**

We must continue to think out how modern perspective, as symbol, affects modern vision by virtue of the dynamics of its apparatus, that is, *how the mystical center which supports modern thought is hidden but still functions*. At the center of modern perspective and the thought it engenders (with its “color code”), opacity takes on a new form and function, now as a malignant ignorance; at its core already racialized, it disguises itself as a universal seer, surveilling and marshaling forth an apparently benign advancement of its intellectual (colonial) reach. White sight obscures its relation to this hidden, mystical center, and in so doing takes on a certain dimension of evil. Utilizing logics of opacity and enigma to hide behind logics of transparency and claim for itself a universality and transcendence from particularity, white sight feeds off the basic “ignorance” or darkness of this center to obscure the way in which the subjectivity engendered therein crafts itself upon a symbolism of evil. The conceptual apparatus of the mystical ignorance in Cusan perspective is utilized for an insidious racially-centered ignorance that *cannot see its own limitations*. The power structures of modernity which engender social misrecognition and miscognition gain their operative power from social epistemologies and cultural aesthetics that have codified and (ab)used this hidden mystical center to obscure their own agency in harmdoing.

Charles Long helps us to situate what is at stake here. He discusses how the colonial process was one of cultural contact in which the people of the non-Western cultures “newly”
encountered were placed in a temporal tension or distanciation between non-rational/ primitive and rational/civilized. This then “was translated into a distanciation in space … [one] defined by the distance of these contemporary cultures from the western metropoles.” This spatiotemporal symbolism was operationalized, Long writes, as “the cultures of the so-called archaic, primitive, and backward peoples of the world became simultaneously the raw materials for the technological manufacturing industry of the West and the ideological basis for various notions of cultural evolution as well as the necessary substantiation for their notion of civilization.” Long describes this as the enlightenment (and we can say, too, the Renaissance) arche, which operated according to a “discourse of difference.” Here: “The actions, behaviors, and customs of other cultures could then be seen as embryonic growths of reason or as reason hidden and obscured by its shadows.” Ideas of modernity and “universal humanity” emerged from out of the “biopolitical arithmetic” of the “epochal rupture” of New world slavery.

Aníbal Quijano discusses, in a similar vein, the notion of “coloniality of power” as the power structure of “the Eurocentric knowledge perspective [which] acts as a kind of distorting mirror” that shows a partial and contorted image of reality. Arguing that a new historical world was birthed when America emerged, Quijano focuses on how this emerging world was not merely built around the rise of a new mode of labor (capital) and labor arrangement (capitalism) but that it was as such in that “race” was constructed as a new category to differentiate

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67 Long, Ellipsis, 289. As we will see, this shows up with Otto’s understanding of the holy or sacred.

68 Jackson, Becoming Human, 45.

conquered and conquering. Labor was configured anew insofar as race happened, granting the logic not only for marking certain biological features but for distinguishing mental and cultural capacity in a global economic arrangement. In this new economic arrangement, there was a concentration of capital for Western European “Whites” as race articulated the arrangement of capital and resources according to “roles and places in the division of labor and in the control of resources of production.”70 Quijano ties this directly to the rationale and structure of modernity itself, which came with a whole new way of thinking about space, time, and the body, defining space, knowledge, and rationality according to the Western European perspective, and expelling the body from thought.71 With this, non-European peoples became objects of knowledge, mythic or mystical vestiges to be dominated and exploited: “All of it gave way to an evolutionist historical perspective, so that all non-Europeans could be placed vis-à-vis Europeans in a continuous historical chain from ‘primitive’ to ‘civilized’, from ‘irrational’ to ‘rational’, from ‘traditional’ to ‘modern’, from ‘magic-mythic’ to scientific”; in sum, from non-Europeans to something that could be, in time, at best Europeanized or ‘modernized’.72 In this new world, race is co-articulated alongside the entire picture of the world and its economic arrangement.

This new economic-racial arrangement came as the “mythical” and “sensuous” elements of human being were intentionally overcome in the new world, in the turn from the “irrational” to the “rational.” Jennings argues that in its colonial reach Christianity “claimed to be the host, the owner of the spaces it entered, and demanded native peoples enter its cultural logics, its ways

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70 Quijano, “Coloniality of Power and Eurocentrism in Latin America,” 216, 218.
71 Quijano, “Coloniality of Power and Eurocentrism in Latin America,” 220-221.
72 Quijano, “Coloniality of Power and Eurocentrism in Latin America,” 221.
of being in the world, and its conceptualities.” Herein, a theological imaginary of spatial displacement led to physical actions of displacement. In this process, the body is separated from and no longer gains identity from the native land: instead of the land, space, and place orienting the body and giving it meaning, the European white male binds other bodies to itself in a form of a new narration and of constant aesthetic judgment. “[W]hiteness,” writes Jennings, “replaced the earth as the signifier of identities.” Jennings outlines a supercessionistic logic which “jettisoned Israel from its calculus of the formation of Christian life” thus creating “a conceptual vacuum that was filled by the European.” Now the European represents an ontic indication of what it means to be Christian. Indeed, as Christian social space was reconfigured around white and black, the European white male body would mark divine election and spiritual formation. While there was in all of this the claim that one could transcend particularity toward a rational ideal, the world was shaped, rather, by that specific particularity which could extend itself freely in its spatiality—that is, white bodies.

The key to understanding these ways in which the new world is constitutively built and maintained as a racial world in a transparent and self-forgetful posture is to realize that it is the mystical center of darkness being put to work out of sight, under the surface, in modern reason to make transparent and thus unseen the fact that modern vision is always already racially constructed. It is not just that opacity has been banished in modern thought: that is not the significance of the link between the mystical self and the modern self. Instead, the modern self

73 Jennings, The Christian Imagination, 8.
75 Jennings, The Christian Imagination, 58.
has taken to its center the potency of darkness—that portal from which one grasps meaning from the depths and secures it therein. I find Charles Mills’ notion of “white ignorance” summarily helpful here. Through white ignorance, racialization shows up in modern reason in an unrecognizable but still malignant way, hidden in broader social epistemological practices. Mills focuses on how ignorance is not merely “false belief” but also “the absence of true belief,” this latter often being perpetuated through social epistemological practices that distribute misinformation and error within the social practices of whites, and the practices that encourage such things.77 This, argues Mills, is a kind of ignorance or “non-knowing” that “is not contingent, but in which race—white racism and/or white racial domination and their ramifications—plays a crucial causal role.”78 Such an ignorance, such “non-knowing” need not be intentional or “based on bad faith.” Mills writes: “Obviously from the point of view of a social epistemology, especially after the transition from de jure to de facto white supremacy, it is precisely this kind of white ignorance that is most important.”79 White ignorance hides itself in the darkness of the mystical center of modern rationality, engaging its secret power.

Kant and the Opaque: Reason and Freedom

To flesh out how the mystical center is carried into but hidden within modern reason in this way, I want to examine Kant. Kant takes up the problem opened by the doctrine of mystical darkness and brings it over the threshold into modernity as he crafts “reason” on this hidden foundation. I will explore this by first discussing Kant’s (well-documented) problem with race as


fundamentally a problem with the body and finitude more generally. Then I will explore how this shows up in Kant’s notion of the *sublime* in his overall aesthetic theory. Lastly, getting to the heart of the question of the symbolism of evil, I will examine Kant’s *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*. Overall, this will move us in our argument toward how modern reason forges itself through logics of opacity, thinking of pathologized opacity in terms of the sublime and, centrally, the fetish. Noticing this deeper substructure in Kantian thought helps us to see how a racial aesthetics is built upon a deeper symbolics of color and evil; most importantly, it makes clear that Kant’s transcendental logic reflects similar ways in which mystical darkness seeks to transcend the body and finitude.

**Connecting Kant’s Problem with Race to a Problem with Finitude**

Instead of rehearsing, as many others have done, the specific ways in which Kant’s racism specifically manifests in his corpus, I want to focus on how the deeper transcendental framework operates to affect this—in order to connect this to the larger point about opacity and the hidden center of mystical darkness, specifically focusing in on Kant’s *Groundwork for a Metaphysic of Morals*. In his *Groundwork*, Kant explains that rationality needs to be separated and cleansed from the empirical in order to reach a *pure*, unmixed reason. Duty, the key concept of morality for Kant, is when action is “abstract[ed] from the influence of inclination, and with it every object of the will, so nothing is left over for the will that can determine it

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except the *law* as what is objective and subjectively *pure respect* for this practical law” (4:400, p. 16). This ultimately has to do with the freedom of the will: when the will in its causality is autonomous and as such determined “independently of alien causes” (4:446-447, p. 63). The free will for Kant is the will acting out of reason and not inclination. Thus, notions of purity and mixing (thus a symbolism of defilement) are at the very center of modern thought.

In understanding why freedom is configured in this way, we must realize that for Kant humans live both in the *world of sense* and the *world of understanding*. He writes that whatever things might be *in themselves* is not known to us; we know things and cognize objects “only as they affect us;” thus, “we can attain merely to the cognition of *appearances*, never to *things in themselves*.” Behind, however, the appearances of things gleaned from the senses, we must assume “something else that is not appearance, namely the things in themselves, even if of ourselves we are satisfied that since they never can become known to us except as they affect us, we can never come any nearer to them and can never know what they are in themselves.” Though, because we are sensual, we must consider ourselves as part of the world of sense, “in regard to whatever in [one] may be pure activity (what attains to consciousness not through the affection of the sense but immediately), he must count himself as in the *intellectual world*, of which, however, he has no further acquaintance” (4:451, p. 67-68). Reason is key here: though our understanding works with our senses, reason is “pure self-activity:”

[Reason] shows such a pure spontaneity that it thereby goes far beyond everything that sensibility can provide, and proves its most excellent occupation by distinguishing the world of the senses and the world of the understanding from one another, thereby, however, delineating the limits of the understanding itself. (4:452, p. 68)

The reasoning human being “has two standpoints,” one in the world of sense, ruled by the heteronomous law of nature, and one in the intelligible world, ruled by the autonomous law
“grounded merely in reason.” Though there is a split in this way between these two worlds, yet “the world of understanding contains the ground of the world of sense,” and so we cognize ourselves as intelligible beings bound to reason and thus free (4:453, p. 70). Freedom comes from grounding the will in the causality reason, resisting influence from the sense and nature.

What is especially interesting for us—as we interrogate the question of how a hidden center of mystical darkness operates within modern rationality—is the way in which there is a mysterious relation between these two worlds the human rational subject inhabits. The modern subject experiences the tension of being caught in these two worlds as an intelligence, but is able to understand himself as both affected by sensibility and conscious of being an intelligible being (4:457, p. 73). Yet a person cannot will and act in freedom (from a rational place) as influenced by “inclinations and impulses;” instead, “with a will free of the impulses of sensibility, he transports himself in thoughts into entirely another order of things than that of his desires in the field of sensibility” (4:454, p. 71). Indeed, this mysterious divide is exacerbated further because freedom always remains an idea ungrounded in the world of sense: “freedom can never be comprehended, nor even can insight into it be gained. It is valid only as a necessary presupposition of reason in a being that believes itself to be conscious of a will.” One cannot pretend to know the essence of things but must reckon “that behind appearances things in themselves (though hidden) must ground them” (4:459, p. 75-76). Freedom roots itself in the unknowable center of rationality, but a center which eviscerates the connection between the senses and the intelligence.

Kant concludes the *Groundwork* by arguing that reason can better get to the constitution of the thing in itself and therefore “what belongs to the mere appearance is necessarily subordinated by reason to the constitution of the thing in itself” (4:461, p. 77). Thus is the shape
of modern rationality, of the transcendental imagination, which treats finitude in the same way as linear perspective does and thus shows through the same mechanism of the mysterious opaque center. Of the intelligible world that grounds reason, Kant writes:

> although I have an idea of it, which has its own good ground, I still have not the least acquaintance with it and also can never reach one through every striving of my natural faculty of reason. It signifies only a ‘something’ that is left over if I have excluded everything from the determining grounds of my will that belongs to the world of sense, merely in order to limit the principle of motivation from the field of sensibility, by setting boundaries to it and showing that it does not embrace all in all, but that outside that principle I am still more; but I am not any further acquainted with this ‘more.’ (4:462, p. 78)

The intelligible world here is a kind of ever-escaping horizon. But not like that of Nyssa, in which—through our center of freedom, our mirror-soul—we are able to participate and journey toward. It is more like a Cusan leap, but one in which has been shed the theological tension. Kant has transposed the unknowing center of mystical darkness into modern rationality, but in such a way that he banishes and makes inoperable that mystical center that (in its potency) affected sensible transformation toward the infinite divine.

**Kant on Aesthetics and the Sublime**

Let us nestle this consideration further into the problem of race according to the pathologization of opacity in modernity by exploring how this plays out on the plane of Kant’s aesthetics in his Third Critique, specifically in the matter of the sublime as mysterious, unreachable center. The notion of freedom—that is, properly relating the world of sense to reason—is connected in the Third Critique to aesthetic judgment. For Kant, aesthetic judgment is that ability to bridge the great divide between nature and freedom, now in the matter of reckoning our taste with our perception of beauty and the good. Kant was concerned to explain, notes Paul Guyer, that it would be implausible for morality to be comprehended without sensible
representation: “although the content of the moral law must be deduced by ratiocination alone, we are not creatures who can really be expected to grasp the nature of morality itself by pure, unaided reason.” As Kant wrote in the *Groundwork*: “In order for a sensibly affected rational being to will that which reason alone prescribes the ‘ought’, there obviously must belong to it a faculty of reason to *instill a feeling of pleasure* or satisfaction in the fulfillment of duty, hence a causality of reason to determine sensibility in accordance with its principles.” But of this center of relation, this question of “how pure reason can for itself be practical, without any other incentive that might be taken from anywhere else,” Kant writes: “all human reason is entirely incapable of explaining that, and all the effort and labor spent in seeking an explanation are lost.” Nonetheless, aesthetic judgment, for Kant, is this bridge of “the arbitrary realm of sensation and the law-governed autonomy of reason,” the realms of nature and morality. And so, in bridging this divide, for Kant aesthetic judgment is not a matter of a subject grasping an object, but in fact is a matter of the “free play” of the imagination which allows the subject to see beauty in the object without thereby subsuming the object under one’s subjective concepts.

