

The Perplexed Persona of Frantz Fanon's *Peau noire, masques blancs*¹

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Fanon's increasing popularity among postcolonial critics, together with his militant revolutionary activity and impact on subsequent anti-racist movements, has led him to be a fascinating subject for more than one biographer. Alice Cherki's *Frantz Fanon: un portrait* is an intimate testimony to Fanon's life from the point of view of a psychiatrist who worked with him, and was first published by Seuil in 2000, the same year as David Macey's mammoth historical study *Frantz Fanon: A Life*, published by Granta. These joined David Caute's summary *Fanon* of 1970 and Albert Memmi's self-consciously playful biographical article, "La vie impossible de Frantz Fanon" ["The Impossible Life of Frantz Fanon"] of 1971. These are perhaps just some of the best known and most explicitly biographical among a host of studies of Fanon's career and intellectual development, charted also by thinkers such as Irene Gendzier, Nigel Gibson and Patrick Ehlen to name a few. It is striking, however, how many studies imply a certain mutability in the Fanonian persona, a protean quality indicating that this is an elusive thinker who wore a series of masks. For David Caute, for example, there were two Fanons, the "pragmatic realist" who wanted to force the French to realise the impact of the Algerian war on living conditions in France and Algeria, and also the more alienated Fanon "who wanted his French friends to share in his subjectivity" (Caute 49). Similarly, David Macey dwells on the amnesia surrounding Fanon's legacy in Martinique, in France and in Algeria, as if to convey his resistance to categorisation according to national frameworks, while also examining the split between the "Third Worldist," revolutionary Fanon and the 'postcolonial' Fanon of identity politics. Moreover, Albert Memmi's "La vie impossible de Frantz Fanon" presents itself as a partially fictionalised and certainly stylised version of Fanon's life, according to which Fanon experiments with a series of identities (Martinican, French, Algerian, African), but at the end of which we find an enigmatic figure who "n'a jamais accepté de retourner à lui-même" ["never accepted to return to himself"] (Memmi 272. My translation). It is also perhaps telling that Cherki's personal testimony begins with the observation that, though Fanon was voluble about his political commitments, he was uncomfortable recounting particularities from his personal life, and her own reticence towards the

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possibility of biographical disclosure leads her to dub her study “a testimony once removed” (Cherki 4). Critics have identified multiple incarnations of Frantz Fanon, and he emerges as a slippery persona that they struggle to pin down in biographical form.

This article will complement these depictions of the mobility and intractability of the Fanonian persona by exploring the mutability of the narrating voice in the apparently autobiographical *Peau noire, masques blancs*. As a francophone intellectual militating against colonialism, Fanon knows he retains a precarious relation with the colonised more generally and writes from a position that is on some level estranged from that of the masses in whose name he argues. As a result, his text presents a perplexed persona who, alienated both by colonialist racist discourse and by his position as a francophone intellectual in the margins of colonised society, nervously alters the identity of the self he stages. In this eclectic and hybrid text, Fanon first shifts between a subjective “je” [“I”] and the more abstract, objective “nous” [“we”]. The “je” at times serves to relativise and soften his pronouncements, as if to betray an anxiety about their broader resonance and applicability, whilst at others it works to emphasise the affect and trauma of his lived experience as a black man. The “je” is also a sign of autobiographical subjectivity, though this is not a constant Fanonian “self” but a shifting performance that masks more than it reveals. Expressions of doubt and alienation, however, are interspersed with a more confident stance in which the philosopher and psychiatrist claims to speak for, by turns, the Martinican, the colonised, the black man. Yet even here, Fanon’s apparent assertiveness is deceptive, and the degree of his identification with these groups can be subjected to questioning. Furthermore, Fanon intermittently upholds the importance of negritude as a source of identity, but he also rails against its potentially limiting effects. He then affirms the self’s belonging to the universal category of humanity, though he is anxious to distinguish this humanism from that of the French, which he sees as bound up in the colonial mission to assimilate and therefore alienate the colonised other. If *Peau noire* is on the one hand, then, an assertive and militant critique of colonialism, its narrating persona is on the other hand a slippery figure unable, or perhaps purposefully unwilling, to tie the polemic to a specific identitarian position.

The fabric of the narration of Fanon’s *Peau noire, masques blancs* has received little attention, and the work has tended to be analysed above all for its concepts and arguments rather than for its form. Anjali Prabhu’s article “Narration in Frantz Fanon’s *Peau noire, masques blancs*: Some Reconsiderations” is a rare example of a highly sophisticated reading of hybridity in Fanon’s text, not only in the analysis of the black man’s splitting and doubling but also in the self-staging of the narrating “je.” According to Prabhu, the text testifies to “the tremendously difficult task of reclaiming the existence of the individual, sensuous, original black man that he heroically (or tragically) wishes to undertake” (Prabhu 201). The present article will refine Prabhu’s point, however, by problematising the “feeling of

