

Johns, Derrida, and Sartre: Reading the Metaphysics of Racism

James Palermo
Buffalo State College

If Dewey's warning that teaching demands one psychologize the material (that is, connect curriculum to the student's "own past doings, thinkings, and sufferings"¹), then attempts at multicultural education must first read and decipher the racist text of the student's lived experience. Toward that end, selected work of the artist Jasper Johns and of the philosophers Jean-Paul Sartre and Jacques Derrida is used to psychologize the language of racism and to ground an interventionist model. The intent is to expose the invisible palpability of racism as a metaphysical principle that directs cultural life. The sources used are Derrida's, "Racism's Last Word," Sartre's, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, and Johns's piece entitled, "Flag." Although the contexts vary, the aim of changing perception is common. The model that emerges is described as the aesthetics of difference.

I

To lay the groundwork of this aesthetic, the analysis begins with Johns. Johns's work expresses a shift in the artistic idiom from the modern to the postmodern. If Jackson Pollock's canvas assaulted the viewer with frenetic lines of force and bold striations of color that punched the viewer into a state of *angst*, so be it. Pollock, the icon of modernism, embodied the ethic of a unique vision, self expression and the *avant-garde* quest for spiritual purity.² For most, however, modernism was a private language inaccessible and untranslatable.

Against this, Johns's postmodernist canvas is filled with representations of real things: numbers, flags, maps, even noses. The subject matter appears lifted directly from ordinary life; it is at once recognizable, banal, derivative, and recycled. Moreover, the canvas seems not so much an instance of unique self-expression as the anonymous, jumbled sensibility of everyman: the portraiture of the Kodak instamatic: spiritual *angst* is replaced by profane humor. The 1958 Johns canvas "Flag" is a paradigm case. "Flag" depicts "the stars and stripes" on three wooden panels using the medium of wax encaustic.³ The stars appear like cutouts which are stuck to the surface crust. But, unlike "Old Glory," Johns's flag is a stiff, flat, thick simulacrum. It certainly looks like the flag, but we know it at once as a reproduction: This flag cannot and was never meant to fly.

What is going on then? In Johns's words: I begin with "things the mind already knows. I like to repeat an image in another medium to observe the play between the two, the image and the medium." One way to make sense of Johns's distinction is to treat both flags as signs and then contrast the opposing significations. Begin with the real flag and ask what you already know. From my own experience, what I already know is that in kindergarten I mouthed Allegiance to, and in the Marine Corps I saluted, the flag. The lesson was that the flag is a patriotic sign, something that stands for me and all Americans. But what is hidden in these prosaic observations is a cultural narrative sending certain political, emotional, and spiritual

messages. Politically, a pledge of allegiance to the flag denotes acceptance of the authority of the government. One also already knows such a pledge acknowledges the possibility (if not likelihood) of being conscripted. Spiritually, the flag signifies the renewal of the nation as it is taken up by each generation. What the American already knows then, is that the flag is an icon with a message: The flag says, "You are an American citizen."

But the Johns "Flag" is a material contradiction. The painting "Flag" is also not a flag. The viewer experiences the painting now as a political trope and now as an artistic design. Stated simply, Johns has put the sign of the flag into spasm. Like an involuntary contraction, John's "Flag" breaks down the one "true" set of meanings that pairs the sign American flag with the signified citizenship. Significations are split. Johns's flag is no longer a surrogate for patriotism; it is simultaneously an aesthetic object which at once intrudes upon and cancels fixed perceptions, defers original significations, and produces a play of signs.



Jasper Johns, Flag, 1954-5.
Encaustics, oil and collage on fabric.
42 1/4" X 60 5/8".
© Museum of Modern Art.

The beauty in this is that Johns's canvas has re-presented a quasi-sacred sign taken from ordinary life and broken the metaphysical chain, that is, the fixed one to one correspondences between the flag and patriotic behaviors. Johns's flag collides against the fixed patriotic ensemble of signifier/signifies in a new, different, and disruptive system. Saluting Johns's "Flag" is more than inappropriate; such a performative is an "unnatural act."

