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REVIEW

Cynthia R. Nielsen, *Foucault, Douglass, Fanon, and Scotus in Dialogue: On Social Construction and Freedom* (New York; Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), ISBN: 978-1137034106.

In *Foucault, Douglass, Fanon, and Scotus in Dialogue: On Social Construction and Freedom*, Dr. Cynthia R. Nielsen, Catherine of Siena Fellow at Villanova University, brings four timeless thinkers together into a captivating discussion of power, resistance, and freedom. Nielsen's readings of Michel Foucault, Frederick Douglass, Frantz Fanon, and John Duns Scotus converge here into a valuable synthesis of the ideas of some perhaps unlikely dialogue partners who come from very different times and historical situations. This book - as a contribution to the series *New Approaches to Religion and Power*, edited by Joerg Rieger - is an inspiring example of scholarly harmonization, a theme that is lucidly illustrated throughout by Nielsen's use of musical analogies. Her project artfully weaves together Foucault's theory of power and subjectivity, Douglass's lived experience of resistance, Fanon's symphonic humanism, and Scotus's ontology of multidimensional freedom into a tapestry of emancipation and transformation.

The first chapter, "Themes and Their Variations: Harmonizing Humans as Socially Constructed and Free?" begins with a triplet of statements which echo the first lines of Aimé Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism*:

A destiny that proclaims one people or nation superior to all others is a flawed destiny.

A destiny that scripts subjectivities while asserting their fixity is a deceitful destiny.

A destiny that reduces human beings to commodities is a grotesque destiny (1).

With these declarations, Nielsen establishes the field of her concern, and begins her project of articulating a philosophical system that can accommodate the re-scripting of subjectivities in a way that runs counter to these oppressive destinies. She presents to the reader the theory of race as a socially-constructed phenomenon, a theory in which the contents of notions such as "blackness" are "constructed intentionally as well as unintentionally through discourses, institutions, traditions, and sociopolitical practices" (11). Although Nielsen is a proponent of social constructionism, she does not endorse the view that human beings are solely the products of social forces. By harmonizing the philosophies of the four thinkers, Nielsen is able to fashion a system that acknowledges the fundamental free agency at the

core of human subjectivity - a system that allows human beings to live creatively in resistance to prescribed, and inscribed, oppression.

Nielsen's second chapter, "Foucault and Subjectivities," is concerned with Michel Foucault, the enigmatic 20th century French scholar whose life-long work sought to illuminate the various powers and processes that shape human beings into subjects. Though Foucault's archaeological and genealogical methods of historical analysis both function to reveal the contingent nature of historical events and their resulting social consequences in a way that suggests that present social formations are malleable, many Foucault scholars believe that his strong emphasis on historical and social contingency de-centers the subject to an extent that genuine human agency is rendered void. Nielsen argues against this widespread understanding, and claims that Foucault's conception of power relations presupposes free subjects at the core of every formation of subjectivity.

Nielsen describes Foucault's early work as a project that focuses primarily on the ways in which human beings are influenced by institutions, practices, and discourses; in his later work, however, Foucault begins to shift his attention toward the ways in which individuals are able to reconstitute their "selves" despite the ever-present powers of social construction. Nielsen rightly points out that both of these processes – subjectification and subject self-creation – imply that a singular site of selfhood exists. Though Foucault does not consider this site to be the pure sovereign subject of the Western Enlightenment tradition, it nevertheless is something uniquely personal, something to be cared for, and something to be artistically refashioned in practices of liberation. Because Foucault was reluctant to root this theory of selfhood in any kind of transcendent, universal human ontology, Nielsen turns to the other three thinkers to enhance and extend Foucault's project by grounding it in theories that establish freedom as an inalienable human right, or condition.

In the third chapter, "Frederick Douglass on Power Relations and Resistance 'From Below,'" Nielsen turns to the life and writings of Frederick Douglass, the 19th century social reformer who experienced an exodus from chattel slavery to freedom. In Douglass, Nielsen sees an archetypical illustration for Foucault's description of the dynamism of power relations. Douglass's dehumanizing experiences with the slave-breaker Edward Covey provide particularly excellent examples of how power operates through individuals and societies in the construction of subjects; likewise, Douglass's assertion of his humanity, which culminates in an act of physical resistance to Covey's violence, shows that every manifestation of power entails an implicit opportunity for resistance.

Nielsen also draws attention to the presence of a trademark Foucauldian theme in Douglass's life: the "intimate relation" between knowledge and power (58). Douglass was first given reading lessons by Sophie Auld, the wife of his master, Thomas Auld. When Mr. Auld discovered that his wife was teaching Douglass to read, he immediately put an end to the activities, as he understood that educating slaves could produce discontentment. Douglass remained active in seeking educational opportunities wherever possible, but found that the enlightenment of his mind also brought sorrow and torment in light of his physical captivity. According to Nielsen, this conflict between mental freedom and physical

enslavement reveals the presence of an *a priori* human need for freedom: "Douglass's literacy, while no doubt providing him a new and invaluable mental freedom, nonetheless, was insufficient for a flesh-and-blood, embodied *human* being to flourish in *this* world." (p. 60) Foucault is once again brought to the discussion as Nielsen reminds us that his theory of power relations requires the presence of ultimately free subjects beneath layers of social construction. Though Douglass's subjectivity was constructed as a slave-subject, at his very core there remained an ontologically free being.