‘authentic’ subjectivity” to which she claims that Fanon adheres, and by identifying both the dynamism and the uncertainty of his persona’s presentation (Prabhu 191). *Peau noire* has an autobiographical dimension that is usually overlooked, but even more, the autobiographical “je” is not one that knows itself fully or that remains constant in its identifications with the Antilleans, the “nègres,” the colonised or merely the “men” in whose name he speaks. This exposition of Fanon’s eclectic persona is, moreover, not intended as a critique of the theorist’s inconsistency, but precisely as a testimony to the paradoxes and impasses of francophone intellectual writing under colonialism. The tensions experienced by the francophone writer are to a certain extent related to those analysed by a long tradition of thinkers, including perhaps most famously Sartre, who explores in *Plaidoyer pour les intellectuels* the paradox of the intellectual’s position divorced from the masses whose condition he analyses:

Pour lutter contre le particularisme de l’idéologie dominante, il faudrait prendre le point de vue de ceux dont l’existence même la condamne. Mais pour prendre ce point de vue il faudrait n’avoir jamais été un petit-bourgeois puisque notre éducation nous a infectés au départ et jusqu’aux moelles. Et, comme c’est la contradiction de l’idéologie particulariste et du savoir universalisant chez un petit-bourgeois qui fait l’intellectuel, il faudrait *ne pas être intellectuel*.

[In order to struggle against the particularism of the dominant ideology, it would be necessary to adopt the point of view of those whose existence condemns it. But in order to adopt this point of view it would be necessary never to have been a petit-bourgeois since our education has infected us from the beginning and into our bones. And, as it is the contradiction between particularist ideology and universal knowledge in the petit-bourgeois that makes him an intellectual, it would be necessary *not to be an intellectual*.] (Sartre 417. My translation.)

Fanon’s narrator suffers from a comparable double bind in his vilification of the class of intellectuals to which he inevitably belongs, though his anxiety is also part of a particular unease experienced by the privileged but traumatised elite of colonised writers. Like Aimé Césaire of the previous generation, he seeks through his writing no less than to liberate the colonised black man from oppression, and yet his ability to speak ‘for’ the people is highly suspect. The alienation inherent in Fanon’s writing is a result of colonial and racial tensions, and it is these tensions that lead the persona to pluralise his position and voice.

Peau noire, masques blancs is an incendiary study of the violence of colonialism and of the traumatic effects of French colonial discourse. Exploring in depth the alienation experienced by the black man who, believing himself to be French, is subjected to racism when he arrives in the métropole, the text presents the identity of the colonised as traumatically split in ways that will be discussed later in this article. But Fanon’s depiction of alienation is intensified and problematised, because the voice narrating the text is itself not reconciled with his identity and stance. The language of the opening pages of *Peau noire, masques blancs* already betrays something of the changing position of the “je” towards his project. The text begins with the dual statement that: “l’explosion n’aura pas lieu aujourd’hui. Il est

trop tôt . . . ou trop tard. / Je n'arrive point armé de vérités décisives' [‘the explosion will not happen today. It is too soon . . . or too late. I do not come with timeless truths’] (Fanon 9). Fanon is predicting a seismic shift, a decisive change that will achieve the force of an explosion, yet it is not clear when this shift will take place. There is an assertiveness in the anticipation of radical change, and yet at the same time the certainty of the change is undermined by the haziness of its timing. Equally, the first statement is presented as neutral and objective, and yet the “je” that creeps in immediately in the second paragraph retracts that objectivity and betrays a doubtful and cautious subjectivity. Next, Fanon leaps to assert his search for “un nouvel humanisme . . . / La compréhension des hommes . . . Nos frères de couleur” [“a new humanism . . . / Understanding among men . . . / Our colored brothers”] (Fanon 9). Here again, the hesitant “je” is effaced and subsumed in the simultaneous affirmation of a universal humanism and of black fraternity. And even more, on the following page he states the ambitiousness of his project by affirming: “nous ne tendons à rien de moins qu’à libérer l’homme de couleur de lui-même” [“I propose nothing short of the liberation of the man of color from himself”] (Fanon 10). The tentative “je” is now replaced by the confident “nous” of French philosophical discourse, and the persona makes the bold claim that his work will serve no less than to liberate the black race. Nevertheless, despite the inflammatory quality of most of Fanon’s pronouncements in the following pages, the philosopher intermittently veers away from his assertions. He admits, for example, that “beaucoup de nègres ne se retrouveront pas dans les lignes qui vont suivre” [“many Negroes will not find themselves in what follows”], only to counter this admission with the further defiant statement that “les attitudes que je me propose de décrire sont vraies” [“the attitudes that I propose to describe are real”] (Fanon 14). The “nous” has once again become “je,” even if now, unlike at the beginning, the “je” recklessly lays claim to the truth of his utterances. The most confident assertions, then, are intertwined in these lines with signs of doubt. Fanon claims a universalist stance even as the “je” admits his distance from the experiences of many black men.

