

Subjective Elasticity, the “Zone of Nonbeing” and Fanon’s New Humanism in *Black Skin, White Masks*

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The primary aim of this paper is to conduct a schematic close reading of Frantz Fanon’s shifting subjectivity in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952). This is an understated aim, perhaps, when viewed in the austere light of much loftier appropriations of the text by, for example, postcolonial and identity theory. Yet it is striking that such a study is still to be done, especially when one considers the quantity of critical attention Fanon has received over the years. In seeking to explicate the elastic narratorial patterns displayed in *Black Skin*, this article looks, as it were, to resituate the horse before the cart, the text before the theory; and, in doing so, to seek to better understand the ways in which Fanon, via the existential declivity he labels “the zone of nonbeing,” embarks on his often discussed and frequently maligned “new humanism” (7).

The all-too-easy bracketing or dismissal of *Black Skin*’s nascent humanism relies on the contention that—bereft of all options—Fanon simply “magics” a universalising, de-racialised brotherhood out of thin air. Yet such readings underplay (or simply ignore) the textual dynamics that lead to the possibility of such a vision in the first place. In this article I argue that Fanon’s intricately coded subjective positions open up a *space* in which this humanism can unfurl, and whilst the practicality of this vision can be (and frequently is) questioned, it is clear that its *function* within the text deserves closer scrutiny. This is especially true when we consider that the humanistic frameworks and ideas developed in the final chapter of *Black Skin* still resonate with current thinking in cosmopolitanism and alterity studies.

In a similar manner to the way in which Ross Posnock argues in *Color & Culture* (1998) that one can find in Fanon, as in Du Bois, an effort to “displace the originary Cartesian subject by deriving identity from action” (88) rather than from pre-established and “raced” categories, here I argue that there is within *Black Skin* a humanistic perspective or ethos based upon a performative and raceless (rather than original and “authentic”) identity, and that in order to discern it, one must take seriously, rather than denigrate, the imaginative “leap” that underpins Fanon’s grand restaging of colonial selfhood. Fanon’s “performative cosmopolitanism” (88), to borrow a phrase from Posnock, flickers to life from the depths of nonbeing, and it emerges, not from some last-ditch effort to salvage the text from itself, but rather, from a series of delicately framed textual triggers that work to encode, and then to work through, the objectifying machinery of colonial representation.

None of this is to say, of course, that Fanon's fluid subjectivity in *Black Skin* has escaped notice altogether. David Macey correctly points out in *Fanon: A Life* (2000) that "the 'I' that speaks [. . .] is often a persona" (161-162); Robert Young makes reference to the "visceral experiential language" of the text ("Fanon . . ." 39); and Jean Khalfa comments that Fanon constantly shifts "from the scientific 'we' (the psychiatrist/philosopher) to the subjective 'I' (the self as consciousness), to the objective 'he' (the self as *nègre*, 'negro' or 'nigger')" ("My Body . . ." 43). What escapes these analyses, however, is the function that such "experiential language" serves within the text itself. Khalfa probably comes closest to describing this function through the racially inflected category of "he," which operates as a sort of repository for racist vernacular, prejudices, and stereotypes, but even this is a simplification of matters. For what is crucial in *Black Skin* is the way in which Fanon's subjective "I" *traverses* both the scientific "we" and the objective "he." Intermittently throughout the text, the self-as-consciousness absorbs the self-as-psychiatrist and the self-as-"negro," and in doing so, gradually accumulates the stories, myths, discourses, and misinformation that surround the colonial subject in French-run Martinique. Khalfa's tripartite structure thus becomes a far more mutable configuration; and it is with this new, elasticised self-consciousness in mind that Fanon's descent into nonbeing, as well as his subsequent new humanism, can be considered in a new light.

