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The Plunge into the Chasm of the Past

Fanon, Self-Recognition, and Decolonization

Negritude is for destroying itself, it is a passage and not an outcome, a means and not an ultimate end.

—Jean-Paul Sartre, “Black Orpheus”

In no way do I have to dedicate myself to reviving a black civilization unjustly ignored. I will not make myself the man of any past. I do not want to sing the past to the detriment of my present and my future.

—Frantz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks

This chapter begins to sketch out in more detail the alternative politics of recognition briefly introduced at the end of chapter 1. As suggested there, far from evading the recognition paradigm entirely, Fanon instead turns our attention to the cultural practices of critical individual and collective self-recognition that colonized populations often engage in to empower themselves, instead of relying too heavily on the colonial state and society to do this for them. This is the realm of self-affirmative cultural, artistic, and political activity that Fanon associated largely but not exclusively with negritude. The negritude movement first emerged in France during the late 1930s as a response to anti-black racism. Although negritude constituted a diverse body of work and activism, at its core the movement emphasized the need for colonized people and communities to purge themselves of the internalized effects of systemic racism and colonial violence by rejecting assimilation and instead affirming the worth of their own identity-related differences. In this sense, it has been argued that negritude represents an important precursor to contemporary “identity politics” in the United States and elsewhere.¹

However, despite the extensive commentary that Fanon’s relationship to negritude has generated, no clear consensus has been reached regarding the
extent to which he ought to be read as a critic or supporter of the movement’s claims and achievements. For example, some commentators, such as David Caute, Irene Grendzier and David Macey, have suggested that where Fanon can be read in his early work (particularly *Black Skin, White Masks*) as more sympathetic to certain aspects of negritude’s objectives, over time he eventually came to stress the movement’s limitations, either seeing it as representing, at best, a “transitional” stage in the dialectic of decolonization (following the position of Jean-Paul Sartre discussed below), or worse, as having little substantive value whatsoever. Other critics, however, have advanced a near-opposite reading. As Jock McCullock writes with reference to Caute and Grendzier: “If the substance of these critiques are examined in detail, it is apparent that Fanon became more rather than less sympathetic to negritude with the passing of time.” And yet other commentators have refused to draw a sharp distinction between early and late Fanon’s views on negritude altogether, instead arguing that, although the specifics of Fanon’s complex views altered as his analysis moved from the Antilles to the Algerian contexts, he nevertheless always remained simultaneously a rigorous critic and critical advocate of certain features (and certain proponents) of the negritude movement.

The interpretation advanced below is indebted to this third reading of Fanon. I demonstrate that although Fanon always questioned the specifics of negritude based on its, at times, essentialist and bourgeois character, he nevertheless viewed the associated practices of individual and collective self-recognition through the revaluation of black culture, history, and identity as a potentially crucial feature of the broader struggle for freedom against colonial domination. This potential hinged, however, entirely on negritude’s ability to transcend what Fanon saw as its retrograde orientation towards a subjective affirmation of a prec colonial past by grounding itself in the peoples’ struggle against the material structure of colonial rule in the present.

Although Fanon saw the critical revaluation of Indigenous cultural forms as an important means of temporarily breaking the colonized free from the incapacitating effects of being exposed to structured patterns of colonial misrecognition, he was decidedly less willing to explore the role that these forms and practices might play in the construction of alternatives to the oppressive social relations that produce colonized subjects in the first place. This has led Katherine Gines to correctly conclude that while Fanon recognized the importance of affirming cultural difference as a form of individual and collective
self-empowerment, he was less clear as to whether these differences ought to be substantively retained in the course of decolonization.⁵ In this specific sense, then, it will be shown that Fanon clearly shared Sartre’s view that negritude’s emphasis on cultural self-affirmation constituted an important “means” but “not an ultimate end” of anticolonial struggle, even though both authors arrived at this analogous conclusion via different paths.

This chapter is organized into two sections and a conclusion. In the first section, I sketch the theory of intersubjective recognition that Sartre develops in Being and Nothingness, Anti-Semite and Jew, and “Black Orpheus.” As Sonia Kruks and others have noted, Fanon’s work was “for better and for worse” deeply influenced by Sartre’s philosophical and political writings, particularly as these writings pertain to issues of recognition, reciprocity, and freedom.⁶ Thus, to fully understand what I characterize as the limited transitional function that Fanon attributes to practices of self-recognition and cultural empowerment in the course of anticolonial struggle, we must first unpack Sartre’s earlier views on these and similar matters. In the next section, I examine the instrumental relationship Fanon draws in his work between cultural self-recognition and projects of decolonization. This discussion will pave the way for the argument I lay out in my concluding chapter, which examines the substantive relationship forged between self-affirmative practices of cultural regeneration and decolonization by theorists and activists of Indigenous resurgence working in the settler-colonial context of Canada.

