

# Frantz Fanon, Poet

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*Pleasure of the Text, Power of the Text / Plaisir du texte, puissance du texte*

Why do we read Fanon?

I cannot speak for you, but as for me, I am a captive of his words. The Fanonian text is not a “writing up” of a settled analysis. It is, rather, a messy text, a text of discovery, it translates a process of thinking, of coming to knowledge. It is therefore a text of repetitions, omissions, ambiguities, contradictions, ellipses, of poor transitions, of images, a text traversed by the arguments of others—philosophers, psychiatrists and psychoanalysts, sociologists—a text of striking observations, made on the basis of lived experience, film, and literature. It is a performance, an enacting of subjectivity.

This observation and what follows from it take nothing away from Fanon’s trenchant analysis and commitment on behalf of those he so memorably designated “the wretched of the earth.” It is not the observation necessarily of a post-structuralist, not the assertion of a zero-sum game in which an eviscerated postmodernism carries the day.

I met Frantz Fanon in summer 1968, when the Ford Foundation sent dozens of black and Latino students from southern United States to Harvard, Yale and Columbia in a bid to prepare us for graduate school. As chance would have it, a young civil rights activist saw to it that I received a first class education parallel to the one I was experiencing on Harvard’s campus. My “street” reading list included *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Jonathan Kozol’s *Death at an Early Age*, Claude Brown’s *Manchild in the Promised Land*, and not least, *Black Skin, White Masks* and *The Wretched of the Earth*. In that very hot summer of 1968, following a tumultuous Paris spring, the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, in the midst of ongoing civil rights and anti-Viet Nam War struggles, Fanon was not yet an object of intense academic scrutiny. For an entire generation, he was seen, not as a prophet of hybridity, but of anti-colonial resistance and self-empowerment. It is impossible for me to read Fanon today without remembering the fiery moment in which he appeared on our horizon and for which he was also responsible.

Fanon’s writing represents a productive embrace of the political and the poetic. His ideas have had such a long afterlife, they live on in us, I submit, precisely because the language of their articulation, image-filled and rhythmic, is compelling.

This colloquium has afforded me an opportunity to think about this dynamic in Fanon’s writing. My modest contribution to these two days of reflection on Fanon’s ongoing presence will be an attempt to draw attention to the text as the medium through which most of us encounter Fanon today, to point out that his texts’ pleasure and power are inextricably intertwined. I return in particular to the racial primer *Peau noire, masques blancs*. My main examples come from “Le Noir et le langage” and “En guise de conclusion” with a brief reference to Fanon’s introduction to this collection of essays.

As Edris Makward reminded us yesterday, *Peau noire*, written in 1952, is an early text, a study of multiple facets of black alienation, even as it is indisputably gender-bound. Fanon acknowledges moreover that its subject is the Antilles and that his analysis may not apply to Africa, just as later in *Peau noire* he distinguishes emphatically the different experiences and motivations of the alienated intellectual and the exploited laborer. In this sense, “Le Noir et le langage” and *Peau noire* point to what has become a foundational premise of race and diaspora studies: the historical, linguistic, and power differentials that mark communities of African descent.

Let me begin with the oft-cited observation with which Frantz Fanon opens the masculinist “Le Noir et le langage” and which encapsulates the overarching tensions of the series of essays in *Peau noire* as of other Fanonian texts:

Parler c’est être à même d’employer une certaine syntaxe, posséder la morphologie de telle ou telle langue, mais c’est surtout assumer une culture, supporter le poids d’une civilisation. (13)

Here, then, Fanon juxtaposes structuralist and dialogic dimensions of language. The first, nodding to Saussurian linguistics, focuses on language as system, its sounds and ordering of words, the mechanics of speech; the latter signals language as social medium and its afterlife, carrying with it into the future the residue of past social experience. The two dimensions of this Fanonian assertion are in balance, each resting on two infinitives. The first two however [*employer* and *posséder*] stress the speaker’s control. The latter two [*assumer* and *supporter*], while active verbs, strictly speaking, are poised between doing and acquiescing. In effect we possess language and language possesses us. While these aspects of language exist simultaneously and do not seem contradictory, it is of course the dialogic dimension that is at the heart of Fanon’s project in this text.

*Assumer* means, of course, to “take on” [*prendre à son compte, se charger de*] a position, a job, a role, a task. It is “to bear,” “to carry” [*endosser, supporter*] or “to accept consciously a situation, a psychological state and their consequences” (106). Interestingly, the model sentence offered by the *Petit Robert* comes from Jean-Paul Sartre who, through his prefaces, plays the pivotal role of translator between black writers of the 1940s, 50s, and 60s and their French public and who helps shape the discourse of blackness in mid-century. The *Petit Robert* cites Sartre: “Nous ne sommes nous qu’aux yeux des autres, et c’est à partir du regard des autres que nous nous assumons comme nous” (106). This is a remarkably charged usage of *assumer*, as much philosophical as lexical: it is through others’ gaze that we come to know ourselves. This hall of mirrors, of course, is precisely the problematic that Fanon explores. It is the history of Eurocentrism and racism as they underpin forms of domination in colonialism and slavery, the trace of the white gaze residing in French language which Fanon wants the black man to transcend.<sup>1</sup>

To be able “to speak” without the burden of “weight” is in some sense the Fanonian ideal. This text and others aspire to transcendence, which might be thought of as attaining the pure space of simple language (syntax, morphology), unfettered by History and the claims of racial identity. It is this utopic yearning to reach full humanity and the struggle to escape the claims and material effects of History that Fanon’s words actualize and that give tremendous poignancy to his text.