The critic Christopher Knight argues that Johns's work:

created a vacuum that showed how works of art attain notice, stature, and even meaning: they represent the interests of like-minded individuals, drawn from among a differentiated public that constitutes the audience. The authority of social experience, materialized through an artistic language of idiosyncratic private pleasure, is what characterized Johns's surprising work, not the other way around.⁴

Put simply, the "Flag" painting viewed as an abstract aesthetic form "displaces social usage into new context. [The result is that a singular unquestioned] social function ceases."

II

Doubtless, Johns did not intend "Flag" as an aesthetic critique of racism. But the power of Johns's "Flag" to change the viewer's consciousness is echoed in Derrida's deconstruction of metaphysical language.

A brief discussion of the latter is illustrative. Derrida radicalized Saussure's discovery that language is built upon the differences between signifier and signified, insisting that signifiers produce a signification without precise origin. Most important, the metaphysical misuse of language begins with the speaker's elision of the difference between signifier and signified. That is, the speaker is under the delusion of having direct access to thought, and that his/her word and thought are a transparency. Moreover, this mistake presents language in essentialist terms as a substance that appears to the speaker as unmediated. Derrida says, "[this] auto affection is experienced as a suppression of difference — this phenomenon, this presumed suppression of difference, this lived reduction of the opacity of the signifier are the origin of what we call presence."⁵

The source of this mistaken presence is the sound of one's own voice: "this priority of the signified leads back to a putative grounding in speech and self-presence...it identifies consciousness itself with the absolute privilege granted to vocal expression...such is at least the experience — or consciousness of the voice: of hearing (understanding) oneself speak."⁶

This blindness to the difference between content and representation (that is, the difference between signified and signifier) submerges the fact that language, whether written or spoken, is built upon a relationship of differences between marks and sounds, differences in spelling, pronunciation, and definition, and differences between context and parts of speech. And Derrida emphasizes that the consequence of treating speech as self-presence is the negative assessment of writing as the inferior, subordinate supplement of speech. To overcome this blindness to the difference between context representation, Derrida reinstates the priority of written language over spoken. He does this by recovering the exterior public, spatial signifier interrupting self presence.

This priority of writing tears apart the self-identity of signifier and signified by emphasizing what Derrida calls *differánce*. Obviously, *differánce* also is a new spelling of the French *différence*, meant to underscore the difference between writing and speech. *Differánce* means both to differ in meaning and to defer meaning. *Differánce* points to the impossibility of locating the absolute origin of language in either event or structure. *Differánce* refers to the impossibility of locating a pure temporal punctum, a present point in time experienced without the overlap and difference of past and future that frame the present. But the key is that *differánce* points to the breakup of metaphysical self presence and destroys the pretense of absolute closure in language.⁷

To summarize the above, the connective tissue between Johns and Derrida is that of *differánce*. Obviously, each is working with different texts: artistic artifacts as against words. But “Flag” shows directly the profound difference of *differánce*: “Flag” first defers and then displaces an original, seemingly natural and permanent signified. And “Flag” exposes the protean possibilities of the sign system. In both Johns and Derrida this difference breaks up self-presence and denies any text the possibility of an ultimate meaning.

The technique I have used to compare Derrida and Johns is what the deconstructionist calls grafting. A graft is the production of a new structure in which two side by side but separate discourses are sewn together. Derrida compares grafting to the act of “passing a knife between two texts.” And he asks “Why do it? Or at least why write two texts at once?”⁸ The answer is that making sense of one text depends upon the examination of the second text. Put differently, reading the second text reverses the meaning of the first text by exposing contradictions within it, exposing metaphysical closures.

III

Derrida’s critique of the metaphysics of racism is at the latest form of twentieth century state racism, the apartheid system of South Africa. Derrida’s piece, “Racism’s Last Word,” was written in 1983 (before the Mandelan Revolution) as a commentary for the UN exhibition of paintings, “Art Contra Apartheid.” “Racism’s Last Word” is a philosophical critique that excavates the double-bind logic of the law of apartheid.⁹ Throughout the piece, Derrida treats apartheid as a watchword asking the questions: “What do the discourses of apartheid say?” And, “How are the claims that rationalize apartheid contradicted by their own proofs?” This is a deconstruction of the text of apartheid; in no sense is it an ordinary language exercise meant to unpack the use of the term. Derrida uses the term “text” to refer not simply to words on a page but to the limits of situated real life. The text of apartheid demands action. Derrida’s voice, then, is not declarative, but subjunctive and rhetorical.

