

**Through the Zone of Nonbeing:
A Reading of *Black Skin, White Masks* in
Celebration of Fanon's Eightieth Birthday*
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Introduction

Fanon was an ironic writer who was struggling with the complex question of paradoxical reason and paradoxical history. The modern collapse of "Reason" and "History" into all things European represented a *failure* of Reason and History that required self-deception regarding Europe's scope. Put differently: Europe sought to become *ontological*; it sought to become what dialecticians call "Absolute Being." Such Being stood in the way of *human* being or a human way of being. It thus presented itself as a theodicy. Theodicy is the branch of inquiry that attempts to account for the compatibility of God's omnipotence, omniscience, and goodness in the face of injustice and evil. There are several formulations of the problem: If God has the power to do something about injustice and evil, why doesn't He? If God has created everything, and God is perfect, how could God create imperfect (often evil) beings? If God has foreknowledge, how could we continue to insist on God's goodness when He had advanced knowledge of the consequences of his creation? There have been many classical efforts to address this problem. The most influential has been St. Augustine's insistence, in *The City of God*, that God's love for humanity required human freedom, and freedom requires the ability to do right or wrong. The problem does not only emerge in the Western tradition. Among the Akan of Ghana, for instance, the problem emerges as well, and solutions similar to St. Augustine's have been posed by, for example, the Ghanaian philosopher Kwame Gyekye.¹ There, the Akan Supreme Being, Onyamē, is supposed to be the force (*sunsum*) behind and through all Being. Is He, then, the source of evil as well? Theodicy does not disappear with modern secularism. Whatever is advanced as a Supreme Being or Supreme Source of Legitimacy faces a similar critical challenge.

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Rationalizations of Western thought often led to a theodicy of Western civilization, of Western civilization as a system that was complete on all levels of human life, on levels of description (what is) and prescription (what ought to be), of being and value, while its incompleteness, its failure to be so, lived by those constantly being crushed under its heels, remained a constant source of anxiety often in the form of social denial. People of color, particularly black people, lived the contradictions of this self-deception continually through attempting to live this theodicy in good faith. This lived contradiction emerged because a demand often imposed upon people of color is that they accept the tenets of Western civilization without being *critical* beings. Critical consciousness asks not only whether systems are consistently applied, but also whether the systems themselves are compatible with other projects, especially humanistic ones. Take, for instance, Rationality. Rationality emerges in many systems (especially modern liberalism) as free, say, of racist adulteration. What should we make, then, of Racist Rationality? An explosion erupts in the soul of a black person, an explosion that splits the black person into two souls, as W.E.B. Du Bois observed in *The Souls of Black Folk* and the earlier “Conservation of the Races,” with a consciousness of a frozen “outside,” of a being purely as seen by others, in the face of the lived-experience of an “inside,” of a being who is able to see that he or she is seen as a being without a point of view, which amounts to not being seen as a human being.² Such interplay of ironic dimensions of sight and thought, of doubled doubling, are hallmarks of Fanon’s thought.

At the precipice

Fanon begins *Black Skin, White Masks* by announcing a subjunctive “explosion” that is either “too soon” or “too late” (*Pn 5/ BS 7*) and then confesses that there was a “fire” in him that has cooled sufficiently to address the “truths” at hand.³ He wasn’t kidding. His brother Jobi recounts, in Isaac Julien’s *Frantz Fanon: “Black Skin, White Masks”* (1997), visiting him during his studies at Lyon. A faculty member described Fanon to Jobi as “Fireworks on the outside, fireworks on the inside!” This motif of fiery affect recurs in the book. He recalls anger (fire) that has now become sober (cooled). Sobriety here does not mean an absence of heat. Throughout the work, Fanon struggles to hold the fire at bay, the result of which is an ongoing heat that occasionally bursts into flame. Cooled, he reflects sardonically on modern

liberalism—equal rights and fraternity—and the many ways in which modern thinkers have attempted to address the so-called “black problem.” “Still,” he reflects, “a single line would be enough. Supply a single answer and the black problem will lose its seriousness. What do blacks want?” (*Pn 6 /BS 8*).

The convergence of the “black problem” with desire (“want”) already marks a distinction in Fanon’s analysis. When Du Bois considered the black problem half a century earlier, he argued against the question itself; it confuses, he argued, blacks with their problems. Blacks themselves are not the problem. The problem is the tendency to construct blacks as the problem, and that construction often emerged from white communities. By adding the dimension of what blacks want, Fanon raises the question of the subjective life of blacks, of black consciousness, that parallels the Freudian question of women—what do women want? This question of want, of desire, is not as simple as it may at first seem, for the life of desire is pre-reflective and reflective. What one claims to want is not always what one actually wants. And what one actually wants could become discarded upon reflection. That Fanon has raised the subjective life raises, as well, the split between lived-reality and structure. An individual black’s desire may not comport with the structural notions of black desire. As Fanon cautions the reader, “Many Negroes will not find themselves in what follows. This is equally true of many whites. But the fact that I feel a foreigner in the worlds of the schizophrenic or the sexual cripple in no way diminishes their reality” (*Pn 9 /BS 12*). He affirms this focus later on: “I am speaking here, on the one hand, of alienated (mystified) blacks, and, on the other, of no less alienated (mystifying and mystified) whites” (*Pn 23 /BS 29*).

Fanon raises this schism between individual and structure through making an important distinction. That the study of the black as a form of human study requires understanding what he calls *ontogenic* and *phylogenic* approaches. Ontogenic approaches address the individual organism. Phylogenic approaches address the species. The distinction pertains to the individual and structure. Fanon adds that such distinctions often miss a third factor—the *sociogenic*. The sociogenic pertains to what emerges from the social world, the intersubjective world of culture, history, language, economics. In that world, he reminds us, it is the human being who brings such forces into existence. What does recognition of such a factor offer our understanding of the black problem and what blacks want?

The black is marked by the dehumanizing bridge between individual and structure posed by antiblack racism; the black is, in the

end, “anonymous,” which enables “the black” to collapse into “blacks.” Whereas “blacks” is not a proper name, antiblack racism makes it function as such, as a name of familiarity that closes off the need for further knowledge. Each black is, thus, ironically nameless by virtue of being *named* “black.” So blacks find themselves, Fanon announces at the outset, not structurally regarded as human beings. They are problematic beings, beings locked in what he calls “a zone of nonbeing.” What blacks want is not to be problematic beings, to escape from that zone. They want to be human in the face of a structure that denies their humanity. In effect, this “zone” can be read in two ways. It could be limbo, which would place blacks below whites but above creatures whose lots are worse; or it could simply mean the point of total absence, the place most far from the light that, in a theistic system, radiates reality, which would be hell. His claim that “In the majority of cases, the black lacks the benefit of being able to accomplish this descent into a real hell (*Enfers*)” (*Pn / BS* 8) suggests the first read, but Fanon has much in store for the reader. For even if the “majority” of blacks lack such ability, it does not follow that in *this case*—namely, Fanon’s unfolding narrative—the descent into *Enfers* cannot be made. Such thoughts suggest that although the text has an epigraph from Aimé Césaire’s *Discours sur le colonialisme*, the suffering of which he speaks gains its poetic flavor from the mythopoetics of hell that have governed many writers in the western world—namely, Dante Alighieri’s *Inferno*.⁴ That Fanon’s formal education was exclusively western, and that the Martinique of his childhood was (and continues to be) predominantly Roman Catholic means that the grammar of normative life would take the form of the Church’s founding imagery in spite of Fanon’s existential atheism. The connection with Dante’s mythopoetic vision of church doctrine raises the question, however, of Fanon’s role in the text. Is Fanon Dante the seeker threatened by sin (the “fire” he brought to truth) or Virgil the (“cooled”) guide from Limbo? Or is he both? The social world is such that it is not simply a *formal* mediation of phylogeny and ontogeny. It also offers the content, the aesthetics, the “lived” dimensions of mediation. Fanon our guide, then, plans to take us through the layers of mediation offered to the black. As such, he functions as Virgil guiding us through a world that many of us, being “imbeciles,” need but often refuse to see. So, utilizing Fanon’s observation of sociogenic dimensions of this structural denial, the argument takes the following turn.

Constructivity and the semiotic folly of the dialectics of

recognition

There is a white construction called “the black.” This construction is told that if he or she really is human, then he or she can go beyond the boundaries of race. The black can “really” “choose” to live otherwise as a form of social being that is not black and is not any racial formation. Racial constructions are leaches on all manifestations of human ways of living: language, sex, labor (material and aesthetic), socializing (reciprocal recognition), consciousness, the “soul.” Chapters 1 through 7 thus become portraits of an anonymous black hero’s efforts to shake off these leaches and live an adult human existence. Each chapter represents options offered the black by modern Western thought. In good faith, then, the black hero attempts to live through each of these options simply as a human being. But the black soon discovers that to do so calls for living simply as a white. Antiblack racism presents whiteness as the “normal” mode of “humanness.” So, the black reasons, if blackness and whiteness are constructed, perhaps the black could then live the white construction, which would reinforce the theme of constructivity. Each portrait, however, is a tale of how exercising this option leads to failure. And in fact, “failure” takes on a peculiar role in the work; it is the specialized sense in which Fanon is using the term “psychoanalysis”: “If there can be no discussion on a philosophical level—that is, the plane of the basic needs of human reality—I am willing to work on the psychoanalytical level—in other words, the level of the ‘failures,’ in the sense in which one speaks of engine failures” (*Pn* 18 / *BS* 23). We should bear in mind that he says “willing to” work so, for, as we will see, Fanon raises, as well, the question of whether the approach of working on the level of failure is, too, a form of failure, which raises the question of whether such a psychoanalytical approach is exemplified or transcended.

The motif of failure raises, still more, the question of the *type* of text he has composed and how he is situated in relation to that text. What we find is that each failure is not necessarily Fanon’s failure, for he is both the voice of the text (the black) and the voice *about* the text (the theorist and guide). Thus, although Fanon the hero of the text, the black, constantly fails, Fanon the critic of Western discourses of Man, Fanon the revolutionary theorist who demands systemic and systematic change, succeeds. Paradoxically, if the hero of the text wins (that is, achieves his aims), the hero of thought (the theorist) fails, and vice versa. Thus, after announcing in the introduction that ontogenic and phylogenic explanations fail and need to be mediated by sociogenic

explanations with a recognition of human agency, he charts the course of the black with these theoretical “idols” of humanization. Like Friedrich Nietzsche, who sought to break the idols of (and, thus, idolatry in) Western civilization, Fanon hopes to destroy the idols that militate against the human spirit in an antiblack racist world.

The transformative force of linguistic mastery is one such idol. Language is a construction that has the force of forming reality. Taking heed of Marx’s encomium in his eleventh thesis on Feuerbach—“Philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it”—Fanon advances the godlike quality of this dictum through Paul Valéry’s observation that language is “the god gone astray in the flesh.”⁵ To transform language, then, is the godlike project of transforming reality. Language is, however, embodied. Flesh and language are, in other words, symbiotic. Fanon is here referring to the phenomenological view of body and flesh; they refer, as well, to consciousness. Consciousness is always embodied consciousness of things, including of intersubjective consciousness or the social world. That language invests meaning in those who embody it means, then, that the transformation of language entails the transformation of language-users. The black, thus, takes it upon him or herself to transform the world through a different language of self-presentation. He or she attempts to live words that transcend, if not eradicate, blackness. The efforts are familiar: “I am not black, I am brown.” “I am not black, I am a mulatto.” “I am not black, I am Martinican.” “I am not black, I am French.” “I am not black, I am simply a human being.” The result is tragicomic. Fanon recounts many instances of the black struggling to wear and thereby express non-blackness—the effort at ontological transformation by departure from colored colonies to living for a time in Paris, the French metropole, where the Reality Principle awaits (in Paris, there are “real” French people, so by becoming Parisian, one “really” becomes French); the struggle with the *r*-eating tongue, which Fanon describes as a “wretchedly lazy organ,” as in the case of the newly-arrived Martinican who knows the stereotype—«*Je suis Martiniquais, c’est la pemiè fois que je viens en Fance*» (“I come fom Martinique; it is my fust time in Fance”)—has practiced rolling his *rs* to the point of yelling, «Garrrrçon! Un vè de biè.» (“Waiterrr! Bing me a beya!”)⁶ Fanon recounts admonitions from his childhood against speaking Creole and advocacy of speaking “real French,” “French French,” that is, “white” French. The phenomenon is familiar in the Spanish- and English-speaking Caribbean. In the Anglo Caribbean, one is admonished against speaking *patois* and encouraged to speak the

“Queen’s English.” Such French, Spanish, and English—and in other areas, Dutch, German, Portuguese, and Italian—offer words of whiteness. A critic may be quick to respond that there is an important class dimension to this observation, for certain ways of speaking the dominant language offer, as well, economic mobility. Fanon, however, has a powerful response.