There are around sixteen instances within *Black Skin* where the subjective flickering described above could be documented and analysed. For the sake of brevity, this paper focuses only on those that appear most structurally important to the work as a whole. These are organised around Fanon's analyses concerning Jean Veneuse, Octave Mannoni, and Mayotte Capécia.¹

To begin, then, here are the opening lines to Chapter Three, "The man of color and the white woman":

Out of the blackest part of my soul, across the zebra striping of my mind, surges this desire to be suddenly *white*.
 I wish to be acknowledged not as *black* but as *white*. Now—and this is a form of recognition that Hegel had not envisaged—who but a white woman can do this for me? By loving me she proves that I am worthy of white love. I am loved like a white man.
 I am a white man.
 Her love takes me onto the noble road that leads to total realization . . .
 I marry white culture, white beauty, white whiteness.
 When my restless hands caress those white breasts, they grasp white civilization and dignity and make them mine. (63)

Fanon's engagement here with the prejudicial vocabulary of the black stereotype and the mythic wish for racial ascension through white love is obviously far beyond that of an impartial adjudicator. If these are case notes, then the subject is not some lovelorn resident of the Saint Albern Psychiatric Center, but Fanon himself, imbued with an identity more desirous than rational, more grasping than constrained. We subsequently see the same pattern (and in fact the same subject matter)

repeated later in the chapter during a close-reading of René Maran's novel *Un homme pareil aux autres* (1947), where, following an extended quotation from Maran's text, Fanon offers the following commentary:

What a struggle to free himself of a purely subjective conflict. I am a white man, I was born in Europe, all my friends are white. There are not eight Negroes in the city where I live [. . .] I am European, do you understand? (70)

The shift from third- to first-person narration, free of any punctuated demarcation, portrays once again the flexibility of Fanon's subjective stance. The "I" is not (strictly) Fanon, of course, for he was not born in Europe but Martinique, yet as a vehicle for experience, this roving first-person pronoun, ever distorting its own boundaries and limits, is able to assume the life of Veneuse, along with his prejudices, alienation and neuroses. Fanon later goes on to address Veneuse in the light of Germaine Guex's little-known psychoanalytic text *La Névrose d'abandon* (in which abandonment neurosis is discussed), and once again the same pattern is shown. Fanon begins by stating that Guex's description fits Veneuse perfectly, yet upon further elaboration he slips *back* into the first person: "What is going on here? Two Processes. I do not want to be loved. Why not? Because once, very long ago, I attempted an object relation and I was *abandoned*" (74). Again, just three pages later Fanon traverses the same dichotomy with the following line: "He is called back. He is needed. He is loved. And yet what fantasies. Does she really love me? Does she look at me objectively?" (77).

As should by now be clear, then, Fanon's first-person narrative is rarely static. His "I" apprehends texts, people, and scenarios, absorbing new stereotypes and racisms, to form a volatile and explosive amalgam. Just over the course of a single chapter, Fanon has assumed at least *four* subjective positions: the black man lusting over the white woman, Jean Veneuse, Jean Veneuse in relation to Guex, and as Frantz Fanon—the author and psychiatrist. (We could even augment this list with other, silent voices, like that of René Maran *writing* the character of Veneuse.) Yet this really only becomes important when Fanon attempts to disengage Veneuse from the contextualising thesis of the book as a whole—when, at that crucial moment, he writes, "I contend that Jean Veneuse represents not an example of black-white relations, but a certain mode of behaviour in a neurotic who by co-incidence is black" (79), and "I should like to think that I have discouraged any endeavours to connect the defeats of Jean Veneuse with the greater or lesser concentration of melanin in his epidermis" (81). In one movement, here, the detailed discussion of Veneuse, together with his psychological make-up, has been torn away from the issue of race. Fanon is saying, and rightly so, that to attempt to abstract a universal model from a particular case-study, especially if the case-study is a literary invention, is completely unjustified. Veneuse, Fanon argues, is an example only of a neurotic: colour is incidental to his condition, and had it not been present, he would have manufactured another objective difference "out of nothing" (79).

This intrinsic movement works on two interconnected levels in the text. Firstly, and most apparently, it frees Veneuse from his racial stranglehold. Fanon has, to paraphrase an aim stated in *Black Skin's* introduction, analysed this particular psycho-existential complex to destruction (12). In doing so, however, a secondary (and less perceptible) consequence arises, since Fanon's "I," marked by the dangerous and pervasive residue of its contents, *retains* the racially inscribed interpretation of Veneuse that was so ably sloughed off under scrutiny. A clear distinction has thus been made: whilst Veneuse can be liberated from his bondage through Fanon's psychiatric arsenal, *Fanon's* identity—or, more correctly, his performative *identification* with the collective identity of the black man—remains trapped by untruths, myths, stereotypes, and neuroses. His shifting, polymorphous "I" has knitted the material of the chapter together into an imbricated whole, yet through doing so it has accumulated and retained the racist vernacular and ideas that come to constitute, for Fanon, the culturally imposed collective unconscious of the black man living under colonial conditions.