However, Derrida’s work goes beyond South Africa, revealing the metaphysics of self-presence characterizing all racism. The critique is built upon four themes: 1) the metaphysics of the word “apartheid,” 2) European discourse on race, 3) theological-political discourse, and 4) art as the negation of racism. His overarching concern is to reveal the moral contradictions that structure apartheid. My own analysis follows Derrida’s technique of grafting. That is, two columns will be used to highlight the separate but interdependent texts found within apartheid.

First enacted as South African law in 1948, apartheid meant “the separate development of each race in the geographic zone assigned to it. [This meant] the forced assignment to ‘natural’ territory the geography of birth.”

Apartheid is at once the name and the law. Because this duality is unrecognized, apartheid appears as a metaphysical essence. The graft of the texts exists between two columns (*RLW*, 292):

APARTHEID	
COLUMN I: WORD/LAW	COLUMN II: METAPHYSICS
Name and signifier in the Dutch	No signifier or equivalent in other languages
The signifier that marks separation (<i>Heid</i>) is an arrest mark	Aparthness appears ontological
In the language of apartheid, racism is decreed natural	Legitimation appears creationist, divine law

The contradictions played out between columns I and II reveal language used to hypostatize experience: The untranslability of apartheid indicates that the term is a transcendental signifier — that is, a metaphysical self presence that disallows other contents. And, the legal imperative of apartheid is legitimated by an appeal to origins — something not possible in the play of *differance*.

EUROPEAN DISCOURSE	
SIGNIFIER: WESTERN IDEOLOGY	SIGNIFIED: POLITICAL REALITY
The myth: white migration preceded black migration into S. Africa	Minority white population controls of government is legitimated
White government, judicial superstructure, is just	Racist regime has origins in Western culture - nature, life, history, religion, and law
1973 crime against humanity proclamation	No Western nation acts to force abolition of apartheid. European trade with S. Africa in gold and strategic ores is protected; the trade route around the Cape is open for trade in arms.

The significance of Johns’s “Flag” for all of this is underscored in the 1964 apartheid law that forbade blacks even to touch the flag of the South African Republic. For example, “the South Africa’s Ministry of Public Works sought to assure the cleanliness of national emblems by means of a regulation stipulating that it is forbidden for non-Europeans to handle them.” This censorship of touch symbolized in the handling of the flag signifies that the black citizen owes obedience to the republic. Simultaneously his/her touch with whites must be erased as unclean. In this contradiction the black is no longer human, but a disembodied, disenfranchised cipher. And unfortunately, the European discourse on apartheid appears as counterfeit: Moral denunciations against apartheid are voiced even as the West protects the Praetoria government. The most powerful declaration in the 1973

United Nations pronouncement declared apartheid, “a crime against humanity.” But Derrida exposes contradictory oppositions between this ideological language of the West against the political reality (*RLW*, 292).

However, the most hellish aspects of apartheid are legitimated as theology is made to turn tricks and scripture serves as the hand maiden of politics. The contradictions are internal as theological discourse is grafted to the politics of separation and control (*RLW*, 296).

SIGNIFIER	SIGNIFIED
THEOLOGICAL DISCOURSE	POLITICAL IMPLEMENTATION
Government has foundation in scripture; political power comes from God. God wants nations and people to be separate. The well-being of the colored man is central.	Prohibition of Mixed Marriage Act; Reservation of separate amenities population registration, segregates the races.
Equal educational opportunity	Institute for National Christian Education proscribed non-Christian or Marxists from teaching
The story of the Chosen People is found in the Long trek	Jews are excluded from government because of their own story.
The Bible decrees that whites should govern	72% of the population (Blacks) are declared foreigners.