The black’s effort at transformative linguistic performance is a comedy of errors; instead of being a transformer of words, the black is considered to be, as we have seen, a “predator” of words, and even where the black has “mastered” the language, the black discovers in those cases that he or she becomes linguistically dangerous. Against the class critique, Fanon observes that the black never speaks whiteness as even working-class whites speak whiteness. Such whites speak whiteness “bookishly,” whereas people of color speak whiteness “whitely” or “white-like.” Speaking whiteness whitelike means that the black does not achieve the normative escape that he or she seeks but the limitation of what some theorists call “semiotic play.” Semiotic play refers to the activity of taking seriousness out of the use of signs and symbols of a language. Seriousness is absolute; it leaves no option. It collapses the world into “material values,” where there is supposedly no ambiguity. “White-like” and “whitely” signify imitation. The black, thus, becomes a masquerade, a black wearing a white linguistic mask. The tragedy, in this tragicomedy, is that such a mask signifies a monstrosity, a danger:

Nothing is more astonishing than to hear a black express himself properly, for then in truth he is putting on the white world. I have had occasion to talk with students of foreign origin. They speak French badly: Little Crusoe, alias Prospero, is at ease then. He explains, informs, interprets, helps them with their studies (*Pn* 30 / *BS* 36).

The reference to Crusoe and Prospero are, of course, to the allegory of their relation to Friday and Caliban. In both Stevenson’s *Robinson Crusoe* and Shakespeare’s *Tempest*, the white interloper exercises dominion over the island native who seeks the powers of the interloper’s ways of knowing—in other words, language and science. The impact of this allegory on modern thought is tremendous, to the point of there now emerging “ways of knowing” that attempt to understand, if not alleviate, Friday’s and Caliban’s condition. Friday and Caliban did, after all, have ways of knowing that preceded Crusoe’s and Prospero’s conquest of their

islands. From such a perspective, the study of European civilizations become Crusoe or Prospero studies, and the effort to understand Friday's and Caliban's situation (which incorporates their knowledge of Crusoe and Prospero), Friday or Caliban studies. Fanon's description of the danger is Calibanist: Prospero (the white) is safe so long as Caliban (the black, or perhaps more on the mark, the "nigger") struggles with instead of "masters" the language of mastery.⁷ It is a double-standard that is demanded: Blacks are human if they can speak white, but if they can speak white, they are dangerous; therefore, they must be reminded of their limitation: "Yes, the black is supposed to be a good nigger. . . . And naturally, just as a Jew who spends money without thinking about it is suspect, a black who quotes Montesquieu had better be watched." More: "When a Negro talks of Marx, the first reaction is always the same: 'We have brought you up to our level and now you turn against your benefactors. Ingrates! Obviously nothing can be expected of you.' And then too there is that bludgeoned argument of the plantation-owner in Africa: Our enemy is the teacher" (both quotes from *Pn* 27–28 /*BS* 35). He then further invokes Prospero's point of view through an excerpt from Dr. Michel Salmon's *Présence Africaine* article, "D'un juif à des nègres" ("From a Jew to the Negroes"), which he cites in note 11 of that chapter. Writes Salmon, as quoted by Fanon:

I knew some Negroes in the school of Medicine ... in a word, they were a disappointment; the color of their skin should have permitted them to give *us* the opportunity to be charitable, generous, or scientifically friendly. They were derelict in this duty, this claim on our good will.... We had no Negroes to condescend to, nor did we have anything to hate them for; they counted for virtually as much as we in the scale of the little jobs and petty chicaneries of daily life.

The black finds no direction that offers solitude here. Colored discourses represent a "lowering." To demand whites to speak to blacks with *that* discourse signifies condescension. To speak to whites in *their* language represents usurpation. The recourse of both colored and white reality is often the same to such a black: "You had better keep your place" (*Pn* 26 /*BS* 34).

There is, as well, for some whites who may have transcended fear, the moment of marvel in the face of blacks who have mastered the dominant language. Fanon cites André Breton's introduction to Aimé

Césaire's classic poetic anticolonial work, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, where Breton declared: "Here is a black man who handles the French language as no white man today can," to which Fanon replies: ". . . I do not see why there should be any paradox, anything to outline, for in truth M. Aimé Césaire is a native of Martinique and a university graduate" (*Pn* 31 /*BS* 40). The black television reporter who speaks as white reporters speak, the black attorney who speaks as white attorneys speak, the black medical doctor who speaks as white medical doctors speak, the black university professor who speaks as other university professors speak, and on and on, why do these professionals' *speech* often surprise, and at times shock and frighten, other times arouse, those who hear them?

The promise of language proves limited. Semiotic resistance, albeit important—Fanon, after all, admonishes the use of condescending language—at times intensifies the problem instead of alleviating it. Mastering the language for the sake of recognition *as white* reflects a dependency that subordinates the black's humanity. As Chester Fontenot succinctly summarizes this conclusion: ". . . the Blacks unwittingly place themselves in an inferior, compromising position to that of the whites. The Blacks' attempts to assert themselves against the colonialists serve to imply that they seek recognition from the colonialists, and are, therefore, relegated to an inferior status."⁸ To its credit, however, the intensification of the problem brings it into focus. A significance of language is its inherent publicity. Failing a public retreat, the black may now move inward, to the private sphere, to the sexual sphere, for solitude.

"I'll be your mirror"

Fanon's discussion of psychosexual retreat has received much criticism. It has been the basis of accusations of his being misogynous because of his discussion of women of color and especially his criticisms of Mayotte Capécia's autobiographical novel *Je suis Martiniquaise* and her follow-up novel, *La nègresse blanche*.⁹ The first is ordinarily translated as *I Am Martinican*, but the "é" on the end signifies the author's gender, which renders the translation literally as *I Am Martinican Woman*. To smoothen the English, one could add an article, rendering it as *I Am a Martinican Woman*. There is much ambiguity here, however, for the author stands as more than "a" Martinican woman, given the way texts by black authors are read. She stands as "Martinican woman" or worse—"the Martinican woman." The second book's title is

straightforward, given her use of the definite article “la”: *The White Negress*. The back-and-forth in the critical literature on Fanon’s treatment of Capécia’s first book has been such that one commentator, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, wrote an account and criticism of how the debate has spilled over into a debate on Fanon and feminism.¹⁰ I have often wondered if many of the critics actually *read* what Fanon said instead of commentaries on what he is reputed to have said. That being so, I should like to state here that there are flaws in arguments that expect symmetry in analyses focused on the absence of symmetry, and it is unclear to me how Fanon is expected to have written on the two main accounts of women of color, Capécia’s and A. Sadjí’s, without the criticisms he has offered as part of his ongoing argument.¹¹

Fanon announced that he was examining pathological cases, cases of the phobic, cases of failure. Throughout the text, I don’t see how one could defend the claim that black men, especially Francophone ones, fare particularly well. They are tragicomic searchers of recognition, full-of-themselves visitors in Paris who return to the West Indies to be “deified,” deluded searchers of civilization in a pair of “white breasts,” pathetic slaves in search of whiteness through, if not white women, at least mulattas who condescendingly offer a bit of whiteness, and on and on. Added to this treatment is Fanon’s relationship with his father. The relationship is the stuff of which drama could be made; his hostility to the man was such that it seemed at best insensitive, if not cruel. Fanon acted as though he only had a mother, especially during his years in North Africa and Southern Europe during World War II, as we see in this correspondence on the eve of a dangerous mission:

Papa, you were sometimes remiss in your duty as a father. If I allow myself to so judge you, it’s because I am no longer of this life. These are the reproaches of one from the Beyond. Mama was sometimes made unhappy because of you. She was already unhappy because of us.... If we, your eight children, have become something, it’s Mama alone who must be given the glory.... I can see the expression you’ll make in reading these lines, but it’s the truth. Look at yourself, look at all the years gone by; bare your soul and have the courage to say, “I deserted them.” Okay, repentant churchgoer, come back to the fold.¹²

He states repeatedly in *Black Skin, White Masks* that the black

man is not a man, and he mentions, as we have seen, seeking his virility, his manhood, in his lover. Although he is speaking figuratively—as something that people generally do—he is also speaking autobiographically. Fanon's behavior makes sense if we take heed of his growing up in a colonized Caribbean. The biographical and critical literature on Fanon is almost entirely devoted to the French influences on Martinican society, influences that are clearly patriarchal. Fanon himself reminds us that “the patriarchal European family with its flaw, its failures, its vices, closely linked to the society that we know, produces about 30 per cent neurotics” (*Pn* 39 / *BS* 48). What many Martinicans, and other Caribbean peoples, try desperately to shed, however, is their African lineage, a lineage whose retentions structure property, for instance, matrilineally. The result, often, is that the household, and even home ownership, tends to be female-centered. If the colonial values weren't imposed as “real” values over the African and (in other regions) indigenous ones, this situation would simply be one of living two sets of values. A matrilineal household would not be a “defect.” But in culturally mixed communities that center patriarchal values, the result is catastrophic. Fanon's father was a custom official who was at times employed and at other times working through the family shop, but Fanon felt, as no doubt many sons felt, that their fathers held no power against white men, however few in number those white men were. Fanon shows evidence of having despised his father because he felt that his father wasn't a man, and the result was that Fanon himself was ever on guard for masculine demotion. There is a famous footnote, to which we will later turn, where he denies the existence of the Oedipus Complex in Martinique. He was both right and wrong. He was right in the sense that a structural White Man hovered over black male reality. But he was wrong in his own existential situation, for he longed for the replacement of his own father. This longing emerged in a world where the manhood of colored males is always called into question. In such a society, a male of color is manly the extent to which he is useful, but with an economy that renders him little more, but often less, useful than the female inhabitants to a colonizing force that infantilizes and exploits them both, such gender questioning is incessant. It has been the case everywhere where there is racism. In the end, then, Fanon was not misogynist nor homophobic (as we will later see), but instead was a man who hated the role laid out for him as a black male. If the black male was not a man, and he was a black male, then he, too, was not a man. He desperately wanted to be a man.

Capécia desperately wanted to be something more than a

woman. She wanted to be white. She already *knew* that she was a woman, but as a woman of color, she was locked on a scale of desire that sought, above all, something she lacked. She did not only desire whiteness, but she desired to be desired, and since she considered whiteness to be most desirable, that is what she most desired. Both Fanon and Capécia represented a failure, but his failure will manifest itself throughout the work. His goal in chapters 2 and 3, in particular, is to explore failure of a special kind, failure that emerges from the retreat from the public sphere of language to the supposed private sphere of sexual intimacy. To understand Fanon's analysis of such a retreat, we need, at first, to understand the Lacanian dimensions of his argument.