In the discussion of Dominique Octave Mannoni's *Prospero and Caliban* (1964) in Chapter Four of the text, we find Fanon displaying a similar pattern. Mannoni's apologist thesis is that there exists in colonised societies an in-built and pre-existing (as in, pre-contact) dependency complex that makes colonial subjects particularly suitable for and susceptible to subjugation—the argument being that colonialism is merely following the natural order of things according to psychological constitution. Here is Fanon's fierce critique of this perspective:

if at a certain stage he has been led to ask himself whether he is indeed a man, it is because his reality as a man has been challenged. In other words, I begin to suffer from not being a white man to the degree that the white man imposes discrimination on me, makes me a colonized native, robs me of all worth, all individuality, tells me that I am a parasite on the world, that I must bring myself as quickly as possible into step with the white world, "that I am a brute beast, that my people and I are like a walking dung-heap that disgustingly fertilizes sweet sugar cane and silky cotton, that I have no use in the world." (98)

Interesting here is that we are presented with both unpunctuated *and* punctuated subjective intercessions. First we are given what we might call, for the purposes of this discussion, a normative shift in subjectivity, where the objectified Malagasy third person ("*his* reality as a man") segues into Fanon's ever-expanding first person ("*I* begin to suffer"). This is the same shift as outlined above, and through it we find Mannoni's "intextuated" Malagasy native internalised by Fanon during analysis. The additional, quoted "I"—that of Aimé Césaire via his negritude poem *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (1939)—then presents yet another pejorative (and animalistic) depiction of black existence under slavery. There is, however, a conspicuous constancy of tone between Fanon's assumed subjectivity and Césaire's poetic "I" that works to undercut punctuated demarcation. Without skipping a beat, the sentence integrates Césaire into its imposing rhythm (or maybe it is the other way around?), and in doing so makes plain the

causticity of Mannoni's cod-psychology (which is of course just one racist discourse among many others). Fanon's absorption of objectified Malagasy selfhood thus quickly becomes *Césaire's* prerogative, just as Césaire's brutal description of slavery in the Caribbean (in the name of negritude) becomes Fanon's and, in turn, the Malagasy's. This scriptural process, then, operates in a combinative, accumulative, and circular manner, with each layer of imposed text reverberating endlessly (like in a feedback loop) within the unconscious. Within such a system there is no minor discursive offence; even the most innocuous of sentiments, once caught in the loop, can create a din loud enough to rupture subjectivity.

Another brief example worthy of note is in Chapter Two, "The Woman of Color and the White Man," in which Fanon comes to subsume the Manichean structure that impelled him to write the book in the first place. The focus of the chapter is Mayotte Capécia's autobiography *Je suis Martiniquaise* (1948), a book in which the author, a black woman living in Martinique, aspires to better herself through finding a white husband. Perhaps more than any other text to feature in *Black Skin*, this angers Fanon, who labels it "cut-rate merchandise [and] a sermon in the praise of corruption" (42). Following a stern critique of the book, Fanon offers the following observations:

It would seem indeed that for her white and black represent the two poles of a world, two poles in perpetual conflict: a genuinely Manichean concept of the world; the word has been spoken, it must be remembered—white or black, that is the question.

I am white: that is to say that I possess beauty and virtue, which have never been black. I am the color of daylight . . .

I am black: I am the incarnation of a complete fusion with the world, an intuitive understanding of the earth, an abandonment of my ego in the heart of the cosmos . . . (44-45)

Over the course of three sentences, Capécia's diametric perception of the world—black as repository for all that white is not—is absorbed by Fanon's elastic subjectivity, and a book he considers dangerous now inhabits his unconscious mind. Both black and white, yet wholly black, the emblematic subjectivity of Fanon (as universal exemplar) takes on and *retains* this Manichaeism, which is etched acquisitively onto the skin, silently possessing its host until disjuncture arrives. It is such divisiveness that fuels the shadism present in Fanon's depiction of Martinique—"That would be all we need, to be taken for niggers!" (26)—and which, in a very real sense, underpins the driving thematics of *Black Skin* as a whole.

It is of little wonder, then, that when Fanon becomes aware of this edifice holding together his identity with the words "Look, a Negro!" (109), "*T' bursts apart*."