In the end, Derrida provides incisive conclusions regarding apartheid, America, and thinking itself. First, he believed the double-bind logic legitimating apartheid had won. Against the indictment by Amnesty International that, “As long as apartheid exists, there can be no structure conforming to generally recognized norms of human rights and able to guarantee their application,” he sees the worn out ideological homilies once again used to legitimate this repression. For example: “world peace,” the general economy, the market place for European labor all would be threatened by Western intervention to end apartheid” (*RLW*, 195).

But most important for us, he finds America complicitous. In plain words, Derrida says, “apartheid is surely an American problem.” First, in an obvious sense, without an American decision to apply economic muscle, “especially in universities obliged to manage their capital,” apartheid will continue.¹⁰ But the real problem for America is its misreading of apartheid as a problem for South Africans, to be cured over there, by them. Apartheid, he claims, represents the segregation of American society: “No doubt, this segregation has become more urban, industrial, socioeconomic (the frightening percentage of young black unemployed, for example).”¹¹ But the very need to speak this way to Americans, this need to expose racist ideology, again and again underlines the failure of language itself. Derrida says that discourse, “...draws contracts, dialecticizes itself and reappropriates again” (*RLW*, 299).

Derrida searches for another mode of thinking to break through the prison-house of language. Like Johns, he finds it in art. While the immediate context is the exhibition that he is writing about, he draws larger conclusions about the “language”

of art, citing Picasso's "Guernica" as a paradigm case. The power of the exhibition derives from imagery. In this sense, the exhibition is like "Guernica;" it neither commemorates nor represents an event; "it is the name of hell, of a town and of a work." And in place of words, "Guernica" fixes us with a "gaze that gazes back at us making us its own object" (*RLW*, 299).

IV

Keeping in mind the connections between the ways metaphysical thinking is overcome by Johns and the application in Derrida's critique of apartheid, I shall now turn to Sartre. But before discussing his text, the need to show how to effect a legitimate misreading of Sartre, that is, one that shows a convergence with Derrida, must be dealt with. The early Sartre is an existential-phenomenologist, his work is built upon the intentionality of consciousness.¹² Following this view, the human subject is described as *pour-soi*, incomplete and empty, a transcendence of the present moving toward a not yet. But, this free subjectivity is situated in the world of things: *en-soi* full completions, as well as other persons. Being human means having to make choices without guaranteed outcomes. And living authentically means not avoiding, but bearing responsibility for, one's choices. Denying choice, seeking relief from the contingency of freedom, indeed succumbing to the domination of the Other's freedom involves the attempt by the subject to give up his/her freedom for the solidity and permanence of a thing. Such a metaphysical change is doomed to failure and represents inauthenticity. Freedom, choice, situation authenticity, inauthenticity, consciousness, *pour-soi*, and *en-soi* are the key words that structure *Anti-Semite and Jew*.¹³

Obviously, the problem in all of this is that Derrida's poststructuralist framework is a criticism of phenomenology. In place of the lived-world, one finds a text, instead of consciousness, the play of signifiers, and language not subjectivity is where one begins doing philosophy. Is there a linkage between Johns, Derrida, and Sartre? I believe the argument can be made by doing two things. First, the connection between aesthetic paradigms must be clarified. And most important, the metaphysics of racism must be shown. This finally can be done by misreading *Anti-Semite and Jew*, applying Derrida's grafting technique to key words and arguments within the text.

Sartre's aesthetic paradigm is encapsulated in a scene from his novel, *Nausea*, in which the protagonist Roquentin listens to a scratched recording of Bessie Smith singing "Some of These Days." Roquentin's reaction is this, "Behind the existent which tumbles from one moment to another, without past, without future, behind these sounds which decompose from day to day, are chipped away and slide toward death, the melody remains the same, young and steady, like a witness without pity."¹⁴

And regarding literature itself, Sartre writes that literature requires "the conjoint effort of author and...reader...there is not art except for and by others." The point is that the aesthetic object is co-created by the artist and the sense making activity of the "reader." Using different constructs, Sartre and Derrida come to the same conclusion. But this is not a simple convergence. In reading the "Some of These Days" episode, what is obvious are Sartre's phenomenological concerns. Bessie

Smith's words and the melody punctuate Roquentin's existence by imposing order on the chaos of the character's life. But more than that, "Some of These Days" is a phenomenological essence. That is, despite the record's scratches, Rougentin can play it again; he can return to a melody that is repeatable, unchanging, a-temporal, and ideal.