The pithy, fragmented statements of Fanon’s introduction lurch from the general to the specific, and on to the autobiographical and the singular.² Exhibiting the rigidity of the labels propagated by colonial discourse, Fanon for the most part uses “Noir” and “Blanc” as broad but static categories pitted against one another. In stating “le Blanc est enfermé dans sa blancheur./ Le Noir dans sa noirceur” [“the white man is sealed in his whiteness./ The black man in his blackness”], Fanon is deliberately replicating the Manichaeism of colonial discourse, and the use of these generalised terms is part of his endeavour to reveal the absolute nature of the colonial vision (Fanon 11). Much of the introduction to *Peau noire, masques blancs* in this way appears to refer to “blacks” and “whites” and not the particular contexts in which

² “Specific” is distinguished from “singular” here, in the sense that the specific is grounded in history whereas the singular is a force of self-differentiation. For more on this distinction, see Hallward.

different black and white people live. Nevertheless, the final pages of this introduction suddenly retreat from the general and return to a focus on the Caribbean. Fanon continues to affirm the importance of his vision of a new future, and yet “cet avenir n’est pas celui du cosmos, mais bien celui de mon siècle, de mon pays, de mon existence. En aucune façon je ne dois me proposer de préparer le monde qui me suivra” [“this future is not the future of the cosmos but rather the future of my century, my country, my existence. In no fashion should I undertake to prepare the world that will come later”] (Fanon 15). What had appeared to be a global analysis of black versus white turns out to be a specific engagement with the history of Martinique during the twentieth century. Similarly, Fanon notes, “étant Antillais d’origine, nos observations ne valent que pour les Antilles” [“since I was born in the Antilles, my observations and my conclusions are valid only for the Antilles”], and the study is no longer set up as a project for the liberation of all black men (Fanon 16). Although he aspires to a universalist vision of freedom and emancipation, Fanon at the same time strives not to obfuscate the specific experiences of Martinicans. In addition, there is a further slippage in both quotations between an analysis of all Martinicans, and a reflection on the experiences of Fanon’s narrating persona. The “je” is also autobiographical and calls on personal lived experience, and if at times he wants to figure this experience as somehow exemplary, he also questions the possibility of such a gesture. Across the few pages of the introduction, then, Fanon flits disconcertingly between the universal, the specific, and the autobiographical, as if to stress the co-implication of the three levels. The relation between these stances, however, and the philosopher’s conception of and investment in each of them, will remain unresolved as the text develops.

Fanon’s first chapter is a study of the black man’s language, and this reflection on the use of French will be one of the initial sources of irony in his self-presentation. Beginning with the neutral voice of an analyst, Fanon sums up his argument with the following statement: “le Noir Antillais sera d’autant plus blanc, c’est-à-dire se rapprochera d’autant plus du véritable homme, qu’il aura fait sienne la langue française” [“the Negro of the Antilles will be proportionately whiter – that is, he will come closer to being a real human being – in direct ratio to his mastery of the French language”] (Fanon 18). Parroting the colonial discourse of assimilation, Fanon performs the point of view of the coloniser in order to stress his distance from the latter’s way of thinking. The use of the French language may be for Fanon an important tool for the colonised to assert his equality as well as his resistance, but the coloniser’s belief that the colonised is only a man if he masters the colonial language is one aspect of his dehumanising violence. Even more perniciously, the coloniser’s sense of the superiority of his language infects the colonised, so that “dans un groupe de jeunes Antillais, celui qui s’exprime bien, qui possède la maîtrise de la langue, est excessivement craint” [“in any group of young men in the Antilles, the one who expresses himself well, who has mastered the language, is inordinately feared”] (Fanon 20-21). The

colonised Antillean, desperate to achieve the status of the French, rolls his 'r's and attempts to speak like a Frenchman only to give away his local accent in the next sentence, as demonstrated by the anecdote of the Martinican in Le Havre who orders: "Garrçon! un vè de biè" ["waiterr! Bing me a beeya"] (Fanon 21). Nevertheless, Fanon himself also insists on the proper use of French and stresses the damaging effects of "parler petit nègre" ["to talk pidgin nigger"]. Turning now to an autobiographical idiom, he states that as a doctor, "je m'adresse toujours aux «bicots» en français correct" ["I make a point always to talk to the so-called *bicots* in normal French"], and laments that the language of the "petit nègre" serves only to stereotype and pigeonhole him further (Fanon 33). It means that the black man continues to conform to the white man's expectations of his inferiority and it hardens his essence as subordinate. Fanon is performing a certain role here, however, and his own ironic use of the derogatory term "bicots" indicates both his distaste towards such categorisations and the manner in which the French litter their speech with slang, with their own version of "petit nègre." The French themselves do not always preserve the standard idiom, and Fanon is also mocking the coloniser's misuse and deformation of the French language (and of Creole). More recent supporters of the Créolité movement such as Chamoiseau and Confiant reveal the difficulties associated with Fanon's embrace of the French language, though it should be remembered that they were writing at a time when attitudes towards Creole would have been very different. It is also perhaps true that the celebration of local idiom was less likely to be convincing as a symbol of resistance at the time of Fanon's writing. Nevertheless, the question of Fanon's own attitude to and use of French remains a perplexed one: he denounces the violence of the coloniser's assumption of superiority but himself upholds the use of a good register of French.

