

When I Was There, It Was Not

On secretions once lost in the night

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Reason was confident of victory on every level. I put all the parts back together. But I had to change my tune.

That victory played cat and mouse; it made a fool of me. As the other put it, when I was present, it was not; when it was there, I was no longer.

(Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 1967: 119-20)

Is mystery an epistemological politics?

(Wahneema Lubiano, Foreword to Ronald A. T. Judy's *(Dis)Forming the American Canon*, 1993)

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, a text that is itself a *tour de force* performance of blackness and its problematization, Frantz Fanon unveiled an anxiety through which desire manifests itself neurotically. He, a man of science and by extension an apostle of reason, attempted to woo a repulsed beloved. He extended his hand, and he was rebuffed. Reason, catching sight of him, appeared unreasonable.

Fanon was traumatized. In his words: 'The psychoanalysts say that nothing is more traumatizing for the young child than his encounters with what is rational. I would say that for a man whose only weapon is reason there is nothing more neurotic than contact with unreason'"(1967: 118).

The distinction between rationality and reason is not accidental here. Neither is the reference to the child and the man. Rationality demands consistency. It is the proverbial response against the exception: 'If everyone did it. . .'. The child's anxiety is straightforward:

'But I am not everyone.' But the child, as we know, wants to have an already eaten cake. When excluded and frustrated, the child asks, 'Why am I not part of everyone?' Consistency, however, is a terrible demand to meet *consistently*. The misrepresentation, as Freud observed in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, is the notion that out there, in the world, there are grown-ups *who are always consistent*. The child has, after all, seen things. Out there, in the world of adults, there are people who break rules. There are people who do not do what they say. Even what they say is not really what they are saying. Out there, something else is afoot. It is not consistent. And it *evaluates*. Are they, in a word, unreasonable?

At a basic level, reason is broader than rationality. Although difficult to maintain, rationality is ultimately simple. It boils down to the maintenance of a rule. If things appear otherwise, demonstrate that one is ultimately doing what one initially claimed. At its core is a distinction between appearance and reality. In reality, rules are maintained. All is fine in the world. Yet, as we should also have learned from the world of science, sometimes simplicity is not so simple, and it is often even more difficult to achieve. Embedded in such simplicity, especially in our efforts to evaluate it, is the more that awaits its emergence in contradictions.

Reason, however, offers no neat distinction between appearance and reality. There is no reason beneath reason. To be unreasonable is to refuse to do something. It is an unwillingness to

admit what appears and what lies beneath, which, too, must have appeared in order to be concealed. Unreason, in other words, demands a kind of unseeing or, better yet, repression.

Fanon's allusion to the child and the man speaks of the modern structure of black to white. As known by African anti-colonial writers, the history of modern colonialism, at least in relation to the people who became known as blacks, is best formulated by Lord Lugard in the late nineteenth century, who counseled a guardianship relationship with the people of Africa. The project was the cultivation of a childlike people whose resources must be managed by grownups, a mature race, or, more formally, the civilized. Children have no weapons against such an assault. But adults suffer an unusual addition: To fight such degradation without the use of reason would legitimate it. The best way to claim adulthood is to be an adult. Reason thus becomes *the only weapon*. As Fanon reflected, 'I felt knife blades open within me. I resolved to defend myself'"(118). What, however, can one do when reason has taken flight?

Fanon's language of love is not accidental. Fanon *loved* reason. Such love made him vulnerable. The unreasonableness of reason, the rejection of *his* love, betrayed its source. Why was reason being unreasonable? Of what was it afraid?

Reason is afraid of love. Or, in Fanon's language, stripped of euphemism, it fears *intimacy*. What occasions such fear?

The Negro is a human being. That is to say, amended the less firmly convinced, that like us he has his heart on the left side. But on certain points the white man remained intractable. Under no conditions did he wish an intimacy between the races, for it is a truism that [according to Jon Alfred Mjoen] 'crossings between widely different races can lower the physical and mental level. . . . Until we have a more definite knowledge of the effect of race-crossings we shall certainly do best to avoid crossings between widely different races'.