As already mentioned, there are many other instances of subjective elasticity in *Black Skin* that could have been called upon, but the examples cited above should be sufficient to demonstrate the intricately coded, culturally imposed subjectivity at work in the text. In order to explicate how this subjectivity results in Fanon's descent into

nonbeing, however, it is important first to retrace our steps slightly and to engage with Fanon's existentialism and his treacherous encounter with the Other.

Jean-Paul Sartre was hugely (if complicatedly) influential in Fanon's thinking, and many of his works, particularly *Black Orpheus* (1948) and *Anti-Semite and Jew* (1960), feature heavily in *Black Skin*. The ambivalence of this relationship can be seen in the long sections of the text devoted to the applicability and eventual modification or rejection of Sartrean models. Sartre's relegation of negritude to a self-negating term in a Hegelian dialectic, which Fanon describes as "a blow that can never be forgiven" (133), is a famous case in point. And so is Fanon's fluctuating stance regarding Jewish and black brotherhood, which shifts from kinship—"Anti-Semitism hits me head on: I am enraged, I am bled white by an appalling battle" (88)—to fundamental difference—"the Jew can be unknown in his Jewishness. He is not wholly what he is [. . .] But in my case everything takes on a new guise. I am given no chance. I am overdetermined from without" (115-116).

This logic of sameness and difference probably reaches its purest form, however, during Fanon's brief but important discussion of Sartre's existentialism in *Being and Nothingness* (1957)—a text less quoted in *Black Skin* than *Black Orpheus* and *Anti-Semite and Jew*, but certainly no less influential. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre presents his encounter with otherness thusly: "I am in a public park. Not far away there is a lawn and along the edge of that lawn there are benches. A man passes by those benches. I see this man; I apprehend him as an object and at the same time as a man" (277). Crucially, of course, this is a reciprocal model founded upon mutual recognition: it is not possible to look at the man as one might look at the grass, since this objectifying gaze would be countered by another consciousness capable of the same act (280). Fanon's racial intercession into this model, however, transmogrifies it from mutuality to "crushing objecthood" (109), producing a new brand of devastating existentialism along the way. The differentiating factor, Fanon explains in a footnote, is this:

Though Sartre's speculations on the existence of The Other may be correct (to the extent, we must remember, to which *Being and Nothingness* describes an alienated consciousness), their application to a black consciousness proves fallacious. That is because the white man is not only The Other but also the master, whether real or imaginary. (138)

In adapting white European existentialist thought to black Martinican experience, Fanon discovers that the parameters change. Rather than endorse reciprocity, the all-enveloping power of colonialism produces a subjective rupture that actively works to undercut it: "the black man stops behaving as an actional person. The goal of his behaviour will be The Other (in the guise of the white man), for The Other alone can give him worth" (154). In Fanon's encounter, therefore, there is a white "double vision" created through the objectifying gaze of the white man coupled with the culturally inscribed myth of white

superiority retained within the collective unconscious of the black man (“I”). Outside of this double vision sits the Manichean scapegoat, lying dormant until the first moment of contact between white and black, but since, as Fanon argues, “the white man chooses the black man for this [scapegoat] function and the black man who is white also chooses the black man” (192), the only avenue left open is *self*-objectification.

Here, of course, we are in the territory of Sartrean shame, described in *Being and Nothingness* as “the recognition of the fact that I *am* indeed that object which the other is looking at and judging” (285). For Fanon it is the impact of the words “Look, a Negro!” and the subjective inscriptions that preceded them (“I”)—plus a persistently absent Other who is “hostile but not opaque, transparent, not there” (112)—that produces this nauseating process of self-objectification. And it is the devastating power of this process that is described in the most famous section of *Black Skin*, “The Lived Experience of the Black Man,” where Fanon himself violently oscillates between objecthood and selfhood in an effort to actuate his being.²