Jacques Lacan, the famed semiotic psychoanalyst, presented several important discussions of the impact of language on our understanding of the Oedipus Complex.¹³ For Lacan, the Father became symbolic, which made the order of legitimacy that flowed from the Father also part of a symbolic order. Woman thus has a problematic existence in the symbolic order, for the order is patriarchal, positioned by the father. Power is here phallic, and woman differs, so to speak, from that order. As in classical psychoanalysis, where woman is conditioned by castration anxiety (the "absence" of a penis), in Lacanian psychoanalysis she is lack or difference or, if we will, failure. Willy Apollon, the famed Haitian Lacanian psychoanalyst, has observed that such a situation led to a recurring theme of desire in his psychotic female patients, the desire for a certain type of love. What they desired, he argued, was "a certain quality of love—more precisely, words of love, certain words addressed to them as subject."¹⁴ These words, as it turned out, could only be supplied by their father or someone who functioned as such. Let us call these "words of love." Love offers recognition that is also legitimating. When one is loved, one receives judgment from another regarding one's existence. The lover bestows a judgment to the world, that the beloved should exist. That is why the lover finds the thought of the beloved's death unbearable, and it is why, as Kierkegaard has observed, love also continues for loved-ones who have passed away; the love is transformed to the judgment that the deceased other *ought* still to exist. Lovers "see" their beloved differently than do others. The lover celebrates the perfections and imperfections of the beloved; features that may otherwise seem unattractive take on the veneer of wonder; the beloved's uniqueness is verified by such features and confirms the beloved's irreplaceability. In Fanon's words, "The person I love will strengthen me by endorsing my assumption of my virility,

while the need to earn the admiration or the love of others will erect a value-making superstructure on my whole vision of the world. . . . [.] authentic love—wishing for others what one postulates for oneself, when the postulation unites the permanent values of human reality—entails the mobilization of psychic drives basically freed of unconscious conflicts” (*Pn* 33 / *BS* 41).

Fanon’s treatment of the impact of alienated love on women of color presages Toni Morrison’s observation in *The Bluest Eye*: “The best hiding place was love. Thus the conversion from pristine sadism to fabricated hatred, to fraudulent love. It was a small step to Shirley Temple. I learned much later to worship her, just as I learned to delight in cleanliness, knowing, even as I learned, that the change was adjustment without improvement.”¹⁵ What is the impact of antiblack racism on love, where one seeks in the eyes of one’s lover and from the words that flow from one’s lover’s mouth a form of justification of one’s existence? Fanon and Morrison demonstrate a special failure here, a failure to escape the social reality principle of antiblackness through a loving whiteness. Fanon’s position is not that interracial relationships must be pathological efforts to escape blackness. His argument is that where whiteness is the basis of the liaison, the effort is pathological and hence a form of failure.

Fanon’s decision to analyze *Je suis Martiniquaise* and Sadjì’s *Nini* is based on two criteria: the popularity of the first work and the insights both works bring into the subordinated relations of black women and mulattas in an antiblack society. Here is how Fanon introduces *Je suis Martiniquaise*:

For after all we have a right to be perturbed when we read, in *Je suis Martiniquaise*: “I should have liked to be married, but to a white man. But a woman of color is never altogether respectable in a white man’s eyes. Even when he loves her. I knew that.” This passage, which serves in a way as the conclusion of a vast delusion, prods one’s brain. One day a woman named Mayotte Capécia, obeying a motivation whose elements are difficult to detect, sat down to write 202 pages—her life—in which the most ridiculous ideas proliferated at random. The enthusiastic reception that greeted this book in certain circles forces us to analyze it. For me, all circumlocution is impossible: *Je suis Martiniquaise* is cut-rate merchandise, a sermon in praise of corruption (*Pn* 34 / *BS* 42).

T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting provides information on the “enthusiastic reception that greeted this book in certain circles.” She writes on p. 36 of her study:

In 1949, Mayotte Capécia would become the fourth Antillean and the first black woman to be awarded the renowned *Grand Prix Littéraire des Antilles* for *Je suis martiniquaise* (1948). The annual award, paying the handsome sum of 20,000 francs, was established in 1946 in Paris for novels, historical novels, essays, and poetry. Interestingly, the jury who found Capécia’s work worthy of recognition was composed of thirteen Frenchmen. The autobiographical novel was hardly seen as a *chef d’oeuvre* among the writers of the *négritude* movement, nor did it ever gloss the pages reserved for literary criticism and book reviews in *Présence Africaine*. And the authenticity, i.e., Capécia’s authorship, of the book has recently come under scrutiny. Notwithstanding Maryse Condé’s bibliography of Francophone Antillean women writers in *paroles de femmes*, Capécia’s work is not mentioned in Patrick Chamoiseau’s and Raphaël Confiant’s historical-literary tour de force on writings by Antilleans, *Lettres créoles: Tracées antillaises et continentales de la littérature 1635–1975*. One could certainly argue that the marginalization of black women writers by black male literati is not surprising and even that it is indicative of persistent attempts to privilege male voices and silence women’s candid articulation of their experiences. However, such a statement would be in haste, for the monthly 1940s–50s issues of *Présence Africaine* include scores of writings by black and white women, and *Lettres créoles* does in fact have a cadre of Antillean women writers, including Maryse Condé, Simone Schwarz-Bart, and Suzanne Césaire.

The popularity of the work, then, offered insight into what an influential group of white French men wanted to read, which provides insight into the “white construction” of Fanon’s study (cf. *Pn* 6 / *BS* 8). But more, even with the realities of a market dictated by a white French reading public, there is room for understanding of the portrayal of pathological blackness presented as black normativity. In short, Capécia’s

autobiographical novel provides insight into social forces that are at work in the lives of colonized people of the Caribbean. Valorization of whiteness is well known in all of the Caribbean. In Fanon's time—and arguably today, as well—there were two principles at work in the life of the people of these islands, where the demographics were typically similar to Martinique's, of a small white population from Europe, a small population of “local” whites, a population of brown people (usually mulattoes and, in the Anglophone Caribbean, East Indians), and the majority black population. Capécia characterized these populations as “France's whiteys,” “Martinican whiteys,” “mulattoes,” and “niggers.” (In Jamaica, an Anglophone island, one hears of “whites,” “white neeygas” [“white niggers”], “browns” and “coolies,” and “blacks” and “neeygas.”) The seriousness of these categories and the extent of the disdain for blacks and having black ancestry were, and in many instances continue to be, such that in, for instance, the Dominican Republic, legislation was implemented to *declare* Dominicans as a population of white and Indigenous American mixtures, in spite of the genocide implemented by the Spanish Conquistadors against the indigenous peoples there since Columbus's time. In effect, the Dominican claim is that there are no *mulattos* in the Dominican Republic. *Mulatto*, we should bear in mind, is from the Latin word *mulus*, which means “mule,” and it refers to any mixture between whites (horses) and “negroes” (donkeys). The mule reference illustrates the form of self-deception that permeates antiblack societies: such racial mixtures supposedly produce sterile offspring. One could imagine the social ontological forces threatened by a “fertile mulatto,” who is supposedly a contradiction of terms. Some communities attempt to resolve the contradiction through pure white identification. In Puerto Rico, for instance, there are many poems with the riff, “You say you're white, then show me your grandmother?,” which alludes to a history of infusion of whiteness in the black population that both contradict claims of (white) purity and placed a reminder of them often falling short of romance. An insight of the Puerto Rican adage is its absence of symmetry; one does not ask, in other words, for the racial snob to produce her or his black “grandfather.” Implicit is the social convention that many mulattoes face concealing not only the existence of a black recent black ancestor but also that the union with the white ancestor was often without the conventional blessing of wedlock. The number of white women who had their relationships with black men concealed by the morphological whiteness of their offsprings during those times also substantiate the point since they, unlike many of their black female

counterparts, had reasons to authenticate their child's whiteness with a claim for *purity* instead of *mixture*.

Capécia, Fanon observes, could not describe her lover's beauty beyond the fact that he was blond, had blue eyes, and was white. He points out that her childhood bears witness to a woman of action. In her early years, she attempted to "blacken" the world by throwing ink over lighter-skinned children and whites who insulted her. Learning the limitations of her efforts, she switched to whiten it, to launder it, to "clean" it. She became a laundress. But that was not sufficient, and in spite of the success of her laundering business, whiteness could not be achieved without white recognition. Her white lover, André, was a white officer who afforded such a gift. Capécia submits to him totally. In Fanon's Hegelian reading—where a Lord–Bondsman relationship emerges in struggles for recognition—André "is her lord. She asks nothing, demands nothing, except a bit of whiteness in her life" (*Pn* 34 /*BS* 42). She supports him, and at one moment convinces him to take her to an upper-class social of whites, where she is humiliated by the behavior of the white women there: "The women," she writes, "kept watching me with a condescension that I found unbearable. I felt that I was wearing too much makeup, that I was not properly dressed, that I was not doing André credit, perhaps simply because of the color of my skin—in short, I spent so miserable an evening that I decided I would never again ask André to take me with him" (*Pn* 35 /*BS* 43; Capécia 1948: 150). Why did Capécia find all the faults in *her*? Why didn't she simply admit that those white women were a group of cruel racists or that André was spineless? In her references to blacks, she spared no invective, especially in her subsequent *La négresse blanche*, where black men are typically referred to as "niggers" and black women as "nigger whores" and "sluts." The answer is simple. Whites can do no wrong. They are gods. Fanon observes her outrage at the film *Green Pastures*, which has God and the angels played by black actors. Protests Capécia: "How is it possible to imagine God with Negro characteristics? This is not my vision of paradise. But, after all, it was just an American film" (*Pn* 41 /*BS* 51/ Capécia 1948: 65). Capécia's theodicy requires a white God.

At one point, Capécia is delighted to discover that her maternal grandmother was white. Fanon's response, in stream with what is said in Puerto Rico, is that

Since he is the master and more simply the male, the white man can allow himself the luxury of sleeping with

many women. This is true in every country and especially in colonies. But when a white woman accepts a black man there is automatically a romantic aspect. It is a giving, not a seizing. In the colonies, in fact, even though there is little marriage or actual sustained cohabitation between whites and blacks, the number of hybrids is amazing. This is because the white men often sleep with their black servants (*Pn 37 /BS 46 n5*).

After quoting in the same note Manoni's representation of French soldiers' liaisons with young Malagasy women as free of racial conflict, Fanon adds:

Let us not exaggerate. When a soldier of the conquering army went to bed with a young Malagasy girl, there was undoubtedly no tendency on his part to respect her entity as another person. The racial conflicts did not come later, they coexisted. The fact that Algerian colonists go to bed with their fourteen-year-old housemaids in no way demonstrates a lack of racial conflicts in Algeria. No, the problem is more complicated. And Mayotte Capécia is right: It is an honor to be the daughter of a white woman. That proves that one was not "made in the bushes." (This expression is applied exclusively to all the illegitimate children of the upper class in Martinique; they are known to be extremely numerous: Aubery, for example, is supposed to have fathered almost fifty.)

Fanon's remarks hardly represent hatred of women of color nor a failure to understand their situation. He is addressing a reality that permeates every racist society. How was it, for example, that so many mulattoes emerged during slavery and in post-bellum nineteenth-century America when there were laws against miscegenation? One need simply look at Angela Y. Davis's classic study, *Women, Race, and Class*, to find answers to such questions.¹⁶

Black-hating blacks and mulattoes often regard whiteness by itself as a good, but evidence of voluntary gifts of whiteness is a bonus. In Abdoulaye Sadjí's *Nini, mulâtresse du Sénégal*, there is an educated black male accountant, Mactar, who pursues a mulatta stenographer, Nini. Of Mactar, Fanon writes, "One must apologize for daring to offer

black love to a white soul. . . . Just as Mayotte Capécia tolerates anything from her lord, André, Mactar makes himself the slave of Nini, the mulatto” (*Pn* 44–45 / *BS* 56). Mactar is rebuked to the point of the mulatto community attempting to sick the police on him. In the story, a white man eventually offers his hand in marriage to a mulatta, which occasions a celebration of hope among the mulatto community and a new level of degradation: Mulattas who were engaged to mulattoes were now rebuked for failing to achieve a higher possibility.