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82 Paul Guyer, *Kant and the Experience of Freedom: Essays on Aesthetics and Morality* (New York: Cambridge, 1993), 30-31. Guyer helps to clarify. Had not Kant, he notes, grounded morality in a kind of universal law apparent in nature? What, then, could be at stake here? The key, explains Guyer, is that in the *Third Critique* “Kant suggests that although virtuous *motivation* can be constituted by the thought of duty alone, such a restrictive state of mind is not what virtuous motivation itself aims to produce.” Guyer, 30. Kant writes: “The concept of freedom determines nothing in regard to the theoretical cognition of nature; the concept of nature likewise determines nothing in regard to the practical laws of freedom: and it is to this extent not possible [it seems] to throw a bridge from one domain to the other … [but in fact] the power of judgment provides the mediating concept between the concepts of nature and the concept of freedom, which makes possible the transition from the purely theoretical to the purely practical, from lawfulness in accordance with the former to the final end in accordance with the latter, in the concept of a purposiveness of nature.” Kant, *CJ*, §IX, 5:195-196 (p. 80-81).

83 Kant, *Groundwork*, 4:460, p. 76.

84 Kant, *Groundwork*, 4:461, p. 77.


There is here a radical otherness to beauty, an evasion of human understanding, and an escape from human control. But the other side of this is that for Kant aesthetic judgments must have “general communicability” or a “sensus communis” because an aesthetic judgment is a matter of universal assent (CJ §40, 5:293, p. 173). Thus “[t]he necessity of universal assent in aesthetic judgments opens a debate in which individual people make their private feelings about beauty the object of public dispute.” With the notion of the sublime, Kant discusses the limit or hidden center of this capacity to bridge the realm of nature and freedom.

There is a specific connection between reason and the sublime. While the beautiful is concerned with objects and thus with limitations, the sublime “is to be found in a formless object insofar as limitlessness is represented in it;” thus the beautiful is connected to understanding while the sublime is connected to reason (CJ §23 5:244, p. 128). Kant also writes that the sublime “cannot be contained in any sensible form, but concerns only ideas of reason, which, though no presentation adequate to them is possible, are provoked and called to mind precisely by this inadequacy, which does not allow of sensible presentation.” And yet, in this very connection, the sublime presents an ambiguous, perhaps even negative feeling. So Kant writes that the sublime both attracts and repels, and as such is a “negative pleasure.” Whereas beauty can be connected in aesthetic judgment to the purposiveness of nature, the sublime “may to be sure appear in its form to be contrapurposive for our power of judgment, unsuitable for our


88 Kant writes: “In all judgements by which we declare something to be beautiful, we allow no one to be of a different opinion, without, however, grounding our judgment on concepts, but only on our feeling, which we therefore make our ground not as a private feeling, but as a common one.” CJ §22, 5.239 (p. 123).

89 Siebers, “Kant and the Politics of Beauty,” 45.
faculty of presentation, and as it were doing violence to our imagination.” Notions of chaos, disorder, devastation rule here (CJ §23 5:245-246, p. 129-130).

We come to see that the sublime is connected both to reason and to notions of devastation and undoing because the sublime has to do with the notion of infinity. Kant describes the sublime as that “which is absolutely great” and thus “beyond all comparison” (CJ §25 5:248, p. 131). If this is true, and if the sublime, being connected to reason, is not a matter of the senses, why does Kant discuss the sublime under the notion of the aesthetic judgment? Kant writes that though nothing in nature in itself is technically sublime, nature can evoke a feeling of the sublime:

Thus nothing that can be an object of the senses is, considered on this footing, to be called sublime. But just because there is in our imagination a striving to advance to the infinite, while in our reason there lies a claim to absolute totality, as to a real idea, the very inadequacy of our faculty for estimating the magnitude of the things of the sensible world awakens the feeling of a supersensible faculty in us … Hence it is the disposition of the mind resulting from a certain representation occupying the reflective judgment, but not the object, which is to be called sublime. (CJ §25 5:250, p. 134)

The feeling of the sublime is that which is evoked by absolute greatness, not from the object itself, but from our sense of being able to go beyond our understanding in reflecting on sensible nature—thus when we experience “a faculty of the mind that surpasses every measure of the senses” (CJ §25 5:250, p. 134). Kant gives an example of observing the Egyptian pyramids up close, which we start to measure and apprehend but soon can no longer comprehend: “For here there is a feeling of the inadequacy of his imagination for presenting the ideas of a whole, in which the imagination reaches its maximum and, in the effort to extend it, sinks back into itself, but is thereby transported into an emotionally moving satisfaction” (CJ §26 5:256, p. 136). We could say: one comes in touch with the mystical center here. But this is a negative place or a non-place as the sublime in this way “resides nowhere in the things of sensibility (which can only
suggest it), but only in the mind, which discovers, even in the instant of its rapture, its own essential superiority over all of nature.”

This brings us to the key point I want to highlight through Kant’s notion of the sublime: an experience of *imagining the infinite* through a supersensible human power. Kant writes: “But even to be able to think the given infinite without contradiction requires a faculty in the human mind that is itself supersensible” (*CJ* §26 5:254-255, p. 138). Again, evoked by the magnitude of an object, through a supersensible faculty connected with or related to reason, one can intuit the idea of infinity: “Nature is thus sublime in those of its appearances the intuition of which brings with them the idea of its infinity” (*CJ* §26 5:255, p. 138). Reason here “discovers in itself a supersensible power that is infinitely free of and infinitely greater than the realm of representation.”

Hart observes here an overall mental striving from beauty to sublimity to infinity, so that “the sublime serves as both median and partition, both indicating a continuity and assuring an inviolable division between the beautiful and the infinite.” It is just this “going beyond” the imagination, only to recover something of vital human powers, that is a drawing on the power of the mystical darkness—thus betraying that which is hidden but necessary to the intellectual project of modernity. Although, I should mention that while Kant must expose the center in this way in order to think infinity and thus secure modern vision, there is some

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91 Kant continues: “For it is only by means of this and its idea of a noumenon, which itself admits of no intuition though it is presupposed as the substratum of the intuition of the world as mere appearance, that the infinite of the sensible world is completely comprehended in the pure intellectual estimation of magnitude under a concept, even though it can never be completely thought in the mathematical estimation of magnitude through numerical concepts.”


instability and disruption here, as I have noted. Jean-François Lyotard, in particular, comments upon the sublime in Kant in this way, noting that it leaves a kind of irresolvable tension or “destruction” of the terms intending to be resolved.\textsuperscript{94}

**Kant’s Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason**

Finally, Kant’s framework for understanding reason and freedom directly pertains to how he answers the question of evil. With the topic of religion in view, Kant equates freedom and autonomy of reason to the expansion of “the good principle” which can outpace the human propensity toward evil. On this plane, the tension just discussed between the sensible and the intelligible is now a matter of how the idea of the good takes root in a society through the sensible vehicle of the church. Ecclesiastical faith emerges from autonomous reason because “of the natural need of all human beings to demand for even the highest concepts and grounds of reason something that the senses can hold on to, some confirmation from experience or the like.”\textsuperscript{95} But—and this is the center of Kant’s claim about the nature of evil—religion is properly related to morality “not as the ground of its maxims but as a necessary consequence accepted in conformity to them” (6:4-5, p. 58). A Kantian morality based in duty leads to and shapes a pure, rational, and practical religion (6:6, p. 59-60).

Central to Kant’s claim is the difference between a *human being of good morals* and a *morally good human*: “We can say of the first that he complies with the law according to the letter (i.e. as regards the action commanded by the law); but of the second, that he observes it


according to the spirit (the spirit of the moral law consists in the law being of itself a sufficient
incentive).” Evil, in this light, consists in impurity of duty: when “incentives other than the law
itself … are necessary to determine the power of choice to lawful actions.” What is at stake is not
any deed itself but “propensity” or the “subjective determining ground of the power of choice
that precedes every deed” (6:30-31, p. 78-79). Goodness and evil, for Kant, is about the relation
between incentives and moral maxim: evil lies in constructing morality that is interested or
incentivized by something other than the pure goodness of the good deed (6:36, p. 83). Drawing
on the Genesis account of the fall, Kant writes that the propensity of evil lies in the fact that
“instead of following this law absolutely as sufficient incentive … the human being looked about
for yet other incentives … which can be good only conditionally … And he made it his maxim
… to follow the law of duty, not from duty but, if need be, also with an eye to other aims.” Upon
questioning the absoluteness of the command and thus entertaining “merely conditional
obedience,” finally “the preponderance of the sensory inducements over the incentive of the law
was incorporated into the maxim of action, and thus sin came to be” (6:42, p. 87-88). Such an
evil is “radical” because “it corrupts the ground of all maxims.” And yet, writes Kant, “it must
equally be possible to overcome this evil, for it is found in the human being as acting freely”
(6:37, p. 83). Kant argues that a move away from evil and toward the good, then, lies in
the recovery of the purity of the law, as the supreme ground of all our maxims, according
to which the law itself is to be incorporated into the power of choice, not merely bound to
other incentives, nor indeed subordinated to them (to inclinations) as conditions, but
rather in its full purity, as the self-sufficient incentive of that power. (6:46, p. 91)

This turnaround is not a matter of “gradual reform” but instead “a revolution in the disposition of
the human being” (6:47, p. 92). This is possible because Christ as “prototype” is the ideal of
moral purity presented to our reason, the ideal to which we have a “duty to elevate ourselves”
A vision of Christ is the answer to the question of evil, but now entirely as a matter of rationality, as a call to escape from sensuality.\footnote{Kant writes: “And the required prototype always resides only in reason, since outer experience yields no example adequate to the idea.” 6:63, p. 105. Also: “in the appearance of the God-man, the true object of the saving faith is not what in the God-man falls to the sense, or can be cognized through experience, but the prototype lying in our reason which we put in him.” 6:119, p. 149.}

The matter of good and evil quickly becomes, for Kant, a discussion about the apparent difference between Christianity and Judaism, which itself is set in a symbolism of defilement and purity which roots this notion of moral autonomy—that mysterious center of mystical darkness rendered inoperative—deeper into the symbolics of evil. While “the good principle” retained some kind of force through the setting up of a government (specifically “the Jewish theocracy”), this “institutional order did no substantial injury to the realm of darkness;” with the advent of Christ comes the dawn of rationality, tied into the Greek legacy of “moral doctrines on freedom” (6:79-80, p. 118-119). Kant writes that Christ in this way “by exemplifying this principle (in the moral idea) … opened the doors of freedom to all who, like him, choose to die to everything that holds them fettered to earthly life to the detriment of morality; … while he abandons to their fate all those who prefer moral servitude” (6:82, p. 121, emphasis mine). Freedom (with clear anti-Semitic sentiment) is the shedding of one’s bodily nature, as salvation is radically interiorized:

to interfere with this [innermost] adoption [of genuine moral principles in their disposition] is surely not the so often blamed sensibility but a certain self-incurred perversity or, as we might otherwise also call this wickedness, fraud …: [this is] a corruption that lies in all human beings and cannot be overcome except through the idea of the moral good in its absolute purity. (6:83, p. 122)\footnote{For commentary on the anti-Jewish nature of this sentiment, see Carter, Race, 108-117.}

This interiorization and the need to shed sensibility as a kind of moral weight is so much the case that the “ethical community” out of which the good principle spreads is itself a “sublime, never
fully attainable idea” which is “at best capable of representing with purity only the form of such a community” (6:100, p. 135). While human beings need something the senses can hold onto that can represent the concept of the ethical community, and so “a historical faith attaches itself to pure religion as its vehicle,” Kant expresses the hope that we can near a “pure religious faith until finally we can dispense of that vehicle” (6:115, p. 146). In the end, writes Kant “religion will gradually be freed of all empirical grounds of determination” at which point “at last the pure faith of religion will rule over all” (6:121, p. 151). On this third plane of freedom, upon the question of good and evil, the mystical center is now not only hidden yet operating but operating specifically by employing a symbolism of evil to frame human freedom—and in this, weaving a subterranean structure of justification for spinning out tangible violence.

This realization is further seen in how Kant connects Judaism to the notion of the fetish, showing the way in which the hidden center of rationality with this symbolism of evil builds itself upon the pathologization of opacity. Kant’s discussion of Judaism as separated from Christianity upon logics of defilement and purity comes to a head in terms of the notion of the “fetish-faith.” Kant contrasts the rational universal faith with Judaism, fundamentally noting that the latter was constituted according to coercive laws, not moral laws (6:126, p. 155). The path to the universal, reasonable community is not just to be found in the “origin of Christianity” but as such in that it is “a total abandonment of the Judaism in which it originated, grounded on an

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98 See 6:95-96, p. 130-31 for discussion of “ethical community” versus the “juridico-civil” community.

99 We could also point out how Kant speaks of the very hiddenness of this community itself: “We have reason to say, however, that ‘the Kingdom of God is come into us,’ even if only the principle of the gradual transition from ecclesiastical faith to the universal religion of reason, and so too a (divine) ethical state on earth, has put in roots universally and, somewhere, also in public – though the actual setting up of this state is still infinitely removed from us. For since this principle contains the basis for a continual approximation to the ultimate perfection, there lies in its (invisibly) – as in a shoot that develops and will in the future bear seeds in turn – the whole that will one day enlighten the world and rule over it.” 6:122, p. 152.
entirely new principle.” Judaism—perhaps the entire body itself—was just a preparation for Christianity, a “corporeal sign” that must be discarded (6:127, p. 156).

Kant differentiates moral, reasonable religion from the “fetish-faith” in this way: “Every beginning in religious matters, when not undertaken in a purely moral spirit but as a means in itself capable of propitiating God and thus, through him, of satisfying all our wishes, is a fetish-faith.” Again, this is connected to the body and finitude, for “the sensuous human being still searches for an escape route by which to circumvent that arduous condition” of pure and rational morality (6:193, p. 209). The fetish-faith yields a “counterfeit service” which is done to satisfy “the will of a superior” instead of directly for the pleasure of the ultimate law-giver (God). The difference between rational faith and the fetish faith is less about outward forms of service and more about how the form of service connects to purity of morality:

Differences of external form here count equally for nothing but everything depends, rather, upon the acceptance or the forsaking of the one single principle of becoming well-pleasing to God – upon whether [we do it] through moral disposition alone, so far as the latter manifest its vitality in actions which are its appearance, or through pious play-acting and nothing-doing. (6:173, p. 192)

Fetishism, in view of this, is being “under the delusion of possessing an art of achieving a supernatural effect through entirely natural means” when one “makes use of actions that in themselves contain nothing well-pleasing to God as means nevertheless for gaining God’s unmediated favor” (6:177, p. 196). In this way the fetish-faith, for Kant, is further connected to “priestcraft” which obtains “wherever statutory commands, rules of faith and observances, rather than principles of morality, make up the groundwork and the essence of the church.” Such fetishism and priestcraft, Kant argues, robs one from their moral freedom, because it does not

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100 Kant writes about the “heart which is indeed too weak to obey his moral commands but makes up for this lack by its demonstrated eagerness to obey” and compares this to “a hidden inclination to deceit.” 6:169-170, p. 189-190.
convince but only gives orders (6:179-180, p. 198); true faith is “a service of the heart (in spirit and truth), and can consist only in the disposition of obedience to all true duties and divine commands” (6:192, p. 208). Again, for Kant, freedom is tied to reason—strained out from sensibility—but now enmeshed within an overall symbolism of evil.