In “The Lived Experience of the Black Man,” we find Fanon-the-psychiatrist subsumed into his own case-study: “I” bursts open, and with it comes every inscription, myth and stereotype etched onto his (emblematic) subjectivity. Borrowing from the title of the text from when it was initially (and somewhat remarkably) submitted as Fanon’s thesis for his medical degree, it is within this crucial chapter that the dialectical complexities involved in colonial “disalienation” are fully (and personally) worked through by the author.³ That such provenance suggests, at root, that *Black Skin* was to serve originally as something of a psychological intervention into the psychoses wrought by French colonialism makes both the personal and overtly disheartening nature of the testimony all the more surprising. *Black Skin*’s adapted existentialism results, after all, and somewhat paradoxically, in a terrifying descent into *nonbeing*, yet it is only from this declivitous zone, Fanon argues, that the casting off of such accumulated myths and stereotypes (or what we might like to call “disalienation”) can begin, and that an “authentic upheaval can be born” (8). One must be “ready to see what is happening at the very depths” (Fanon, *Black* 195) to resurrect selfhood. The antinomy that is Fanonian existentialism, then, contains the absolute negation of existence as its source of germination: nothingness and infinity (140) are its soil and water, self-determination its sun.

Perhaps predictably, as Paget Henry points out in “Fanon, African and Afro-Caribbean Philosophy,” any move made to actuate being under such conditions must tread exceptionally carefully, since “[e]ach time it [the ego] attempts to constitute itself, the effort ends in collapse [. . .] In Fanon’s language, this is an ego that has no ontological resistance to the look and evaluation of the white” (*Black* 232). Conflictingly, then, the zone of nonbeing is both volatile and nurturing, leaving the dissolved ego locked into a perpetual tug-of-war between poles of existence—between emergent selfhood and racist objectification. Over the course of the chapter, this conceptual zone is

tested and reified, and Fanon discovers that the cultural machinery in place dissolves anything other than nonbeing: history, reason, creativity, and negritude all prove, as developmental stages, to be ill-equipped at exploding the mythic framework both within and without the subject: “Every hand was a losing hand for me . . . I wanted to be typically Negro—it was no longer possible. I wanted to be white—that was a joke” (132). In order to answer this seemingly intractable paradox (nonbeing as both cause *and* effect of being) Fanon determines, in typically Sartrean phraseology, to introduce “invention into existence” (229). But to ascertain clues as to how this invention is able to give birth to authentic selfhood, we need to return just briefly to Sartre’s existentialism.

For Sartre, nothingness is the defining characteristic of the being-for-itself, since the being-for-itself (i.e. a human being), as opposed to the being-in-itself (i.e. a tree), has no determined essence or fixity; it must create itself through acting in the world, and this creation, driven by the inherent *lack* of the for-itself in relation to the unconscious plenitude of the in-itself, continues in perpetuity. To question being requires a prerequisite of nothingness as its “origin and foundation” (46), since it is only through the possibility of negation that such questions can be posed in the first place.

Within this framework, Fanon’s “nothingness,” his zone of nonbeing, is transformed from disempowerment and objectification into an empowering ability to inject invention into existence; and his notion of “infinity” now expresses the hope of exponentially extending this invention. Seen in this light, Homi Bhabha’s critique of *Black Skin* in *The Location of Culture* (1994) seems to have missed the point:

If the order of Western historicism is disturbed in the colonial state of emergency, even more deeply disturbed is the social and psychic representation of the human subject. For the very nature of humanity becomes estranged in the colonial condition and from that “naked declivity” it emerges, not as an assertion of will nor an evocation of freedom. But as an enigmatic questioning . . . What does the black man want? (59-60)

For Bhabha, such questioning fulfils no emancipative or formative potential. To ask “what does a black man want?” is enigmatic to the point of obfuscation, and thus clouds the emergence of self-determination and freedom. But Bhabha here has disengaged Fanon from his Sartrean foundation and, in doing so, effectively shuts down his nascent existential humanism in one blow. (He in fact goes on to describe this humanism rather witheringly as being “as banal as it is beatific” [87].) In re-establishing this important foundation, however, Bhabha’s nullifying critique of Fanon’s “enigmatic questioning” transforms from a stultifying absence of freedom and will into a perpetual if fragile empowerment of those selfsame qualities. Fanon’s interrogatives require nothingness as a prerequisite, and this nothingness in turn substantiates the very *presence* of freedom and will: they are searching questions with no definitive answers, and their enigmatic qualities conform to the anti-determinist sentiment that runs throughout the spine of *Black Skin*. As Fanon succinctly puts it in the

final line of the text, “O my body, make of me always a man who questions!” (232).

Fanon’s resolution, therefore, is grounded in European existentialism: his wish to “recapture [his] past, validate it, or condemn it through [his] successive choices” (228) echoes the facticity of Sartrean memory and signals a rejection of bad faith, just as his assertion that “I am my own foundation” (231) conforms to Sartrean philosophy in its rejection of all determinism (Macey, 186).