Yet the idiom of Fanon's chapter on language is itself eclectic. Fanon is clearly highly educated in French literature and thought, and his language enables him to play the role of an assimilated French academic and psychiatrist. The use of Valéry's image of language as "dieu dans la chair égaré" ["god gone astray in the flesh"] to emphasise its power is significant both because the metaphor underlines the significance and (godlike?) impact of Fanon's use of French and because it does so by means of a reference to the French literary canon. The chapter is also peppered with quotations from French thinkers such as Sartre and Leiris, though Fanon refines Sartre's analysis of negritude poetry in "Orphée noir" by stressing the difficulty of inventing a black poetic language. At the same time, Fanon frequently writes with the confidence of a psychiatric diagnosis, including categorical statements on the condition of all colonised peoples alongside his literary references. Again, Fanon cites a French thinker, psychoanalyst Octave Mannoni, and though he will subsequently criticise Mannoni's assumption that the dependency of the colonised predates colonisation, in the chapter on language he straightforwardly argues against the use of a black pidgin with reference to Mannoni's thesis. Despite Fanon's clear adherence to a

French academic tradition, however, and despite his critique of local dialects, the chapter also retains a linguistic richness and multiplicity. Alongside Valéry and Sartre, Fanon cites Damas and Césaire, and though he uses their work in order to support his analysis of the hegemony of French, the dynamic, syncopated rhythm of Damas's lines seems alien to the conventions of French verse. Similarly, the many quotations in Martinican idiom interrupt the academic register of the French, and the anecdotes such as that of the man in Le Havre, or of the idioms Fanon uses in his clinical practice, give the text a linguistic diversity and freshness. This richness is once again a sign of Fanon's indecisive self-staging as a francophone writer, intellectual and psychiatrist; his language reflects both an urge for immediacy and academic abstraction. He embraces a French academic heritage and recommends a standardised French, but his prose has a lively eclecticism and resonates with a local and spoken idiom. Fanon's philosophical and psychoanalytic language is broken up by traces of everyday immediacy, oral rhythms closer to lived experience, and these transcend the boundaries of the academic language and tradition.

Many critics have objected that Fanon's education and analysis distance him in problematic ways from the colonised subjects he sets out to liberate. Neil Lazarus, for example, refutes the criticism levied by Christopher Miller, namely, that Fanon ignores pre-colonial traditions, but argues rather that Fanon occludes the subaltern. According to Lazarus, Fanon, at least in *Les Damnés de la terre*, risks falling into the trap of "speaking for" the masses (Lazarus).³ More specifically, in his study of anti-colonial leadership in Dubois, Fanon and Cabral, Charles F. Peterson notes that Fanon writes from the point of view of the colonised élite and appears to have little understanding of the experience of the masses. According to Peterson, "as Fanon writes of the travails of colonized life in *Black Skin, White Masks*, he states his argument to be on behalf of all colonized men, when in fact the colonized life he describes is that of the privileged few" (Peterson 93). The colonised man figured in "Le Noir et le langage" is one who has had some education in French and who is at least partially assimilated. Peterson goes on to argue that this blindness is eradicated by the time of *Les Damnés de la terre*, but it remains an ambiguous effect at this stage of *Peau noire*. Moreover, Françoise Vergès goes further and argues that the difficulty with Fanon's analysis is that he never explores the effects of slavery on Antillean consciousness. Even more, Vergès comments on Fanon's rejection of his Antillean heritage in favour of Algerian national identity, and she conceives this as a rejection of his enslaved ancestors. For Vergès, "Fanon disavowed a society in which the master was always present on the scene of history and in the primal scene. Fanon disavowed the Creole filiation, the enslaved father and the raped mother could not be his parents" (Vergès 594). So Fanon from this point of view is hopelessly estranged from the people he sets out to liberate.

³ Lazarus refers to Christopher Miller's chapter on "Ethnicity and Ethics" in *Theories of Africans*.