V

The convergence between Sartre and Derrida is found recalling the latter's discussion of "Guernica." In Derrida's words, "Guernica" neither "commemorates nor represents an event...it is the name of hell, of a town and of a work" (*RLW*, 299). Derrida reads this as a poststructuralist ideality. That is, the appeal is not to consciousness but to language. Displaced from its historical context of 1930s Spain, "Guernica" is a signifier in the imperative voice — the viewer is exhorted to move, overcome a present evil; "Guernica" is in the subjunctive mood — the viewer is reminded that South African freedom is a condition contrary to fact. "Guernica" highlights a past political repression in South Africa, and "Guernica" is a stimulus for a future free South Africa. Derrida named neither "Guernica" nor "Some of These Days" an ideality. But the shared language regarding the repetitive temporal signification of these aesthetic objects, as well as the co-creativity of artist-object and audience, mark a real convergence between both philosophers.

This claim is reinforced when recalling Derrida's argument that "Guernica" fixes us with a gaze that "gazes back at us, making us its own object." This description could have been lifted out of *Being and Nothingness*. For Sartre, *le-regard* represents the stare of the other. The stare is the other's attempt to fix me in the present and transform me into Being for Others. Ironically, Derrida uses the gaze in his own way to overcome the metaphysical thinking of racism, just as Sartre's gaze jolts the reader to realize the existential demand of choice. In both examples, a profound *differánce* overcomes metaphysical thinking. As in John's "Flag," "Some of These Days," and "Guernica" are uprooted from a fixed signifier/signified correspondence. And, caught in the loop of signification, the "reader" becomes more reflexive. That is, the signifier "Flag," and the Guernica paintings, and the record, "Some of These Days," are detached from a fixed meaning. The detached signifier floats, joined to other signifiers. The "reader" himself/herself becomes a signifier. What is crucial is that the reader is decentered and must respond.

VI

In this context, *Anti-Semite and Jew* is read using Derrida's technique of grafting. The power in Sartre's text is more than any description of apartheid. His words hit us directly, psychologizing racism by exposing the invidious racism in the heart. He says anti-semitism is a racism in which the anti-semite can excuse in himself as simply a matter of his opinion, his personal choice and taste. But an opinion does not lend itself to criticism (*ASJ*, 7). Voicing an opinion closes a conversation. One is really saying: "This is what I think; don't try to change my mind; shut-up." But Sartre's point is that an anti-semitic opinion is the excuse to deprive Jews of their rights, to keep them out of economic and social activities, "[even] to expel them from the country [and] exterminate them" (*ASJ*, 9). Certainly,

Sartre is speaking about France of the 1950s. But his problem is our problem now, a metaphysical thinking that we Americans can apply to ourselves, to our own situation. Sartre's attack on racist thinking is explicit: "If by race is understood the indefinable complex into which we are tossed pell mell both somatic and intellectual and moral traits, I believe in it no more than ouija boards" (*ASJ*, 61). Having said that, his focus is upon the anti-semite's two systems of interpretation regarding "the idea of the Jew, the Jewish nature, and the Jewish role in society" (*ASJ*, 13). Indeed, the anti-semite infuses his experience with hate founded in irrationality: The Jew is metaphysically bad, and the anti-semite is the good citizen. The graft between these poles reveals an out of control passion. The issues of intelligence, citizenship, and human nature are illustrative.

INTELLIGENCE

JEWISH FRENCH MAN

is abstract, tentative, deals with things such as money, securities, and is destructive or critical.

must earn his way, speaks a learned French that is acquired.

"NATIVE" FRENCH MAN

has special sensibility, deals with the concrete, "is correct," and is magically connected to the land.

inherits property, speaks the language with mistakes that are genius.