The issue, however, is that emanating from this internal solution, grounded in invention, choice, and will, is a human relationship based upon *reciprocity*, which has already been shown by Fanon to be unworkable under colonial conditions. We return, then, to the paradox of being (where nonbeing is both the cause and effect of being), since Fanon’s demand for “human behaviour from the other” (229) is immediately quashed by the subjective elasticity that preceded it. For Sonia Kruks (as for Bhabha), this paradox is the damning “gulf” that lies at the heart of *Black Skin*, and she argues in “Fanon, Sartre, and Identity Politics” (and largely repeats in her monograph *Retrieving Experience: Subjectivity and Recognition in Feminist Politics* [2001]), that Fanon’s attempt to “leap so abruptly across” this gulf represents nothing more than “abstract universalism” (132). Through this reading, the void between Sartrean existentialism and everyday black existence becomes irreconcilable, since any move to seal over the divide inevitably abstracts the text from its historical and cultural particularity, which in turn depoliticises its message—a point Kruks in fact makes when she writes that “to affirm one’s identity is not, in itself, to change the world” (133).

Yet this inhibiting reading of Fanon acknowledges the *presence* of the paradox without assessing its *function* in the text. To be sure, the flying leap that Fanon makes reveals a structural lacuna at the heart of *Black Skin*, but it is only through enacting this leap that Fanon is able to dispel the undermining “I” that haunts his Sartrean resolution and destabilises the foundations of his humanistic vision. The paradox functions, in this regard, as a demolition job of sorts, a space-clearing device through which a new and fertile nothingness, free from the ocular imprisonment of Sartrean thinking, can emerge at the heart of colonial being. This new space for actuation is thus a restaging of nothingness from European existentialist terms into deracialised, non-specular terms: a grand vision, undoubtedly, and one that will require precisely that difficult and excluded element in Kruks’s reading—namely, a “restructuring of the world” (82).

As previously mentioned, it is the reliance on vision that largely fuels this non/being paradox, since contained within the look of the Other are the cultural inscriptions that cause self-objectification and shame. Here is Fanon’s description of the process:

I am being dissected under white eyes, the only real eyes. I am *fixed*. Having adjusted their microtomes, they objectively cut slices of my reality. I am laid bare. I feel, I see in those white faces that it is not a new man who has come in, but a new kind of man, a new genus. Why, it’s a Negro! (116)

The objectifying gaze here operates as a prison of anonymity: one black person becomes all black people, and through this collectivisation the group are hypostasised and held in place. In *The Pleasures of Exile* (1960), George Lamming describes this succinctly as a “way of seeing” (57), and it is clear from his analysis that it is as destructive as it is quotidian. Writing of an elderly English lady’s reference to colonial postmarks and stamps, he comments:

Black stamps! We must be clear about her meaning. She didn’t simply mean Negro; she meant stamps marked Africa or India, China, or the West Indies. One kind, honest and courteous old woman had fixed almost two thirds of the world’s population with one word. (57)

This old lady’s way of seeing is comprehensively flattening. In creating a tabula rasa of blackness, she dissolves selfhood at conception and, once again, creates a repository for a Manichean framing of the world. This “livery” of blackness, as Fanon puts it, is worn at the behest of white society, and it is devastatingly inscribed by ways of seeing. The all-pervading “I” of cultural inscription is enforced imperceptibly through the act of visual perception, and as long as being-for-itself remains rooted in this visual (which is to say, racial) realm, there can only be one outcome: negation. David Theo Goldberg’s answer to this problem in his essay “In/Visibility and Super/Vision: Fanon on Race, Veils, and Discourses of Resistance” is therefore a neat one: if visibility results in objectification, why not try *invisibility*?