(p. 120)

There it is. The logic moves from returned love to amalgamation. What lurks within Fanon's love is intimacy that offers no resistance against sex and, where heterosexual, the possibility of producing offspring. One cannot here say 'reproduction', since it is not a separation that is reproduced. In Aristotelian fashion, where like produces like, there is no like in such intimacy. There is not even, properly speaking, the new. For the new would be *sui generis*. There is, instead, the *mixture*. There is no 'whole' in this notion of mixture. It is a consolidation of halves', which should mean, in effect, the logic of never quite enough. But even that does not work since one half has the teleology of higher and the other of lower. In effect, the notion is of attached twins where one has wings and the other has very heavy feet. One half attempts to take flight while the other, wishing to fly, keeps both stuck on the ground. Perhaps an occasional hop is achieved, to catch a glimpse of what could be.

The black, reaching out to Reason, is calling for intimacy. Mixed offspring await conception. But sex and reason, we have learned, are incompatible. As we should know, at least from St Augustine's ruminations in *The City of God*, sexual impulses are at war with reasonable ones. They are the product of sin. And more, at least in modern times, their embodied realization is obscene: 'Two realms: the intellectual and the sexual. An erection on Rodin's *The Thinker* is a shocking thought. One cannot decently "have a hard on" everywhere' (165). How could a fusion of sex and reason be, in a word, reasonable?

Yet Fanon unveils the neurotic situation. He *needs* reason, but its pursuit makes him a lover who brings too much to the relationship. Reason demands that he leaves much behind as a condition of their embrace. But how reasonable is an expectation that requires an impossible performance? How could a black be embraced under the condition that no blacks must be embraced? 'A man was expected to behave like a man,' Fanon declared, but 'I was expected to

behave like a black man -or at least like a nigger' (114).

Reason's failure to be reasonable elicits a moment's reflection on what to do. Should Fanon, here taking the role of The Black, attempt to *force* his relationship with his beloved? Reason leaves little room for Fanon but rapacious behaviour. For the flight of reason from his outstretched arms requires of him that he not molest it into submission. The neurotic thesis is repeated: He faces reason as his main resource against unreason, even where the source of such consternation is Reason itself.

Reason does not want his love. There is too much baggage. To embrace him is to face 'secretions'. Fanon brings stuff from the past. He brings in the present things that Reason does not want to see. He is secreting these things. He offers the risk of reason becoming 'dirty'. Reason must be clean. It must also be firm or stable. It must not move. Fanon attempts a Negro cry' and admits: 'Little by little, putting out pseudopodia here and there, I secreted a race. And that race staggered under the burden of a basic element. What was it? *Rhythm!*' (122).

Fanon's hand reached out to reason. Should reason accept his touch, it would be moved. It would become intimate. It would also dance.

Rational dance is controlled motion. It is movement that does not groove. In dance, there needs to be a flow that exemplifies freedom. Mere unconstrained movement is not sufficient for dance to occur, however. For dance to occur, as with play, the activity must be infused with spirit, in a word, reason. But rhythm, what is manifested in music and dance, is not necessarily melodic or significant enough to manifest higher expressions. In rhythm is the dichotomy between higher and lower. The rhythmic supports what is expressed at the surface. In effect, the rhythmic becomes the subterranean anxiety. It is a tension beneath that enables expression above.

Fanon was right to have been concerned by the consignment of rhythm. It locates the Black in the framework of an aesthetic economy of

continued servitude. And as in the semiotics of that economy, the rhythmic, requiring repetition, moves through subterranean orders of natural forces. It signifies the blind, the constant, mechanistic possibilities that lurk beneath a dark expansive universe of movement toward that which ultimately makes no difference. For that concern, one must move into existential reflection on the meaning brought to circumstances of objective futility. Stoic resistance relies on the cultivation of meaning as an antidote to despair.

Fanon, oddly enough, did not like the blues. He lamented black music as a symptom of racism, which will disappear with such maleficence. Yet, the blues often transcend racism in their lyrical expression of life's contradictions. In the blues there is an adult sensibility of an unfair and unforgiving world in which one, nevertheless, must take stock and bear responsibility. This theme of looking into the contradictions and absurdity of life, of being born into a world of suffering, is indication of an insight from ancient times that has taken new forms in the modern world. The ancient insight is, as Nietzsche indicated in *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music*, a realization that the absence of suffering could only have been achieved from not having been born. We encounter here, then, the theme of the cathartic realization of life and its relation to suffering.