At stake in the overall project of Kantian modern rationality is how the sensible, hidden center or foundation from which the reasonable community arises and upon which it grounds itself now comes to deal with those “visible” bodies excluded as “irrational,” that excess materiality or refuse that cannot be subsumed in transcendence toward the ideal. This mystical-turned-rational center now expresses the anxiety over its own project of negating sensibility in its infinite reach by marking as visible and corporeal that materiality that it cannot (yet) subsume and negate. Fetishization just is this obsession over externalizing as material the anxiety over an intelligible, supersensible ground. This speaks to how the sensible and bodily are not done away with in the autonomy of reason, but are rendered inoperative as modern perspective makes the claim to universality and transparency of vision. This topic of the fetish then reemerges as a symptom of modern rationality trying to control its mystical center, wrestling with the opacity on which reason depends (first revealed in the sublime) but cannot quite grasp.

**Tracing Aesthetics toward the Sublime, the Uncanny, and the Fetish**

Having traced out in the Kantian notions of the sublime and fetish a certain (ab)using of the center of mystical darkness at the heart of modern rationality, I want to give a broader account of how the sublime and the fetish—and now the uncanny intervening between them—can be connected to a course of the pathologization of opacity in white subjectivity and the sight it gives. In Chapter One, I pointed out how the question of the good and the beautiful has historically all too easily turned, in the mode of the sublime, to differentiating and racializing
Indeed, the sublime opens up toward the fetish particularly in view of race, bridging a connection between the troubled foundation of reason and the racialized patterns it engenders through internal and external spatiality.

Rudolph Otto’s *The Idea of the Holy* and his notion therein of *numinous* religious experience provides a key for connecting opacity to race and then to a pathological unfolding from the sublime, to the uncanny, and to the fetish. This starting point provides insight into the broader problem at stake because the question of the sublime asks a larger question about modernity and modern rationality. An exploration of the sublime is both to explore the hidden center of modern reason and its very limits. This can be seen, for example, in David Bentley Hart’s detailed work connecting the sublime to various narratives of postmodernity that seek to disrupt or disintegrate an ontotheological unity between the good and the beautiful. Though Hart sheds light on the ways in which the sublime is connected to opacity and the mystical center which has always threatened to disrupt modern rationality, my own interest is not in how the sublime has been configured in the history of the metaphysical or anti-metaphysical project, but how the sublime is connected to symbolic logics of evil and color.

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102 Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 44. This harkens back to nominalism’s “dissolution of being” (as we have seen with Dupré). Hart writes: “it is not implausible to say that the entire pathology of the modern and postmodern can be diagnosed as a multifarious narrative of the sublime.” 51. In Hart’s discussion of, as he puts it, the differential, cosmological, ontological, and ethical sublime, we can observe a connection between the sublime and the mystical—several times Hart even refers to a “mysticism of the sublime.” 51-52. For example, Hart argues that the “postmodern” sublime stresses the veiled, hidden, absent, or “unrepresentable” nature of God and the infinite (44); the sublime is a limit on totality and disruption of adequate representation of sensible beauty, even (reminiscent of Cusa’s *docta ignorantia*) helping “thought achieve an extranarrative vantage from which the strategies of totality become visible” (48); the sublime is connected to primordial chaos and myth (56-59); the sublime is connected to freedom and radical gift (72-75).
Opacity and the Sublime

Otto helps us to think about how the dialectic of rationality and non-rationality pertains to a symbolism of evil engendered by the pathologization of opacity, and what this might have to do with moral spatiality. Otto connects opacity and darkness to the sublime within logics of evil because of the matter of the profane and sacred. Reflecting on the experience of the numinous “holy,” Otto writes that when we think about the divine we begin with the “rational” in the idea of what we can grasp and conceive conceptually of God, but “beneath this sphere of clarity and lucidity lies a hidden depth, inaccessible to our conceptual thought, which we in so far call the ‘non-rational.’”\(^{103}\) Otto connects this “non-rational” core directly to the mystical: “But essentially mysticism is the stressing to a very high degree, indeed the overstretching, of the non-rational or supra-rational elements in religion.”\(^{104}\) How, for Otto, does this have to do with the mystical? The experience of the holy, for Otto, is centrally the experience of one’s creatureliness and profanity; Otto speaks of this in terms of a sense of self-depreciation and even self-annihilation—on this last point because one identifies with absolute reality.\(^{105}\) Thus the holy for Otto is a “wholly other.”\(^{106}\) In this sense of transcendence of the sacred, this numinous feeling is of the “mysterium tremendum” and of the fascinans. Here there is a sense of awfulness and dread, even related to a demonic dread. Otto writes: “It has wild and demonic forms and can sink to an almost grisly horror and shuddering.”\(^{107}\) All of this is described negatively but experienced

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positively. The negative moment represents “the terrifying arbitrariness of the relation between signs and the world, an aporia safely hidden when ordinary discourse functions normally;” while in the positive moment “the terrifying procession of signifiers is halted by the making of metaphor, by the act of symbolic substitution that resolves the crisis by making the absence of meaning itself significant.”

In framing this experience of the *numinuous* holy as “wholly other” and sacred in these ways, Otto is explicitly drawing on Kant’s notion of the sublime which, as we have seen, is an a priori experience which provokes “the immeasurable gulf” between the ideal and the real, where “[t]he task of the sublime then becomes that of affording passage between these incommensurable orders.” The imagination fails here and yet harnesses a positive moment to intuit the unlimited. Reflective of this, Otto fundamentally says of the holy that it is experienced within an “overplus of meaning.” But the key, again, is how we experience the holy in this absence and surplus: while we can indicate something “positive” of the experience with concepts, the experience itself is only of something “negative.” Our words and concepts only *represent* this overplus as a substitute. Otto tries to grasp at how to name the unnamable, thus stressing the inadequacy of language to make meaning and reflect on the infinite. The numinous is a “nothingness,” then, that is discovered, represented, and comes on the scene by language, akin to the notion of being stained with a dye. In addition to the Kantian sublime,

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Otto explicitly discusses this feeling in terms of the uncanny.\(^{114}\) The uncanny is connected to the sacred; in both cases, it is something that haunts.\(^{115}\)

The holy and the sacred are connected to this numinous overplus before ethics, connected to non-rational feeling before the conceptual and rational connecting of the holy to the idea of “goodness.”\(^{116}\) The holy, then, is connected to the profane and sacred not firstly in terms of ethical purity, but fundamentally in terms of transcendence.\(^{117}\) It is as the sacred and profane is connected to matters of transcendence (that is, spatiality) that the feeling of the numinous and of transcendence relates to symbols of purification and cleansing. Otto writes:

> It comprises, first, a manifestation of the numinous awe, viz. the feeling that the “profane” creature cannot forthwith approach the numen, but has need of a covering or shield against the [wrath] of the numen. Such a “covering” is then a “consecration”, i.e. a procedure that renders the approacher himself “numinous”, frees him from his “profane” being, and fits him for intercourse with the numen.\(^{118}\)

This covering or grace is conferred, writes Otto, “by the numen itself, which bestows something of its own quality to make man capable of communion with it.”\(^{119}\) In light of our study so far, this point is particularly poignant, and brings the notion of the (mystical) sublime closest to being in touch with a symbolism of evil. The idea here is that the experience of the sublime, which is

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an experience of transcendence, makes transcendent the approacher, gives its own transcendence in a mutual magnification of both numinous and subjective infinity.

This dynamic is folded into the matter of the connection between the nonrational, uncanny core of numinous experience and primitiveness, again bringing us back to the matter of colonialism and racialization. The transition from the non-rational to the rational also represents, in part, the transition from savage mind and primitive religion to rationalization of feelings.120 Elaborating on this point, Poland argues that the historical context of Otto’s publication (1917), him trying to make sense of the terror and anxiety of the First World War, explains the attempt to make meaning through the sublime as one “pictures to oneself” infinity which “cultivates the terrors of excess for the purpose of affirming that excess can be mastered and culture sustained.” Otto converts the “‘merely natural’ fears of his historical situation into the universal structure of the mysterium tremendum et fascinans.”121 Part of this fear was a larger concern over the future of Western civilization:

[Otto] looked to culturally exotic and primitive sites of darkness for provocation … evidence of the way dark continents threatened to confuse the difference between imperialist self and other, blurring the edges of the West’s boundaries. For Otto these terrors too become metaphors of the subject’s relation to transcendence: the obscurity of blurred boundaries becomes a darkness ‘of quite another kind,’ numinous dread. This uncanny, ‘wholly other’ fear becomes for Otto originary: ‘deeper than the filiations and affiliations of natural and cultural history, it is ‘the starting point for the entire religious development in history … the basic factor and basic impulse underlying the entire process of religious evolution.’122

The sublime speaks to the opaque, mythical space of preconceptual and prelinguistic chaos that threatens the meaning of cultural and ideational filiation. Sublime terror “is a glimpse beneath


the symbolic order, beneath the region where struggles between father and son take place.”

At stake here is the demonic dread when one “glimpses behind any particular act of repetition the demonic power of the compulsion to repeat … an invisible energy whose eerie operations become visible only when ‘stained’ by particular repetitions.”

In this way, the sublime, like the uncanny and fetish (as we will see), symbolizes darkness of the other within a symbolism of evil as it links to the Oedipus complex and the fear of castration.

**Opacity and the Uncanny**

The uncanny is a bridge between the sublime and the fetish; it also brings to the surface the intersection of a symbolism of evil and the question of history, memory, and countermemory which emerge as key themes in the spatiotemporal orientation of a symbolism of evil. I mentioned in Chapter One how Ricoeur connects opacity to Freud’s *Unheimlichkeit* in discussing the inhabiting of the dialectic between memory and history. With Freud’s *Unheimlichkeit* we heighten the hidden/revealed dialectic at stake already in opacity, through the sexual and racial pathologization on the level of history. Freud highlights the strange tension at stake in uncanniness, noting it as “that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar.”

But how is it that something familiar is terrifying? Freud explores the internal tension in the German word *heimlich*, noting that it travels from a sense of homeliness and intimacy into the sense of secretness and concealing from sight, nearly coinciding with its opposite *Unheimlichkeit*; thus: “on the one hand it means that which is

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familiar and congenial, and on the other, that which is concealed and kept out of sight.”

Freud connects this ambivalence to what he argues is a fundamental repression at stake in the uncanny, which he divides into two classes: the second class relates to primitive, animistic beliefs, but the first class, that which is related to infantile psychology, is what particularly interests us. This category pertains to the example of the castration-complex and fundamentally has to do with repression—thus the “hidden” and “familiar” dialectic. Here Freud decisively connects the uncanny to the theme of the “double,” which he first connects to our primary infantile narcissism and then to the development of self-criticism in our conscience; it is this early mental stage of “friendly” doubling that through the progression of the ego begins to be a “vision of terror” that thus gains purchase as “uncanny” (for example, being afraid for a second of your own unexpected reflection in a mirror). Doubling is similarly relevant in events perceived as “involuntary repetition” or fateful, inescapable, chance encounters or circumstances—events which, for a moment, harken back “to a time when the ego was not yet sharply differentiated from the external world and from other persons.”

Such doubling is fundamentally uncanny because it taps into this familiar-unfamiliar dialectic of repression, yes, but also to an infantile repetition-compulsion principle in our unconscious mind. We perceive as uncanny those things and circumstances that remind us of this inner principle. Both familiar and hidden, “this uncanny is in reality nothing new or foreign, but something familiar and old-established in the mind that has been estranged only by the process of repression,” now revived by some impression.

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126 Freud, “The ‘Uncanny,’” 129.
127 Freud, “The ‘Uncanny,’” 143.
Ricoeur himself connects this notion of the uncanny to the problem of history, exploring the thought of Pierre Nora, among others. Especially important to Nora’s project is les lieux de mémoire ("places of memory") which emerge amidst the rupture between memory and history and represent only “a memory in tatters” which resides there like a trace.\footnote{Ricoeur, Memory, History, Forgetting, 401. For general context as mentioned here, see 404-405.} It is such places that initially preserve something of memory, that which has a certain prominence over history in its connection to life and actuality but which can easily be lost. Womanist theologian and ethicist Emilie Townes draws on Nora to show how history is incomplete and only carried along and given life by living memory and living societies;\footnote{Townes, Womanist Ethics, 14. Townes takes note of Nora’s thought, how “historical continuity has been broken and it survives only in residues or in what he calls sites of memory” which replaces, in an artificial way, living memory "that was with us for ages but has now ceased to exist." 13.} and it is from here that Townes brings to the surface the notion of microhistories. In view of Nora, Townes argues that the story of a society’s dominant group can cover over other living memories.\footnote{Thus: “They are microhistories only because the larger society selects certain markers of the past and invests them with symbolic, political, and theological significance while ignoring others.” Townes, Womanist Ethics, 15.} Countermemory, drawing on Nora’s framework, is a “subversive place/space” opened up in the status quo as the fantastic, instead of being “ghettoiz[ed] … can retain its subversive qualities without capitulating to narrow categorization or classification designed to tame or make the fantastic sensible.”\footnote{Townes, Womanist Ethics, 22.} Thus countermemory looks to the past “for microhistories to force a reconsideration” of history.\footnote{Townes, Womanist Ethics, 22-23.} By recognizing microhistories—particularly for Townes those that pertain to Black lives marked by the stereotyping of Black femaleness—one can discover the cultural production of evil at play.\footnote{\textsuperscript{13}}
Townes brings to our attention a certain pathologized system of thought that affects the Black woman. “The fantastic hegemonic imagination,” Townes writes,

traffics in people’s lives that are caricatured or pillaged so that the imagination that creates the fantastic can control the world in its own image. … The fantastic hegemonic imagination uses a politicized sense of history and memory to create and shape its worldview. It sets in motion whirlwinds of images used in the cultural production of evil.\(^{135}\)

Townes’ effort is both to exegete this system of thought through examining the various images and myths it has produced and to highlight the power of countermemory in order to “resist measuring Black realities by the ideological stereotypes, the denigrating myths, of the fantastic hegemonic imagination.”\(^{136}\) For example, the image of the Mammy came to represent the idea of a slave, and eventually subservient Black woman, who did not want freedom but was happy to nurse the coming generations of White families even while she neglected her own children. This image, which Townes argues coincided with the rise of the Southern Belle, was constructed to provide “safety for an idealized patriarchal White family structure,” casting the female slave as desexualized, unattractive, fat and old in order to strengthen the white woman’s ideal and to obscure the ugly fact of the sexual exploitation of Black women by white men.\(^{137}\) Such an image, though questionable historically, functioned mythologically to serve “the needs of nostalgic White southerners seeking to make sense of and defend slavery and segregation.”\(^{138}\) Overall,

\(^{134}\) Townes, *Womanist Ethics*, 17. She writes: “to understand structural evil is to recognize, from the outset, that the story can be told in another way.” 16.