Invisible at the margins, the marginalized can challenge and sometimes ignore visible power at the very visible and cumbersome center . . . In a passing reversal, the formerly invisible may become momentarily visible, while the formerly visible are frozen at the margins of their own fabrication. (199)

This answer is an important one, and becomes increasingly so when seen in the light of Fanon’s later text, *Studies in a Dying Colonialism* (1959), in which the very “unveiling” of Algeria assumes a vertiginous and revolutionary symbolism (36-68). In relation to the humanistic ethos of *Black Skin*, however, it is still only a first step. In aligning *invisibility* with potential empowerment, Goldberg creates a camouflaged resistance hidden from the dominant way of seeing and, in doing so, grants anonymity to the subjugated, who are “[i]nvisible to the conqueror” and therefore able to “delimit the power of the coloniser over their lives” (181). Goldberg does not elaborate the extent of this delimitation, though, and his insistence on eventual visible recognition, violent or otherwise, works to mute the transformative power of this *invisibility*. His analyses of the Los Angeles riots, South African apartheid, and Aboriginal assimilation are all important cultural examples of the invisible becoming visible, but they are still nonetheless caught up in the hierarchical binary pair of in/visibility that Fanon is seemingly seeking to transcend in *Black Skin*.

In *The Wretched of the Earth* (1967), of course, we find an increasingly actional politics not predicated on the rejection of

visibility (in fact, the opposite is true), but with Fanon's first book we have a laboratory of sorts for a radical new humanism that travels *beyond* invisibility and its dependence on visibility, to an authentic, which is to say *deracialised* and *performative*, communication that transcends ways of seeing.

This is not to say that Fanon discards the self/Other model outright. As Charles Villet elaborates in "Hegel and Fanon on the Question of Mutual Recognition" (2011), subjective action and humanistic values must, if they are to gain traction, come bound up with an "affirmation of differences" separate from, but contained within, any form of universalising impulse (46).⁴ Fanon still recognizes that for authentic communication to be possible there requires, in Hegelian terms, a sense of "being acknowledged," and, by extension, a sense of difference and of particularity. It is more likely that Fanon alters the terms of this differential acknowledgement so that its dependence on the gaze can be neutralised and its hierarchy (somewhat) flattened:

Superiority? Inferiority?
Why not the quite simple attempt to touch the other, to feel the other, to explain the other to myself?
Was my freedom not given to me then in order to build the world of the *You*?
At the conclusion of this study, I want the world to recognize, with me, the open door to every consciousness.

My final prayer:
O my body, make of me always a man who questions! (231-32)

The mode of engagement between self and Other here deserves closer scrutiny, since it is rarely static. Initially, Fanon works to flatten the hierarchical distinction implicit in the culturally inscribed self/Other binary and, in doing so, dispels the gaze as a tool of imposition. In its stead, we have communication founded on the *tactility* of the skin ("to touch the other") and the *vibrations* of the vocal chords ("to explain the other"). The conspicuous absence of the body, however, in relation to the "the open door of every consciousness" suggests that even corporeal awareness may prove extraneous, or at the very least that the body's position within Fanon's humanism is attenuated and subtle. And indeed, with the incantation that closes the quotation (and the book), we return to the body as a mode of actuation, and as a vehicle for the questioning that projects ever-outwards into the (modified) nothingness of the non/being paradox.

This flickering body, then, both present and absent, corporeal and apparitional, maintains a sort of palimpsestic, translucent (for want of a better, less ocular word) determinacy for Fanon, whereby it can escape the ocular imposition of the gaze yet still retain an integrity, difference, and history that maintains the separation of self and Other and enables authentic communication via new channels. Thus, the way to escape the encasing inscriptions of the all-pervasive "I" is to dissipate the shell of the body into new modes of non-visual, non-racial acknowledgement. And it is only from the "gulf" that yawns open at

the heart of Fanon's text that such a "restructuring of the world," with "combined action on the individual and on the group" (100), can commence. Like a fragile, toppling form, this humanism, free from the dual imposition of "I" and eye, emerges from the space carved open by the paradoxical application of Sartrean existentialism to black lived experience. It grows, as it were, cautiously, from a dense and fertile nothing.

One could argue, in fact, that we get a sense of both the promise and fragility of such a humanistic ethos through Fanon's robust identification with Algeria in *Wretched of the Earth*, in which he speaks freely, and in wholly performative terms, of "We Algerians" (152) and "We African politicians" (154). Fanon possessed, as Posnock notes, a "lavish indifference to origins or limits, be they of homeland or of 'blood'" (91), and this "world citizenry," to put it in the terms of Diogenes, allowed for a cosmopolitan and performative identification beyond the messy substance of corporeality. That such affection was fed predominantly by Fanon's astonishment and anger at French colonial racism does go some way to expressing the inherent limits and contradictions of such an all-inclusive "cosmopolitanism," as does the fact that after Fanon's death there were moves made in Algeria to actively distance the revolution from Fanon's direct (and distinctly *external*) influence (Posnock 96). To say this is merely to highlight that what Fanon boldly proposes in the final chapter of *Black Skin* is difficult and precarious, and caught always in the trap of identitarian (and therefore fixating) politics. It is not that Fanon is simply declaring a state of play, or switching on some cosmopolitan light; it is, rather, as the final two lines of the book make clear, a "prayer" or incantation, aimed horizon-ward, filled with action, with questions and with nothingness, that is being offered up to us, as readers, in the hope of an improving future. But it is not without risk.