Nielsen's fourth chapter, "Fanon on Decolonizing Colonized Subjectivities and the Quest for an Historically Attuned Symphonic Humanism," presents the contributions of Frantz Fanon, a 20th century psychiatrist/philosopher/revolutionary from Martinique whose experiences within predominantly white French intellectual circles, as well as his activities as a member of the National Liberation Front in the Algerian Revolution, gave him special insight into the psychology of colonialism and oppression. Fanon's work provides a social-psychological account of racism, one derived from his own experiences in a world dominated by Imperialism. Nielsen brings Fanon into the discussion particularly for his descriptions of how racial identities, or identities of inferiority, are socially constructed, prescribed, and finally internalized by those they are intended to subjugate.

Nielsen relays a story from *Black Skin, White Masks*, in which Fanon is confronted with the "white gaze" while riding on a train. As a young child cries, "Look! A Negro!" and draws attention to Fanon's presence, he does not only become conscious of the white gaze through which he is viewed within society, but also gains an awareness of his own ability to see himself through that gaze. Nielsen relates Fanon's experience of the white gaze to Foucault's description of Bentham's Panopticon as a structure built for maximal surveillance capabilities. The design of the Panopticon places the subjects of surveillance in a position where they believe they are under constant surveillance, though they cannot see their observers. This inability to see their observer creates a situation in which people act as if they are being observed, though in reality there may be no one actually observing them. Foucault shows how social norms, expressed "Panoptically" via institutions, discourses, and practices, authoritatively operate to shape human beings into particular subject formations. Likewise, the white gaze transmits a history, an account of racism that operates to transform its subject. According to Fanon, the white gaze embodies a historico-racial schema that is forced upon an "Other" until she inscribes it, and internalizes it as a primary constitutive foundation of her identity.

Fanon argues that this social prescription, this "out-sourcing" of one's history and identity, must be rejected, and that new narratives of selfhood must overwrite the biographies contained within the white gaze. Nielsen points out that Fanon's philosophy "acknowledges the black person's agency or active participation in the present unfolding of this already given white-scripted history" (83). Though Fanon recognizes the potential difficulty in acting against the great constraints of social influence, the presence of this underlying agency is once again determined by Nielsen to be the critical ontological fact that permits acts of resistance, and self re-narration.

In chapter five, “Duns Scotus and Multidimensional Freedom,” Nielsen invites the work of the medieval philosopher-theologian John Duns Scotus into the discussion. In the previous chapters on Foucault, Douglass, and Fanon, Nielsen continually points to the ways in which their philosophies imply the existence of a foundational free self as the site where processes of social construction operate. Nielsen now reveals Scotus’s ontology of human freedom to be the missing ingredient, the final piece of the puzzle that allows the existence of a field of possibility for the elaboration of the other writers’ emancipatory theories. Up to this point in the book, Nielsen is largely focused on describing social constructionist accounts of subject formation, and showing how the effects of social construction can be overridden; Scotus is important to this discussion because his ontology of human freedom can provide justification for the reasons *why* we ought to oppose any form of oppressive subjectification.

According to Nielsen, Scotus bases his ontology of freedom in his characterization of will as a “distinct, active, self-determining power” (103). For Scotus, will is distinguished from intellect in that it exhibits flexibility, and freedom of choice. For example, intellect is limited in that it can only assent to propositions without real alternatives, such as “2+2=4.” Conversely, will operates in situations where one must choose from a set of possibilities. In Nielsen’s words, Scotus concludes that “will constitutes a rational faculty with a greater operational extension and thus a greater operational capacity than that of the intellect” (107). The primacy of will in this sense is significant, as it draws attention to the primordial freedom in which will is exercised.

Nielsen claims that Scotus’s account of metaphysical freedom “helps us to understand and to explain why humans typically resist the kind of dominating, inflexible relations of which Foucault disapproves but has no recourse to defend or justify” (104). This account can also help us understand how “resistance to oppressive regimes and dominating relations is a fairly constant, empirical, and transcultural phenomenon” (104). Thus, by bringing Scotus into dialogue with Foucault, Nielsen is able to synthesize a philosophical system in which we may understand how power and resistance function in human relations, as well as an ontology that supports the creation and preservation of freedom in those very relations.

In the final, recapitulatory chapter, Nielsen once again echoes Césaire’s triplets; this time, however, the timbre of the statements has changed. Whereas the first set of triplets denounced the injustice of oppressive, prescribed destinies, this final set conveys the hope that lies in the possibility of re-writing the narrative of human lives as:

- A faith-strengthening narrative: that is, a narrative that affirms our finitude and frailty, as well as our relational dependence;
- A hope-inspiring narrative: that is, a narrative that does not deny the dislocation of this world yet compels us to manifest the “not yet” in the “already”;
- A love-engendering narrative: that is, a narrative that allows multiple voices to contribute distinctive melodies to an unfinished symphonic masterpiece (148).

Nielsen's synthetic work in *Foucault, Douglass, Fanon, and Scotus in Dialogue* is of great value as a wonderful example of how philosophers can construct liberating and emancipatory theories by harmonizing the ideas of the many great thinkers we revere within the philosophical canon. Too often we find ourselves mired in combative work, hunting for the weaknesses in the arguments of our philosophical adversaries. Nielsen's approach reminds us that ideas can be blended into beautiful configurations, in the same way that blending colors on a painter's palette can yield all of the hues required to reflect the way we see the world.

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