Where does all this lead? There are two principles that emerge in an antiblack society. They are “be white!” and “avoid blackness!” Capécia and Nini represent these edicts thus: “. . . there are two such women: the Negress and the mulatta [*mulâtresse*]. The first has only one possibility and one concern: to turn white. The second wants not only to turn white but also to avoid slipping back” (*Pn* 44 / *BS* 54). These two principles structure the failure of these women’s efforts to escape. For the white lover’s desire to serve as a transformation of their blackness, it must be either a love born from their love for blackness or their hating blackness but failing to see it in the beloved. The first has to be rejected because such love would devalue the lover’s affections in the antiblack black’s eyes, for the aim of the pathology was to eradicate blackness. This rejection eliminates a *third* possibility, that the white lover both loves blackness *and* happens to love the beloved, for the lover’s loving blackness would ruin the conjunction. So we go to the second. There, the problem is that a white lover who hates blacks but is in love with a black through denying the blackness of the beloved is lost in a game of self-deception or bad faith. The self-deception is twofold: Both the white lover and the black beloved would be in bad faith. The white lover’s self-deception would be one about his beloved’s blackness. But the black beloved’s is another matter. There, the deception emerges from the meaning of what the white lover offers her. In this case, recalling Willy Apollon’s observation of words of love, it will be “words of whiteness.” We find ourselves here on the plane of narcissism, a phenomenon to which Fanon refers throughout the text. Fanon writes of many efforts by blacks to be “seen” in a special way, to be seen as a white. On narcissism, Jean Baudrillard has argued that the narcissist seeks a deluding self-image in the eyes of others and is thus seduced by the deception. He writes,

“I’ll be your mirror” does not signify “I’ll be your reflection” but “I’ll be your deception.”. . . To seduce is to die as reality and reconstitute oneself as illusion. . . .

Narcissus too loses himself in his own illusory image; that is why he turns from his truth, and by his example turns others from their truth.¹⁷

Similarly, Heinz Kohut has identified a form of rage that he calls “narcissistic rage.” Narcissistic rage manifests itself as hatred toward limitations on one’s desire to live without limitations.¹⁸ The enraged narcissist desires to be beautiful without limitation, which amounts to being the most beautiful; intelligent without limitation, which amounts to being the most intelligent; and so on, to the point of becoming, in a word, godlike. In stream with Baudrillard’s depiction, narcissistic rage invites seduction because no human being is god or godlike, which means the desire of such rage requires a lie to the self. The demand of narcissism is for others to be the narcissist’s mirror, to offer the narcissist a desired image, an image of the world as the narcissist would like it to be. Veiled by “I will be your mirror” is the truth: “I will be your lie.” Perhaps the quintessential modern allegory of narcissism is the effort of the stepmother in “Snow White.” The stepmother looks into the mirror and orders it to tell her what she knows deep down is not true and cannot be maintained. Even if one were once the most beautiful woman in the land, it defies reality always to remain so. One could be so, if and only if, one is the last woman in the land, and even there the criteria for beauty would become vague, if not absurd. The mirror’s answer to her query is, however, simple and imposes an objective limit on her lie: Snow White. The elimination of Snow White, whose name signifies both white virtue and the coldness (snow) of truth (white), becomes a necessary condition for the preservation of her lie. Thus, the mirror is, in the end, not the lie, but instead her projected mirror becomes her narcissistic fantasy.

Fanon’s discussion of the effort to escape on the level of intimacy portrays a tale of narcissism. Narcissism is the theme of some of his examples along the way:

I was talking only recently to one such woman [who deplored black men]. Breathless with anger, she stormed at me, “If Césaire makes so much display about accepting his race, it is because he really feels it as a curse. Do the whites boast like that about theirs? Every one of us has a white potential, but some try to ignore it and other simply reverse it. As far as I am concerned, I wouldn’t marry a Negro for anything in the world.” Such attitudes are not rare, and I must confess that they

disturb me, for in a few years this young woman will have finished her examinations and gone off to teach in some school in the Antilles. It is not hard to guess what will come of that (*Pn* 38 /*BS* 48).

No doubt Fanon was added to Césaire on such women's lists. We will see, however, that this woman's assessment of Césaire is not without some validity, for would not valorization of blackness also be a form of narcissistic rage? What Fanon has in mind, however, is brought out further by another example: "I knew another black girl who kept a list of Parisian dance-halls 'where-there-was-no-chance-of-running-into-niggers'" (*Pn* 40 /*BS* 50). One could imagine what such a woman expected to see in those dance halls. We could imagine what it would take for her to be in a room with no "niggers." It would, indeed, have to be a room with no mirrors save the eyes of the white patrons. Those eyes, should they behave without irritation, should they behave as though things were "normal," would affirm that black woman's self-deception: It would seem as though there were *no* blacks in the dance hall, and since she would be among the patrons, then she would be among the no-blacks-in-the-dance-hall. This is what Capécia sought when she demanded André to take her to a white social. What he offered her was the self-deceiving words of whiteness, words that only whites could offer her. The situation is a failure because love is what should appear on the personal terrain; *André*, not his whiteness, should have offered her existence something. André, however, doesn't seem to have deserved even her near-white kind of love, for the story ends with his playing a very typical role of the white French military toward black female love by abandoning her with their child, and she is ironically thankful for the bit of whiteness left in her. Love, in this liaison, was unattainable because of the imposition of whiteness; no love words, only white ones remained.

Although Fanon formally examines the failure of the man of color in the succeeding chapter, he hints at it early on in his discussion of Mactar and Nini. Mactar was also a Capécia, but he was so in relation to a mulatta. If Mactar, or any black *man*, for that matter lives as a *man* in the Lacanian framework of value-endowing words, then the issue would have been what he brought to Nini, not what Nini brought to him. His words of love should have been enough. But since he is also Capécia, then he sought something from Nini, her words, that disrupts the order of patriarchal bourgeois European society. Fanon returns to this theme in his formal discussion of the man of color, where the focus

is Jean Veneuse, the protagonist of René Maran's autobiographical novel, *Un homme pareil aux autres* (*A Man Like Others*), whom he describes as "a lamb to be slaughtered."¹⁹ Veneuse/Maran was an orphan from the Antilles who grew up in French boarding schools. In his adult years, he is a bookworm, an "introvert," a so-called "Good Negro," "the kind of negro that a lot of white guys ought to be like" (*Pn* 53 /*BS* 65 /Maran: 19). When a white girl flirts with him, he replies: "Courage is a fine thing, but you're going to get yourself talked about if you go on attracting attention this way. A Negro? Shameful—it's beneath contempt. Associating with anybody of that race is just utterly disgracing yourself" (*Pn* 53 /*BS* 66/ Maran: 46). Notice Veneuse/Maran's language of distance ("that race"). The story takes a decisive turn when Andrée Marielle, a white woman, emerges as a love interest. She loves Veneuse/Maran and he loves her. But Veneuse/Maran tells her that their relationship cannot be.

Now, if Veneuse/Maran were white, a standard analysis of the situation would be that he is an abandonment neurotic. Orphaned in his youth, an introvert in his adult life, he is afraid of abandonment so he abandons others to avoid such an experience himself. That he is black and that Marielle is white brings a dimension to love and abandonment that draws Veneuse/Maran closer to Capécia than he and Mactar should have been. Marielle writes him a letter declaring her love for him. She has, literally, given her words of love, words that, given the antiblack racial dimensions of the context, should have functioned as well as words of whiteness. But Jean Veneuse needs "authorization," argues Fanon. "It is essential that some white man say to him, 'Take my sister'" (*Pn* 55 /*BS* 68). He consults a white male friend, M. Coulanges, who replies with the much-sought words of whiteness:

In fact you are like us—you are "us." Your thoughts are ours. You behave as we behave, as we would behave. You think of yourself—others think of you—as a Negro? Utterly mistaken! You merely look like one. As for everything else, you think as a European. And so it is natural that you love as a European. Since European men love only European women, you can hardly marry anyone but a woman of the country where you have always lived, a woman of our good old France, your real and only country. . . . As soon as you are back in France, rush to the father of the girl who already belongs to you in spirit and strike your fist savagely on your heart as

you shout at him: “I love her. She loves me. We love each other. She must marry me. Otherwise I will kill myself here and now (*Pn* 55–56 /*BS* 68–69 /*Maran*: 152–154).

And there we have it: An alienated black man who has joined alienated black women in search of words of whiteness from the same source—the white man—words that affirm them as most desirable, as desired desire, as, in similar kind, Snow White’s stepmother’s mirror was prodded to affirm for her. Yet in both classical and Lacanian psychoanalyses, there is a distinction between what a woman wants and what a man wants. The “unhealthy” dimension raised by race is that the distinction disintegrates. The black antiblack woman and the black antiblack man collapse into the same. Their desires mark the limitations on their flight in the world of intimacy. Having whitened that world with words of whiteness, they have thrown to the wayside the project of love. Fanon’s concluding assessment of *Un homme pareil aux autres*?

Un homme pareil aux autres is a sham [*imposture*], an attempt to make the relationship between two races dependent on an organic unhealthiness. There can be no argument: In the domain of psychoanalysis as in that of philosophy, the organic, or constitutional, is a myth only for him who can go beyond it. If from a heuristic point of view one must totally deny the existence of the organic, the fact remains, and we can do nothing about it, that some individuals make every effort to fit into pre-established categories (*Pn* 64 /*BS* 80).

What could be done with such vulnerable constitutions?

Fanon’s reference to constitutionality announces the quarry of chapter four, Dominique Mannoni’s constitutional rationalization of a supposed colonial complex among colonized people as presented in his *Prospero and Caliban: The Psychology of Colonization*.²⁰ He has already identified an apologist’s tendency in Mannoni’s work when Mannoni attempted to treat white French soldiers’ access to young Malagasy girls as a situation without racial conflict. Mannoni’s error is that he is persistent. He argues, for instance, that the Malagasy had a colonizing complex, that their culture had, at its normative core, a pre-conquest conviction of

their inferiority. Mannoni goes further to compare French society with other European nations and concludes that since the French were supposedly the least racist of the lot, then the racism and colonialism that emerged in Madagascar were functions of complexes that were already there. In response, Fanon advances his famous dictum that either a society is racist or it is not. It is because French society is racist that it conquered, colonized, and imposed its racist structure on the Malagasy. Mannoni's rationalization violates Du Bois's admonition against problematizing people; it is tantamount to claiming that the "appearance of varicose veins in a patient does not arise out of his being compelled to spend ten hours a day on his feet, but rather out of the constitutional weakness of his vein walls; his working conditions are only a complicating factor. And the insurance compensation expert to whom the case is submitted will find the responsibility of the employer extremely limited" (*Pn* 69 / *BS* 85). After chronicling Mannoni's various rationalizations, he concludes that Mannoni, and all constitutionalist theorists of colonization, simply miss the point: All forms of exploitation are forms of dehumanization. The basic problem is to restore the humanity of each denigrated person. Mannoni compares forms of colonialism without ultimately bringing colonialism itself on trial. His project is, in other words, a theodicy of colonialism; it is an effort to free the system from critique by blaming the people it dominates.

At this point, Fanon's argument takes an interesting turn. Although psychoanalysis was earlier advanced as the analysis of failure, a dimension of psychoanalysis is rendered untenable in the colonial and racist context: The relevance of classical psychoanalytic semiotics in a colonial setting. Here, the symbolic is not psychoanalytical but *colonial*. Instead of black bulls and rifles that appear in the nightmares of Malagasy children representing the phallus of classical, or even Lacanian, psychoanalysis, they stand, instead, as signifiers of *real* encounters with colonial violence. They are the images of the black Senegalese soldiers used to maintain the colonial order in Madagascar. This failure of the classically symbolic closes three stages of failure—failure of the public, failure of the private, and failure of the ontogenically private (the constitution of the organism or individual). Of importance here, as well, is that schemes of rational explanation are finding their limits. In each instance, the black attempts to address a problem and encounters himself or herself as the problem. So Fanon goes to a deeper level of interiority or inward existence: His own experience *as lived*.