\(^{135}\) Townes, *Womanist Ethics*, 21. She draws on Gramsci’s work on hegemony and Foucault’s work on the “fantastic.”


\(^{137}\) Townes, *Womanist Ethics*, 31-32.

\(^{138}\) Townes, *Womanist Ethics*, 33.
images like the Mammy and other “images of Black womanhood serve as a reservoir for the fears of Western culture,” as Patricia Hill Collins writes.\(^{139}\) Or, perhaps, as “a dumping ground for those female functions a basically Puritan society could not confront,” as the Mammy was constructed as uncannily physical and funky, “the part of woman that white southern America was profoundly afraid of” and thus “is needed as an image, a surrogate to contain all those fears of the physical female.”\(^{140}\)

Regarding uncanny “places of memory,” Ricoeur notes that over time Nora would come to argue that these places have dissolved into a kind of commemoration-memory or patrimonialization, “its crystallization into the ‘historical monument’ with its spectacular topography and its archeological nostalgia” making a place out of the “symbolic instrument whose heuristic interest was to render ‘place’ immaterial.”\(^{141}\) In this solidification and appropriation, an uncanniness develops and then haunts, as in the end, notes Ricoeur, “the ‘uncanniness’ of history still prevails, even as it attempts to understand the reasons why it is contested by commemorative memory.”\(^{142}\) The challenge and possibility of testimony amidst the uncanny present of the historical past, is just what is at stake in Towne’s argument. The effort is to speak of those things which have been veiled in silence; and the way in which a conversation and a history have been built on the making-silent of those who do not have a voice in the historical record. Toni Morrison notes how, specifically in reference to American literature,


Africanism is so often “deployed as rawness and savagery [that] provided the staging ground and arena for the elaboration of the quintessential American identity.”  

In this way “the Africanist presence informs in compelling and inescapable ways the texture of American literature. It is a dark and abiding presence, there for the literary imagination as both a visible and an invisible mediating force.”  

With this reflection on the Mammy image and the fantastic hegemonic imagination, we are not only nearing the most interior matters of the symbolism of evil but we begin to make explicit how an inner psychic treatment of opacity gains purchase externally and economically, through its sexual and racial pathologization transforming the material world in real-worldly ways. With the uncanny, we make clear how the tension of given-hidden at stake in opacity is represented pathologically in the psyche, one’s inner spatiality as it is manifest in memory and history.

**Opacity and the Fetish**

Opacity as pathologized in the fetish allows me to explicitly come to coloniality and racialized moral geography. From the psychic anxiety over the self’s spatiotemporal unification in the uncanny we make the connection to the fetish, which brings to light the inherently racial dynamics of this malady of the “inner eyes” of whiteness as it pathologizes and solidifies opacity externally. In thinking the uncanny and fetishism together under the notion of opacity, we bring to the fore how the multi-dimensional pathology of the symbol lies in the harnessing and transmogrification of indeterminacy into a symbol of evil, which itself then builds tangible, economic worlds of domination and control over the sexual and racial unknown.

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As Portuguese merchants came to interact with the Sub-Saharan Western coast of Africa and encountered African approaches to matter, the modern “imagination of matter” began to emerge through fetishization. European merchants encountered Africans prizing certain objects and materials which seemed useless in their estimation but which the Africans were reluctant to trade: for these prized objects like skulls or animal bones was “demanded great quantities of the commodities brought by the merchants,” even though for the Europeans “these found objects or objects crudely made of base materials were assigned value far in excess of what any rational calculation of utility and exchange value would justify.”\(^\text{145}\) Moreover, European merchants were repulsed and dismissive in their stereotyping. Through the notion of the fetish, the Europeans distinguished and set apart their imagination of matter; so “the notion of fetish is less about producing an accurate description of the practices of the people that European merchants encountered and more about establishing the terms of a differential essence between peoples based on claims about approaches to material objects.”\(^\text{146}\)

In this way the fetish, as Long argues, was used “to describe an essential African difference” in terms of how Portuguese merchants perceived African exchange and trade in terms of “overvaluing [or overdetermining] matter by understanding matter and material objects as living substances that can be alive with other presences.” Connected, then, to the charge of animism, the specific claim “was that this was a nonrational approach to matter, manifest as bad religion, as African religion, as \textit{fetish religion}.”\(^\text{147}\) In this way, black flesh and its imagination of


\(^{146}\) Carter, “Anarchē,” 129.

\(^{147}\) Carter “Anarchē,” 128-129.
matter was understood according to an over-against-ness of the “universal man,” in the face of a sublimity or uncanniness that is then solidified in the fetish: “As mysterium tremendum et fascinosum, these cultures present an Otherness that is at once an immanent and transcendent mystery.” Specifically this “otherness” was the other of a “new mode of humanity” developed through modern perspective, as we have seen, one which is (as Carter writes) “figured as a self-possessed, sovereign ‘I’ whose self-ownership or whose having a grasp or grip on the self as a free agent without dependence on matter is conditioned by a disavowed (colonial and enslaving) grasping after ownership or the right to own things including the ground or the earth itself.”

Explaining the significance of the fetish, Long writes that the presence of Africans “was the occasion around which the problem of value in the New world revolved.” He notes that the “practices and ideologies of the Atlantic world” affected how human value and the value of human products was understood. Whereas previously “this issue was defined in religious terms that held together the religious and economic dimensions of human action,” these two dimensions were separated as both human value and the value of human products was reconfigured upon the body of the African. Long particularly draws on the thought of William Pietz from a series of articles on the fetish written from 1985 to 1988. Pietz had defined the fetish along a number of lines: as related to “the untranscended materiality of the fetish;” as highlighting “the radical historical[ity] of the fetish origin” (heterogeneous fixation instead of universal principles); as noting the “dependence of the fetish for its meaning and value on a

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149 Carter “Anarchē,” 128.

150 Long, Ellipsis, 282.
particular order of social relations;” lastly, Pietz wrote of “the active relation of the fetish object
to the living body of an individual.” Long summarizes the significance:

Pietz in a masterful way demonstrates how fetishism as a theory about the origin of
religion in Africa was in one movement applied to the enslaved Africans themselves as a
false religion and in another, transferred to the notion of matter and materiality, this time
to African bodies, which became a locus of matter in the form of chattel.151

Thus the fetish on the one hand represents the incapability of the modern period to show “how
materiality enters into epistemological constitution.”152 On the other hand, as materiality was
rejected on one plane of the (rational) epistemological project, it was upon the materiality of
blackened flesh that “all material forms of the world and one’s relationship to them could be
disenchanted into commodities.”153 In this way, black(ened) flesh and its imagination of matter
was manufactured as “a locus of a new modality of matter in the form of chattel, which is to say,
property.”154 At the same time that the colonial encounter marked African understandings of
matter and religion as fetishized, the Europeans themselves were crafting a new valuation of the
matter of black flesh, solidifying this object they feared (as holy, sublime, haunted, uncanny),
and over-determining it—just in that it, being human flesh, was determined economically.

This return to the “imagination of matter” in view of fetishization sharpens all the more
what is at stake for our study of white sight. Fetishization is directly a response to the enigmatic.
Indeed, “[f]etishism is a mental strategy or defense that enables a human being to transform
something or someone with its own enigmatic energy and immaterial essence into something or

151 See Long, Ellipsis, 283.
152 Long, Ellipsis, 290
153 Long, Ellipsis, 283.
someone that is material and tangibly real, a form of being that makes the something or someone controllable.”155 In this way, fetishism “transforms ambiguity and uncertainty into something knowable and certain”—an object or material that can then bring reassurance in the face of the danger of the uncontrollable, unknowable, and ambiguous energies or forces.156 Freud himself explicitly discusses the fetish (like the uncanny) in terms of the castration-complex, repression, and compulsion: an object is inexplicably excessively valued or prized, and one works to control movements or emotions through it. Often worn on the body, fetishes are felt “to control the body [as] substitutes for a missing body part. This missing body part is originally the phallus, seen lacking in the mother.” The fetish, then, for Freud “owe[s] all its power to the subject’s anxiety over something immaterial and invisible: the phallus projected into the maternal body.”157 In this way, the fetish represents a pathologized course of sexualizing and racializing the enigmatic, unknown, darkness of symbolic indeterminacy. Ultimately, the idea of the fetish was about a valuation of black flesh, the value of matter, and the nature of religious experience, all caught up in a symbolism of evil that shaped a moral geography (crucial as it was to crafting an entirely new economic order). What is at stake here is fundamentally the pathologization of symbolic “doubling:” the opaque unknown is “doubled,” so to speak, as it is substantiated into an object for the purpose of controlling the darkness or unknown one fears. In the end, whiteness is a way

155 Kaplan, Cultures of Fetishism, 5. While the things “that provoke us, seduce us, command our movements, deceive us, and jinx us come from other worlds” (Lingis, Body Transformations, 121), the fetish object, the shoe or whip, “is a tangible thing; something that can be seen and felt.” Kaplan, Cultures of Fetishism, 2. Moreover, “In contrast to the god or spirit who is ephemeral and intangible, the fetish exists within the realm of the real and actual world. A fetish can be held, seen, smelled, even heard if it is shaken, and most importantly it can be manipulated at the will of the fetishist.” Kaplan, Cultures of Fetishism, 5.

156 Kaplan, Cultures of Fetishism, 6.

157 Lingis, Body Transformations, 117. In other contexts besides Freud, there is an explicit connection between the fetish and the uncanny, for example in certain kinds of aesthetics or art. See Kaplan, Cultures of Fetishism, 13.
of being that responds on the deepest moral and emotional register to its inner excess or ambiguity that it cannot master, which it can never escape (in fact, from which it is continually *haunted*), though it continually tries to externalize it through tangible worlds of domination.

**The Moral Geography of Perspective and the Desiring Subject**

As I come to the end of this hermeneutical-historical detour on perspective and examination of white sight, I come to a psychoanalysis in light of the need to reckon with one’s pathology and seek reconciliation. Here psychoanalysis is a tool to re-trace and untie one’s pathology, a technique for a new creation of self through language. A Lacanian psychoanalysis, specifically, can engage us in how the production of space comes to be developed through a symbolic order that is crafted in response to the Other, and thus can expose the hidden “desiring subject” at the center of modern perspective and its rationality. With Lacan’s focus on the “mirror stage,” this is to return explicitly to the genealogy of subjectivity as crafted upon gazing into the *mirror* (of mystical darkness). But this also returns us to the monk and the Ethiopian demon (Chapter One). I explored there how the alterity of the black-skinned diabolical other “is a projection of the monk’s own erotic desire,” the black figure facilitating the ‘othering’ of a dimension of the self that the unformed monk must renounce.”¹⁵⁸ Kristeva writes of “the archaic, narcissistic self, not yet demarcated by the outside world” which “projects out of itself what it experiences as dangerous or unpleasant in itself, making of it an alien *double*, uncanny and demoniacal. In this instance the strange appears as a defense put up by a distraught self.”¹⁵⁹ At stake here is the hidden desiring subject and how it shapes a world through the symbol, how it

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shapes materiality through the imagination and the unconscious. The desire for the infinite that had driven the epiktastic journey for Nyssa and the expansion of the self’s transcendence for Cusa, now has something to do with a new imagination of matter, a making of a new infinite nexus between inner world and outer world.

Lacan, the Mirror, and the Desiring Subject

As I seek to bring to light this desiring subject, I want to highlight, in a final consideration, the importance of the mirror in the making of modern subjectivity. This is the final stage of opacification of perspective: the hiding of the “universal” see-er through the obfuscation of the particularity of sight; the labyrinthine way in which the desires and power of the modern self are made transparent and made to disappear; the way in which what is hidden most deeply is the commitment this universal surveillance has to the sexual/cultural desire concerned with proper generation and filiation. An inner vision, a world of desire, shapes a material world—but hides those connections and subterranean channels. Now a psychotherapy can show and re-align that desire; to enter this is to tap into that primordial, anterior mystical core hidden beneath and at the center of modern rationality, upon which perspective has sought to orient desire toward the “good” of a false synthesis. Psychoanalysis, like mysticism, is the rearranging of interior (and anterior) space. Indeed, here psychoanalysis is like the mystical journey inward that affects a relationship with the Other, going inward to go outward in transcendence; exploring inner world to understand true reality of our world.

Let me briefly situate a psychoanalysis within my overall argument. Amidst the dispossession and critique of the self, which was called for in view of the opacity of the self, a productive understanding can still be recovered from out of the same depths from which misunderstanding is forged. Ricoeur himself writes of the importance of psychoanalysis: “The
realism of the unconscious, the topographic and economic treatment of representations, fantasies, symptoms, and symbols, appears finally as the condition of a hermeneutics free from the prejudices of the ego.” This indicates the commitment of hermeneutics to life and the world instead of to the trap of language games; it indicates “a possible transcendence of reflection in the direction of existence.” And so the cogito appears not as self-pretentious but as already existing in being. As psychoanalysis leads to the matter of existence, it is always

in and through interpretation that this surpassing occurs: it is in deciphering the tricks of desire that the desire at the root of meaning and reflection is discovered. I cannot hypostasize this desire outside the process of interpretation; it always remains a being-interpreted. I have hints of it behind the enigmas of consciousness, but I cannot grasp it in itself without the danger of creating a mythology of instinctual forces …. It is behind itself that the cogito discovers, through the work of interpretation, something like an archaeology of the subject. Existence is glimpsed in this archaeology, but it remains entangled in the movement of deciphering to which it gives rise.

While in this way “the linguistic order [is drawn] back to the structure of experience,” perception and experience is still already interpretation. Thus, juxtaposed to this archeology of the subject is a philosophy of the spirit which looks in front of subject and draws it out of infancy towards its telos. Though I have focused in this work on the pathologization of opacity in white sight, there is a productive and teleological dimension to symbolic opacity.

Psychoanalytic therapy here is an effort, one could say, in critical counter-memory. I am reminded of Ricoeur’s thought on “the work of remembering against the compulsion to repeat” when discussing blocked memory at the pathological-therapeutic level as a type of abuse of

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161 Ricoeur, The Conflict of Interpretations, 21.
162 Ricoeur, From Text to Action, 42-43, 47.
163 Ricoeur, The Conflict of Interpretations, 21-22.
memory. Drawing on Freud’s essay “Remembering, Repeating, and Working-Through,” Ricoeur notes how resistances to memory are due to repression which is the “compulsion to repeat:” thus, acting out is substituted for memory as the patient, in the words of Freud, “reproduces it not as a memory but as an action; he repeats it, without, of course, knowing that he is repeating it.”