It is undoubtedly true that Fanon cannot help but write from the perspective of the colonised élite, but my interest here lies above all in the multiple strategies he undertakes in his writing to mask, to justify, or to overcome his position of alienation. Fanon endeavours no less than to liberate the black man from himself, and in this sense he sets himself up as a leader and spokesman. By offering a psychological analysis of the condition of the colonised, he exposes their suffering and paves the way for their emancipation. In taking on this role, however, Fanon at times uses a language and a set of analytical tools that are alien to the subject of the analysis, and isolates himself from the subaltern in whose name he writes. He justifies this process by pointing out the dangers of adhering rigidly to what he terms “parler petit nègre,” but the very terminology used, as well as the argument, seem to patronise those who have not attained the education he was fortunate enough to receive. In addition, however, Fanon litters his academic French with anecdotes, with Creole idioms and personal encounters, and his language in fact lends a suppleness that his argument, at face value, would reject. He notes that a keenness to learn and to acquire power can also, in the Antillais, lead to a rare mastery of the French language, and he cites the elegance and lexical diversity of Césaire’s speeches as an example. Yet he simultaneously disrupts his own academic French by quoting a spectator’s comment in Creole, when a woman fainted while listening to Césaire delivering his electoral campaign, that “Français a té tellement chaud que la femme là tombé malcadi” [“his French (the refinement of his style) was so exciting that the woman swooned away”] (Fanon 39). The narrating persona finishes by performing a flexible dynamism, a combination of immediacy and conceptual abstraction, and subverts his stated argument with regard to the maintenance of standardised French.

While this sense of the francophone intellectual’s alienation and mutability is apparent in the above ways in Fanon’s discussions of language, it is in “l’expérience vécue du noir” that the psychological phenomenon of the colonised’s alienation is analysed explicitly. The voice of Fanon the psychiatrist and thinker also occupies a changeable position here. First, Fanon at times maintains the generalised terms “Noir” and “Blanc” and analyses the universal condition of the colonised black man. The black man’s ontology is conceived and defined by the white man: “car le Noir n’a plus à être noir, mais à l’être en face du Blanc” [“for not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man”] (Fanon 110). But Fanon at the same time wants to refuse the masterful position of the psychiatrist analysing the black man from the outside, and he opens the chapter with the striking cry “sale nègre!” [“dirty nigger!”] together with the subjective response of the “je” reacting to his objectification. Much of the chapter goes on to narrate the persona’s experience of alienation on arriving in France, believing himself to be French, only to be subjected to a series of racial stereotypes that sever him from his self-image: “mon corps me revenait étalé, disjoint, rétamé, tout endeuillé dans ce jour blanc d’hiver” [“my body was given back to me sprawled out, distorted, recolored, clad in mourning that white winter day”] (Fanon

113). This narrator wants to shy away from analysis of the images placed upon him (“je ne voulais pas cette reconsidération, cette thématisation” [“I didn’t want this revision, this thematization”]) (Fanon 112), and seeks to convey a brute subjective reality. While on one level the text offers a generalised psychoanalysis of the black man’s alienation, on another level the writing refuses its objective stance and the persona speaks from raw experience. At the same time, however, Fanon’s “je” is also not a transparent autobiographical self: it is not clear that it is Fanon himself who speaks, and in any case, the persona explores this experience of alienation rather than disclosing an alternative hidden “self.” This textual subject is, moreover, an opaque figure who precisely evades the gaze of the European. Alienated by the white man’s image of him, the persona repeats in response: “je me glisse dans les coins, je demeure silencieux, j’aspire à l’anonymat, à l’oubli” [“I slip into corners, I remain silent, I strive for anonymity, for invisibility”] (Fanon 116). This self-dissimulation is ostensibly a response to the “white mask” worn by the black man, and yet the effect of this search for anonymity is also that the narrating self eludes the grasp of the reader. The “je,” then, is curiously both singular and universal, it conveys subjective experience but also refuses to give away much of the identity of the author. Appearing to reject a stance of generalised philosophical mastery, the “self” is nevertheless depersonalised, and the autobiographical Fanon is hidden in the recesses of the text. The “je” is autobiographical but also insists on a form of anonymity.

Fanon shifts between the general and the singular, but he also prevents the singular “je” from coming too close to autobiographical disclosure. Analytical statements are juxtaposed with raw subjective expressions of desperation and discontent, but these at the same time preserve the narrator’s anonymity. Equally, Fanon intersperses the subjective reactions of the alienated black man with the point of view of the racist coloniser, but these merge into one another to reveal how the colonised absorbs the coloniser’s way of thinking. The insistent pattern of “le nègre est une bête, le nègre est mauvais, le nègre est méchant, le nègre est laid” comes alongside the confession “mon corps me revenait étalé . . .” [“the Negro is an animal, the Negro is bad, the Negro is mean, the Negro is ugly,” “my body was given back to me sprawled out . . .”], to suggest that the persona’s apparently subjective voice is already riven by the colonial vision (Fanon 113). Similarly, imagined citations such as “—regarde, il est beau, ce nègre” and “—le beau nègre vous emmerde, madame!” [“look how handsome the Negro is” and “kiss the handsome Negro’s ass, madame!”] interrupt the persona’s musings, but again, are a part of his internal dialogue and serve to split his voice further (Fanon 114). Fanon the intellectual vows that he knows that the stereotypes he cites are false, but in the text they are presented as voices from inside his consciousness. Even the voices of coloniser and colonised are blurred, and the narrating persona performs in this self-obfuscation both the black man’s self-loss, and his inaccessibility to the reader’s searching grasp.

