

# Identity and Agency in Frantz Fanon

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The three papers that follow, by Anita Chari, Neil Roberts, and Chris Buck, were originally delivered in 2003 as part of a panel for which I was the commentator at the North American Sartre Studies meeting at Purdue University. The papers have subsequently been revised for publication and, instead of a commentary, I am offering a brief introduction in an attempt to establish a context for reading them in a way that best displays their place in current research, not just on Fanon, but also on Sartre. My aim here is not to paraphrase them, but to suggest ways in which they are in dialogue with each other around the important questions of identity and agency that Fanon poses in his discussion of Sartre in the fifth chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks*.

The work of Fanon has been increasingly important in contemporary race theory, and the more Fanon is studied in detail, the more his relation to Sartre can be shown to be crucial. In 1952, in *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon was clear that Sartre was a major resource for him. At one place, for example, he called certain pages of *Anti-Semite and Jew* “among the best I have ever read.”<sup>1</sup> At the same time, he was remorseless in his criticisms of Sartre. One of Fanon’s objections was that Sartre in “Black Orpheus” had attempted to locate the negritude movement within a dialectic whose ultimate end was a raceless and classless society. Fanon complained that when Sartre asked the Negro to renounce his or her race, then this white man had destroyed black enthusiasm (PN 109; BS 135). This is not an easy passage to interpret. Fanon’s response was not to deny the dialectic but to complain: “I *needed* not to know” (PN 109; BS 135). The reason why this is important is because Fanon himself seems to be advocating a raceless society at the end of *Black Skin, White Masks*, albeit perhaps not of the same kind or arrived at in the same way as that proposed by Sartre. Furthermore, Fanon went on

to question the value of enthusiasm, so the destruction of enthusiasm is not as bad as it first sounds (PN 6; BS 9). However, it is clear that Fanon was concerned to show that Sartre, by locating negritude within a dialectic, had attempted to render the absolute density of black consciousness relative to the historical role assigned to them (PN 108-109; BS 133-134). But this was to forget that a consciousness committed to experience does not know, ought not to know, the essences and determinations of its being. Furthermore, it was to forget the Black experience of the body in all its density: the Black cannot pass, unlike the Jew.

Sartre never responded directly to Fanon's critique, although there are perhaps implicit references to it, for example, in the second volume of *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. For that reason, it is tempting to see some of the transformations that Sartre's political philosophy underwent in the mid-50s, such as when he represents oppression as a system rather than as a situation, as much as a response to Fanon as to Merleau-Ponty. It is possible, therefore, that Fanon was more important to Sartre than is usually recognized. In any event, by 1961, the time of *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon was favorably disposed to the changes Sartre's thinking had undergone. David Macey describes how in the summer of that year, Fanon, knowing that he had only a short time to live, went to the soldiers of the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN), who were eager to fight for Algeria but who were stuck on the Tunisian border, and lectured them on Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. This extraordinary image is clear evidence of Fanon's admiration for Sartre's thinking, even though at this time he still questioned Sartre's commitment.<sup>2</sup>

For some time, Fanon has predominantly been seen as a theorist of recognition. Like Kelly Oliver, Anita Chari, in her paper "Exceeding Recognition," rejects this interpretation. However, whereas Oliver presents Fanon as a philosopher of love, for Chari, he is a philosopher of agency; albeit she concedes that this focus on agency is only a tendency, even in *The Wretched of the Earth*. Perhaps ironically, given Hannah Arendt's antipathy toward Fanon, Chari presents Fanon as having a somewhat Arendtian conception of agency, where action invents, brings the new into existence, and transforms, but it is crucial to notice that, on Chari's account, Fanon's interest lies mainly in the obstacles to action of this kind, such that structural injustice for Fanon arises not so much from misrecognition of identity as from lack of agency. This is a significant finding.

Christopher Buck contrasts Fanon's apparent rejection of reparations for slavery in *Black Skin, White Masks* with his support for repa-

rations for colonized peoples in *The Wretched of the Earth*. Buck also observes the difference between Fanon's direct claim that "I have neither the right nor the duty to claim to reparation for the domestication of my ancestors" (PN 185; BS 228), and the qualified rejection of reparations: "But I as a man of color, to the extent that it becomes possible for me to exist absolutely, do not have the right to lock myself into a world of retroactive reparations" (PN 187; BS 231). But what does it mean "to exist absolutely?" I am not clear how Buck understands the phrase, but one way of construing it would be to associate it with the distinction between those who, by locating the negritude movement within a dialectic, accord blacks a relative existence and those who live black consciousness as an absolute density. However, this would supply an entirely different reading of the passage than is normally given to it. On this interpretation, it would not be in the name of racelessness that Fanon eschews reparations, but as a man of color existing absolutely, because he believes that would be to lock himself in a retrospective temporality. Buck not only highlights important aspects of the contemporary debate over reparations, he also shows that different conceptions of identity are related to different conceptions of temporality. Buck highlights from *The Wretched of the Earth* the idea that the colonized should use the past "with the intention of opening the future, as an invitation to action and a basis for hope,"<sup>3</sup> but one could see the same idea already at work when, in *Black Skin, White Masks*, he wrote that "the problem envisaged here is situated in temporality" (PN 183; BS 226. Translation modified). In Fanon, authentic temporality is primarily futural.

Neil Robert's "Fanon, Sartre, Violence, and Freedom" is the most provocative of the three papers because he takes us to the very limits of our capacity to theorize when he locates the justification of a certain violence outside of the framework of instrumentality, that is to say, outside of the framework of results or consequences. The distinction between intrinsic and instrumental violence is not only unstable but difficult to mark, as reference to some of the problems associated with the idea of "acting under description" confirms. The same act of violence may be described in intrinsic or instrumental terms. Indeed, does not Fanon's appeal to the alleged beneficial psychological effects of violence as part of its justification threaten to subvert the distinction? This is perhaps only a specific variation of the more general concern of which Arendt herself was well aware, that action in the Arendtian sense of *praxis* must be referred to the production of a story (*poiesis*) for its meaning to be revealed. The diffi-

culty of sustaining this important distinction has troubling implications for Roberts' paper, if one is looking to the distinction to provide a criterion which will enable us to decide where violence is justified, but it supports his paper insofar as one sees his contribution as challenging Arendt's attempt to deny that violence can be a *praxis*. It is possible that for the sake of forming a new humanity, some instrumental violence might be necessary and valuable, but this must be distinct from the sense in which intrinsic violence might be necessary and valuable. Indeed, one might ask if all intrinsic violence is intrinsically valuable in the way that for Arendt all *praxis* seems to be because it is constitutive of what makes us human.

The value of these three essays lies as much in the questions they open up as in the issues they decide. However, one thing is clear: research of the interrelation of Fanon and Sartre is, more than fifty years after *Black Skin, White Masks*, still vital.

## Notes

1. Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs*, Paris: Seuil, 1952, p. 108. trans. *Black Skin, White Masks*, C. L. Markmann, New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1982, p. 181. Henceforth *PN* and *BS* respectively.
2. David Macey, *Frantz Fanon*, New York: Picador, 2000, pp. 453 and 460.
3. Frantz Fanon, *Les damnés de la terre*, Paris: Gallimard, 1961, p. 280; trans. Constance Farrington, *The Wretched of the Earth*, New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1991, p. 232.