From the Particular to the Universal: Jean-Paul Sartre, Identity Politics, and the Colonial Dialectic

Sartre’s Anti-Semite and Jew provides an analysis of the nature of French anti-Semitism in the wake of World War II.⁷ Although many scholars have since criticized Sartre’s hyper-constructivist account of Judaism and Jewish identity as a mere effect of anti-Semitism—reflected in Sartre’s famous assertion that it is the anti-Semite “who creates the Jew”—in the following section I want to bracket these well-warranted criticisms. Instead I want to focus on the logic underwriting Sartre’s argument in order to demonstrate the transitional role he attributes to the recognition and self-affirmation of identity or difference in the struggle for freedom and equality on the one hand, and the ways in which Fanon simultaneously adapts and critiques this position in his writings on decolonization on the other.
Sartre’s project in *Anti-Semite and Jew* is best read as a practical reworking of his prior engagement with Hegel’s dialectic of recognition in *Being and Nothingness*, only this time cast, like Fanon’s later intervention in *Black Skin, White Masks* through the lens of European racism. In stark contrast to Hegel’s “optimistic” portrayal of intersubjective recognition in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*,9 Sartre’s rendition of the master/slave relation in *Being and Nothingness* denies the possibility of reciprocal relations of affirmative recognition. Although Sartre, like Hegel, acknowledges the role played by recognition in constituting subjectivity, unlike Hegel, Sartre portrays this constitution as a theft, as objectification, and as such the “death of [one’s] possibilities.”10 For Sartre recognition constitutes a form of enslavement, of being “fixed” by “the look” of another.11 As Sonia Kruks observes, “the Other,” in Sartre’s account, “is always a threat to my own experience of self, having the power to objectify me and to cause me to flee into self-objectification.”12 According to Sartre, the only way out of this situation is for the objectified to make the other into the object of one’s own look, to “turn back” the gaze, thereby reversing the process of objectification.13 At the heart of Sartre’s theory of intersubjectivity, then, is the notion that recognition is forever mired in a power struggle, “a constant unending conflict between subjects who seek to make each other objects of the gaze as the precondition of reclaiming their inner freedom.”14 Conflict thus constitutes the core of Sartre’s account of “being-for-others.”15

However, when applied to the concrete situation of the Jew in an anti-Semitic society, the option of reversing the gaze and thus one’s objectified status is denied by Sartre. This is because the Jew is not only objectified in the ontological sense of “being-for-others”—as the condition of his or her “fundamental relation” to others—but also as a Jew. This is what Sartre means when he states that the Jew “is overdetermined.”16 Overdetermination fundamentally undermines the Jew’s ability to cast the gaze back. Anti-Semitism thus constitutes a relationship in which the gaze works unilaterally between the one who objectifies (the anti-Semite) and the one who is objectified (the Jew).

What, then, are the options available to the Jew in the context of anti-Semitic racism? Here Sartre introduces two concepts fundamental to his existentialism: authenticity and inauthenticity. The most common response explored in *Anti-Semite and Jew* is represented by the actions of the inauthentic Jew. According to Sartre, the inauthentic Jew is one who chooses to flee from his or her situation as a Jew. For Sartre, the Jew’s situation is the “ensemble of
limits and restrictions”—social, economic, political, cultural—that “forms [the Jew] and determines his possibilities.” Yet the Jew’s situation is also given meaning through the choices he or she makes “within and by it.” In short, the Jew’s situation is the inherited field within which he or she must act, make choices, and derive meaning—and this context is, whether one likes it or not, an anti-Semitic one. Sartre suggests that, when faced with the painful burden of living in this situation, the inauthentic Jew will choose to “run away” from it, to “deny it, or choose to deny their responsibilities” to positively act within it. Sartre equates inauthenticity here with assimilation, the process whereby the Jew, suffering from an “inferiority complex,” seeks to reject her or his particularity by either appealing to abstract universal principles (what today we might call “difference-blind” equality), or by trying to eradicate her or his particularity as such (through religious conversion, secularization, intermarriage, and so on). Although Sartre’s portrait of the inauthentic Jew is not meant to cast “moral blame” on the Jew for his or her evasive actions, Sartre is nonetheless quick to suggest that these actions serve to double back and reinforce the anti-Semitic propaganda that prompted the evasive conduct in the first place. In short, the inauthentic Jew “has allowed himself to be persuaded by the anti-Semites; he is the first victim of their propaganda. He admits with them that, if there is a Jew, he must have the characteristics with which popular malevolence endows him.”