But therapy occasions a working-through that is a work of remembering:

> ceasing to lament or to hide his true state from himself, ‘[the patient] must find the courage to direct his attention to the phenomenon of his illness. His illness itself must no longer seem to him contemptible, but must become an enemy worthy of his mettle, a piece of his personality, which has solid ground for its existence and out of which things of value for his future life have to be derived’ …. Otherwise, there will be no ‘reconciliation’ (Versöhnung) of the patient with the repressed material.

Belonging to this work, argues Ricoeur, lies “the courage required on the part of the analysand to recognize himself as ill, in search of a truthful relation to his past.”

Lacan is a helpful interlocuter for the psychoanalysis I want to engage here. In the first place, with him we can reflect one more time on the problem of constructed subjectivity vis-à-vis the mirror. Lacan names the “mirror stage” how, at a very young age (as early as six months), the child recognizes their reflection image in a mirror and begins to notice, through this reflection, the way in which they relate through their body to the world around them. Even before being able to walk, the child can be captivated by their own gaze in the mirror. Lacan writes of the significance:

> This jubilant assumption of his specular image by the child at the infans stage, still sunk in his motor incapacity and nursling dependence, would seem to exhibit in an exemplary situation the symbolic matrix in which the I is precipitated in a primordial form, before it

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164 Ricoeur, Memory, History, Forgetting, 70.
165 Ricoeur, Memory, History, Forgetting, 70.
166 Ricoeur, Memory, History, Forgetting, 71.
is objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other, and before language restores to it, in the universal, its function as subject.168 This “Ideal-I,” Lacan argues, “situates the agency of the ego, before its social determination, in a fictional direction, which will … only rejoin the coming-into-being of the subject asymptotically.” Thus, the mirror stage presents an apparatus or process that forms the self in a tension with oneself-as-image, recessed in the unreachable past of the self—as imago and mirage, more akin to how we see ourselves in dreams or in the uncanny of the double.169 Through defining and delineating the very fragmentation of the body in this way, the mirror stage is decisive to the making of the subject. And it is decisive to shaping the self as a desiring self. As one forms one’s I in the mirror of one’s own image, one not only comes to the world through (what Lacan refers to technically as) the Symbolic realm, but the coming to selfhood in the transition from the “specular I” to the “social I” is normed by what one experiences in the mirror: “the desire of the other” as an outgrowth of one’s “primordial jealousy.”170 That the self is fundamentally constituted through gazing at oneself in the mirror as one constructs oneself and the world—which we have seen to be the case with modern perspective—means the self is constituted in desire for the other, an Other that one can never reach: failed desire.

A second point. At the center of Lacan’s project is the notion not of knowledge but of this desire, that is enjoying, and the way in which our enjoyment or jouissance is related to lack, or our inability to fully reach the true thing we seek to enjoy (we always miss it by aiming at


something other than what we seek). Thus with Lacan we can foreground “the centrality of fantasy and enjoyment to racism.” What I want to specifically examine here is how race is problematically connected to desire in this regard, especially concerning the issue of filiation. Part of the construction of the ego amidst the symbolic order, for Lacan, is how the moral law situates the subject socially through the prohibition of jouissance, first regarding one’s mother but then more broadly in the incest taboo—a prohibition that protects and perpetuates sociality and kinship. Seshadri-Crooks, however, critiques this in view of the historical taboo against miscegenation (interracial marriage). Although it would seem at first that both these taboos are similar, Seshadri-Crooks argues that prohibition of miscegenation threatens and undoes the moral law at stake in the incest taboo: by refusing to admit those racially-other into the family, historically the white slave master relied on the voiding of the incest taboo to widely cohabitate with slaves though they were (legally) in the same kinship circle. Thus, the miscegenation taboo both makes incest possible and also threatens the incest taboo at a deeper level, since it suspends the moral law. In this way: “The prohibition of miscegenation should above all be understood as the tenacious refusal to grant legitimacy in order to preserve the possibility of incest.” In this way, she argues, whiteness seeks to escape the moral law “even as it upholds it ferociously at the level of the racial family.” This analysis in a Lacanian framework regarding the complication

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172 George and Hook, 6.


174 Seshadri-Crooks, *Desiring Whiteness*, 42.

175 Seshadri-Crooks, *Desiring Whiteness*, 43.
of desire and the problem of illicit enjoyment finally sets the problem of filiation in its truest light: as a fundamental force for racialization in the modern world.

**Modernity’s Moral Geography**

This final horizon of how the enigmatic, symbolic mirror affects subjectivity is crucial to bringing us to the hidden desiring subject at the heart of modernity’s moral geography. The question of mystical darkness and perspective has always been a question about the nature of space and positionality, and all the more so as it is paired with the “color space” of modernity. This mystical center does not merely shape *interior* spiritual or intellectual space but also *external material* space (as we have seen)—issues of external geography and cartography. My point about the “coloniality of power” and historical connections between geography, geometry, and racialization means white sight is a matter of the process of constructing material spaces from out of ontological, symbolic, and epistemological commitments—that is, the “points” and the lines drawn out from the center to craft a world in the gaze of modern vision.

The idea of thirdspatiality is helpful here to understand how a space can be enmeshed in a symbolism, can be created out of the “imagination of matter.” As I mentioned in my introduction, Ed Soja insists that all social and historical processes are also spatial processes and that different types of spatiality must be accounted for. Again, Soja distinguishes three spaces: 1) perceived space or spatial practice (*Firstspace*); 2) conceived space or representations of space (*Secondspace*); and 3) spaces of representation (*Thirdspace*).\(^\text{176}\) Consider an illustration, a city bus. In *Firstspace*, we consider that this space is such and such dimensions and located at such and such a position in the road of a city. In *Secondspace*, this measured entity is now conceived

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as a bus, and as such, something that one can sit in to move from this point to that point of the city, a space that can get us somewhere we want to be—perhaps even a particular bus, like Rosa Park’s bus. In thirdspace, this bus is more precisely a segregated, social space—space represented according to a symbolics of evil—that locates bodies differently according to skin color (whites seated in front, black people in the back); it is lived space, a bus in Alabama in the 1950s from which a political stand will be made. Parks’ movement from the back of the bus to the front of the bus will literally change the social production of space across the United States. That bus becomes an icon instead of a piece of transportation. A whole phenomenology of spatiality comes through. Each space has its own epistemology and intentionality; each produces a different kind of intended space. The key is not getting locked into one kind of space, but to be able to navigate through and perceive the manifold spatiality. Thirdspace is a place of political struggle, of peril and problem, of creativity, of resistance; it is ambiguous, as both dominated space but potentially counterspace. Thirdspatiality is a way to theorize the kind of space at stake in what the icon (and mystical darkness) gives. The point I want to make regarding the modern thirdspatiality or moral geography is that bodies and finitude are lost in modernity, bracketed or excluded by the point of the perspective apparatus. This is not only the case in thirdspatiality. Reflecting on Rosa Parks bus, we realize that first- and second-spatiality were configured too narrowly, already compromised by a symbolism of evil that attempted to negate and physically erase space for certain bodies.

What is at stake here is how the perspective apparatus organizes the gaze according to a “geometric dimension” which shows “how the subject is caught, maneuvered, captured inside the

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177 Soja, *Thirdspace*, 67-68.
field of vision.” The development of the perspective painting and its promise to give the subject a God’s-eye view only exploited and reinforced what was already constitutional to a new humanity and a new world: the “captivat[ion] [of] the ‘subject’ in a [geometric] relation of desire, but one that remains enigmatic.”

This finally focuses us again, in a sharper manner, on what modern perspective has to do with geometry, that is, “measuring” the earth. A certain obsession is involved in Alberti’s and Filarete’s quest to find the definite origin and beginning to painter’s perspective in Florence and to Brunelleschi, an obsession which relates, ultimately, to the question of finding a definite and universal origin point for geometry, in order to craft an objective world that is available to master.

Geometry and measuring the world emerges from out of the perspectivists. The question of and obsession with the origin of perspective always had to do with the nature of the “point” of linear perspective, out of which the subject unfolds the world. The point that engenders the fundamental cleavages of the modern subject: firstly, the point of view that somehow also encapsulates the total viewpoint; secondly, the point between the historical, incarnate subject and the historicizing, intellectual subject.

The “mad” point that (in the thought of Freud) is connected to the “madness that comes from God” reflected in the “primal scene” of patricide—a point reason must turn away from but upon which it builds itself, thus a point out of which it fetishizes that which escapes reason. The point that, as Atlantic,

178 Damisch, The Origin of Perspective, 46.
179 See Damisch, The Origin of Perspective, 77: “In the eyes of tradition the question of the origin of perspective resembles that of the origin of geometry.”
180 Damisch, The Origin of Perspective, 83.
181 Damisch, The Origin of Perspective, 54-55.
182 Damisch, The Origin of Perspective, 54.
originates a new humanity, fashioning upon the mirror / water / black flesh an edifice—or abyss—of a “free” and “rational” society.

Even when, as I have already mentioned from Panofsky’s analysis, this point-of-view-as-point-of-infinity comes together in Lorenzetti’s Annunciation, the point, argues Damisch, “doesn’t appear as such; it is dissimulated, or, to be more precise, obliterated, obstructed by a column in low relief.” Damisch writes, in fact:

Numerous other examples of such contradiction could be cited; it is almost as though the point designated by the construction was somehow so powerful, yet so suspect, that it cannot be openly acknowledged, that it had to be dissimulated behind a mask or veil. This point is the center of mystical darkness, hidden but still operating in its potency—for good or for evil—and a whole world is measured out of it. Wrestling with this question of the relation between perspective and the desiring subject is to wrestle with the question of the origin of modern perspective—this, after all, for me has to do with the construction or development of whiteness. As I have already shown, within the perspective apparatus, the seer is a “voyeur” reducing to an eye, shed of their body. The modern scientific mindset and the modern world it has engendered does not leave behind this obsession with the geo-graphical/metrical point of origin, the point from which and symbolic system from within which seeing and being is engendered. Indeed, linear perspective opened the way “to the most rigorous developments of descriptive and projective geometry, perhaps even anticipating them, while it furnished the ideology … of the apparatus that seemed most suitable for its operation.”

183 Damisch, The Origin of Perspective, 81.
184 Damisch, The Origin of Perspective, 81.
185 Damisch, The Origin of Perspective, 128-129.
186 Damisch, The Origin of Perspective, 159.
The contribution I have made here is that this spatiality that emerges from out of modern perspective is rooted in a deeper symbolism of evil in which the doctrine of mystical darkness is enmeshed. Concrete space is engendered through transcendental ideation especially as it is normed by notions of sacred and profane, pure and impure, genuine and adulterated. Racialized space, the essence of modern space, is developed out of these logics and the need to create real-worldly boundaries to avoid transgressions and contamination.

In the end, a psychoanalytic therapeutic for white sight is not a recovery of premodernity so much as a different way of treating opacity in light of what has been done in the (ab)use of opacity. One cannot simply “go back.” As Dupré writes: “Not merely our thinking about the real changes: reality itself changes as we think about it differently. History carries an ontic significance that excludes any reversal of the present.”187 He continues: “A genuinely new synthesis, if ever to come, will have to rest on newly established principles. … Our present task may well be the humble one of exploring how the fragments we are left with may serve as building blocks for a future synthesis.”188 Because of this treatment of opacity, postmodernism (our present condition) “is a phenomenon of modernity’s bad conscience; it betrays suspicion that modernity lacks legitimacy, suspicion that has shadowed the modern world from the very beginning.”189 The freedom granted to the modern subject in the infinite expansion of ideational and lived space would eventually bequeath to us in our time (for those who inhabit whiteness) “a

187 Dupré, Passage to Modernity, 6.
188 Dupré, Passage to Modernity, 7.
189 Harries, Infinity and Perspective, 4
new sense of homelessness” and thus of “nihilism and self-loathing.” This is because, as I have shown, the very concept of modern freedom was an empty promise in that its engine to release us into the skies and release us from the bonds of our present evil was itself grounded in a symbolism of evil. Nietzsche, and others, then, are our true prophets who reveal the nihilistic foundations of the modern age. “Freedom thus appears,” writes Harries, “as both the ground that supports the modern world and as the abyss that threatens its destruction.”

So a new foundation must be built, a new freedom envisioned. But not a freedom crafted out of a single powerful viewpoint that seeks universal dominion. Getting free, however, of white sight is a challenge for white people. As I have shown, it frames even what seems like naked perception. Still, those who are white in this postmodern world must seek to re-found their perception in a kind of “starting over” through a radical critique as we have done here. I will argue in my conclusion that this best happens through a “jolting” or “amazement” through the genuine recognition of another’s perspective. I am reminded, as Damisch argues about clouds in Renaissance painting, that “wispy phenomena nevertheless find their way into painting despite being marginalized by perspective’s ‘structure of exclusions.’” The mystical center has all along empowered other ways of being that have survived and at times flourished alongside modern subjectivity, even if there has been a constitutional effort to banish, hide, marginalize,

190 Harries, Infinity and Perspective, 8-9.
191 Harries, Infinity and Perspective, 12.
193 See Damisch, The Origin of Perspective, 32-33.
194 Damisch, A Theory of Cloud.
make inoperative, and in every way attempt to exclude that potent center. As Long argues, the opaque ones of the modern world have thrived and existed.

To untangle, then, the pathology over opacity and recover perspective “from the technological oblivion into which it has been plunged by ideology” will certainly be, as Damisch has argued, an “anamnestic project.” It will also be, as I have shown here, a psychoanalytic project. But more than that, this critical way forward is less about a turn inward and more about a hermeneutical turn outward toward the neighbor who already lives in, speaks out of, and calls us into an alternative geography—a thirdspatiality of the icon released from its fetishization of radical alterity.

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195 Damisch, The Origin of Perspective, 52.
CONCLUSION

Trying to get at the phenomenon of white sight has engaged us in a mostly deconstructive path. To come to see that framework in whiteness that makes sight and perception possible in the first place—which also happens to operate, like a cataract, by screening-out or obstructing vision—we had to take a certain hermeneutical-historical detour around the immediacy of sight to unearth the experience that enlivens the phenomenon. This focus on white sight is central to the overall formation of white subjectivity because it gets to the heart of the symbolic process of constructing the world which has engendered the white way of being. Our exploration has also traced a complicated theological puzzle because white sight fetishizes black flesh as it symbolizes it as evil in response to anxiety over the hidden and repressed mystical darkness at the center of modern thought. This mystical darkness represents the potency of the possibility of self-formation in the face of transcendent otherness. Thus, on the very place of the freedom of the self, the evil of the self erects itself under a cloak of transparency and invisibility.

