One may, no doubt, expect that given the title of my essay, my intention is to present something of an overview of the thought of Frantz Fanon. As the title would suggest, Fanon’s 1952 Black Skin, White Masks is the specific object of such a description, a project that has had more than a few adventurers. After all, Fanon himself makes no secret of his intellectual debt to phenomenological existentialism. In fact, though, while my essay is something of an overview, one that focuses on Fanon’s Black Skin (and I mean that not only as a quick reference to his book), my endeavor amounts to something more than collecting phenomenological bric-a-brac of so revolutionary a thinker and practitioner as Frantz Fanon, on this, the fortieth year of his death, which occurred not far from here, at Bethesda Naval Hospital, Maryland, under CIA guard. (It is also important to note, for purposes that will become apparent later, that last year (2000) marked the fortieth anniversary of the death, in Paris, of Richard Wright, a black radical intellectual who had also come under the same kind of surveillance by U.S. watchdog agencies as Fanon. Wright and Fanon died a year apart at the beginning of what the United Nations designated as “the Africa Decade,” under circumstances that remain murky to this day. The circumstances of their deaths, in countries from which each had exiled themselves, could not have been more revealing of the diasporan dialectic that made black thought so revolutionary and international a dimension of the postwar world.)

In the end, I may or may not have succeeded in escaping the kind the arbitrariness that so often attends scholarly adventures into the Fanonian dialectic. For it is also no secret—and Fanon is one of those rare twentieth century intellectuals who makes us alive to this at a visceral level—that he had to have been passionately in search of a liberatory method to have so seamlessly gone from the kind of restless postwar veteran and French Caribbean intellectual who could never “return to his native land,” to the radical clinical psychiatrist in revolutionary Algeria, to the self-identified African revolutionary theoretician whose thought would become synonymous with Third World liberation. One does not, in other words, go willy-nilly making phenomenological bricolage out of such compelling philosophical commitments without risking some critical blow-back. That polemic is for another time however. The expectation that my essay is an overview is, nonetheless, not misplaced. It is simply that by calling it “Frantz Fanon’s Phenomenology of Black Mind,” I mean nothing so essentialist or essentializing as negritude, toward which Fanon had at first an understandably ambivalent attitude that then evolved with his growing revolutionary commitments into a scathing critique. Nor have I in mind the kind of postmodernist eclecticizing of Fanon that anachronizes the revolutionary content of his thought. I have something else in mind.

I

Without adequate preparation, the Negro of the Western world lives in one life, many lifetimes. . . . The Negro, though born in the Western world, is
not quite of it; due to policies of racial exclusion, his is the story of two cultures: the dying culture in which he happens to be born, and the culture into which he is trying to enter—a culture which has, for him, not quite yet come into being; and it is up the shaky ladder of all the intervening stages between these two cultures that Negro life must climb. Such a story is, above all, a record of shifting, troubled feelings groping their way toward a future that frightens as much as it beckons.

Richard Wright,
Introduction to
George Lamming’s
In the Castle of My Skin

Merleau-Ponty’s “flesh of the world” is an elemental fact that makes all apparent facts actual facts. Fanon’s “black skin,” too, is the flesh of the world, one that is caught up in other worlds of apparent and actual blackness. Merleau-Ponty’s “flesh of the world,” in other words, is Fanon’s “fact of blackness.” I am privileging “fact of blackness” over the “lived experience of the black,” recognizing that Fanon may have given the latter as the actual title of chapter 5 of Black Skin, White Masks, because “fact of blackness” comes closer to Fanon’s phenomenological project. Both Merleau-Ponty’s “flesh of the world” and Fanon’s “fact of blackness” concentrate around them the meaning(s) of the world. That the inter-corporeality of the flesh/fact of the world is its phenomenological meaning means that my lived experience is not only in-itself but is for-others whose facticity is similarly involved in the “flesh of the world.” We participate in the field of experience of others because we share, possess, and experience the same meaning ascribed to the “flesh of the world.” We look back at those who look at us. Indeed, the perception of seeing becomes meaningful when it becomes a “look,” i.e., an act of perception between two perceivers who reciprocally intend to construct a certain objective meaning or certainty of the world. For a racially constructed world, the meaning is Manichean. “Black skin,” looked at, participates in that meaning or Being of the world that is elementally “flesh.” Like touching a hand that touches the world and others in it for their sensuous meaning, which corresponds to the phenomenological reduction carried out in the concepts of labor found in the pre-Phenomenology philosophy of spirit of Hegel, and in Marx’s Economic-Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, looking sees the flesh that looks at the world for meaning. Looking not only gives facticity to what is seen, it lends meaning and intentionality to whomever looks back. It is that meaning, or if you will, Being, which we participate in that ignites and enlivens existence.

This “fact” marks the contingent boundaries of human realities. The other looking back at Richard Wright during his 1953 trip to Africa, for instance, was not his elite African counterpart, but his non-elite African “other” camped along the side of the road, haggling in the markets, practicing “fetish” in the bush. The encounter changed the lived experience of the world of Richard Wright that had been so overly determined by the southern white glare. As contingent as the flesh of these worlds may be there remains a historical determination that fore-saw the fact of Wright’s blackness, a determination, as logical as it is historical, that was always already there certain of the turn history would take to deliver him into the structures of different references and feelings.