Fanon's wavering attitudes towards Sartre and negritude in this chapter contribute to this sense of the persona's uncertainty towards the various identificatory strategies with which he experiments. Quoting Sartre's *Réflexions sur la question juive*, Fanon nevertheless argues that the black man's subjection is distinct from that of the Jew because it is from his very skin that he is alienated. More problematically, having shown his indebtedness to Sartre, Fanon goes on to rail against Sartre's understanding of negritude as a stage in a dialectic that would culminate in the "société sans races" ["society without race"].⁴ Sartre's pronouncement serves no less than to rob Fanon of his negritude, indeed, to take away his sense of being. First, then, it is significant that Fanon is both heavily influenced by Sartre and angered by his conclusions. Secondly, Fanon's argument is additionally contorted because he himself is unresolved on the question of negritude. He adamantly affirms the importance of black identity and states his response to Sartre by repeating "plus violente retentit ma clameur: je suis un nègre, je suis un nègre, je suis un nègre" ["my cry grew more violent : I am a Negro, I am a Negro, I am a Negro"] (Fanon 138). But he also admits that "l'expérience nègre est ambiguë, car il n'y a pas *un* nègre mais *des* nègres" ["Negro experience is not a whole, for there is not merely *one* Negro, there are *Negroes*"] (Fanon 136). In addition, he quotes Césaire to stress that negritude is not a monument or edifice but an action, a process: "ma négritude n'est ni une tour, ni une cathédrale, / elle plonge dans la chair rouge du sol, / elle plonge dans la chair ardente du ciel, / elle troue l'accablement opaque de sa droite patience" ["my negritude is neither a tower nor a cathedral, / it thrusts into the red flesh of the sun, / it thrusts into the burning flesh of the sky. / it hollows through the dense dismay of its own pillar of patience"] (Fanon 137). Even more, by the end of the chapter he affirms "je me sens une âme aussi vaste que le monde" ["I feel in myself a soul as immense as the world"] (Fanon 140). And by the end of the book, Fanon goes so far as to assert "le nègre n'est pas. Pas plus que le Blanc" ["the Negro is not. Any more than the white man"] (Fanon 231), and he states categorically that black skin has no essence, no inherent ontology, and does not carry with it any specific values. Taken together, these multifarious statements suggest that Fanon wants both to identify with negritude, with a notion of black identity, and to reach beyond it. Furthermore, if he does retain the term "nègre," the reference to Césaire's poem alongside the point about the plurality of black identity suggests that an affirmation of negritude would not signify a specific notion of selfhood. The "lived experience" of blackness is celebrated by Fanon, and yet the lived experience to which the reader gains access is only that of alienation and there is no exposition of specific black cultural practices or traditions. "Nègre" is a term that Fanon endlessly circles around, then, but whose meaning he is unwilling to identify. Fanon's call for black self-affirmation does not rely on a clear sense of ethnic specificity.

⁴ In "Orphée Noir," Sartre rewrites Marx's conception of the "société sans classes" as the "société sans races."

It is humanism, rather than negritude, moreover, that Fanon finishes by championing at the end of the text. Uneasy about the meaning of the term “nègre,” Fanon speaks now for the liberation of “l’homme.” If the black man is to be recognised for his humanity, however, this requires not the admission of a shared culture or identity but precisely the celebration of difference. Humanity is championed because it is dynamic, and each individual capable of endless self-invention. Fanon’s “je” is now not intent on identifying himself as “nègre,” but as a man who constantly evolves. If in the conclusion to *Peau noire* Fanon repeats several times “je suis un homme” [“I am a man”], this is a means for him to assert his freedom to create himself and not in order to claim an identity determined by the past—be it by colonialism or by shared suffering. The term “homme” is a sort of empty signifier, it is deployed as a call for a recognition of the freedom of all, and as an affirmation both of the power, and the needs, of every human body. Fanon’s humanism here is also an assertion of respect for the corporeal, it is voiced as a seizing of physical force and a refusal of physical and mental torture. It is perhaps here, then, in this championing of materiality and immediacy that Prabhu locates Fanon’s equation of agency with authenticity, though again, I would argue that this affirmation of subjectivity is a strategic and performative gesture of resistance rather than an assertion of an originary self. Moreover, Fanon’s conclusion refuses a humanism based on the past, on the weight of history: “je ne suis pas prisonnier de l’Histoire. Je ne dois pas y chercher le sens de ma destinée” [“I am not a prisoner of history. I should not seek there for the meaning of my destiny”] (Fanon 229). His affirmation of human value is not rooted in a belief in past achievements, and Fanon vilifies the sclerotic form of Eurocentric bourgeois humanism. This new humanism does not involve “la cristallisation chez le Blanc d’une culpabilité envers le passé de ma race” [“a crystallization of guilt toward the past of my race”] (Fanon 228). It calls for the liberation of all men and for the celebration of human diversity. Against the dehumanising force of slavery, Fanon now upholds not so much the specific identity of the black man as black, but his belonging to the universal but protean community of the human.