Through my project, I have tried to engage George Yancy’s call to turn the gaze back on the (purportedly) universal gaze of whiteness, through a counter-gaze marking the white gaze as particular and historical. Coming to a close, I want to sketch a path forward to the possibility of an ethics. Now the key ethical question can be asked: whether this claim of iconic sight as a “seeing being seen,” this mutual recognition, really gives an opportunity to properly see the other and be seen by the other—whether this is possible in light of the project having gone so wrong historically. Is it possible to recover, out from the fetishization of theological vision, the mystical
imperative and possibility of “together seeing ourselves as seeing and being seen”? Even if such a recovery is possible, how do we engage an ethics if we are to take seriously the opacity of the self spoken of in mysticism? That is to say, how do we think about the question of agency and accountability if the self is not only fundamentally opaque to itself, but if it is opaque to itself precisely because it is rooted in a primordial dependency and interrelation? What follows is only a sketch of the way forward, not only because such a project would be, in a sense, the beginning of a new task, but because I am wary of the kind of false synthesizing that has been at the very root of the problem of white sight. Despite such a caution, we may very well be in need of some kind of universality to ethics—although, one that comes from the radicality of the gift.

The work I have done in this project clears the ground and opens the way for more properly ethical considerations concerning white sight and whiteness as a whole, considerations such as the notions of guilt, sin, and responsibility. I am reminded (considering our constant theme of the mirror) what James Baldwin writes about the color of his skin operating for white people “as a most disagreeable mirror” that, despite white people not wanting to look at, shows “an appallingly oppressive and bloody history, known all over the world … [and] a disastrous, continuing, present condition which menaces them, and for which they bear an inescapable responsibility.” Despite efforts to free themselves from guilt, for white people the “guilt remains, more deeply rooted, more securely lodged, than the oldest of old trees.” My study has sought,

1 Falque, “The All-Seeing,” 785.


3 On this point, see Wall, “The Economy of the Gift,” 253. If I have been somewhat closely following Ricoeur throughout, Wall is instructive here: “Human finitude, for Ricoeur, does not suggest only our situatedness within particular historical communities, but also, and more radically, our obligation to be open to genuine otherness.”

on a pre-ethical, pre-rational, symbolic level, to orientate us for building towards more rational constructions related to the question of whiteness and evil. In view of where our hermeneutical-historical detour has brought us—how white sight engages in an “imagination of matter” through the fetishization of black flesh, thereby building a new world through a moral geography—the way forward is to sketch a new vision-cum-spatiality for white people. I must match in a therapeutic teleology the depths of pathology revealed in our psychoanalytic archeology. The key will be, through a new mysticism, to engage in the promise and potency of thirdspatiality. To get here, I will review the tension between the modern and mystical self, working my way toward recovering the mystical core through inhabiting a thirdspatiality of zones of opacity. I offer that white people can enter such a spatiality through a theological reading of scripture. In the end, though, two aspects are part of the new mystical posture which prevent false synthesizing of finitude and infinitude in theological vision: that of tragedy and that of the gift.

Recovering the Mystical amidst Modern Perspective

Let me summarize the claim I have made regarding how white sight is crafted through modern perspective. This summary is not meant to obscure the specific details we have traced, but to bring into focus the contrast between the modern self with its white sight and the possibility of retrieving a mystical core still. I will then draw out the key implications of the mystical core we must recover.

The Modern Self and the Pathologization of Opacity

More than a mere subjective aspect of habit, whiteness through white sight comes to act as a material reality and ontological force that engenders a new concrete world. From the particular point-of-view that claims universal, infinite vision, white sight interprets black skin through a symbolism of evil by attaching to the material fact and first intentionality of black skin
a second intentionality moored in a symbolism of color: blackness is obscurity, deviation and materiality, sin and impurity, evil. In the shaping of the colonial world, blackness comes to be associated first as obscurity against the transparency of modern vision, then as impurity and defilement—a wholly otherness represented in dark bodies in opposition against which meaning is made by the whiteness that encounters it. The symbolization of black flesh as evil through fetishization comes to shape the materiality and finitude of the world. The symbol of perspective fundamentally forms a material space back from out of an immaterial ideal of the mental space.

The colonial or modern self, having dislodged the opaque relation between the finite and infinite held in tension by the mystic self, objectified opacity itself as the nothingness of the unknown and then set opacity-as-objectified over against the self’s finite perspective. The modern self was ontologically magnified so as to inhabit a totality and universal vision, even in its particularity (a particularity now obscured). This new self appropriated the unknown or darkness of infinity as a drive within one’s subjectivity, because the over-determining nature of enigmatic opacity can never itself be eliminated but must be used in some way in the making of the self. This subjective drive is now infinitely moved by the lack of the fullness of one’s finitude and limits, which the opaque unknown marks by a first-order negation. As Achille Mbembe writes, blackness and race “have constituted the (unacknowledged and often denied) foundation, that we might call the nuclear power plant, from which the modern project of knowledge—and of governance—has been deployed. Blackness and race, the one and the other, represent twin figures of the delirium produced by modernity.” The “Black Man” emerges from the nothingness of sight—“when one sees nothing, when one understands nothing, and, above all, when one wishes to understand nothing.” And as such, blackness encountered “unleashes impassioned dynamics and provokes an irrational exuberance that always tests the limits of the very system of
reason. Whiteness is a way of being that responds on the deepest moral and emotional register to its anxiety in the face of “excess” and “ambiguity” that it cannot master and from which it can never escape and from which it is haunted.

Opacity is now ignored as a potent catalyst for self-formation in the face of otherness and stands as an obstacle for the certainty of self-saturation and self-limitlessness that a powerful particularity needs to maintain its purity. The modern self holds within itself the potency of the symbol’s opacity but must hide it. So the very source of freedom of the modern self—its limitless reaching-out as it shapes a material world through expanding its intellectual domain—becomes the source of the evil of the modern self. And as the modern self attempts all the more to cleanse from within itself the banned and inoperative enigma of mystical opacity, it pushes this opacity deeper into its unconscious foundation through a radical, technical externalization into the “other” of the dark body. The modern self as a total saturation of finitude cannot tolerate the other. At this point, opacity was fully objectified as unknown or unseen otherness that needed to be conquered and made transparent; opacity was placed upon dark bodies whereupon would play out the brutal aesthetics of white empire. The dark body then begins to bear the weight of all the hidden desire and dissimulated meaning, the enigma, lack, and confusion that self-saturation continually tries to cleanse from its own making. Depth here has finally been defaced—even defiled—and deflected into a new hierarchy (that is, holy order or arrangement and structure of world) which emerges on the wings of clear-eyed white sight. Now, goodness and evil take on new dimensions and valences of meaning as a new external economy of salvation is constructed

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upon this existential color symbolism, all while hiding the ethically problematic deployment of logics of transparency rooted in violence.

**Recovering the Mystical Core**

In the wake of this legacy, the *visio Dei* potentially stands as a rebuke to the infinite reach of human vision; with its opacity (to human vision), it calls forth an absoluteness and anteriority that resists any *particular* contraction and capture—that is the key to the survival, potency, and subversive quality of the mystical core. But the key is, for my interest: *that this absoluteness and anteriority then does not work to engage human vision in an absolute vantage point itself,* but that it makes possible the integrity and inner possibility of each particular and finite vantage point to be in network with the infinite. Let me work in the opposite direction from the hermeneutical detour I have engaged in the preceding chapters. I start with Cusa because we inherit from him perspective as an entirely new way of seeing and thinking, one which is now ours. Once we recover perspective from white sight, we can reengage the delicate *coincidentia oppositorum* of finite/infinite that mystical sight offers to us. Perspective that develops out of this mystical core puts us in touch with the *genuinely* universal because it frees us to our finitude.

At its theological core, mystical subjectivity can give a perspective which provides an access point to infinity and the absolute, but not such an access point that is necessarily particular in this certain way or that; in fact, it calls for a necessary *plurality* of viewpoints. Falque argues that herein Cusan perspective is different from Husserlian perspective in that by understanding absolute vision as that which “hold[s] all the modalities of seeing in one same act,” Cusa proposes a model of “synthesis” over a Husserlian model of “bracketing,” reflecting on the experience of vision in its unfolding and multiplicity instead of its simplicity. Falque explains the significance: “the ‘absolute gaze’ of God contains at once and in unified fashion the totality of
profiles on the world (*Abschattungen*) at the same time as it bursts the apperceptive transfer of the other by persisting and adopting the ‘here’ (*hic*) where I am, without leaving the ‘there’ (*illic*) where I no longer am.” The varying of legitimate perspectives authorized here “pushes us to accept the diversity of our points of view” and brings amazement that arises from the “plurality of modalities of our lived experiences” that is shared together from neighbor to neighbor in the sharing of God’s vision.⁶ A genuine alterity and infinity allows for the truthfulness of my vision as *particular*—and also (amazingly, according to Cusa) the truthfulness of the other’s viewpoint, as both obtain within the absolute vision of God in which they share. We remember how Cusa describes the *visio Dei* as giving intense identity and a nascent subjectivity to the Tegernsee monks, but only as they hear the testimony of their neighbor. Remember, too, how Cusa ends his reflection on perspective in *De visione Dei*: Cusa writes that “each intellectual spirit sees in you, my God, something which must be revealed to the others if they would attain to you, their God, in the best possible way,” as each “reveal[s] their secrets to one another” (*DVD* 25 §117, p. 288).

I am reminded of Patricia Hill Collins here, when she writes: “Each group speaks from its own standpoint and shares its own partial, situated knowledge.”⁷ Cusa develops perspective in order to build a communal space *found only through the multiplicity of perspectives*.

What we need to particularly hold onto in Cusa is the intersection in perspective of interpretation and perception, hermeneutics and phenomenology, self and other. As Harries explains, Cusa radicalizes the notion that perception “already imposes a human measure on whatever presents itself to our senses.”⁸ Because of Cusa’s radical perspectivism, what appears

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⁶ Falque, “The All-Seeing,” 775.


to us has already been subjected to our human measure. In this de-centering and re-centering of the subject in Cusan perspective, numbers and mathematics (as we have seen, with figures like the infinite circle or triangle), help us “to redescribe nature in a way that makes it more commensurable with our mind’s mode of operation.” This “mathematization of the science of nature,” Harries argues, marks “a shift from the heterogeneity of the immediately experienced world to the homogeneity of a world subjected to the measure of number.” In this “we do not construct the world we experience” but, as we have seen with the Cusan experiment, we construct “a similitude, an enigma, an image, or a picture” which gives some distance between our experience and our understanding. This re-presentation of reality through a “mathematical” and intellectual theology is possible through the unfolding of God’s intellect in nature. Through the exercise of one’s own mind as an image of the divine mind, the nascent modern subject creates an abstract or virtual “second world” which “provides the linguistic or logical space in which what we perceive has to take its place if it is to be understood at all.” What I seek to emphasize is that though Cusan perspective does lay open in advance the apparatus that the modern transcendental subject seizes upon, Cusa himself—insisting on the coincidence of opposites that grounds his docta ignorantia—sought to chasten the knower’s reach into the infinite absolute even as the infinite was opened up in a new way through the particularization and historization of the project of human knowing.

This is why Cusa is such a crucial figure for us in asking the question about the value of finitude, even if in Cusa this moment of self-discovery all too quickly seems to close up—and

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indeed does so in modern perspective as a whole. Speaking toward this point, Gadamer highlights the “real importance” of Cusa is in his showing how the meeting of Christian and Aristotelian thought in Scholasticism newly turned “the distinction between the divine and the human mind into something positive.” Especialy with Cusa’s notions of unfolding and enfolding, “discursive multiplicity” or the variety of human thinking and language, is accepted as the unfolding of divine truth. Still in Cusa there was a connection between this variety of language and thought, and the unity of absolute truth. With this unitive focus, Gadamer notes that Cusa is still a long way off from the notion of different languages yielding different worldviews; still for Cusa, there is a “real affinity” or “concordance” of word and concept. Peter Casarella draws out from Gadamer here how “Cusanus did not merely mediate a solution to the attack on universals posed by the nominalists. Cusanus’s position differs from those of his contemporaries because he forged a wholly new basis for addressing the problem.” Casarella himself highlights the theological, indeed christological, nature of Cusa’s unique thought. Thus he pushes back against the notion that Cusa separates linguistics (word, figure, particularity) from metaphysics (a point that I myself have tried to stress in pointing out Cusa as a threshold figure who is trying to hold together a tension theologically). Casarella writes: “Rather than de-linguistifying metaphysics, Cusanus redivinizes language in an abstract, intellectual, and Christocentric

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vestment.\footnote{Casarella, \textit{Word as Bread}, 46-47.} In the end, Cusa attempts in the sharpest way possible to mutually magnify particularity and universality—a project which brings human subjectivity to a new plane.

But in view of the dangerous way in which such a project was taken through the course of modern thought, and as a way to retrieve the promise of Cusan perspective from its seizure in the modern age, I find Gregory of Nyssa especially helpful for retrieving the mystical potency and promise at stake in the doctrine of the darkness of God. In fact, by retrieving Nyssa only after Cusa, I am equipped to be sensitive to the racial symbolism in Nyssa’s own project. Gregory gives a coherent and influential framework for perpetually keeping in tension the transcendence of God and transcendence of our imagination and reason as we progress in the human project.\footnote{For an in-depth discussion of the relation between the thought of Cusa and Nyssa, see Donald F. Duclow, \textit{Masters of Learned Ignorance: Eriugena, Eckhart, Cusanus} (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006), 275-281.} His notion of \textit{epektasis} represents a way of thinking that insists that our bodies are inextricably bound up in any transformation toward the infinite—and hold within their nature radical possibilities for transformation toward the good. Such a notion helps us to restore the theological insistence on the simultaneity and integrity of universality and contextuality, and of the material (body) and the immaterial (spirit) in symbolic transformation.

With Nyssa we can consider how the rigor of finitude and creatureliness (I resist saying the rigor of reason), is a rigor fundamentally opened toward infinite distance by being a rigor focused on ethical transformation \textit{toward virtue}. Our virtue in our embodiment is what opens us out toward the unlimited, but keeps us back from going beyond it since we are created beings. In this way, the mystical darkness of infinity is embraced as one accepts their creatureliness (thus particularity) and yearns after continual transformation as one is stretched out upon the face of
the deep. This juxtaposition is made possible because our bodies are inherently malleable (as a positive quality), allowing us to stabilize only as we asymptotically transcend toward the infinite (never letting go of our body). In Nyssa’s epektasis, opacity is relation-as-possibility, that is, relation of materiality to possibility—to its ownmost possibilities manifoldly transplaced upon the unlimited. In the fleshiness of our finitude we participate in the infinite God.