Fanon’s affirmation of the trace of history and culture in language is in its time a critical intervention, suggesting the epistemological and psychological dimensions of political and economic domination which had been, for the most part, ignored. As such, it opens the door to the examination of representation and alterity that we now associate with early postcolonial studies. Fanon’s assertion about the ambiguous culture of the colonized

resonates for me with two extremes of later theorizing, depending on one's position: postcolonial *convivialité*, according to Achille Mbembe, and Audre Lorde's problematic assertion that, "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (110-113).

While Fanon's statement points to a facet of language that is critical, I have always been troubled by it. For it does not admit the possibility and fact of divergence within culture, the multiple registers and conflicting interests traversing language, and it suggests moreover that language is a finished project, a game concluded before the latest wave of actors arrive on the scene, actors like Fanon himself.

Toril Moi calls the elasticity of language and art both to say and unsay, to put forth orthodoxies and simultaneously to controvert them the "polysemic" value of the sign: "though it is true to say that the dominant power group at any given time will dominate the intertextual production of meaning, this is not to suggest that the opposition has been reduced to total silence. The power struggle *intersects* in the sign" (158). Likewise, Jimmy Baldwin, attending the 1956 meeting of Black Men of Culture at the Sorbonne, sensing the distance between what might be thought of as Césaire's at-homeness with French culture and his vitriolic talk on "Colonialisme et culture," asserts in a similar vein that "Césaire had left out of the account one of the great effects of the colonial experience: its creation, precisely, of men like himself" (36-37).

So the shouldering of the weight of civilization in speech is but a first step of a complex process. The Fanonian text is itself a further step in this process and represents a contestation of such (French) civilizational authority.

## Poetics

I want to think in what follows about three elements of Fanonian poetics in *Peau noire, masques blancs*. I will focus on the use of metaphor and in "En guise de conclusion," an ambiguous/multiple "I" as persona that we find elsewhere, and finally to what Brent Edwards has called "anaphoric poetics," the repetition of the same word or words at the beginning of successive phrases.

Symbolic language, whether metaphor or metonymy, is one of the most striking aspects of all Fanon's texts, and it renders his thought both incisive and memorable: For example, the recurrence of the term *livrée* in *Peau noire*. Originally referring to the regalia *delivered* by a lord or king to his entourage, the *livrée* becomes by the sixteenth century the uniform of male domestics of a household. The term is now used to refer to external signs characteristic of a condition or state (*Petit Robert*, 1001).

In "Le Noir et le langage," Fanon writes that "Le nègre doit, qu'il le veuille ou non, endosser la livrée que lui a faite le Blanc" (27). This acceptance or recognition of the racialized world, the world as it is, implied in donning this costume/role, is not only a practical strategy for survival in the most minimal sense, but an intellectual necessity, a coming to terms. For Fanon's ultimate objective is announced in his introduction to this collection of essays: "Je veux vraiment amener mon frère, Noir ou Blanc, à secouer le plus énergiquement la lamentable livrée édiflée par des siècles d'incompréhension" (10). "Le Noir et le langage," indeed the whole of *Peau noire* as of *Damnés de la terre* is precisely the record of grappling with this world as it is so as to attain the fully human.

The second stage liberatory gesture, the "vigorous shaking off of the pathetic *livrée*, is in fact a radical project. Here, then, an admission: It is not only the black man who bears the burden of the *livrée*, constructed by centuries of what is for Fanon "misunderstanding."

It is also the white man. This, it seems to me, is his nod to men of good will but of impoverished imagination, men like Mannoni.

The *livrée*, as Fanon's metonym for language and culture, is reinforced by the choice of adjective, *édifiée* [built up], evoking simultaneously lofty purpose and virtue, suggesting principles and practices that have stood the test of time and which are, for all intents and purposes, sanctified.

The dialectic represented in these two successive or simultaneous engagements of the *livrée* are characteristic of this essay and Fanonian thought more generally: the ambivalence towards negritude which is both claimed and rejected, the ambivalence towards French language, which is both burden and the possibility of its transcendence.

But the *livrée* as metaphor is in dialogue with and nuanced by other metaphors. For the *livrée* suggests an imposed costume, at best an exterior form. Fanon saves the alienating effects of that costume for the metaphor of the title, the "white masks" which suggest a willed act of subterfuge on the part of those with black skin who refuse an historical identity and embrace the destiny of Whiteness in its various guises. In the conclusion of *Peau noire*, Fanon abandons the symbolic ornaments of the *livrée* and the mask and writes instead more abstractly—one might say more inclusively, if not universally--of *la densité du Passé* and *la densité de l'Histoire*. He associates these terms with weight, heaviness, contingency, congestion, childhood. These are the characteristics an inequitable society bequeaths to its members and from which they must extricate themselves.