Sartre then contrasts the conduct of the inauthentic Jew with the actions of the Jew who acts authentically in their situation. Faced with this situation the authentic Jew actively commits to affirming his or her Jewish identity against the objectifying gaze of the anti-Semite. The authentic Jew refuses to let the racist propaganda of the anti-Semite determine from the outside her or his actions, his or her being. Instead “he stakes everything on human grandeur [and in accepting] the obligation to live in a situation that is defined precisely by the fact that it is unliveable . . . he derives pride from his humiliation.” It is through this gesture of self-affirmation that the Jew strips anti-Semitism of its discursive power and virulence. As Sartre explains: “The inauthentic Jew flees Jewish reality, and the anti-Semite makes him a Jew in spite of himself; but the authentic Jew makes himself a Jew, in the face of all and against all. He accepts all, even martyrdom, and the anti-Semite, deprived of his weapon, must be content to yelp at the Jew as he goes by, and can no longer touch him. At one stroke the Jew, like any authentic man, escapes description.” For Sartre, then,
authentic self-affirmation provides an important weapon in the Jew’s fight against the objectifying and alienating effects of anti-Semitic overdetermination. But given that anti-Semitism is a socially constituted phenomenon, Sartre is quick to point out that, while authenticity may serve as an important means through which to work over the individualized effects of objectification, on its own it will do little to undercut the social relations constitutive of anti-Semitism as such. “The choice of authenticity is not a solution of the social aspect of the Jewish problem,” writes Sartre. Rather, it “appears to be a moral decision, bringing certainty to the Jew on the ethical [or subjective] level but in no way serving as a solution on the social or political level.” For Sartre, the transformative potential of affirming one’s difference will always be limited insofar as it leaves intact the generative conditions that serve to reproduce anti-Semitic conduct on the one hand, and the effects that this conduct has in shaping the subjectivity of Jews on the other. Ending anti-Semitism thus requires that existential self-affirmation be cashed out in a transformative engagement with these generative conditions; it requires that the Jew’s situation be transformed “from the bottom up.” For the increasingly Marxist Sartre of the mid-1940s, the generative structures identified as most important in the fight against anti-Semitic racism were those associated with capitalism and class conflict. In Sartre’s (overly simplistic) formulation, anti-Semitism served to ideologically mask the root cause of class conflict by positing the Jewish community as the source of class antagonism instead of the capitalist mode of production. Seen in this light, anti-Semitism represents “a mythical, bourgeois representation of the class struggle, and [as such] could not exist in a classless society.” Following this logic, once the “social and economic causes” of anti-Semitism have been eliminated, the affirmation of Jewish difference will no longer be required; indeed, after the revolution has created a world stripped of the economic/social pluralism within which anti-Semitic racism flourishes, affirming Jewish difference would be at best redundant, or worse, it might serve to ideologically reproduce its own divisions and thus foreclose the possibility of a society free from conflict and social stratification. Here the politics of difference is implicitly posited as an important stage in the struggle against anti-Semitic racism, but in no way should it be conceived as an end in itself.

Similar themes are further developed and elaborated by Sartre in “Black Orpheus,” his well-known preface to Léopold Senghor’s 1948 anthology of negritude poetry, Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue
française. However, unlike the situation sketched in *Anti-Semite and Jew* two years earlier, Sartre, now explicitly Marxist in orientation, begins “Black Orpheus” with an important distinction drawn between the situation faced by the Jew in his or her encounter with anti-Semitism, and that of the colonized black person in the context of anti-black racism. Like the condition of the Jew vis-à-vis anti-Semitic racism, and now the “white worker” vis-à-vis the capitalist mode of production, Sartre locates the oppression of colonized black people “in the capitalist structure of . . . society.” However, unlike the situations of the Jew and the white worker, the black person finds him or herself a victim of capitalist exploitation and domination “insofar as he is black and by virtue of being a colonized native or deported African.” In other words, for the colonized black worker, capitalist exploitation and domination is mediated through the lens of race and through the lived experience of racism. Now, as we saw previously, for Sartre, the victimization of Jews by capitalism is also mediated through anti-Semitism and their experience as Jews, but he then goes on to explain that, unlike the Jew, “there is no means of evasion” for the black person; “no ‘passing’ that he can consider: a Jew—a white man among white men—can deny that he is a Jew, can declare himself a man among men. The [N]egro cannot deny that he is a [N]egro, nor can he deny that he is part of some abstract colorless humanity: he is black.”

What does this mean for the black subject who chooses to act authentically in her or his situation? Here Sartre claims that the black person essentially has “his back up against the wall of authenticity.” As he explains: “Having been insulted and formally enslaved, [the black person] picks up the word ‘nigger’ which was thrown at him like a stone, he draws himself erect and proudly proclaims himself as black, in the face of the white man. The unity which will come eventually, bringing all oppressed peoples together in the same struggle, must be preceded in the colonies by what I shall call the moment of separation or negativity; this anti-racist racism is the only road that will lead to the abolition of racial differences.”