With Nyssa’s insistence on the experience of the infinite only as and always as one is a creature, we can engage the possibility of a different kind of perspective, which I have described throughout as reverse perspective. In this, we fundamentally accept with Nyssa the importance of bodies, words, and materiality as the only entry-point into the infinite. Such an “anagogical” intentionality traverses all at once the depths and surfaces of life only through formation in virtue and love of neighbor. If we were to reengage perspective (and the icon) in this light, we begin to shift the framework from an ontological to an ethical one. We move away from quasi-ontological considerations of the icon that are bound up in thinking too closely the icon and the mirror within a light-dark aesthetics; we move toward the notion of relation and an ethics of use. In such a framework, as bodies or words meet one to another in their particularity, a genuinely new intentionality is opened up, not otherwise possible in the individuality of each entity itself (as seen in metaphorization on the linguistic plane).¹⁸ Finitude is released to the vastness of its own inmost possibility by radical alterity. Possibility here is not about the surpassing of or catching up into the “spiritual” through ontological differentiation, but about explosion toward agency, freedom, and transcendence (in the sense of always traversing new horizons, experiencing more plenitude and fullness of finitude released to itself and its potential).

¹⁸ I make this point about metaphorization in light of Ricoeur’s interpretation of the Song of Solomon, which I will soon explore here.
Nyssa’s notion of *epektasis* and its transposition to an iconic or anagogical aesthetics provides the kind of aporia of rigor and open-endedness that is necessary to bolstering an ethical aesthetics that can receive well opacity in its manifold variety. It presents an opportunity to move theological thinking on the icon away from a mere eidetics to hermeneutical consideration of the icon-made-flesh in the world. *Epektasis* engenders an aesthetics of opacity as one’s spiritual formation is tied to the reception and embrace of productive darkness. Overall, this presents an opportunity to move away from dependency on the eyes, and opens a theological and phenomenological route through other senses—especially of hearing the witness of the neighbor.

**Thirdspatiality and Zones of Opacity**

Despite the challenges of white sight for white people, I argue for the possibility of a recovery of mystical subjectivity. I begin to unfold here a new mysticism for a racialized age that can embrace radical otherness. A key to unfolding this mysticism is to make clear the alternative thirdspatiality that must be inhabited from which a new world can be (or is already) engendered with its different kind of material spatiality.

**Thirdspace and the Icon**

We can imagine a thirdspatiality of the icon released from its fetishization by returning to the radical alterity at stake in the project of mystical darkness. Thirdspace is key to moving space beyond a mere dialectics and to the third of othering—responding to the fact that, in the words of Henri Lefebvre, *il y a toujours l’Autre*—there is always the other. Thirdspace is Soja’s unique conception which tries to speak of that space which is both dominated space but potentially

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19 Soja, *Thirdspace*, 30-32. Soja writes: “Whenever faced with such binarized categories …, Lefebvre persistently sought to crack them open by introduction an-Other term, a third possibility or ‘moment’ that partakes of the original pairing but is not just a simple combination or an ‘in between’ position along some all-inclusive continuum. This critical thirding-as-Othering is the first and most important step in transforming the categorical and closed logic of either/or to the dialectically open logic of both/and.” 60.
counterspace, a space of political direction, of creativity, of definition and struggle; a space of “radical openness and teeming imagery,” of “subliminal mystery and limited knowability.”

Soja defines thirdspace more fully in this way:

> a knowable and unknowable, real and imagined lifeworld of experiences, emotions, events, and political choices that is existentially shaped by the generative and problematic interplay between centers and peripheries, the abstract and concrete, the impassioned spaces of the conceptual and the lived, marked out materially and metaphorically in *spatial praxis*, the transformation of (spatial) knowledge into (spatial) action in a field of unevenly developed (spatial) power.

Thirdspace is fundamentally “a space of radical openness, a vast territory of infinite possibilities and perils” that is “intentionally incomplete, endlessly explorable, resistant to closure or easy categorical definition.” Thirdspace seems to break apart firstspace (measured space) and secondspace (conceived space) as, for example, what once was a tool or a jersey or (to revisit the example I shared in the last chapter) Rosa Parks’ bus becomes an icon or artifact in a museum.

Here we can recall Cusa’s perspectivism and the spatiality the perspective experiment entailed, where around the center of mystical darkness a multiplicity of perspectives was engendered. This compares directly to Soja’s discussion of “the Aleph” as he elaborates on the nature of thirdspace. Reflecting on the Aleph, Soja writes of it that it is “the space where all places are, capable of being seen from every angle, each standing clear; but also a secret and conjectured object, filled with illusions and allusions, a space that is common to all of us yet never able to be completely seen and understood, an ‘unimaginable universe.’”

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23 Soja, *Thirdspace*, 56.
“envisions a complex totality of potential knowledges but rejects any totalization that finitely encloses knowledge production in ‘permanent structures’ or specialized compartments/disciplines.”

As such, thridspace properly opens up a space of freedom and political emancipation, because it moves against the “illusion of transparency” of the kind of ideational space engendered as the mystical center is hidden and rendered inoperative in modern perspective. Following this notion of thridspace, we begin to understand how the theological aspect of perspective and sight can be retrieved from modern rationality despite its racialization of this very darkness. In this recovery of thridspatiality as genuinely iconic (that is, not as fetishizing), white sight can be transformed. If whiteness is fundamentally about an identity that sees and constructs space in a particular way, undoing white sight will be about re-organizing space, untying it from its commitments to form and a color code that creates a racialized world. In thridspatiality, through showing “the existence of multiple forms of the gaze in various cultural productions and … the challenge of contradictory perceptions,” not only can white sight be seen for what it is, but it can possibly be disengaged.

**Zones of Opacity**

Considering the argument I have made, the overall challenge before us lies in realizing and responding to how in any particular *arche* the “inner structure of matter … [is] the basis for cosmic order.” And, moreover, reengaging “the possibility for the rediscovery of the life of matter as a religious phenomenon—an equal and sometimes alternative structure in the face of

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24 Soja, *Thirdspace*, 57.

25 Soja, *Thirdspace*, 64, 70.

the dehumanizing and terroristic meaning of history.”  

This is potential of thirdspatiality, specifically as such spatiality manifests on the ground as “zones of opacity”—that is, alternative political-public (universal) spaces for the emergence and flourishing of “dark bodies” that is not a withdrawal from the mess of finitude but an entering-differently into the folds of the world. In this case, “[r]esistance is about the cultivation of invisibility, opacity, anonymity, and resonance.”  

Such zones of opacity necessarily resist the “zoning” of the Western arche and biopolitical arrangement, which are catalyzed by obfuscation through the pathologization of opacity. As Mbembe puts it: “This ‘imperialism of disorganization,’ which feeds on anarchy, leverages practices of zoning to manufacture disasters and multiply states of exception nearly everywhere.”  

Working against such zoning of white sight, zones of opacity are already thriving and being inhabited in spite of modernity. This spatiality treats opacity and its heterogeneity with productive poesis instead of fetishizing it within a logic of universal transparency and surveillance. White people can only enter into such spaces but not themselves create them (their way of seeing has made this impossible). But the very transformation of white sight will involve coming to sit in this spatiality, from which one can see a new world.

This (third)space is already present in our world and is expressed in any number of projects that are forging authentic black subjectivity. Andrew Prevot highlights the challenges of thinking positively of darkness of race in the frame of mystical theology, and yet still shows how the notion of opacity can be recovered theologically as a hope for the re-making of the self in

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27 Long, Ellipsis 126.


29 Mbembe, Critique of Black Reason, 5.
light of the darkness or possibility of the future. Carter discusses black life as “anarchic” and, as such, able to resist and unsettle the reigning arche of modernity. He writes: “To think that beyond, that an-archē, which is irreducible to any archē or Being of Rule, is the task of theorizing black religion.” bell hooks testifies of “choosing marginality” as a black woman, claiming right to subjectivity as she forges a space of “radical openness and possibility.” hooks discusses “homeplace” as a space of inclusivity and a site of resistance.

Directly to the point of opacity as recovered and re-used, Édouard Glissant in his Poetics of Relation argues that opacity protects diversity in the post-colonial situation. While generalization and universality operate under a claim to transparency, the opaque for Glissant is a kind of infinite abyss and “absolute unknown” that becomes a kind of subversive knowledge. Here opacity fundamentally opens to diversity, engendering a kind of “errantry” which, as a kind of learned ignorance, “conceives of totality but willingly renounces any claims to sum it up or to possess it.” In this, Glissant stresses the idea of the rhizome, as opposed to the notion of the

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30 See Prevot, “Divine Opacity.”


32 bell hooks, Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 145-153; see Soja, Thirdspace, 97-98.

33 hooks, Yearning, 47.


35 Glissant, Poetics of Relation, 21.
root, to explore how the good and beautiful might be connected as ideas to the infinite: “The notion of the rhizome maintains, therefore, the idea of rootedness but challenges that of a totalitarian root. Rhizomatic thought is the principle behind ... the Poetics of Relation, in which each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other.”36 For Glissant, the Tout-Monde or All-World expresses the world as a totality, as one part in a weave of livingness.

Glissant also connects the notion of opacity to a kind of tragedy or tragic knowledge. Mbembe describes how Glissant discusses the silt of the world, the mass of apparently dead things and bare matter, becoming fertilizer for new life, out of the debris; “language is reconstituted in the place where the human being meets its own animal form. The durability of the world depends on our capacity to reanimate beings and things that seem lifeless—the dead man, turned to dust by the desiccated economy; an order poor in worldliness that traffics in bodies and life.”37 Highlighting this theme of tragedy and possibility, Glissant writes:

A modern epic and a modern tragedy would offer to unite the specificity of nations, granting each culture’s opacity (though no longer as en-soi) yet at the same time imagining the transparency of their relations. Imagining. Because this transparency is precisely not en-soi. It is not rooted in any specific legitimacy, which thus implies that the disclosure of tragedy would be directed toward a continuum (in expansion) and not toward a past (set in filiation).38

In this way opacity demands a resistance to a “reductive transparency” instead of provoking it. It demands a kind of “visibility” to logics of opacity. It is not a totality that can leap beyond and go without finitude, but one that only grows out of the integrity of that finitude. There is hope here:

36 Glissant Poetics of Relation, 11.

37 Mbembe, Critique of Black Reason, 180-81.

38 Glissant, Poetics of Relation, 55.
“The refusal to perish may yet turn us into historical beings and make it possible for the world to be a world.”

The wholeness of the whole both radically critiques and gives radical hope.

**Theological Tool of Opacity: Theological Reading of Scripture**

I ended my historical-hermeneutical detour of white sight at the point of a psychoanalytic or psychotherapeutic in order to diagnose the pathology of white sight and bring one to the threshold of a new way of being. Let me briefly comment on the tension between this “scientific” route to address a theological concern, especially if my interest is to try to re-engage the integrity of a theological project. On the one hand, for Freud “psychology” as a science and technology moves forward the project of culture against nature and the danger of instinctual forces; but *religious ideas are only “illusions,”* not that they are inherently in error but that they are based in a wish-fulfillment that pursues its end detached from the need to verify by reality. On the other hand, Lacan writes that mysticism testifies of a “jouissance that is beyond”—that is, beyond the phallus or symbolic order that prevents proper desire. Reflecting on the coincidence of the “contemplative eye with the eye with which God looks at” the mystic, Lacan writes of how the mystic must “partake of perverse jouissance.” Indeed “mystical jaculations” testify to experiencing a coming “but know[ing] nothing about it.”

My prescription amidst the critical therapy is not merely to ask white people to “look at things differently” (which is certainly unhelpful, and might not even be possible as simple advice). Like Cusa, I want to lead desiring mystics in a practical way to the experience of (new)

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mysticism. I propose an “easy” or facile theological tool: a theological reading of Scripture that embraces opacity and enigma. This theological route can work alongside a psychoanalysis as both are a type of inward journey that explores the inner world that comes to affect one’s outer world. This begins the work of transposing the quasi-ontological iconic framework of theological vision to an entirely different schema—one which remains on the textual-linguistic level and can achieve a certain kind of ontological suspension. I take my clue in this regard from Ricoeur who, reflecting on especially Origen’s allegoresis at stake in his *Commentary on the Song*, argues for a model of intertextual theological reading. One can, Ricoeur argues, follow the “movements of love” in the Song, in order to move *outside the text itself* toward metaphorization and intertextuality. In this, Ricoeur argues for the value of such an intertextual “allegorizing” over a Platonic one: “to speak of an intersecting metaphor [or intertextuality] is to give allegory a much broader field than that of Platonizing allegorism conceived of as the vertical transfer from the sensible to the intelligible, at the risk of abolishing, denying, even of defaming the sensible.” Ricoeur here invites us into an understanding of enigma that gives justice to the sensible. Elsewhere he writes of how the “limit-expressions” and parabolic “bursting” at sake in this kind of intertextuality can orient us to radically new possibilities.

In proposing a theological reading, I am reminded that Carter argues that the solution to the problem of ontological blackness, what engages the re-forging of selfhood that rejects the modern racialization is a kind of mystical, exegetical spirituality. Here, a theological interpretation of Scripture is meant to remedy what, in the first place, was a rising of a different way of reading scripture (reflected in the early Gnostics) which, in part, led to racialization. Carter, *Race*, 324-325. At the same time, I recognize Jennings’ challenge regarding how Scripture has been used to reinforce whiteness and racialization. Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 207-249.


To give an example and paradigm of the theological reading at stake, consider Luke 24 concerning Christ on the Emmaus Road as a stranger with certain disciples just after the resurrection. I draw out three main exegetical points which themselves highlight what is at stake in such theological reading in general. *First*, in meaning-making the particularity of the body is embraced both as a scandal and a promise: one’s understanding is disoriented twofold because *Jesus’ body* is between the text and understanding, and *one’s own body* is between the self and the recognition of the body of Jesus. There is a scandal here in that bodily particularity must be traversed doubly (first one’s own body and then that of the risen Christ) but also a promise in that to embrace the body and its depths is to re-form the imagination and see a new world. *Second*, however, to avoid the idolatry (or ideology) of particularity, we note the importance of distance: the double-traversal of embodiment means that at the very heart of Christian development is the presence of an Other who is infinitely distant and cannot be subsumed into the sameness of oneself. *Third*: the traversal of the body of Christ/scripture/self is simultaneously an opening up to the other in view of the Spirit at Pentecost and the path it creates toward Gentile inclusion in the people of God. In the end, even through traversing this whole course of recognition, visibility itself is not secured: Christ *disappears* upon recognition; the *visio Dei* is not given—or rather, it is deflected horizontally, away from even the greatest visible and Icon, to the human community as it is reconstituted in the gift of the Spirit. Through such a theological hermeneutics, the radical alterity of symbolic opacity can be recovered in text, self, and other.