The kind of writing Fanon offers is ironically a performance of this blues sensibility. He offers outstretched arms to a world that rejects him, which he responds to at first with humour and then anger and then retreat into a naïve rationalism whose crumbling, at the end of the fifth chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks*, drove him to tears that washed away his investments in completed subjectivity and prepared him to explore the contradictory world of psychopathological signifiers. The movement that led to his wading in such dangerous waters is a repetition of the first four chapters through autobiographical admission of lost salvation. In effect, the blues movement of repetition brings

the subject's anxieties on reason to bear in an understanding that such subjects require preparation of the self.

The self, however, is not here offered as whole or secure or strong. Such a self, Fanon shows, must realize how much of what was not itself enabled it to be itself. There are others out there who offer themselves even in their acts of rejecting the others around them. The closure of the self, then, invests the self with its exclusions, and that intersubjective process makes recognition a morass of overturned expectations. As Fanon argued, antiblack racism structures a black Self-Other dialectic beneath a white one in which there is an asymmetrical relationship of no-selves below. In effect, The Black, in this schema, does not struggle against otherness but instead struggles *for* otherness in which ethical relations could take place.

This exclusion into a subterranean schema of life beneath the Self-Other dialectic occasions an added anxiety in the modern world. For this world, as Max Weber observed in *The Protestant Work Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, is governed by a shift in self-formation from the questioned soul to the salvific one. The struggle for salvation stimulates an economy of scarcity since not everyone will be saved. Security for one's salvation rests in those who are damned.

The Black, as a function of the modern world, has lost something. For many blacks, this has been the historic dignity of their humanity. But the effort to reclaim their humanness raises the question of whose standards are its exemplars. To be *as human as the whites* offers only one counsel: become white. The retreat into the personal quest to find the true self as *the black self* offers frustration as well. How, that is, could such a black stand on his or her own foundations without being its source? The path reveals loss from levels of phylogeny to those of ontogeny. Realization of such loss offers a special kind of despair.

Abdul JanMohamed has recently explored the modern black as a figure governed by 'death-bound subjectivity.'" This subjectivity is

conditioned by the rationalization of modernity as best lived without black folk. That judgement offers a moratorium on black subjects that, in its efforts at erasure, constitutes the illegitimate self. That illegitimacy saturates institutions, especially those governed by force, to the effect of destined mortality outside of the sphere of normal expectations. Death, then, is lived not as a horizon that organizes concern, care or meaning, but one that is as if retroactively foreclosed even in life. 'Accident' falls under the weight of 'when'. 'When will I be stopped by the police?' 'When will I be beaten by the police?' 'When will I be killed by the police?' 'When will I cross the path of another black who has foreclosed his existence and has decide to take me with him?'" 'When will I be imprisoned?' 'What will happen to me there?' 'Might I die there?'" There is, as well, another dimension to this fatalism. As Amy Alexander and Alvin Poussaint have shown, there are many blacks who die from a slow process of suicide. High-risk behaviour is also a manifestation of self-destruction: the pressures of eventual failure and death become seductive, and freedom becomes the manifestation of tempted fate.

The Black is, however, aware that death-bound subjectivity is not a normative ideal. A dream haunts that existence. It is a dream of anonymity, of *ordinary anonymity*. It is a dream of being able to live, to walk and to move through the world without having done something wrong by virtue of being alive. It is a call for existence, for emergence, without appearance as illicit being.

Yet, not all blacks are crushed by the weight of such modes of being. There are blacks for whom there is nothing wrong with being black. The problem is the attitude of the antiblack racist. Such blacks see the limitations of whiteness as a standard of human existence. They also see the danger of demanding of blackness superiority to whiteness, brownness, and any other racial designation. Blackness, in that sense, simply becomes a mode of being among

other modes of being with the realization that the wish for the immaculate birth of the self is a misguided one. Begat from negation, the task is not to avoid that history but to understand it as an organization of a social-historical emplacement of which The Black is indigenus. This indigeneity calls for an act of living, as well, with knowledge of its limitations. To fight it is to create a self the repression of whose inner Other and even not-Other governs its existence.