In positing negritude as an “anti-racist racism” that will eventually lead to the abolition of racial and class differentiation altogether, Sartre is situating the formation of black consciousness in relation to a distinction, often attributed to Marx, between a class that exists “in-itself” and one that exists “for-itself.” Without going into too much detail here, a class that exists in-itself represents the objective, structural positioning of a group in relation to the
capitalist mode of production. Whereas a class that exists for-itself is one that has become conscious of itself as a class and then proceeds to struggle for-itself and thus in its own shared interests. And, of course, the primary agenda of a class that struggles for-itself is to root out the conditions (capitalist production) that determine its existence as a class. However, since the lived, subjective experience of race and racism occupies a mediating position in the exploitation and domination of black people by capitalism, “recognizing that socialism is the necessary answer to [the] immediate local claims” of black people first requires that they “learn to formulate these claims jointly; therefore they must [first] think of themselves as blacks.” Hence, Sartre concludes that “becoming conscious” for black workers “is different from that which Marxism tries to awaken in the white worker.” In the case of the European proletariat, “class consciousness” is “based on the objective characteristics of the situation of the proletariat. But since the selfish scorn that whites display for blacks . . . is aimed at the deepest recesses of the heart, [black people] must oppose it with a more exact view of black subjectivity.34 For Sartre, developing this subjective opposition is the critical role played by negritude in anticapitalist and antiracist struggle.

So, then, for Sartre, becoming conscious of one’s objective class position in the context of racialized capitalism requires that black people first work over the subjective dimension of race and racism. One cannot hope to uproot the social relations that give rise to both class exploitation and racial domination without first coming to grips with the corrosive effects that white supremacy has had on those subject to it. This is why Sartre attributes to negritude a revolutionary “function” in the struggle against capitalist imperialism.35 In short, disalienation through the affirmative reconstruction of black subjectivity, which, as Aimé Césaire once noted, strikes at the core of what the negritude movement was all about,36 serves as the precondition for establishing broader bonds of social solidarity and collective struggle. However, like the Marxist notion of a class that exists for-itself, the moment that black consciousness comes to fruition and affirms its worth as such, it must immediately seek to abolish itself as a form of individual/collective identification. In doing so, Sartre claims that the “subjective, existential, ethnic notion of negritude ‘passes,’ as Hegel says, into the objective, positive, and precise, notion of the proletariat.”37

At this point we arrive at Sartre’s infamous characterization of negritude as a transitional phase in a dialectical move from the particularity of identity
politics to the universality of class struggle. “Negritude appears,” writes Sartre, “as a minor moment of a dialectical progression: the theoretical and practical affirmation of white supremacy is the thesis; the position of negritude as the antithetical value is the moment of negativity. But this negative moment is not sufficient in itself, and these blacks who use it know this perfectly well; they know that it aims at preparing the synthesis or realization of the human in a raceless society.” Sartre then goes on to conclude that “negritude is [thus] for destroying itself, it is a passage and not an outcome, a means and not an ultimate end.” Once again, here Sartre appears to portray the politics of difference much like he did in *Anti-Semite and Jew*: as an important (even necessary) stage in the struggle against capitalist exploitation and racial domination, but ultimately insufficient as an end in itself.

**Frantz Fanon on Negritude, Self-Recognition, and Decolonization**

As discussed previously in chapter 1, one of the central concerns animating Fanon’s analysis in *Black Skin, White Masks* is the problem of recognition in situations marked by colonial racism. In this sense, I argue that Fanon’s early work ought to be interpreted much like Sartre’s *Anti-Semite and Jew* and “Black Orpheus”: as a practical reworking of Hegel’s master/slave relation in contexts where the possibility of achieving affirmative relations of mutual recognition appears foreclosed. Like Sartre’s portrayal of intersubjectivity discussed above, Fanon’s phenomenological account of “being-for-others” in *Black Skin, White Masks* emphasizes the ultimately objectifying and alienating character of intersubjective recognition, especially when these relations are played out in contexts structured by racial or cultural inequality. Indeed, throughout his text, Fanon describes the experience of colonial recognition in profoundly negative terms, like being “fixed” or “walled in” by the violating “gaze” of another. Far from being emancipatory and self-confirming, recognition is instead cast as a “suffocating reification,” a “hemorrhage” that causes the colonized to collapse into self-objectification. However, unlike the situation of Sartre’s Jew in *Anti-Semite and Jew*, when fixated on the colonized black subject the gaze takes on a new significance for Fanon: “I am not given a second chance. I am overdetermined from the outside. I am a slave not to the ‘idea’ that others have of me, but to my appearance.” This leads Fanon to declare that the “black man,” unlike the Jew, “has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man.”
Here Fanon appears to be making a qualification in line with the distinction Sartre came to make in “Black Orpheus” regarding the difference between the situation of the Jew vis-à-vis anti-Semitic racism, and that of the colonized black person vis-à-vis anti-black racism.