“The Lived Experience of the Black”²¹

Fanon begins the fifth chapter by recounting a little white boy’s use of language—publicity—to enmesh Fanon in the realm of pure exteriority, the realm of the epidermal schema. The experience occurred while he was completing his studies at Lyon: “Dirty *nègre!*” or simply, “Look, a *nègre!*” The word *nègre* is ambiguous. It means both “Negro” and “nigger.” (So much of Fanon’s discussion from this point onward hinges on the ambiguity of this word that I shall use the term for the rest of this discussion.)

The force of language, through the mouth of a child, froze Fanon in his tracks. He found himself dried up and laid out in a world of ice-cold exteriority. There, Fanon realized his situation as a two-dimensional object as in Euclidean geometry: He was “out there” without an inside. This passage is perhaps the most influential part of the work. Its impact on post-1950s’ treatments of oppression is perhaps equaled only by Ralph Ellison’s prologue to his *Invisible Man*, a text with which it is often discussed in the critical literature.²² Among the many ironic elements of the passage is its autobiographical status. Its report is paradoxical. Fanon announces the experience of a world that denies his inner life; he examines the supposed absence of his inner life *from the point of view of his inner life*. The paradox of black experience is, thus, raised: Black *experience* should not exist since blacks should not have a point of view. On the other hand, black experience is all that should exist since a black’s subjective life should not be able to transcend itself to the level of the intersubjective or the social. The prejudice is familiar: Blacks live, at best, on the level of the particular, not the universal. Thus, black experience suffers from a failure to bridge the gap between subjective life and the world. It is an experience that is, literally, not experience. Fanon describes this troubled experience at the outset:

I arrived in the world anxious to make sense of things, my spirit filled with desire to be at the origin of the world, and here I discovered myself an object amongst other objects.

Imprisoned in this overwhelming objectivity, I implored others. Their liberating regard, running over my body that suddenly becomes smooth, returns to me a lightness that I believed lost, and, absenting me from the world, returns me to the world. But there, just at the opposite slope, I stumble, and the other, by gestures,

attitudes, looks, fixed me, in the sense that one fixes a chemical preparation with a dye. I was furious. I demanded an explanation.... Nothing happened. I exploded. Now, the tiny pieces are collected by another self (*Pn 88 /BS 109*).

Calling to the social world, he finds himself sealed in a world without reciprocity. He finds himself in a situation of epistemic closure. Epistemic closure is a moment of presumably complete knowledge of a phenomenon. Such presumed knowledge closes off efforts at further inquiry. The result is what we shall call *perverse anonymity*. Anonymity literally means to be nameless. Namelessness characterizes most generalizable features of the social world. It is usually characterized by the indefinite article “a.” One sees “a student” or “a passerby” or “a police officer” or “a man” or “a woman.” In ordinary encounters, we admit limited knowledge of individuals who may occupy these roles or social identities. The encounters become skewed, however, when we presume complete knowledge by virtue of individuals who exemplify an identity. The schism between identity and being is destroyed, and the result is a necessary being, an overdetermined, “ontological” reality. To see someone this way is to close off possibilities. It takes the form of the command and the declaration instead of the interrogative; one does not, in other words, ask questions because one presumes that one already knows all there is that needs to be known. The person seen in this way is never spoken to, never queried, but instead simply spoken about and, at best, ordered with special words as, say, commands to a Pavlovian dog.

I am overdetermined from outside. I am not the slave of the “idea” that others have of me but of my appearance. I move slowly in the world, accustomed to aspiring no longer to appear. I proceed by crawling. Already the white eyes, the only true eyes, are dissecting me. I am *fixed*. Having prepared their microtome, they slice away objectively pieces of my reality. I am disclosed. I feel, I see, in those white eyes, that it is not a new man who enters, but a new type of man, a new genus. Why—a Negro! (*Pn 93 /BS 116*).

Fanon uses theriomorphic language, language suitable for describing animals, to highlight the subhuman dimensions of his two-dimensional,

epidermal being. He proceeds by “crawling,” signifying a devolution into an insect-like existence; his antennae pick up racist snippets here and there:

I slip into corners, and my long antennae pick up the catch-phrases strewn over the surface of things—nigger underwear smells of nigger—nigger teeth are white—nigger feet are big—the nigger’s barrel chest—I slip into corners, I remain silent, I strive for anonymity, for invisibility. Look, I will accept the lot, as long as no one notices me!

Eventually, he devolves to the point of an amoeba under a microscope. He experiences his historicity as a false history and his struggle with Theory, with Reason, as a cat-and-mouse game. Between Reason and History, Theory and Practice, there is *experience*, which in this case is the realization of a situation that stimulates an existential struggle against sedimented, dehumanized constructions:

I was responsible at the same time for my body, for my race, for my ancestors. I subjected myself to an objective examination, I discovered my blackness, my ethnic characteristics; and I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, slave-ships, and above all else, above all: “*Y a bon banania!*”

The Markman translation ended this passage with “Sho’ good eatin’” to signify a breakfast cereal. Banania is a French breakfast cereal consisting of banana flour, cocoa, and sugar. The product came on the market in 1917 with Bonhomme Banania, a Senegalese soldier happily consuming the cereal. His motto: “*Y a bon banania!*” “*Y a bon*” is so-called “African French” for “*C’est bon!*” (“It’s good!”) Fanon has much to say on the use of smiling blacks for the promotion of products; the smile is the “gift” of the happy slave. Over the years, Bonhomme Banania’s human features gave way to simian ones, to the point of a recent logo that resembles a smiling monkey wearing a fez. There is, as well, the obvious connection between blacks and apes through the mediating symbol of banana flour. It is a black African—nay, a Senegalese!, the supposedly most “savage” of the bunch—the marketing campaign suggests, who could *really* appreciate a quality banana flour cereal.²³

The struggle here is no less than Promethean. It is an embodied struggle against forces that are not readily identifiable; how could it be that the mere invocation of *le nègre* draws upon forces, as if by magical incantation, and seizes him so? Such seizure could be understood through an exploration of the body, the aspect of Fanon that was blown apart and reconstructed as an overdetermined “thing.”

Fanon at first observes that he wants to laugh but *cannot*. It is not until he risks public harm by insulting the boy’s mother, a white woman—“Kiss the handsome *nègre*’s ass, Madame!”—that he is able to laugh and then move on to an engagement with assessing his situation, with, that is, Reason: “I would personally say that for a man whose only weapon is reason there is nothing more neurotic than contact with unreason. I felt knife blades open within me. I resolved to defend myself. As a good tactician, I intended to rationalize the world and to show the white man that he was mistaken”(Pn 95 /BS 118). But, he soon discovers, Reason proves limited: “. . . I had to change my tune. That victory played cat and mouse; it made a fool of me. As the other said it, when I was there, it [Reason] was not; when it was there, I was no longer”(Pn 96 /BS 119–120). Fanon cites scientists for progressive organizations like the World Health Organization presenting the same racist hierarchies *scientifically*. Scientific racism presented an antinomy in antiracist reason, an antinomy similar to the verdicts he found with philosophical resistance. The same could be said for History. Although blacks live in history, it seemed as though blacks were invisible to it; blacks seemed to be, as Hegel claimed, patently *not* Historical. Against History and Reason, Fanon then attempts *poetic* resistance, resistance on the level of affect. The Shepard who will bring him to that salvation? Senghorian and Césairian *négritude*.

The encounter with *négritude* betrays an odd dimension of the narrative. Fanon’s experience with *négritude* predates the founding moment of reflection in the chapter. He was introduced to it from the age of seventeen, during his *lycée* days in Martinique, through his teacher Aimé Césaire, who had coined the term and presented his ideas in his review *La Reveue Tropicque*, in addition to his now classic *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal*. Fanon had in fact adopted *négritude* to the point of, upon returning from fighting in World War II, working for Aimé Césaire’s election to the mayorship of Fort-de-France under the Communist ticket. Although Fanon no doubt encountered Senghor’s writings and thought through Césaire’s teachings during his *lycée* days, he couldn’t help being struck by the Senghorian brand of *négritude* that took center stage in 1948, during his studies at Lyons. Recall that

Senghor had edited a volume of poetry, *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française*. The volume was marked not only by the uniqueness of its poetry, but also by the foreword, “Orphé Noir” (“Black Orpheus”), written by Jean-Paul Sartre, a classic to which we shall shortly turn.

Négritude grew out of an exchange between Francophone blacks in Paris and American blacks from the U.S. in the heyday of the Harlem Renaissance. According to D.A. Masolo,

During this time [1931–1932], a Martinican group, led by Paulette (or Andrée) Nardal founded and published six issues of *Revue du Monde* (*The Black World Review*), a bilingual review to which leading exponents of the black movement contributed articles. In addition to the exchange of views in the review, frequent meetings also took place between Africans, Antilleans, and leading Afro-American intellectuals in Paris.... Thus the influence of the Harlem Renaissance upon the birth of *négritude* was not only from a distance; it was also direct, through personal contacts.²⁴

The aim of *négritude* writers was to rehabilitate the image of the *nègre* through writing or expressing a positive or affirming blackness. The movement initially had two wings. There was a group of radical Antillean students who organized the periodical *Légitime Défense*, which appeared in 1932. “The other wing,” writes Masolo, “led by the Guyanese Léon Damas, the Martinican Césaire, and the Senegalese Léopold Sédar Senghor, was much more a cultural movement than a political one (at least at the beginning). While for the founders of *Légitime Défense* political revolution had to precede cultural revolution, for Senghor and his friends politics was but one aspect of culture.”²⁵ After World War II, *négritude* began to gain influence among black Francophone intellectuals—perhaps because of similar sentiments as Fanon’s after having fought in that war and witnessed an affirmation of the racial practices that preceded it—which led to Senghor’s radicalizing his position of black and white difference as a departure for his brand of *négritude*. The culmination of these reflections was the following infamous dictum: “*L’émotion est nègre comme la raison hellène.*” (“Emotion is black as reason is Greek.”)²⁶ With this Manichean dictum, the world follows a flawless logic. One could easily see its immediate attraction. Fanon’s “place” was announced. He was supposedly in a cat-

and-mouse game with Reason because it wasn't his "nature." His place was in the world of "emotion," a world of "affect," of rhythm, song, and dance. Here, we find seduction and narcissism, themes of his discussion of intimacy in his second chapter, returning on a different level of inwardness. If whiteness represented the outer, the objective, the realm of Reason, the black's realm will be the radically inner, the subjective, the realm of Unreason. Fanon cites Senghor's "Ce que l'homme noir apporte" ("What the Black Man Brings"), where his racial "secretions," his racial "essence," is *rhythm* (*Pn* 98 /*BS* 122).²⁷ At last, he thinks, he has found a terrain on which whites will lose, the terrain of the irrational. He invokes Senghor's poem, drawing upon a musical leitmotif punctuated by onomatopoeia here and there, and the stereotypes of the jungle versus the city, the savage versus the civilized. As is expected in an analysis of failure, his search for *nègre* greatness encounters its impasse in an ironic moment of fusion, namely, Sartre's "Orphé Noir."

Négritude, Sartre argued, was akin to the reincarnation myth of Orpheus, the lyrical singer, musician, and poet, who descends into the Underworld to rescue his beloved Euridyce but is told, after beguiling Hades, that he could return to the surface world with her so long as he doesn't look back. Orpheus looks back, loses Euridyce, and is subsequently ripped to shreds by mad worshipers of Bacchus, the god of wine, women, and tragedy. Sartre attempted to capture, poetically, the "descent" of the *négritude* poets—descent into blackness—which, he argued, manifested a form of antiracist racism. It was racist because it affirmed black superiority. It was antiracist because it was a rejection of white supremacy and antiblack racism. Sartre was here addressing an important dialectical move, that perhaps white supremacy could only be negated through playing out its inferiority. Sartre pointed out, however, that what is gained from this move is a revolutionizing awareness. From the negative moment that *négritude* manifested—"descent"—the *nègre* can then "ascend" to a universal, revolutionary consciousness, which, Sartre argued, was the "universal" struggle of the proletariat, in a word, Marxism.