**Tragedy and Catharsis**

Still, in view of our study, we could say that the whole process of patri-religio and cultural filiation is sent awry from the beginning because it is anteriorly rooted in the fetishization of black flesh (from the beginning as *diabolic, sexual other*). Thus, even in the best
of theological vision, “fornication disrupts the relationship between a disciple and an elder.”45

Reading does not untie how racial logics define and secure filiation. Two radical ideas, then, need to be embraced amidst a theological reading of scripture: the tragic and the gift. As to the first of these, the matter of tragedy holds us back from reconciling to the good all too quickly. Because a false synthesis is the “evil of evil,” we hold back hope in order to preserve it. By finally bringing our study on white sight and opacity under this theme of tragedy, I am pressing into the emphasis in tragedy on character formation as caught in a certain vision or horizon that is limited and destructive. Second, tragedy critiques the project of an ethics which thinks of evil merely as a corollary to freedom. I am also pressing on the transformational potential of classical tragedy: how in tragedy “we await the shock”—even to ethics as a whole, but certainly to our subjective formation—“capable of awakening our mistrust with respect not only to the illusions of the heart but also to the illusions born of the hubris of practical reason itself.”46

**Tragedy and the Opaque White Self**

Earlier in my argument, I surfaced certain tragic notions that are key in dealing properly with opacity as it intersects with whiteness: in light of George Yancy’s “opaque white racist self” we are left to realize that whiteness is fundamentally a tragedy, always-already having been forged through the symbolism of evil, perspective, and color. In this tragic vein, Yancy speaks of the need to indefinitely tarry with one’s whiteness and recognize one can never escape their whiteness and the privilege and power it brings. Whiteness cannot be escaped and one cannot rush past one’s racism; in fact one always already arrives too late in this regard and is unable to


give a full account of one’s racism: “Rather, the reality of the sheer depth of white racialization is far too opaque.”

Yancy discusses how this tragic dimension of opacity puts an epistemic limit on white understanding and vision:

there is no ‘dry-dock’ where white people can go to rehabilitate their whiteness. The white self is already on the open sea of white power, privilege, and narcissism … One must begin with the racist white self. … And there is no innocent, fictive tabula rasa to which one can return … Indeed, the white self that desires and attempts to ‘rebuild’ or ‘rehabilitate’ itself does so precisely within the context of complex and formative white racist social and institutional material and intrapsychic forces.

Yancy writes that even as white people might use the mirror as “gift” to reveal a more truthful sight, white people “do not magically become black.” The white self is always already given over from the start and embedded in white privilege and the power it brings; whiteness “is a profound site of concealment.”

In this case, Yancy argues that white people must allow themselves to feel like a problem, to “tarry under the weight” of the tragedy of opacity. The notion of tragedy suspends the effort to close up being in some kind of quick (re)conciliation.

The Tragic Dimension of Evil

I also want to make a point about the tragic aspect of evil. As I have discussed previously (in my Introduction), the tragic dimension of evil is in tension with the ethical vision of evil wherein freedom and evil are thought in relationship to each other. Ricoeur writes that what is lacking in this ethical vision, however, is “the darksome experience of evil which surfaces in

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52 Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations*, 301.
different ways in the symbolism of evil and which constitutes properly speaking the ‘tragic’ aspect of evil.”\textsuperscript{53} I hope I clearly brought out this tragic aspect of evil in discussing the tension inherent in the primary symbols of evil (expressed conceptually in the “servile will”): the acknowledgement in our confession of sin of “evil as evil already there, evil in which I am born, evil which I find in myself before the awakening of my conscience, evil which cannot be analyzed into individual guilt and actual faults.” In the sense of “captivity,” which seems to weave itself in unique ways in each primary symbol and then fundamentally in the servile will, there is the sense of being bound by evil as a power.\textsuperscript{54}

The tragic aspect of evil even shows up in the doctrine of original sin, where there is a sense of being deceived and led astray by the serpentine Adversary before evil is found in the world through human choice. Ricoeur, though, says it is not so much the tragic per se here that resists the ethical vision of the world, but “an aspect irreducible to the ethical, and complementary to every ethics, which has found a privileged expression in the tragic.” The tragic itself, Ricoeur says, prevents both theology and philosophy. But:

The function of the tragic is to question self-assurance, self-certitude, one’s critical pretensions, we might even say the presumption of the moral conscience that is laden with the entire weight of evil. Much pride is concealed, perhaps, in this humility. It is then that the tragic symbols speak in the silence of the humiliated ethical. They speak of a ‘mystery of iniquity’ that man cannot entirely handle, that freedom cannot give reasons for, seeing that it already finds it within itself.\textsuperscript{55}

In this way, as we move toward a more constructive account of the question of whiteness and the problem of evil, we will have to continue to take into account the ways in which (as I have begun

\textsuperscript{53} Ricoeur, \textit{The Conflict of Interpretations}, 304.

\textsuperscript{54} Ricoeur, \textit{The Conflict of Interpretations}, 304.

\textsuperscript{55} Ricoeur, \textit{The Conflict of Interpretations}, 309.
to reveal here) whiteness and white sight can act as an object force back upon white individuals
to reinforce a white racial way of being. This means that notions such as white guilt, shame, and
responsibility may not always come back to the question of intentionality and of conscious will.

**Tragedy as a Form of Thinking and Being**

Tragedy, in a final sense, can be enlisted as a form of critical thought that seeks to
explore and keep open the productivity of the tension between the finite and the infinite. In this
way, tragedy turns us toward the practical. Ricoeur explains that tragedy teaches ethics not in a
didactic sense but “more closely resembling a *conversion of the manner of looking.*”\(^{56}\) Tragic
wisdom, Ricoeur explains, speaks toward the limited horizon or vision of ethics. Tragic wisdom
goes deep into the ethical problem (to its heart in the question of symbolism of evil), marking a
problem or rift that threatens to render asunder all wisdom, deliberation, conversation, and
understanding. Ricoeur proposes recovering a *phronesis* or wisdom at stake here as a kind of
ability to navigate the tragic situation. I call this *phronesis* “tragic-critical thought,” a practice
and thought (which includes but reaches beyond a psychoanalysis) that accepts the
pathologization of opacity yet seeks to re-charge the symbol’s opacity for a more hopeful future.

Tragedy calls forth an audience to experience *catharsis* in the face of tension and death.
Tragic-critical thought can work with and yet reframe this matter of purifying. The ultimate end
of such catharsis is radical hope. From these same depths of pathologized opacity there is still a
possibility for hope and for setting right. Thus Emilie Townes, for example, speaks of the power
of countermemory, retrieving for the good what has been deemed “fantastic” and used for evil.
We could also think here with Cornell West about tragicomic thought: “A tragicomic view is one

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\(^{56}\) Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 245. Emphasis mine.
that … locates human beings as already in ‘the mess’ of the world with no way to ever fully escape it.” Such thought, as West writes, involves both a courage to affirm life and think critically but also a caring for suffering; and it is rooted both in the insistence of objective moral law and, as West puts it, “the blood-drenched tearsoaked traditions of resistance, critique, and contestation—and in the agency of the wretched of the earth.”

Tragedy is key here because we do not seek a cheap present or future that erases the past. Still, the opacity of the symbol can give ethical thought, even though it is masked, occluded, and diverted towards a symbolics of evil; it does this by drawing from its fecundity toward superabundant promise. The potential, then, of tragic-critical thought is to go “deeper into the symbol’s fragility to reorganize its defilement-logic,” as I have written elsewhere. The catharsis undergone in such a project would seek a certain removal of a cataract that clouds or opacifies the lens of our vision. Though, white people in such tragic thought can never see “clearly” (for that is the desire of whiteness), but, in the mode of Cusa’s *docta ignorantia*, can speak out of the particularity of their own journey while they recognize the limited horizon of such a vision.

The Gift of Mutual Recognition

Mysticism is a mode of subjectivity strewn between the tragic and the gift. On the one hand, the mystic “flight” is “the painful stripping away of all that is alien or accessory to

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58 Pederson, “The Symbol Gives Rise to Race,” 166. I write: “Such thought is a critique of the prevailing mythos by bringing “completeness” to episodic reality and therefore including banished voices, where then a new myth can develop. It is a critique of the power of hegemony by bringing to light “discord” in the midst of concordance through the importance of “reversal.” And such thought is a critique of the status quo of “representation” by re-presenting fear and pity through the critique of myth and hegemony so as to affect the purgation and pleasure of the “spectator”—and thus put the spectator into question themselves. This putting-into question, this *katharsis*, engenders both avowal and purgation; here repentance is approached as the dread of defilement is sublimated in the “fear of not loving enough” … To flesh out this thought-type is to flesh out the kind of thinking given in today’s racial experience that seeks true understanding.”
identity;” one the other hand, “it also signifies an integral meeting and union which gives meaningful existence, grace, and light to everything which will come from it.” So, the other side of the tragic is the gift. Tragedy puts us in touch with finitude. The gift reminds us that finitude is always oriented toward openness and potentiality. If embracing a posture of tragic-critical thought is akin to embracing the possibility of death of self, hoping for the gift of mutual recognition is embracing the experience of radically new life. Mutual recognition is not something we can secure by our own efforts and finitude, because it is necessarily a communal project. The thirdspatiality of the icon, now retrieved from its pathological obsession with filiation and sexual generation, under the sign of the tragic, is given as a radical gift as we seek to pay attention to the testimony of the other.

In my last thoughts here, I want to establish a framework for how we might be able to approach the issue of mutual recognition, especially how this can happen in the midst of troubles with filiation. This will set us in a place to begin to address the issue of guilt and responsibility that James Baldwin spoke of in the opening of this chapter. In Ricoeur’s *The Course of Recognition*, he traces out the paths that recognition takes, from recognition as identification, to recognizing oneself, to mutual recognition. What I want to focus on is this last stage of mutual recognition, but one section in particular which will bring my own thoughts to a close. Ricoeur discusses mutual recognition in part under the theme of “Recognizing Oneself in One’s Lineage,” and he touches fundamentally upon a topic that has been central to my own examination of theological vision—that is, filiation.

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59 Corrigan, “‘Solitary’ Mysticism,” 41. See, too, what Lossky notes about Dionysius, that what is at stake in his thought is not a mere dialectic but a purification or katharsis. Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 27. In this way, catharsis goes beyond some facile symbol of purity and defilement to a deeper purging of the ontological economy, a katharsis focused on repentance and purgation in view of God, a repentance of putting oneself at the center of the world, so to be open to the other.
Here, Ricoeur writes about how filiation in the context of the family means that verticality intersects with the horizontality of conjugality and parenthood; and as such, “unvarying factors structure our being-in-the-world through the family” such as being born to certain parents and born in a set of (possible) siblings. The ego here also finds itself split in matrilinear and patrilinear directions. Filiation is not only at the intersection of conjugality and parenthood in this way, but filiation intersects the incest prohibition, which is the “constraint imposed on all the socially accepted variants of conjugality.” In this sense the ego, under filiation, finds itself in a “system of places,” placed—fixed—in a lineage at birth, given a name, and now part of a priceless process of transmission along a number of planes (of life, of name, of inheritance, and so on). I become actualized when I am mutually recognized in filiation by my parents. In this way, the matter of recognizing oneself in one’s lineage leads us to a crossroads: we can hypothetically look backwards and forwards from the fixed place of our lineage; but looking backwards towards our birth only leads to an enigma because it is not itself a pure beginning but part of something before it, part of a broader parental project. We only “escape this speculative vertigo … by replacing ourselves and our parents in the sequence of generations” as we move forward.

In this way, we begin to see how the genealogical principle which norms filiation can come to represent a displacement and dispossession. In one’s lineage, one is set “in the unbounded scale of ages, [where] each rank is both instituted and instituting, none of them being

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the foundation.” This dispossession is heightened by a doubling (or splitting) in the face of both paternal and maternal lineage. This is further heightened in the sense of “indebtedness” in terms of the ascending forward look in filiation, and “heritage” in terms of the descending look backwards in filiation. Thus, the genealogical principle norming filiation is faced with the problem of “absolute foundation” and “the limits of its patrilinear and matrilineal lines,” all of which is “sufficient for confronting the fantasy of being all-powerful.”63 This is all the more heightened in the intersection, specifically, of the genealogical principle and the incest taboo.

The genealogical principle, in order to move filiation forward, objects against the “incest drive,” Ricoeur writes, that drive which is “the bearer of nondistinction.”64 For the genealogical principle to reach its target of filiation, “the objection to incest has to strike down the fantasy of omnipotence.”65 In this way, genealogical ordering, when set in tension with the incest prohibition which norms it, leads us to dispossession and strips sovereignty from filiation.

Filiation, understood in this way, can be recovered as a thoroughly mystical concept and one under the sign of the radicality of the gift. The notion of filiation, as the end goal of spiritual transformation and the visio Dei, can be recovered as an analogue of the “economy of the gift” wherein we can experience genuine mutual recognition. Space does not allow a detailed analysis of Ricoeur’s thought on gift and the economy of the gift. As John Wall describes it, the economy of the gift for Ricoeur is about the “dialectical exchange between the good and the right that is never resolved but rather rendered more or less productive. … The good and the right are

63 Ricoeur, The Course of Recognition, 278 n25. Emphasis mine.
64 Ricoeur, The Course of Recognition, 278 n25.
integrated only on the *theological* grounds of humanity’s encounter with God."66 One could examine the importance of each of the theological virtues with Ricoeur and the gifts they give: faith as “radical dependence;” love as radical, hyperethical obligation to the other; hope as radical trust in the possibility of reconciliation.67 The gift carries a “logic of superabundance” which supervenes upon and interrupts the ethical “logic of equivalence” and the economy of reciprocation. Under the dialectic of *love* and *justice*, these two logics are brought in productive relation, as the demand of love pulls justice up toward extra-judicial notions like the “sense of justice” and hospitality, while the call of justice makes love practical.68 If filiation and theological vision could be rediscovered as a moment within the economy of the gift that in this way pulls love toward justice and justice toward love in the logic of superabundance, notions of responsibility and guilt could be addressed afresh as a part of a process or course of mutual recognition. Here, instead of being addressed all too often within the logic of equivalence (where, for example, guilt necessarily comes from something I did or did not do in the past), concepts like responsibility and guilt could be discovered anew as part of a broader opportunity to hear my neighbor so I can see and be seen by my neighbor. In this way, filiation brings us into a new beyond and into a new ignorance where we are obligated to each other in the bind of love and justice—even when we can only, in our own strength and sight, grope in the dark after what we have done and have left undone in loving and failing to love.

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68 See Ricoeur, “Love and Justice,” in *Figuring the Sacred*. 


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