There is, however, the logic of self-defeat. In a word, such positive assertions of blackness appear as contradictions of terms. Are they 'really' black? We return to the neurotic relationship with appearance. The logic is as follows. To appear is to be in a semiotic stream of signifiers. But such signifiers *are* the dominant legitimating signs. Those signs are, in their economy of expression, colonizing modes of expression. To transcend them, then, is to be not interpretable by them. In effect, disappearance or invisibility or absence becomes the goal of political resistance. I call this neurotic because of the expectations of its being a *politics*. What could we make of politics without appearance? It has been a truism from the days of Aristotle to reflections by Hannah Arendt that political life is fundamentally about appearance. It requires a public realm, a sphere in which one emerges through the words, deeds and senses of others. It is where glory is acknowledged and power is formed. To abrogate appearance is an assault on politics itself. As Fanon's thought on sociogenesis suggests, implosion of the self into the hidden fails to address the failures of subjects of recognition. The return of the distinction between problem people and people with problems take on a structural critique of societal forces.

These thoughts on appearance and subject-formation raise the question of locations of appearance. There is, after all, appearance that takes on inner narratives of retreat, resistance, and despair. Maurice Natanson, who admired Fanon, offered this reflection from his essay

'From Apprehension to Decay: Robert Burton's "Equivocations of Melancholy"':

What there is must be taken as a faint sign of what permeates our lives: a light despair which nothing can dislodge from memory or consciousness, a time-haunted enchantment of rotted foundations first discovered, the far side of hope, the infections of the body in prayer - the ecstatic davening of the flesh.

(1989: 134)

The affinities between Natanson and Fanon permeate this passage. Fanon was critical of the notion of neat resolutions of madness and human suffering. The famous encomium at the end of *Black Skin, White Masks*, the prayer to his body, what else is it but 'the ecstatic davening of the flesh'? That Natanson is examining this theme as a clue into the kinds of performance stimulated by melancholic investigation stimulated by the subject of melancholia as an object of study raises the question of a correlative Fanonian performance. Writing on Robert Burton, Natanson observes, 'For all his discussions and digressions regarding melancholy, I do not think that Burton ever conclusively defines his subject. That is part of his method, no doubt, a clue to the power of typologies of indirection. But if I am correct, attempts to define the meaning of melancholy can at best be entrances to the being of melancholy' (1989:137). In similar kind, Fanon, nearly four decades earlier, had explored such themes without ever conclusively defining his subject. His reasons were explicit: 'I shall be derelict. I leave methods to the botanists and the mathematicians. There is a point at which methods devour themselves' (1967: 12). Fanon's response is to offer an exploration that is both psychoanalytical and phenomenological and, as Sara Ahmed and David Fryer have observed and expanded, *queer*. Acknowledging that the colonization of modern life also happens at the grammatical level by which meaning is produced, Fanon suspends presumption of methodological validity. In doing so, he *performs* the contradictory practice of

methodological rejection of method for the sake of its critical assessment, which allows a confession: '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"' (23).

How does one live with failure? That it is being explored, that reason is being enlisted in such a relationship, suggests that one can do so by understanding it. But such an understanding may require a realization of always falling short of *apprehension*. This theme suggests that something must be given up in a process where something is also possessed, but it is done through a loss. That there are things gained through loss echoes a theme of teleological suspensions, where what was once taken as absolute is transcended for the sake of something else. In *Disciplinary Decadence*, I have argued that reality calls for a transcending of disciplinary deontology, which I call disciplinary decadence, where reality is subordinated to methods as in modern attempts to subordinate reason to rationality. Fanon understood that disciplinary presumptions lead to an attempt to squeeze reality into categories that could not exceed it. To suspend such presuppositions leads to a continually humbling relationship with reality. It is decadent because of its implosive retreat; decay begins when disciplines turn away from reality, as is the case when living beings turn away from life. Judith Butler offers insight into such performance in her essay 'Thresholds of Melancholy':

Melancholy will mark the limits of definition, its indexical elsewhere. As the *indefinite* in definition, melancholy will prompt a digression precisely when one might expect something more lexically precise. This digression will not be beside the point, for the very self under question is, as it were, always beside the point, contouring the point, circumnavigating the imprecision that conditions the very definition by which that imprecision is concealed. Melancholic digression means that precisely where one might expect a fine-tuned denotation, a certain circumlocution

slowly begins to make its rounds. If it is linguistic meaning that cannot give us being, and if an arrhythmia afflicts the 'shift' from meaning to being, then the language that opens the threshold to melancholia will be less than mellifluous. It will stop and start; it will bear the marks of an *essai*, an effort, a trying.