Fanon stumbled. He again had to change his tune. The Reality Principle, so to speak, remained—through Sartre and the skewed iconography of Senghorian *négritude*—white.

When I read that passage [of universalism from "Orphé Noir"] I felt that I had been robbed of my last chance. I said to my friends, "The generation of younger black poets has just suffered a blow that can never be

forgiven.” Help had been sought from a friend of the colored peoples, and that friend had found no better response than to point out the relativity of what they were doing. For once, that born Hegelian had forgotten that consciousness has to lose itself in the night of the absolute, the only condition to attain to consciousness of the self. In opposition to rationalism, he summoned up the negative side, but he forgot that this negativity draws its worth from an almost substantive absoluteness. A consciousness committed to experience is ignorant, has to be ignorant, of the essences and the determinations of its being (*Pn* 108 /*BS* 133–134).

Feeling robbed of his last chance, he simultaneously rebukes Sartre for a rationalist impulse that violated a needed, ironically Platonic lie. Reflection was the death knell of the black, it was that from which he was attempting to escape. Sartre, he suggests, should have encouraged his self-delusion, his narcissistic search for his desired mirror image, if but for the sake of instantiating Sartre’s argument of maximizing the negative moment of the antiracist, anticolonial struggle from the spirited chest of the *nègre*. It needed to be the *nègre*’s moment, his resistance, his upsurge:

My *nègre* consciousness does not hold itself out as a lack. It is its own follower.... What is certain is that, at the very moment when I was trying to grasp my own being, Sartre, who remained The Other ... was reminding me that my *nègritude* was only a minor term. In all truth, in all truth I tell you, my shoulders slipped out of the framework of the world, my feet could no longer feel the touch of the ground. Without a *nègre* path, without a *nègre* future, it was impossible for me to live my *nègre*ness. Not yet white, no longer all the more so black, I was damned. Jean-Paul Sartre had forgotten that the *nègre* suffers in his body quite differently from the white (*Pn* 111–112 /*BS* 137–138).

In spite of this different suffering, of having no where to fall because of already haven fallen, the reality principle returned with dizzying force. Why couldn’t the symbolism articulate, at least, *black reason*? Why were Senghor’s symbolic hierarchy, in the end, an affirmation of the

white constructions against which he has at this point spent twenty five years fighting?

... this *nègre* who is looking for the universal. He is looking for the universal! But in June 1950, the hotels in Paris refused to rent rooms to *nègre* pilgrims. Why? Purely and simply because their Anglo-Saxon customers (who are rich and who, as everyone knows, hate *nègres*) threatened to move out (*Pn* 150 /*BS* 186).

No, at this point, Sartre seemed unforgivable. With seeming nowhere to turn, Fanon ends this chapter, “L’Expérience vécue du Noir,” “without responsibility, straddling Nothingness and Infinity,” by confessing that he began to weep.

That Fanon concludes by confessing that he wept reveals the therapeutic dimension of the chapter. Recall his reference to laughter. Laughter enabled him to cope with his situation, to move on. The role of humor in oppressed communities is well known. There is not only the form of humor in which the oppressor is ridiculed, but there is also self-deprecating humor, humor that creates a paradoxical distance and closeness with their situation. A friend related to me a joke from a Jewish World War II concentration camp survivor: A German officer once yelled to a group of inmates, “Hey—all of you—get from behind that broomstick!” In many black communities, this “snap” or example of the “dozens” appears: “Your father’s so black that when he falls down, people hop over from fear of falling *in*.” There was slave humor; Gypsy humor; Jewish humor—as we see, even in concentration camps; varieties of immigrant humor; and there continues to be self-deprecating black humor. Humor stands in these communities as complex competitors of proverbs, but instead of wisdom, they offer distance. Fanon’s text is loaded with this form of humor; he sarcastically mocks the *nègre*’s tragicomic efforts in this theodicean struggle. But humor has its limitations. It takes much to be able to laugh at oneself, and excess could lead to pathology. The struggle for liberation, for humanization, is thus structurally similar to therapy. Patients may, for instance, laugh at their situation while telling their story, but this laughter is to make them go on although often without genuine confrontation; it is a practice of seeming closeness that leads to distance; the grin, the laugh, also means “too close for comfort.”

“Breakthrough” in therapy often occurs with tears, with catharsis. Fanon wept because he realized that every effort to avoid the

truth failed. It was through such catharsis that he was then able to face the implications of his situation, *in whatever form it may be*. That is why the succeeding chapter is entitled, “The *Nègre* and Psychopathology.” He is now able to face the psychopathological implications of his situation.

Normativity and the problem of normality

The first thing Fanon observes is that black psychology is abnormal psychology. “A normal black child, having grown up with a normal family, will find himself abnormal [*s’anormalisera*] from the slightest contact with the white world” (*Pn* 117 / *BS* 143). Whereas there is a conception of normality for whites—that is, their being “human” by virtue of being white—there is no such thing for blacks. An adult black who is “well adjusted,” as we saw in our discussion of language, is an “abnormal black.” An adult black who is not well adjusted—in fact, infantile—is a “normal black,” which ironically means an “abnormal person” or simply “abnormality.” To be abnormal for a black and abnormal for a human being is to be in a “Catch 22.” It is, as Fanon observes, like Rodin’s *The Thinker* with an erection—“there’s a shocking image. One cannot decently ‘have a hard on’ everywhere” (*Pn* 134 / *BS* 165). In this chapter, as in chapter five, all the motifs of chapters one through four are repeated but with more insight.

Fanon cites an associational test he administered to 500 whites (French, German, English, Italian) over a five-year period. When he felt their guard was down, when they were sure they would not “offend” him, Fanon inserted the word “*nègre*.” His observation?

Nègre brought forth biology, penis, strong, athletic, potent, boxer, Joe Louis, Jesse Owens, Senegalese troops, savage, animal, devil, sin.

Senegalese soldier, used as the stimulus, evoked dreadful, bloody, tough, strong.

It is interesting to note that one in fifty reacted to the word “*nègre*” with *Nazi* or *SS*.... Let me add that some Europeans helped me by giving the test to their acquaintances: In such cases the proportion went up notably (*Pn* 134–135 / *BS* 166).

Black Nazis? The level of investment in blackness as evil was such that all evil, even evil that was patently antiblack, was invested in the *nègre*.

But Fanon's conclusion goes further: "The *nègre* represents the biological danger" (*Pn* 134 / *BS* 165). Fear of the biological becomes fear of the *nègre*: "The *nègre* symbolizes the biological" (*Pn* 135 / *BS* 167). The biological is usually associated with the genital and sex, the result of which is the collapse of the *nègre* to the genital: ". . . one is no longer aware of the *nègre* but only of a penis; the *nègre* is eclipsed. He is turned into a penis. He *is* a penis" (*Pn* 137 / *BS* 170). Fanon is responding to this passage from Michel Cournot's *Martinique*:

The black man's sword is a sword. When he has thrust it into your wife, she has really felt something. It is a revelation. In the chasm that it has left, your little toy is lost. Pump away until the room is awash with your sweat, you might as well just be singing.... Four *nègres* with their penises exposed would fill a cathedral. They would be unable to leave the building until their erections had subsided; and in such close quarters that would not be a simple matter.²⁸

Notice that Cournot did not write of the *nègre* thrusting his phallus into the *nègre's nègress* but into an imagined white reader's wife. We're on familiar ground here, but the danger as expressed by Cournot is not simply of the black male rapist but also of white female desire. The subtext of Cournot's reflection is that the *nègre* is what a white woman "really" wants. Fanon agrees, but with the provision that she be a *nègrephobic* white woman. The *nègre* becomes, on the level of fantasy and phobia, *he who knows*, he who will do to her what, how, and as she imagines she would like to be done.²⁹

The absence of Cournot's imagining the *nègresse* does not invalidate the thesis that she, too, is genital and biological. The missing text is that if the white man could no longer please his wife after she has been with a *nègre*, his dreams of *sexually* pleasing a *nègresse* is hopeless. In the end, it is not the power of his sword but the authoritative force of the color of his skin. The *nègre* pleases her because her "chasm" is so wide that it cannot even "feel" the *nègre's* sword, which makes sexual impact irrelevant for her. She *is* vagina, endlessly open, wide.

Fanon has been rebuked by some feminist critics for announcing in this chapter that, as for the woman of color, he "knows nothing of her."³⁰ Everything we have discussed since chapter two of the text contradicts this. What Fanon means is that he lacks *clinical* knowledge of the *nègre* in the woman of color's fantasy life. The reason for this is

obvious: racism and sexism are such that female mental patients of color would have been taken at their peril to a predominantly white male community of mental health workers. To this day, people of color prefer to take mentally ill female relatives either to clergy counselors or to social workers because of the dangers of sexual violence in such situations. Fanon, in short, had to rely on nonclinical information because of the demographics of most mental health patients: white men, white women, and men of color.

I suspect, however, that we could easily provide a response from both popular culture and in clinical studies today. In terms of the former, there are first-world women of color who, for instance, visit places where there are supposedly “real” men of color who serve pretty much the same sexual role as the *nègre* for *nègre*-hungry white women. The vacation in Africa or the Caribbean come readily to mind. That the “subject” here is women of color should not obscure recognition of this phenomenon, for on the level of fantasy and desire the terrain is familiar: “*Those* men of color *really know* how to treat a woman of color,” as we find in the popularity of *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* (1998), although the women of color in those other regions may beg to differ.³¹ In terms of clinical studies, I have yet to come across a clinical study of neurotic nor psychotic black women’s imagined conceptions of black men, although I suspect that the conclusion might be the same given that mental illness usually retreats to the most conventional—even stereotypical—conceptions of normality.

If the *nègre* is both sex and Western anxiety over sex, then psychoanalysis and other Western human sciences find their limitations here, for “sex” here is not only structurally “deviant,” but, by virtue of its seriousness, also not symbolic. It is, as Fanon declares, *phobogène* (*phobogenic*)—material, existentially serious, real.³² A phobogenic object is *anxiogène* (*anxiogenic*)—a stimulus to anxiety (*Pn* 124 /*BS* 151). Anxiety is a special mode of consciousness. Unlike fear, anxiety pertains to the self. One experiences anxiety when one suffers over what one should *do*, the choices one either wishes to make or avoid. In existential philosophy, especially those Kierkegaardian and Sartrean, it is a struggle with self, over what one will “be” by virtue of what one does or would like to do.

The *nègre*, then, stimulates anxiety in the white man and the white woman. We have already seen what he stimulates in the heterosexual white woman. In the heterosexual white man, one might follow Cournot’s sense of possessing an inadequate “toy.” Fanon goes further, however, and argues that for both the heterosexual white man

and the heterosexual white woman, the *nègre* is a putative sex partner (*Pn* 127 / *BS* 156). In effect, for the white man, the *nègre*-phobic moment is, then, a homophobic, if not homoerotic, one. It is a moment of repulsion and attraction. The violent history of *nègre*-phobia suggests, then, an effort to extricate—as Snow White’s stepmother attempted to extricate the object of her limitation and desire—material homosexual desire from the world. The *nègre*-phobic white man hates, in other words, the fact that he *desires* the *nègre*. But since the world of the phobic is such that symbol and being collapse into one, the *nègre* is homosexual desire. The *nègre* “must,” then, be destroyed. We find here, then, some of the most controversial hypotheses and confessions in Fanon’s *oeuvre*:

Let me observe at once that I had no opportunity to establish the *overt* presence of homosexuality in Martinique. This must be viewed as the result of the absence of the Oedipus complex in the Antilles. The schema of homosexuality is well enough known. We should not overlook, however, the existence there of what are called “men dressed like women” or “godmothers.” Generally, they wear shirts and skirts. But I am convinced that they lead normal sex lives. They can take a punch like any “he-man” and *they are not impervious to the allures of women*—fish and vegetable merchants. In Europe, on the other hand, I have known several Martinicans who became homosexuals, always passive. But this was by no means a neurotic homosexuality: For them it was a means to a livelihood, as pimping is for others (*Pn* 164 n44 / *BS* 180 n44, emphasis added).