In excavating the (dis)connections between Fanon's subjective elasticity, Sartrean foundation, and humanistic vision, it should become clear that the summary dismissal of Fanon's grand leap as "banal" or "abstract" overlooks the complex textual mechanics that provide a space big enough for the author to stretch his legs in the first place. The nothingness that yawns open at the heart of *Black Skin* is anything but empty; it is, in fact, *both full of potential and marked by history*. Derek Walcott writes perceptively in a similar vein in his essay "Culture or Mimicry?" (1974), a text concerned largely with countering Vidia Naipaul's indictment of West Indian creativity as nothing but imitation (and therefore worthy of nothing). For Walcott, as for Fanon, this idea of nothingness-as-vacancy belies the generative agency that exists at its centre. Rather than signifying nothing, as Naipaul contends, this "empty" mimicry actually becomes a resource for new forms of identification based on "imagination as necessity" (6)—on, as it were, a regenerative mimicry, made from nothing, but one that transcends base imitation. Fanon's reproduction of the prejudicial vocabulary of racism throughout *Black Skin* is a form of this active mimicry, and it results in a (generative) nothingness that can only be negotiated (or leapt over) through imaginative and

ongoing processes of performative identification, as opposed to fixed, ocular identity. To borrow an apt sentence from Walcott, it is true that Fanon's zone of nonbeing is "littered with the despairs of broken systems and of failed experiments, that the river, stilled, may reflect, mirror, mimic other images, *but that is not its depth*" (6, my emphasis).

To summarily dismiss Fanon's new humanism as "banal" or "abstract" is to look only at the littered reflection *on* the water without testing its depth—that is, without understanding the delicate textual triggers that work, via an attenuated, colonial form of existential nothingness, to forge a theoretical space into which this new humanism can unfurl. Fanon's vision for humanity, as well as his roving first-person pronoun and ambivalent relationship with Sartre, are not simply textual quirks or beatific universalisms, but rather integral *functioning* components of a far-reaching and complicatedly cosmopolitan text that seeks, prior to the violence of *The Wretched of the Earth*, to envision a world where (post)colonial relationships might be reformulated along performative, deracialised lines, rather than on race, blood, and firm beginnings.

Notes

1. Given the myriad influences Fanon draws upon in *Black Skin, White Masks*—ranging from psychiatry, philosophy and anthropology, to poetry, prose and, of course, personal experience—a certain amount of critical selection has been necessary here. The later focus, for example, on Fanon's adapted Sartrean resolution comes at the expense of dealing with the influence of Hegel's dialectic of recognition (extrapolated by Fanon in Chapter 7 of *Black Skin*, "The Negro and Recognition"), or that of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. So as to retain a critical focus, however, and since it is Sartre that features most prominently during Fanon's crucial descent into the "zone of nonbeing," the discussion draws most extensively from this relationship, over and above others. For more on Fanon's Hegelian adaptation, see Charles Villet's "Hegel and Fanon on the Question of Mutual Recognition: A Comparative Analysis" (2011)—discussed briefly above—and for Merleau-Ponty, see Jeremy Weate's "Fanon, Merleau-Ponty and the Difference of Phenomenology" (2001).

2. This chapter heading is taken from David Macey's correction of Charles Lam Markmann's original translation "The Fact of Blackness."

3. The full title of the thesis was "Essay on the Disalienation of the Black."

4. Villet's argument, in fact, mirrors to some extent the revisionist ethos of this discussion, only in Hegelian rather than Sartrean terms. Villet's thesis is that contained within the seemingly bleak marriage between the Hegelian master-slave dialectic and Fanonian philosophy there resides some kernel of optimism, a dim point of light or

mutuality somewhere beyond the violence and servitude, that might be worth restoring.

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