How do colonized populations tend to respond to this situation? According to Fanon, like Sartre’s Jew, the colonized black person’s most common response is that of “flight.” As Fanon describes, colonial recognition will often provoke within the oppressed a desire to “escape” their particularity, to negate the differences that mark them as morally deficient and inferior in the eyes of the colonizer: “The Negro is an animal, the Negro is bad, the Negro is wicked, the Negro is ugly.” Once internalized, these derogatory images often produce a pathological yearning to “be recognized not as Black, but as White.” Fanon uses a number of terms to describe the result of this process: “inferiority complex,” “psycho-existential complex,” “neurosis,” and “alienation” being the most common. All of these designations are used by Fanon to describe the subjectifying hold that colonial power can have on those within its reach. Seen in this light, there is nothing “inherent” about the perceived “inferiority” attributed to colonized subjects by the dominant society, nor is there anything “natural” about the so-called “complexes” they suffer as a result. Both are the product of colonial social relations: “If there is a flaw, it lies not in the ‘soul’ of the [colonized] individual, but in his environment.”

This, then, is the problematic that Fanon sets out to address in the bulk of his work: namely, what forms of decolonial praxis must one individually and collectively undertake to subvert the interplay between structure and subjectivity that sustain colonial relations over time. Fanon’s complex engagement with negritude is best understood when examined against this dual-structured conception of power. Fanon argued that insofar as the negritude movement sought to undercut the incapacitating effects of internalized racism by discursively reinscribing value and worth to those identity-related differences that colonial discourse had hitherto characterized as savage, dirty, and evil, it constituted a potentially powerful first move in the struggle for freedom. The logic here is that one cannot hope to restructure the social relations of colonialism if the “inferiority complex” produced by these relations is left in place. But Fanon’s endorsement of negritude’s approach to self-recognition was by no means absolute. Indeed, as his narrative continues it becomes apparent that the very attributes of negritude that he saw as potentially the most empowering in
the subjective sphere—namely, the rehabilitation of the colonized subject based on a revaluation of black history and culture—are also the ones that threaten to undercut the movement’s transformative potential in the structural sphere. What is important to keep in mind, then, is a distinction Fanon highlights between what Nigel Gibson has called, negritude’s “objective” limitations, “and its subjective necessity.”

In *Black Skin, White Masks* negritude’s subjective worth is expressed most in chapter 5, “The Lived Experience of the Black Man.” At this point in the text Fanon is faced with the realization that appealing “to the [white] Other” for recognition is a lost cause, and as a result he decides to instead “assert himself as a BLACK MAN.” “Since the Other was reluctant to recognize me, there was only one answer: to make myself known.” In doing so, Fanon found himself fervently excavating “black antiquity” and what he “discovered left [him] speechless”: not only was the white man wrong, black people were not “primitive or subhuman” and belonged to a civilization in its own right—with its own history, values, traditions, and achievements. This discovery, made possible by the path forged by the negritude poets, left Fanon feeling empowered, confident, and mobilized: it provided, if only momentarily, the sense of self-worth, dignity, and respect that recognition from the dominant society had not only failed to deliver, but undercut at every step of the way. Subsequently, Fanon was no longer willing to be recognized on terms imposed by the colonizer: “Accommodate me as I am; I’m not accommodating anyone.”

Later in the chapter negritude’s subjective significance is again emphasized, this time in relation to Sartre’s controversial portrayal of the movement as a mere “phase” in the unfolding trajectory of class struggle. Fanon writes: “When I read this . . . I felt they had robbed me of my last chance. . . . We had appealed to a friend of the colored peoples, and this friend had found nothing better to do than demonstrate the relativity of [our] actions.” After being denied affirmative recognition from the colonial society, Fanon now found himself having to defend his self-affirmative actions against the position of a self-professed ally. All approaches seemed to cash out in a loss: “I couldn’t hope to win,” writes Fanon; “I wanted to be typically black—that was out of the question. I wanted to be white—that was a joke. And when I tried to claim my negritude intellectually as a concept, they snatched it away from me.” Consequently, the foundation upon which Fanon had managed to carve out a constructive relation-to-self was again cut from under him: “I sensed my
shoulders slipping from this world, and my feet no longer felt the caress of the ground. Without a black past, without a black future, it was impossible for me to live my blackness. Not yet white, no longer completely black, I was damned.” In characterizing negritude’s reconstruction of black subjectivity as a temporary moment in the historical narrative of class struggle, Sartre effectively stripped Fanon of his newly won consciousness.