CITIZENSHIP

JEWISH FRENCH MAN

Government is Jew-ridden.

Jews vote in elections.

Authentic "Frenchness" is not available to him.

If race does not exist, the Jew must prove it

Living contradiction: At once the rich Jewish Merchant is the agent of international capitalism and the Bolshevik.

"NATIVE" FRENCH MAN

is above the law

united in a social bond of anger

acquires French, tradition, race, national destiny, has tact and a morality uniquely French which is acquired by birth

nothing to prove

ordinary worker

HUMAN NATURE

JEWISH FRENCH MAN

Individual thinks, sleeps, hears,

is honest or dishonest like a Jew.

Has a Jewish way of speaking, reading, and voting

"NATIVE" FRENCH MAN

Native sons and daughters enjoy

culture not expressible in words.

The contradiction in all of this is obvious: Human nature for Sartre is something we all share only in the sense that "the human is defined as a *being in a situation*, a synthetic whole that is biological, economic, political and cultural. [Moreover, that situation]...is an ensemble of limits and restrictions: the necessity of working, sharing the world with others and death." For the racist, the Jew is a metaphysical

reality: he or she has an essence or substantial form which cannot be modified; s/he is free to do evil but cannot do good.

This is the pretext the racist uses to color his experience. Sartre calls this person a symbolic murderer. He concludes that the anti-semitic “is a man who is afraid. Not of Jews...but of himself...of his liberty, of his instincts of his responsibilities, of solitariness, of change, of society, and of the world — of everything except Jews.”

In Derrida’s terms, the racist turns the Jew into a self presence, a metaphysical signifier. The use of grafting rereads that lived text of racism, setting down its contradictions. The lesson is that the racist is caught in the loop of fixed signification: he himself becomes the metaphysical signifier unable to recognize the self-presence he has created.

VII

The implications for the classroom are several. First, multicultural studies must deal with racism or become a sham. The idea that racism is someone else’s problem must be attacked. This can be done only by psychologizing racism, showing its lived everyday reality.

Second, Jasper Johns piece “Flag” is an excellent model because it speaks directly without words. “Flag” provokes in the viewer a reading with mixed significations. Overcoming unthinking allegiance, “Flag” opens up discussions of metaphysical thinking and gives entrance to Derrida’s paradigm of difference. Third, Derrida’s discussion of apartheid makes direct the implications of Johns’s work. Moreover, the dissection of apartheid allows the student a distance to see racism that is at once removed, yet implicit in his own experience. Fourth, the misreading of Sartre’s text shows a real convergence with Derrida, exposes the fullness of the aesthetic critique, and concertizes racism. But most important, this pedagogical model of reading racism “calls into question, the defining metaphysical framework of uncriticized racist thinking.”

1. John Dewey, “The Child and the Curriculum,” in *The Child and the Curriculum and the School and Society* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1971), 200.

2. Rosalind E. Krauss, “Split Decisions, Jasper Johns in Retrospect,” *Art Forum* XXXV, no.3 (1996): 79.

3. Robert Hughes, “Split Decision, Jasper Johns in Retrospect,” *Art Forum* 35, no. 3 (1996): 84.

4. Christopher Knight, “Split Decisions, Jasper Johns in Retrospect,” *Art Forum* 25, no. 3 (1996): 84.

5. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977),166.

6. *Ibid.*, 160.

7. Jacques Derrida, *Positions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 28.

8. Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978),126.

9. Jacques Derrida, “Racism’s Last Word,” *Critical Inquiry* 12 (1985): 290-99. This book will be cited as *RLW* with page numbers in the text for all subsequent references.

10. Jacques Derrida, “Critical Response,” *Critical Inquiry*13 (1986): 155-70.

11. *Ibid.*, 170.

12. See especially, Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes (New York: The Citadel Press, 1968).
13. Jean Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, trans. George J. Becker (New York: Schocken Books, 1974). This book will be cited as *ASJ* with page numbers in the text for all subsequent references.
14. Jean Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, trans. Lloyd Alexander (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1964), 235.