The architectural motif is once again associated with this weight of the past and perhaps best represents the mystifying powers of European civilization: "Seront désaliénés Nègres et Blancs qui auront refusé de se laisser enfermer dans *la Tour substantialisée du Passé*" (183). How can one fail to hear in this reference the echo from *la livrée édifiée* of the introduction or Césaire's negative definition of *negritude* in *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* ("ma negritude n'est ni une tour ni une cathédrale")?

"En guise de conclusion" vigorously reasserts the necessity of refusing the *livrée* which imprisons one and all in History and leads to the false solution of alienation and the white mask. Rather Fanon privileges action in the present: "je me suis mon propre fondement" (187), "je me crée interminablement" (196); "c'est en dépassant la donnée historique, instrumentale, que j'introduis le cycle de ma liberté" (187); "je n'ai pas le droit de me laisser engluier par les déterminations du passé" (186). Moreover, the "je" of this series of declarations is, like the persona of *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, neither purely autobiographical nor always simply the man of color, but often the human person, male, of course.

The conclusion is in addition a saying that is a doing, an exorcism, a healing, a performance of full subjectivity. It moves from narration and rational argument to incantatory litany to prayer.

Brent Edwards has argued with respect to Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (1939), that the anaphora, the repetition of the same word or words at the beginning of successive phrases, is a key vehicle/medium of self-discovery. Here, Fanon uses this syntax to similar effect:

N'ai-je donc pas sur cette terre autre chose à faire qu'à venger les Noirs du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle?

Dois-je sur cette terre, qui déjà tente de se dérober, me poser le problème de la vérité noire?

Dois-je me confiner dans la justification d'un angle facial?

Je n'ai pas le droit, moi homme de couleur, de rechercher en quoi ma race est supérieure ou inférieure à une autre race.

Je n'ai pas le droit, moi homme de couleur, de souhaiter la cristallisation chez le Blanc d'une culpabilité envers le passé de ma race.

Je n'ai pas le droit, moi homme de couleur, de me préoccuper des moyens qui me permettraient de piétiner la fierté de l'ancien maître.

Je n'ai ni le droit ni le devoir d'exiger réparation pour mes ancêtres domestiqués.

Je ne suis pas prisonnier de l'Histoire. Je ne dois pas y chercher le sens de ma destinée. . . .

Je ne suis pas l'esclave de l'Esclavage qui déhumanisa mes pères. (185-86)

There can be many counter arguments to the perspectives Fanon proposes here. For example, there has been over the last few years an important debate in the United States among black people about the ethics of reparations for slavery. In South Africa, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission also stepped into these waters with limited success, precisely because there can be no peace or reconciliation without the belief that justice has been served. If those who have suffered under apartheid or whose parents suffered under slavery still feel the effects of that disenfranchisement—and they clearly do—one cannot settle into the present and let go of historical wrongs.

But what is important for the purposes of this discussion is Fanon's attempt to divest him/our-selves of the impediments to the vision of freedom and full humanity he envisions. It may well be that because this vision is so fragile, so distant he resorts to this rhetorical strategy. And, of course, in one sense he is right. There is an awful absurdity in any individual's having to shoulder the burdens of history. So that the series of questions "Ai-je . . .?" "Dois-je . . .?," adding nuance upon nuance to this problematic, bringing into focus the enormous disproportions between the value of a life and petty objectives, make the case. They bring this absurdity to the breaking point. Our persona is thereby brought to refuse this *livrée*. And then through the series of negations that elaborate the-identity-refused, the identity-that is-sought, the dream of "man" can emerge. In this echo of Césaire and summing up this very process, Fanon concludes hopefully, emphatically, "O mon corps, fais de moi toujours un homme qui interroge!" (188). This prayer and the unfinished quality of the anaphoric form, complemented by the multiple "I," project a humanist universalism, without claiming to exhaust or contain it.

Gayatri Spivak would surely argue, and here I would agree with her, that these essays cannot neatly resolve the mystifications of History but can only play them out.<sup>2</sup> To offer up the complexity, the ambivalence, to tell the problem fully--this, some would say, is the prerogative of the literary.

Fanonian poetics bring relationships of domination to life with terrible force and immediacy, just as they give rise to an overwhelming desire for the fully human. This is for me—despite their limits--the pleasure and the power of Fanon's texts.

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<sup>1</sup> A comparable perception of a technology in its "pure" state, unburdened by the violence of racial and social hierarchies, seems to animate this statement in Ousmane Sembène's *Les bouts de bois de Dieu* (1960): "la machine . . . elle, n'a ni langage, ni race" (127).

<sup>2</sup> "[L]iterature . . . displays that the truth of a human situation is the itinerary of not being able to find it" (Spivak, 103).