If it were not for the concluding chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks* it would be easy to see how Fanon’s quite visceral response to Sartre’s interpretation could be read as an unqualified endorsement of negritude’s “plunge” into the “absolute” of black history, identity, and consciousness. However, as his narrative continues, at least three problems or limitations with negritude are revealed. The first has to do with the power of negritude resting on a simple inversion of colonial discourse. Insofar as the negritude movement sought to undo colonial subjection by reversing the binary terms of domination—by reinscribing what was once denigrated and demeaned with worth and value—it remained, for Fanon, pathologically fixated around a value structure ultimately predetermined by colonial society. Thus, even though it might appear as though the empowerment derived from this process reflects an *authentic* instance of self-affirmation/determination, in reality this expression of resistance is still, for Fanon, “overdetermined from the outside.” Its is an expression of the colonized’s *ressentiment* insofar as the colonizer remains the “actional” subject locked in their position of superiority as the creator of values, and the colonized remain the subject of “reaction” locked in their subordinated position whose values remain inversely bound by those of their masters. As Fanon explains elsewhere, in this “initial phase,” it is “the action, the plans of the occupier that determine the centres of resistance around which [the] peoples’ will to survive becomes organized. . . . It is the white man who creates the Negro. But is the Negro who creates negritude.” Instead of disrupting the Manichean value structure of savage/civilized, colonizer/colonized itself, negritude’s attempt to restore the Native subject as an agent of history through an inversion of colonial discourse remains comfortably within the very binary logic that has played such a crucial role in justifying the colonial relation in the first place.

The second contentious issue Fanon identifies involves what we might today call negritude’s “essentialist” conception of black subjectivity. It is generally recognized among Fanon scholars that this angle of Fanon’s analysis is
directed largely at the “objectivist” strand within negritude, represented clearest in the work of Léopold Senghor. Fanon’s anti-essentialist critique has two elements. The first is empirical: in Fanon’s view the unified and undifferentiated “black” or “African” subject hailed by Senghor simply does not exist. “The black experience is ambiguous,” writes Fanon, “for there is not one Negro—there are many black men.” Seen in this light, it is clearly nonsense to speak of negritude as the “totality of values” representing black “civilization” as such; “not only [the values] of the peoples of black Africa, but also of the black minorities of America, or even Asia or the South Sea Islands.”

There are “Blacks of Belgium, French and British nationality, and there are Black republics,” writes Fanon. “How can we claim to grasp the essence when such facts demand our attention?” Fanon’s second criticism has more to do with power. His concern here is that many of the specific characteristics and supposed cultural traits that Senghor targets for reinscription—irrationality, rhythm, animism, oneness with nature, sensuality—seem to be more the product of racist stereotyping disseminated through colonial discourse than empirically verifiable attributes of precontact African societies. What negritude refers to as “the black soul” is in Fanon’s view “a construction by white folk.”

Fanon’s point here is that if the structural foundation of colonial rule is at least in part justified through the ideological propagation of racially essentialized binaries, then, in the long run, the logic of negritude’s own essentialist “revaluation of values” could undermine its emancipatory potential.

Fanon’s third criticism is directed squarely at negritude’s elitism and therefore its questionable relevance to those struggling against colonial-capitalist domination and exploitation on the ground. According to Fanon, one of negritude’s main problems was that it tended to inadvertently displace or downplay contemporary questions of colonial political economy by focusing too narrowly on revaluing the historical achievements of colonized cultures and societies. Relating this issue back to the exploited blacks of Martinique’s sugar-cane plantations, Fanon writes: “It would never occur to us to ask these men to rethink their concept of history.” Indeed, the “few worker comrades that I have had the opportunity to meet in Paris have never thought to ask themselves about discovering a black past. They knew they were black, but, they told me, that didn’t change a thing. And damn right they were.” For Fanon, the required solution for this community is to “fight,” to focus their struggle against the “ossified” structure of bourgeois colonial society directly. For Fanon, it is...
by taking a “stand against this living death” that we can hope to bring about decolonization in a truly substantive sense.70

Taken together, then, these three limitations inform Fanon’s conclusion in *Black Skin, White Masks* that, although the process of self-affirmative recognition at the core of projects like negritude represents a potential source of empowerment for colonized populations suffering the effects of internalized racism, this potential hinges on its ability to motivate praxis that is attentive to the structural as well as the subjective features of colonial rule. Understood this way, I suggest that Fanon’s position in *Black Skin, White Masks* is not entirely unlike that of Sartre’s in “Black Orpheus,” although they arrive at their respective views via markedly different paths. When Fanon reprimands Sartre for characterizing the self-affirmative reconstruction of black subjectivity as a phase in the unfolding dialectic of anticolonial class struggle, he is challenging Sartre’s deterministic understanding of the dialectic, not his claim that this process represents “a stage” in a broader struggle for freedom and equality.71

Indeed, by the time we reach Fanon’s conclusion in *Black Skin, White Masks* it is clear that the cluster of practices associated with self-recognition are valuable only insofar as they reestablish the colonized as historical protagonists oriented toward a change in the colonial social structure.72 The moment that this process takes hold, however, the emphasis placed on revaluing precolonial culture and history proceeds to either lose its critical purchase in the fight for freedom, or becomes an impediment to freedom as such. This leads Fanon to assert: “In no way do I have to dedicate myself to reviving a black civilization unjustly ignored. I will not make myself the man of any past. I do not want to sing my past to the detriment of my present and future.”73 Although Fanon concedes that articulating a positive vision of the future requires some prior effort to break the hold of colonial subjection, and that this step often involves revaluing those historical and cultural forms that colonialism sought to denigrate and destroy, in the end it is only by moving beyond these “historical and instrumental” givens that one can truly initiate the “cycle of freedom.”74 Like Sartre before him, Fanon portrays the identity politics of negritude as an important means to achieving anticolonial struggle, but not an end to the struggle itself.