Fanon’s triumphant humanism, however, like his negritude, has a certain ambivalence. For a critic such as Gary Wilder, the interest of Fanon’s work lies in its struggle to challenge both the universalism and the particularism of French colonial discourse. According to Wilder, Fanon’s notion of “lived experience” addresses the complex nexus of reason and unreason, assimilation and rejection that structures the colonial vision, and offers an effective critique of both colonial humanism and nativism (Wilder). Wilder argues that the conclusion to *Peau noire*, however, recommends a crude, bland humanism that glosses over the nuances of the preceding analyses. Fanon’s abstractions suggest “an ungrounded vision of postracial universalism that his own text has already rendered implausible” (Wilder 51). From this point of view, Fanon’s humanism is not the culmination of his anti-colonialism but an empty call that elides some of the more

difficult questions posed by the text. Moreover, it would not be difficult to criticise Fanon's celebration of "l'homme" as androcentric. Bhabha argues that Fanon uses "l'homme" to designate a humanity that includes men and women, and certainly this was probably Fanon's intention (Bhabha).⁵ But given Fanon's inability fully to understand the condition of the black woman in the rest of the text, and in particular in the somewhat schematic reading of Mayotte Capécia, the repetition of the masculine term "l'homme" in the conclusion risks becoming exclusive even as he uses it to call for universal liberation.⁶ For a critic such as Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks, Fanon's masculinism must simply be accepted as "an integral part of his resistance to colonialism which for him is ideologically marked by the manipulation of sexual difference and gender politics" (Seshadri-Crooks 94). And it is certainly true that Fanon's androcentrism is unavoidable, but it is also true that it indicates a further uneasiness in Fanon's search for identification and use of collective terms.

Fanon's humanism might, however, be seen not as a bland attempt to gloss over tensions more explicitly probed in the rest of the text but as a site of tension itself. It is the final example of the philosopher's uncertain process of experimentation with various forms of identification, and it is not an apotheosis but opens a further set of questions. Neil Lazarus argues that in spite of Fanon's shortcomings his work is useful because it shows that we need a new humanism that rejects the old colonial, Eurocentric humanism, and suggests a liberationist standpoint from which it would be possible to speak for all of humanity. But if *Peau noire* demonstrates such a need, it does not posit an unproblematic humanism that occludes the need for particularism of any sort. Indeed, for Ato Sekyi-Oto, Fanon's work can be read as "a dialectical dramatic narrative" (Sekyi-Oto) that keeps alive the tension between the eccentric and the universally human. The notion of lived experience at the heart of Fanon's vision lends a rawness and an immediacy, but Fanon also looks beyond this immediacy without losing sight of its insistent presence. The work is tense, restless and alive, then, because it insists on an awareness of the concrete while grappling with the question of how that concrete experience relates to greater human questions. Max Silverman's reading of Fanon maintains this tension, since he argues that, while the conclusion opts for a purely Sartrean form of existentialist universalism, the real tension of *Peau noire* lies in its attempt to transcend any opposition between such universalism and the need for a sense of the particular. The text does not offer a programmatic humanism, but calls for a new definition of the human that allows at the same time for an awareness of black specificity. Its dynamism lies

⁵ Bhabha adds a note at the end of his analysis of Fanon explaining his interpretation of Fanon's thinking on gender.

⁶ Critics have vilified Fanon for condemning Capécia's story in *Je suis Martiniquaise* of a black woman's love for a white man while writing more sympathetically of the black man's love for a white woman portrayed in René Maran's *Un homme pareil aux autres*. See for example Berger and Sharpley-Whiting.

in its attempts to keep humanism, negritude, as well as singular subjective experience, in play.

Perhaps *Peau noire, masques blancs* never resolves the question of how to articulate an appropriate form of collective identity against colonialism, but it reveals the tensions inherent in notions both of black specificity and universal humanity. The text's protean persona adopts one stance after another, flits disconcertingly between negritude and universal humanism, but these shifts are symptoms of an intellectual struggling, or perhaps refusing, to find a determinate position in this context of profound cultural alienation. The chapter on "Le Nègre et la reconnaissance" suggests that what the black man craves is recognition: Hegel's master recognises his slave, but the problem for the black man is that the white man does not recognise the black man as slave. There is no space even for conflict or opposition. What Fanon ardently desires in *Peau noire* is this recognition, but the eclecticism of his anger suggests that he has not resolved the question of how he wants both the writing self and the black man more generally to be recognised. For Anjali Prabhu, these multiple forms of subjectivity are conceived as a hybridised amalgamation between "the universal, historical, collective 'I'" and the "personal subjective and still-in-formation 'I'," a hybridisation that goes beyond now conventional notions of cultural métissage (Prabhu 201). Yet I want to stress in addition to this that neither of these speaking subjects is as clearly specified or as knowable as Prabhu implies: the persona seeks recognition without affirming a single identity or strategy, and demands a relation with the other, while refusing to specify once and for all the form that such a relation would take. The closing lines demand an ethical relationality, but this would be between one open-ended consciousness and another:

Pourquoi tout simplement ne pas essayer de toucher l'autre, de sentir l'autre, de me révéler l'autre?
Ma liberté ne m'est-elle donc pas donnée pour édifier le monde du *Toi*.
A la fin de cet ouvrage, nous aimerions que l'on sente comme nous la dimension ouverte de toute conscience.