(1995: 5)

I have argued that *Black Skin, White Masks* is an ironic text. It splits the author into the internal faith of the system and the external critic of its theodicy. In effect, it offers a struggle by Fanon with Fanon, which is a *tour de force* performance of the fragmented self and the constitutive practices of subjection and loss. Butler could very well have been describing Fanon in the previous passage, and the following is also apropos:

Understood as an anticipatory intentional positing, melancholy might be said to have 'decay' as its object or, better, to apprehend 'decay' - as the constitutive condition of objects in the world. And yet, this horizon of decay intimates the decaying horizon of the apprehending self. This is not the gradual decaying of a self once whole, but a 'decaying' that persists as the permanent ground of the self.

(1995: 5)

The realization of there not having been a 'whole' black self is what haunts black existence. A response could be narcissistic rage, of erasing the messenger and the message, but the underlying folly reveals itself in what lurks ahead in such performance - namely, as Natanson had observed, 'the far side of hope, the inflections of the body in prayer'. Recall that *Black Skin, White Masks* ends with a prayer. We should remember as well the content of that prayer, which is for his body to make of him a man who questions. To become an interrogative, a question, transcends the closed self, the bonds of epistemic closure. The interrogative always holds the possibilities of yes and *no*. Either permutation serves as the spectre of the other, which makes even affirmation premised upon its opposition.

Thinking through Freud's thought on melancholia, Butler argues that it would be incorrect to read melancholic activity as an attachment to the absence of the other in the formation of the ego. 'Rather,' she avers, 'the "ego" might be said to constitute itself and through that continuing identification, to persist in its identity as an attachment to that absent other. . . . In phenomenological terms, the other is sustained not merely as a memory or as an image, but in and as the self in its imaginary dimension' (1995: 11). The black who sees nothing wrong with blackness appears as pathology in a world of cosmopolitan assimilationism and multicultural diversity. Such a figure loses at both levels. In the former, there is a failure ultimately to become white. In the latter, there is the failure to assimilate into the logic of ethnicity on the one hand, but, even if that were possible, there is the additional failure of zombification. Multiculturalism demands a meeting of culture *as representation*, which means the tallying of 'authentic' exemplars. But what is 'black culture' to bring to such authenticating processes short of its pathologies? Cultures who are lived by black people do, after all, find themselves in conflicts over *their differences*. As Fanon observed in his chapter on psychopathology in *Black Skin, White Masks*, the notion of systemically well-adjusted blacks is the obscenity of the happy slaves, and the notion of maladjusted blacks is the systemically produced normativity of abnormality. Part of black melancholia, of the 'self in its imaginary dimension', is a healthy black self, of what the blues calls to us as maturation, of that questioned other who has learned to live with understanding but no peace with a reason that always exceeds his grasp. From the secretion of a race, perhaps, then, imagined possibilities call for the simultaneous transcending of that onto which we once attempted to hold. 'I, the man of color, want only this: That the tool never possess the man,' declared Fanon, after which he asked, 'Was my freedom not freedom not given to me

then in order to build the world of the *You?*' (1967: 232).

It is crucial that Fanon's conclusion was not a conclusion. He announced that it was by way of seeking it. His work of a decade later, *The Wretched of the Earth*, was also without a conclusion. For the text itself called to the subject that transcended it, as many of his critics have observed, a new man, which should more accurately be understood as humanity itself, since, for Fanon, the human being has been inhibited not by a failure to become complete, but by the failed project of completeness. As with Moses, the great patriarch of melancholia, Fanon understood the value of a performance of a love whose subject is always promised but never had.

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