In Fanon’s later writings similar themes are developed and explored. For example, in his 1955 article “West Indians and Africans” Fanon begins by reiterating his earlier concern regarding negritude’s essentialist portrayal of an undifferentiated black subject: “When one says ‘Negro people,’ one systematically
assumes that all Negroes agree on certain things, that they share a principle of communion.”
However, “the truth,” writes Fanon, “is that there is nothing, a priori, to warrant the assumption that such a thing as a Negro people exists.”
Again, here Fanon is not content with simply challenging the empirical validity of such a characterization; rather, the problem is fundamentally one of power: “The object of lumping Negroes together under the designation of ‘Negro people’ is to deprive them of any possibility of individual expression” and “to put them under the obligation of matching the idea one has of them.”
Here it appears that where Fanon was initially concerned in Black Skin, White Masks with the ways in which self-essentialized constructions of black identity could inadvertently feed back into and justify hierarchical relations between the colonized and colonizer, now he seems to be equally attentive to how similar processes can work to constrain freedom within the colonized population itself. The problem with essentialism thus cuts in two directions for Fanon: it can serve to naturalize relations of dominance not only between but also within social groups.

Yet by grounding his analysis in the concrete operation of specific power relations Fanon is again able to maintain a critical stance toward negritude without denying its significance outright. This is made clear over the course of “West Indians and Africans” as Fanon begins to emphasize the social function played by negritude in mobilizing Antillean blacks against French racism in Martinique. Until this point, Fanon’s endorsement of negritude rested largely on the transformative effects he saw the practice of self-affirmation having on the psychology of individuals, using his own experience in Black Skin, White Masks as an example. This stance undergoes a slight revision in “West Indians and Africans” as Fanon begins to historicize the movement’s influence at the societal level. This is clearest in Fanon’s discussion of Césaire, whose work he claims served to radicalize the local black population in ways that would have been unheard of before the popularization of his poetry and political activism. Indeed, it was Césaire’s “scandalous” assertion that being black was a “good” thing, that it was not only “beautiful” but also a “source of truth” that provided the black community with a counterdiscourse to mobilize around and deploy in their efforts to collectively combat the heightened racism that came to plague Martinique as thousands of French sailors descended on the island during the Second World War. “Without Césaire this would have been difficult,” writes Fanon, for prior to this period “the West Indian identified
himself with the white man, adopted a white man’s attitude, was ‘a white man.’\textsuperscript{79} This came to a grinding halt in 1939, however, for the colonized were now forced into a situation where they had to defend themselves against the derogatory images of blacks hurled at them by the stationed French troops. Césaire provided the discursive ammunition used in this defense, and as a result, “a new generation came into being.”\textsuperscript{80} Blackness was no longer considered an irrelevant category of identification (as blacks had convinced themselves it was before the influx of French sailors), nor was it seen as “a stain”;\textsuperscript{81} it was now a source of strength, an emergent consciousness, and a foundation for collective action.

Fanon also explores the social significance of ne\-grit\-ude in “Racism and Culture.”\textsuperscript{82} Written with the Algerian context in mind, this groundbreaking essay traces the historical evolution of racism as a systematized form of oppression oriented around crude assumptions of biological inferiority to a more subtle form grounded on notions of cultural inferiority. What Fanon here calls the emergence of “cultural racism” anticipates what contemporary critical race scholars have termed the “culturalization of racism.”\textsuperscript{83} Under this new guise, the “object of racism” shifts from those genetically identifiable characteristics once thought to mark certain individuals or groups as inferior, to what Fanon calls entire “form[s] of existing” or “way[s] of life.”\textsuperscript{84} In colonial situations, this cultural variant of racism is what historically served to rationalize the host of repressive colonial practices associated with policies of forced assimilation. The underlying rationale here is that, if the perceived inferiority of non-European peoples does not appear to be attributable to innate characteristics, it then follows that these groups can, in theory, be elevated to the more “civilized” status of their European colonizers. In order to accomplish this, however, one has to first “destroy” the “primitive” “cultural values” thought to impede the so-called “development” of the colonized vis-à-vis the more “advanced” settler society. According to this scheme, colonial rule was (and for some, still is) thought to be justified insofar as it serves to facilitate the moral and cultural development of the colonized group.\textsuperscript{85}