[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 *You*.
At the conclusion of this study, I want the world to recognize me, with me, the open door of every consciousness.] (Fanon 231-32)

Freedom for Fanon is bound up with a reaching out to the other, with new forms of inter-human contact, and his thinking recommends an ethics of openness to all forms of alterity.⁷ The identity of the community or solidarity that would shape the persona's call for recognition nevertheless remains open to question.

The narrating persona of *Peau noire, masques blancs* positions itself in diverse ways and adopts various forms of collective identity,

⁷ It is perhaps pertinent in this context that Nelson Maldonado Torres offers a Levinasian reading of Fanon in his *Against War*.

including those of negritude and humanism. Fanon imagines a more ethical relationality, in which subjects would recognise their mutual differences, and he proposes this on the basis of a sense of profound alienation. The narrating persona of *Peau noire, masques blancs* may privilege the concrete effects of lived experience in determining black identity, but this is not a straightforward autobiographical “je,” and it is also not one that achieves the self-knowledge that his work nevertheless upholds. He urges a new form of contact between colonised beings, but that contact, if it is to involve the narrating persona, must occur between protean and dynamic beings. In this sense, though writing before a more overtly postmodern thinker such as Edouard Glissant, Fanon anticipates the open-ended relational structures theorised in texts such as *Le Discours antillais* (though without reaching the whirlwind figured in subsequent Glissantian texts such as the *Tout-Monde*). Moreover, if Fanon recounts the alienation of the black man in *Peau noire, masques blancs*, his persona suffers from an isolation that is distinct from that of the Antillean people he analyses. And if he is no longer interested in analysing the psychic structures of the colonised’s alienation, in his later work on Algerian independence Fanon again still seems to be adrift from the fantasy of community that he unfailingly continues to promote. Memmi’s judgement that for all his struggles, Fanon never succeeded in finding himself is certainly the culmination of a partially fictionalised narrative of Fanon’s trajectory. Yet, whatever Fanon the man felt about his origins and identity, the voice of his work alters, develops and recreates itself in such a way as to pluralise and deconstruct the possibility of an authentic autobiographical self.

Finally, the alienation and pluralism of Fanon’s writing persona is a symptom shared with other francophone intellectuals, frequently of the previous generation, though writing during the same period. In his review of Janet Vaillant’s impressive biography of Senghor, for example, Christopher Miller characterises the great man as a wearer of masks, and he goes on to argue that, “masks, personas, and role-playing are all strategies consistent with a refusal to submit to the most Manichean dichotomy of colonialism: are you French or African?” (Miller 236) Senghor’s changing public performances would from this point of view be deliberately subversive, though the lyric voice of the poetry expresses perhaps a rather more traumatised divided self. Equally, Césaire may have figured himself as a spokesperson for the people of Martinique in claiming, “ma bouche sera la bouche des malheurs qui n’ont pas de bouche, ma voix, la liberté de celles qui s’affaissent au cachot du désespoir” [“my mouth will be the mouth of those griefs which have no mouth, my voice, the freedom of those that collapse in the dungeon of despair”] (Césaire 88). But within the same text he questions this assumed “heroisme,” designates it a “farce,” and laments his complicity with French colonial discourse (Césaire 108). Like Fanon, Césaire’s “je” serves by turns to speak for the oppressed black man, and to convey the poet’s highly singular experience of alienation. The poetic persona of the *Cahier* also finishes by asserting himself as a man, but his humanity is evoked in diverse, dynamic and

endlessly evolving terms. Even more, the Franco-Berber poet Jean Amrouche figures his writing self as Jugurtha, the King of Numidia who struggled to free his North African people from Roman rule, a figure characterised by his expert mimicry of others, though Jugurtha / Amrouche's skilful mutations betray a figure who is at the same time "inquiet, aigu, désespérant" ["worried, tense, despairing"] (Amrouche 58. My translation). Above all, this is a collection of passionate, engaged thinkers, whose conceptual and political writings are equally engaged and contestatory, but who find that their education leaves them out of step with their compatriots. In response, Senghor, Césaire, Amrouche, and Fanon present an eclectic voice, seizing on the images of collective solidarity offered by negritude and humanism, and playing the role of identifying with multiple groups, while betraying also a persistent sense of alienation and self-loss. Adopting a variety of stances or guises, their protean writing voice conveys this dynamic, endless, and at times anguished search for recognition.

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