Fanon here does not deny the existence of heterosexual transvestites and perhaps bisexuals in Martinique. His claim that the Oedipus complex is absent in Martinique emerges from his view that Martinican men do not have Martinican *fathers* to replace. Even in childhood, such identification is absent:

The young black in the Antilles, who in school never ceases to repeat, “our forefathers, the Gauls,” identifies his [or her] self with the explorer, the civilizer, the white who brings truth to the savages—an all-white truth.

There is identification, that is to say that the young black subjectively adopts a white attitude. The hero, who is white, is invested with all aggression (*Pn* 120 / *BS* 147).

There is no black father to mirror as The Father. Consequently, there is no struggle for the mother. She is already theirs, her children's. It is the White Father, the Colonizing Father, against whom such a relation could be made manifest, but that father is structural and rarely made flesh on the level of the personal. Fanon here maintains his theme that the slightest contact with the white world will produce an abnormal response; that is why he adds that there are Martinican males in Paris who are marketable as "passive" homosexuals. There, white male desire for conquest is reenacted in such roles. (Interestingly enough, Malcolm X recounts in his autobiography white males who sought black males to play the role of sadists over them, a phenomenon which Fanon speaks of as well.) For our purposes, what is important is that Fanon speaks of "neurotic homosexuality," which implies that there are forms of homosexuality that are neither neurotic nor abnormal. A more problematic confession for Fanon's critics emerges, however, in the following passage:

I have never been able, without revulsion, to hear a man say of another man: "He is so sensual!" I do not know what the sensuality of a man is. Imagine a woman saying of another woman: "She's so terribly desirable—she's darling..." (*Pn* 163 / *BS* 201).

Fanon is responding to Michel Salomon's racist fascination with the *nègre* (which Fanon cites on the same page before his remarks): "But to say that the mere fact of his skin, of his hair, of that aura of sensuality that he [the *nègre*] gives off does not spontaneously give rise to a certain embarrassment, whether of attraction or of revulsion, is to reject the facts in the name of a ridiculous prudery that has never solved anything. . . ." Salomon's remarks are clearly homoerotic and they collapse the *nègre* into an essentially sexed being ("the mere fact of his skin"). Fanon's response is twofold. First, he is announcing his heterosexuality. He is also announcing that *he* doesn't have a "hard on" all the time, that he is not, in other words, by virtue of his skin, a permanent source of sexual heat—especially around men. Salomon's sexual fascination with the *nègre* makes the sensual moment a projection, which leads to a

failure to read the absence of a desire to be in a homoerotic relation with him. The racial codes thus displace the codes of sexual orientation. A homosexual who finds another man sensual is “normal.” We could add to this normality the understanding that being attracted to men does not entail being attracted to *any* man, just as a heterosexual man, although not revolted by the thought of sleeping with women, will not necessarily be attracted to *every* woman. The freeness with which Salomon spoke of this attraction suggests a normative feature that makes such an association “safe.” Salomon can, in other words, have a homoerotic attraction to the *nègre* without worry of “really” being a homosexual. A case in point: Popular films like *The Crying Game* (1992) and *Pulp Fiction* (1995) could have scenes of white males sodomizing black males and maintain their appeal to predominantly homophobic audiences because of the accepted hierarchies of masculine white aggressives and emasculated, if not always feminine, black passives. We see similar themes in presentations of relations between white males and Asian (including Asian-American) males.³³ I said earlier that Fanon had for himself a manhood project. It is a project shared by all men whose manhood is called into question. It is a feature of heterosexuality that the heterosexual does not desire members of his sex. That Fanon speaks of “revulsion” should be looked at as, say, a homosexual male who finds sleeping with a woman revolting, or a lesbian who finds the thought of sleeping with a male revolting, confessions of which are in no short supply.³⁴ We should, however, bear in mind that normativity is such that a logic of symmetry often proves fallacious. Thus, in a society where heterosexuality is the norm, the sexual anxieties of a heterosexual may project its own *nègre*—in a word, a heterosexual *nègre*’s *nègre*. Fanon’s remark is homophobic in this sense, but one wonders, after that is said, what would count as a lack of revulsion for homosexual contact short of engaging in homosexual relations with the male who issues the charge of homophobia. We have, however, heard a version of that argument before: “You must hate black men because you won’t sleep with me.” I recall a colleague who was offended by a white woman who told her that she was homophobic because of her rebuffing the woman’s advance. The colleague, who was black, told me that she was offended because of the audacity of her pursuer: “What makes her think that even if I slept with women, I would want to sleep with *her*!”

The example of a woman’s anxieties raises, as well, the question of Fanon’s presumption of a parallel problem with women. Here, Fanon missed the logic that informed his analysis of Capécia and Nini. Women are, after all, sexed in ways that trigger normative acceptance of them

as sites of the “sensual.” Cinema provides ample support for this thesis: The female body can be exposed without much threat of censorship. In pornography, “heterosexual” films routinely have so-called “lesbian” scenes without being “gay” or “bisexual.” Throw in a scene with two white males having sex, and the designation changes. And interracial all-male sex? Much here depends on who is doing what to whom.

Fanon’s concerns were primarily regarding interracial sexual relations. His discussions of homosexual interracial relations raises the question of the relationship of structure to situation. That the black is already structured as the passive challenges the readings of difference and the extent to which the signs and symbols of psychoanalytical themes can accurately characterize the *nègre*’s condition. The Fanonian dictum, that social and cultural forces come into play, pushes their ontological claims to the wayside. Such sciences of the human being work, he concludes, to the extent that they remain blind to the existence of those who embody their limits. White normativity enables us to examine the projections of the *nègre*, but those projections permeate the social world and render it as such that flesh-and-blood people of color suffer a claustrophobic seal whenever they reach beyond their “place.” Can, in other words, blacks and whites “meet”? Are dynamics of such mutual recognition possible?

Below the self-other dialectic

The search for recognition, the focus of the penultimate chapter, follows the path of its predecessors. It fails on two counts—Adlerian psychology and Hegelian dialectics of recognition. The Adlerian move fails because of the superstructural force of the White Man, under whom men of color, as we have seen in our discussion of Fanon’s manhood project, find equality only among themselves *below* the White. That being so, one wonders whether the subordinated status of the black could lead to a dynamic of recognition. Fanon considers Hegel’s classic heuristic treatment of the subject in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which formulates the matter in terms of a struggle for recognition between an hypothesized Lord and an hypothesized Bondsman. Hegel argued that the human being differentiates himself from nature through his ability to do with it whatever he pleases. When he encounters another human being, the project is limited by the other human being’s aiming to do the same to him. A struggle ensues wherein, due to fear of death, one submits and, in exchange for his life, is forced to serve the victor who now becomes, by virtue of such recognition, his Lord. The servant or

bondsman serves the Lord through working with nature, which brings back the realization of his difference from nature and his ability to take care of himself and the Lord. The Lord, on the other hand, becomes indolent and dependent on the bondsman, especially for his recognition as a Lord. Fanon does not address Hegel's treatment in his *Philosophy of Right*, where the realization of eliminating mastery for an age of equality, freedom, and mutual recognition emerges. A promised age of mutual recognition born from the miserable history of *nègre* enslavement? Fanon doesn't think so, because neither the Hegelian Master nor the Structural White Man wants recognition from the *nègre*; each wants *work* and bodies, as we have seen in the many eclipses of the black, without points of view.³⁵

Here, we see as well, why any theoretical articulation of the *nègre's* condition on the basis of Self–Other relations fails. They presuppose the subtle symmetry of “Otherness.” White–black relations are such that blacks struggle to achieve Otherness; it is a struggle to be in a position *for the ethical to emerge*. Thus, the circumstance is peculiarly wrought with realizations of the *political*. Fanon ends *Black Skin, White Masks*, then, politically and existentially. Politically, he imagines what eventually became known as Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Beloved Community, where all join hands and sing “free at last!” but through the very different, tortuous route of a majestic, violent struggle. The message of the failures, then, is systemic: The modern system of human difference is such that it does not by itself hold the resources of human salvation. That the system itself must be attacked is a revolutionary call; it is the call to fight, to struggle against oppression, against, that is, dehumanization. In that struggle, Fanon calls for a pedagogy to build (*édifier*, “to edify,” “to build”), through the tremors of beckoning bodies, a questioning humanity. In his words:

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 of every
consciousness.

My final prayer:

O my body, make of me always a man who
questions!

The final words here carry the irony of a call against final words. Fanon

changes the direction of the analysis to the second person formal, to the unmediated Reader who can best be articulated as *You*. In existential thought, this *You* is familiar; it is the *You* of the unmediated world of Martin Buber, where *I* and *You* leave no room for “it” formulations.³⁶ When I speak to *You*, I am addressing you in your humanity. Such recognition faces the “open door of every consciousness,” another human being devoid of overdetermined presumptions. Such a reaching out leads to a new embodiment. From anger to apprehension to laughter to tears, Fanon leaves us with a *prayer*. And this prayer, ironically, is not to an outside force, to a god, but to the anxieties of the embodied self. His body is called upon to release itself from the enmeshed web of social pathologies to the expression that best suits a mature, free consciousness—the embodiment of questioning.

Some concluding thoughts

What did Fanon achieve at the age of twenty six in *Black Skin, White Masks*?

In those 188 pages (in the French), Fanon made contributions in several areas of thought. The work challenges the viability of any single science of the study of human beings and presents a radical critique premised upon the examination of human failure. In classical psychoanalysis, neurosis and psychosis emerge as aim-inhibited activity rooted in subconscious and unconscious life. Failure there emerges as not achieving—or seeming incapable of achieving—one’s goals. But failure by itself is not properly psychoanalytical. One could experience failure without neurotic or psychotic content. The psychoanalytical emerges through either one’s response to failure or one’s role in the constitution of failure. It is where one is the source of one’s failure that classical psychoanalysis comes into play. Semiotic psychoanalysis moves to the level of structural failure, but there it is on the level of meaning. Instead of failure, “lack” or “difference” is the focus. What one lacks, or the social meaning of oneself as “lack” or “difference,” provide clues into one’s failure, which in such a case is a lack of having what one wants. But again, failure is not necessarily psychoanalytic here. One could as well experience failure, which may symbolize “lack,” but to fail does not necessarily mean to be a source of failure. Psychoanalysis is thus within the set of human sciences that are limited by his critique, but it is so paradoxically because its failure is as a philosophy of failure; that is, if it succeeds it fails, and if it fails, it, or at least Fanon, succeeds.

The paradoxes of a metatheory of failure raises the following

question: What are the conditions by which we are able, for instance, to analyze structural failure? The terrain there, as we have seen, is formally theodicean. Fanon's point is that the black encounters his or herself as the source of failure wherever failure is encountered. He has thus, in effect, complicated the psychoanalytical moment. In most psychoanalytical contexts, as we have seen, it is *sexual* difference that is most basic. Fanon has demonstrated a *racial epidermal schema* that functions in such a way as to collapse sexual difference, as we saw in his discussion of Capécia and Veneuse/Maran. The petit-bourgeois roots of psychoanalysis thus finds, in Fanon, its relative dimension in the advancement of a colonial schema, where the symbolic falls sway to the ever-encroaching materiality of the real. Fanon complicates the analysis of failure, moreover, by raising an existential critique of the symbolic in an antiblack world. By pointing out the *seriousness* of blackness, he has pointed out its materiality in the world of negrophobia. In effect, there is not displacement for the symbolic there, which makes blackness operate on the level of reality, constantly, in such a world. So Fanon introduced the importance of experience and systemic resistance. In the end, one *fight*s against racism and colonialism, which is *external directed* activity instead of internal reflection; his counsel is, in short, *actional*.