Witnessing firsthand the destructive effects of cultural racism in the Algerian context appears to have prompted a slight shift in the dismissive stance that Fanon adopts in his conclusion to \textit{Black Skin, White Masks} toward strategies that seek to revalue precolonial history and culture as an ongoing feature of the decolonization process. This change is reflected in “Racism and Culture”
and then again in the chapter “On National Culture” from *The Wretched of the Earth*. Fanon’s argument in both texts can be stated like this: because colonialism tends to solidify its gains by normalizing the injustices it has perpetrated against the colonized population through a direct attack on the integrity of precontact history and culture, it follows that strategies that attempt to break the stranglehold of this subjection through practices of cultural self-affirmation can play an important role in anticolonial struggle as long as they remain grounded and oriented toward a change in the social structure of colonialism itself. What distinguishes Fanon’s previous position in *Black Skin, White Masks* from the position articulated in “Racism and Culture” and *The Wretched of the Earth*, however, is that the arguments developed in the two latter texts were based on observations Fanon made while in Algeria, where expressions of cultural self-affirmation appeared to emerge organically among the colonized population as a whole, as opposed to being articulated solely among the elites of negritude. This is an important distinction to recognize because I think it alleviates to some degree Fanon’s previous concern regarding the disassociation of cultural revitalization movements from questions of colonial political economy. This is why in “Racism and Culture” and *The Wretched of the Earth* we see Fanon’s most biting criticisms directed more squarely at negritude as a specific practice of cultural self-affirmation, and less toward these types of practices as such.

However, even though Fanon is willing to assign a slightly more substantive value to practices of cultural self-recognition in his post-*Black Skin, White Masks* writings, he does so without abandoning his previous apprehensions entirely. Indeed, one of Fanon’s lingering concerns is that the cultural forms and traditions exuberantly reclaimed and affirmed by the colonized no longer reflect the dynamic systems that existed prior to the colonial encounter: rather, “this culture, once living and open to the future, [has become] closed, fixed in the colonial status.” The problem here is that the cultural practices that the colonized passionately cling to as a source of pride and empowerment can easily become a cluster of antiquated attachments that divert attention away from the present and future needs of the Indigenous population. In other words, what was initially empowering can quickly become a source of pacifying, *ressentiment*-infected nostalgia. This problem is compounded further in the activism of negritude elites like Senghor, whose work, Fanon claims, racializes and abstracts the past cultural achievements of the colonized to such a
degree that it bears little resemblance to the specificity of struggles occurring at the local, national level. What ultimately needs to be realized in both cases, then, whether it be in relation to the self-affirmative activities undertaken by the colonized intellectual or by the grassroots freedom-fighter, is that the “native’s hand-to-hand struggle with his culture” must be geared toward “the total liberation of the national territory.” According to Fanon, it is only under these radically transformed material conditions that a truly national culture can emerge, a “fighting culture” that “does not leave intact either the form or substance” of previous cultural practices, but instead strives toward the construction of a totally new set of social, cultural and economic relations. Insofar as the “plunge into the chasm of the past” provides a possible means of achieving this ultimate end, then Fanon is more willing than he was in his conclusion to Black Skin, White Masks to attribute a transformative function to cultural self-affirmation in the fight for freedom against colonial domination.

Conclusion

In her recent book on Anishinaabe political and cultural resurgence, Dancing on Our Turtle’s Back, Leanne Simpson suggests that while non-Indigenous critical theoretical frameworks still have much to offer our analyses of contemporary settler-colonialism, they are fundamentally limited in their ability to provide insight into what a culturally grounded alternative to colonialism might look like for Indigenous nations. “While theoretically, we have debated whether Audre Lourde’s ‘the master’s tools can dismantle the master’s house,’” writes Simpson, “I am interested in a different question.” She continues: “I am not so concerned with how we dismantle the master’s house, that is, which set of theories we use to critique colonialism; but I am very concerned with how we (re)build our own house, or our own houses.” By now it should be clear that although Fanon saw the revaluation of an Indigenous “past” as an important means of temporarily breaking the colonized free from the interpellative stranglehold of colonial misrecognition, he was less willing to explore the role that critically revitalized traditions might play in the (re)construction of decolonized Indigenous nations. Subsequently, his work tends to treat “the cultural” in a manner inappropriately similar to how Marxists treat the category of “class”: as a transitional form of identification that subaltern groups
must struggle to overcome as soon as they become conscious of its existence as a distinct category of identification. In my concluding chapter I explore a different way of understanding the significance of Indigenous cultural politics in our struggles for national liberation—a resurgent approach to Indigenous decolonization that builds on the value and insights of our past in our efforts to secure a noncolonial present and future.
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