Black Skin, White Masks is, therefore, like Dante's *Inferno*, which ends after a seemingly endless journey of witnessing sinful practices of futility with a beautiful ascent that bears witness to the stars, a patently optimistic text despite its motif of failure.³⁷ The performative contradiction of pessimism is the work itself. Fanon ultimately criticizes the collapse of rationality into *Western* or *White* rationality. The text itself—an effort to *reason* with the reader—is a verdict against irrationalism, although it is not a wholesale endorsement of rationalism. *Too much* rationalism is, after all, irrational.

The other areas in which this work has made contributions are remarkable. The analysis of failure is paradoxical. Fanon examines not only failure, but the failure of failure. His work is, in effect, akin to the Kierkegaardian notion of an existential paradox. An existential paradox is where an achievement requires failure, where a flight from anguish is anguish, or, as we find in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, where good faith is a form of bad faith. Further like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Sartre, Fanon's work also raises questions of *writing*. Existentialists write in ways that challenge the forms of writing they at first seem constrained by. *Black Skin, White Masks* is not written in a way that can readily identify what type of work it is. It speaks about psychology, but not in the format of standard psychological works. It is replete with

philosophical references, but not in the form of standard philosophical treatises. There are analyses of popular literary texts, and references to several classical ones, but the other disciplines challenge a reading of the work as a purely literary effort.

One could argue, as well, that it is a phenomenological work, but one would have to add that the existential imports would make it an existential phenomenological work, and one would have to add that it is phenomenological to the extent that it starts from a radical rejection of presupposed method, which, paradoxically, is *its* method. This radical rejection has an impact on the role of temporality in the text. Chester Fontenot has commented that “Fanon’s insistence on the present, in fact, on a constant presence which is, in a sense, anti-historical, gives his writings an aesthetic quality ... [Fanon] constructs his myth in the present, and focuses on the past only insofar as it gives him a basis to move from the negative zone, which is characterized by the metaphoric tendency toward identification with and assimilation into European culture, to the positive zone, which is characterized by the metonymic urge toward uniqueness and differentiation.”³⁸ Phenomenologists would immediately see these movements as examples of “irrealization,” the phenomenological term for the reality addressed by the phenomenologist after suspension of some of his or her ontological commitments or views about the being of the world. The “present” as used here is a present to which we can return at any moment to continue our inquiry. It is the present of thought, of inquiry, of reflection. Note, as well, Fontenot’s identification of the aesthetic quality that emerges through such an approach. Maurice Natanson has written on this aesthetic quality in his work on phenomenology and literature, where he has argued that philosophical reflection in literature is phenomenological.³⁹ In spite of all this, there are some major differences between Fanon’s phenomenology and some of the major proponents of phenomenology. Unlike the great German phenomenologist Edmund Husserl, for instance, who is considered by most commentators to be the Father of what most contemporary philosophers, social scientists, and literary theorists mean by “phenomenology,” whose radical move inward led to a controversial “Transcendental Ego,” Fanon’s radical move inward led to lived-experience and the collapse of the symbolic. Fanon walked with Husserl (through Sartre and Merleau-Ponty) methodologically, but they eventually departed toward different horizons. Fanon’s phenomenology is, then, *Fanonian* phenomenology. He issues a radical critique at the level of signs and symbols, and even at the way he utilized the signs and symbols of his investigation.

In effect, then, with *Black Skin, White Masks*, a new type of text was born. It is a way of writing that, ironically, in spite of Fanon's quips and jibes at the Caribbean, is peculiarly Caribbean.⁴⁰ It is a creolized style of writing, wherein the writer addresses problems without presumptions of disciplinary, linguistic, nor stylistic allegiance. Although some Caribbean thinkers may not see themselves as influenced by Fanon, the style of writing that emerges from those who decide to negotiate the divide between the poetic and the historical is such that it stands, albeit often ironically, in his shadow.

Notes

1. See Kwame Gyekye's *An Essay on African Philosophy: The Akan Conceptual Scheme* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press), pp. 126–128.
2. For discussion, see Lewis R. Gordon, *Existential Africana: Understanding Africana Existential Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2000), chapter 4. For dynamics of not being seen by virtue of being seen, see also Lewis R. Gordon, *Bad Faith and Antiracist Racism* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1995), Part III.
3. "This book should have been written three years ago. . . But these truths were fire in me then" (*Pn 6 / BS 9*).
All citations of *Black Skin, White Masks* will occur in this form with references to pages in the French edition with a slash and parallel reference to the English edition. The translations are either modified or my own. The full citations to both editions are: *Peau noire, masques blancs* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1952) and *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lamm Markman (New York: Grove Press, 1967).
4. See *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri, vol. 1, "Inferno,"* trans. Allen Mandelbaum (New York: Bantam Books, 1980). *Black Skin, White Masks* is not Fanon's only updating of Dante's classic meditation on hell. He returns to it in his final work, *Les Damnés de la terre*, préface de Jean-Paul Sartre (Paris: François Maspero éditeur S.A.R.L./Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1961/1991), where the connections are even stronger. In that work, each chapter presents a hellish world of violence, betrayal, and

revenge at the end of which Fanon issues a plea for humanity to shed its skin and set afoot a new humanity.

5. Quoted in (*Pn* 14 / *BS* 18), it refers to Valéry's *Charmes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1952).
6. These quotations are on pp. 15 and 16 of *Pn*. See *BS* 20–21.
7. I was once queried by an editor of another piece about the correlation of blacks with Caliban. Caliban, she noted, was despicable, and it is degrading to associate blacks with him. What she failed to realize is that for an antiblack racist, all blacks are ultimately “niggers.” And what are “niggers” if not Caliban?
8. Chester Fontenot Jr., “Frantz Fanon: The Revolutionary,” *First World* 2, no. 3 (1979): 27.
9. Mayotte Capécia, *Je suis martiniquaise* (Paris: Corrêa, 1948) and *La négresse blanche* (Paris: Corrêa, 1950).
10. T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, *Frantz Fanon: Conflicts and Feminisms* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998).
11. Abdoulaye Sadjî's *Nini, mulâtresse du Sénégal* appears in *Présence Africaine* 1–3. See also his article, “Littérature et colonisation,” *Présence Africaine* 6 (Avri 1949).
12. This letter was quoted by Jobi Fanon, “Pour Frantz, pour notre mère,” *Sans Frontière* 5–11 (February 1982): 10, and it appears in Buhlan's *Fanon and Psychology of Oppression*, p. 19. This translation is Bulhan's.
13. Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1977). For a recent, succinct exposition of Lacan's thought in ways relevant to themes in this essay, see David Ross Fryer, *The Intervention of the Other: Ethical Subjectivity in Levinas and Lacan* (New York: The Other Press, 2004).

14. Willy Apollon, "Four Seasons in Femininity or *Four Men in a Woman's Life*," *Topoi* 12, no. 2 (September 1993): 103.
15. Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1970), p. 22. For elaboration of this interpretation of Morrison's text, see Gary Schwartz, "Toni Morrison at the Movies: Theorizing Race through *Imitation of Life* (for Barbara)," in *Existence in Black: An Anthology of Black Existential Philosophy*, ed. with an intro. by Lewis R. Gordon (New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 111–128.
16. Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race, and Class* (New York: Vintage, 1983).
17. Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction*, trans. by Brian Singer (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979), p. 69.
18. Heinz Kohut, "Thoughts on Narcissism and Narcissistic Rage," in *Self-Psychology and the Humanities: Reflections on a New Psychoanalytic Approach*, ed. by C.B. Strozier (New York: W.W. Norton, 1985), pp. 124–60.
19. *Pn 53 /BS 66*. René Maran's text is *Un homme pareil aux autres* (Paris: Editios Arc-en-Ciel, 1947).
20. Dominique Mannoni, *Prospero and Caliban: The Psychology of Colonization* (New York: Praeger, 1964).
21. This is the more accurate translation of the title of the fifth chapter, which was misleadingly translated by Charles Lamm Markman as "The Fact of Blackness."
22. Robert Gooding-Williams's anthology *Reading Rodney King, Reading Urban Uprising* (New York and London: Routledge 1993) and my anthology *Existence in Black: An Anthology of Black Existential Philosophy* are two recent examples.
23. For discussion of the Banania product, see Jan Nederveen Pieterse, *White on Black: Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), pp. 162–3.

24. D.A. Masolo, *African Philosophy in Search of Identity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 25.
25. *Ibid.*
26. This remark is unfortunately often attributed to Senghor without an examination of the context in which he made it in *Liberté: Négritude et humanisme (essai)* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1964). Senghor was here explicating Comte Arthur de Gobineau's position from *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines*, présentation de Hubert Juin (Paris: P. Belfond, 1967), volume 2, chapter 7. Senghor's actual position is that a healthy human being should manifest both emotion and reason. For more discussion of this matter, see Jacques Louis Hymans, *Léopold Sédar Senghor: An Intellectual Biography* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1971).
27. For a wonderful elaboration of this notion of "secretion," see Kelly Oliver, *The Colonization of Psychic Space: A Psychoanalytic Social Theory of Oppression* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2004). Also, Fanon's remark about *rhythm* betrays his sentiments toward music versus written poetry for the expression of black selfhood. For critical discussion of his position, see my essay, "Must Revolutionaries Sing the Blues?: Thinking through Fanon and the Leitmotif of the Black Arts Movement," in *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement*, ed. by Margo Crawford and Lisa Gail Collins (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005).
28. Michel Cournot, *Martinique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1948), pp. 13–14.
29. Anxieties and fears about specifically black men coupling with white women abound in modern western literature and popular culture. For a film that brilliantly portrays (albeit perhaps not intentionally so) Fanon's point about the dangerous black man in the negrophobic white woman's life really being herself, see *Candyman* (1992), where a white female doctoral student of anthropology attempts to investigate an urban myth of a black man with a hook who appears, after one has looked in the mirror and mentioned his name five times, and eviscerates his victim. All the stuff is there—mirrors/self, dangerous black male, phallic

hook, but particularly significant is that the white female protagonist isn't attacked by him but seduced by him into becoming him, which raises the question of whether she were he and he were she in the first place.

30. See, for example, Gwen Bergner's "The Role of Gender in Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*," *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 110, no. 1 (January 1995):141–151.
31. In fact, on the island of Jamaica, those women are called "Stellas." See, e.g., Jacqueline Sánchez Taylor, "Dollars Are a Girl's Best Friend? Female Tourists' Sexual Behaviour in the Caribbean," *Sociology* 35, no. 3 (2001): 749–764, where the author discusses "fantasy" as a commodity of exchange in sex tourism.
32. For discussion of the existentially serious, see *Bad Faith and Antiracist Racism*, chap. 6.
33. See Brian Locke, "The Impact of the Black–White Binary on Asian-American Identity," *Radical Philosophy Review* 1, no. 2 (1998):98–125.
34. See, for example, Andrea Dworkin's *Intercourse* and Edmund White's award-winning *Genet: A Biography* (New York: Vintage, 1994).
35. For discussions of the demand for bodies without points of view, see Lewis R. Gordon, *Bad Faith and Antiracist Racism*, chaps. 14–16.
36. See Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Scribner's Sons, Collier Books, 1958).
37. These themes of suffering and redemption in the possibility the future offers are themes to which he will return in *Les Damnés de la terre*.
38. Fontenot, pp. 25 and 27.

39. See Maurice Natanson, *The Erotic Bird: Phenomenology in Literature*, with a foreword by Judith Butler (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).
40. I cannot develop this claim here because of the limits of space. Interested readers may wish to consult the many discussions, in *The C.L.R. James Journal*, of how Caribbean thinkers write. See especially the set of issues in 2001, which feature discussions of Wilson Harris, Edoard Glissant, Sylvia Wynter, C.L.R. James, Fanon, and many others.