Sartre’s “Orphée Noir” provided something of an epistemological insight into negritude’s “fact of blackness.” Insofar as our perceptions are realizations of the world, race and racial perceptions are realizations of a racialized world; they are in some sense (e)race-ing the world. The flesh of this racialized world is the black skin that is hidden, or otherwise made invisible, behind a gallery of white masks. No matter how much we understand these masks to be manifestations of the colored flesh of the world, the actual world remains hidden.
Spontaneously set off from the “flesh of the world,” Fanon’s body was always (al)ready for the “miracle of vision” (Kwant, 79). Historically, this “miracle” was preceded by its existential Good Friday in which the black body was sacrificed in a social crucifixion (viz., lynching). Fanon meant a resurrection, a new humanism, a new intensity of beginning, to follow the long history of racial sacrifice. The fact that the flesh of the world “predestines [one] to see and to perceive” (Kwant, 79) means that black skin predestines one to see and perceive racially. The “fact of blackness” is the meaning of this form of perception. It, however, escapes the grasp of philosophy, for subject and object are so utterly differentiated by the fact of blackness that it (the difference) gives rise to the most deceptive “objects” and objective appearances.

II

Hence, the situation of philosophy, i.e., metaphysics, in the Fanonian milieu has the semblance of an ideological mask whose many appearances, like Herman Melville’s Confidence-Man, mystifies, as well as manifests the “flesh of the world.” Fanon’s thought, or more precisely, the phenomenology of black mind it discloses, may properly be called philosophy, in Merleau-Ponty’s sense, because it is at once the negation of reflections of any so-called pre-existing “truths” about race, and is the act (qua performance) of the (self-)bringing forth of truth. The Marxian character of Merleau-Ponty’s idea of philosophy also accords with Fanon’s phenomenology of black mind, inasmuch as for both, “the only way to do away with [the cogito] is to fulfill it, that is, to show that it is eminently contained in interpersonal relations” (Merleau-Ponty, 133). As examples of this phenomenological experience of philosophy inhering, or originating, in the “flesh of the world,” Merleau-Ponty tells us that just as “Hegel’s logic is . . . the algebra of revolution,”’ so “The ‘fetishism of [commodities]’ is the historical accomplishment of that alienation which Hegel enigmatically describes, and Das Kapital . . . is a concrete Phenomenology of Mind” (ibid.).

Now, as much as Fanon’s Black Skin, White Masks discloses the intersection of multiple languages and discourses, its performativity or praxis is as much a spoken act aimed at making its readers/audiences conscious of what it means to be human through the transcendence of “our individual empirical understanding of the world” (Couture, 81). Though Fanon was interested in more than creating new rhetorical meanings of the world, wanting instead to actually change the world, it is no less true that he recognized that that was impossible without the force of ideas fitted to a language of disalienation and liberation. And yet, Fanon’s performance was more than a spoken act, as rhetorically visceral as works like Black Skin, White Masks and The Wretched of the Earth are, but a written act, as well. Writing represented that kind of act, for an intellectual like Fanon who had always been a politically marginal figure in whatever milieu he moved, principally because writing involved creating meaning and interpreting realities, especially rhetorically constructed realities, at the margins. The idea that ideas must hear themselves speak determines the way we must grasp them as inherent in our lived experience. For that reason alone, the myriad appearances (masks) or voices found in Fanon’s Black Skin, White Mask makes it a phenomenology of mind.

For Fanon such a phenomenology begins with the sensuous certainty of language, simply because language places our existence for others in question. “The black man has two dimensions” (Fanon, 17), one for other black people, the other for white people. The latter has meant, among other things, that the social science methods of placing black existence in question have been sources of black alienation because historically they fixed the place of the Negro on
the lowest rungs of human evolution. This has, today, been replaced by a new “culture of poverty” discourse that fixes black folk within the political morphology of American society according to their alleged psychosocial pathologies and eugenic destinies. Language, too, not only means the assumption of a certain culture, it signifies the possession of the cultural world implied and expressed by a language. This possession (qua capacity or capital) opens up a social class divide between members of the same racial or ethnic group by virtue of the most proficient minority-group users of the dominant language gaining mastery over it. The overdetermination of language in the adaptive strategies of minority-group members leads to a mutation of cultural identity. This becomes evident in the compulsion to rid oneself of one’s native dialect, for “Every dialect is a way of thinking” (Fanon, 25). Finally, language becomes that province whence the first form of protest against domination issues, particularly in the form of literatures of protest. Here, language and revolution become intertwined when the oppressed begin to speak in the language of a philosophy of liberation (Marx). Owing to the conflict which arises, language comes to define the noble and the base consciousness, the “civilized” and the “savage” mind, the Manichean world of “colonizer” and “colonized.”

Behind the empirical immediacy of language and the conflicting discourses to which race gives rise lies a colonial ontology, one which Fanon finds at once articulated and problematized in Octave Mannoni’s controversial Prospero and Caliban: The Psychology of Colonization. This so-called colonial ontology is the thoroughly historicized, existential, “colonial situation” formed by the “confrontation of ‘civilized’ and ‘primitive’ men” (Fanon, 85). The colonial situation, for which Mannoni “deserves our thanks for having introduced” (84), owes more, however, to Fanon’s reading of Merleau-Ponty than to Mannoni. In fact, Fanon feels that Mannoni “has not understood its real coordinates” (84), despite having called the ontology of the “colonial situation” to our attention.

Despite his well known critique of Mannoni, Fanon credits the French social-psychological anthropologist and colonial administrator with having not avoided African subjectivity in a field known for overdetermining “objectivity.” Not only had Mannoni’s purpose been to “prove the impossibility of explaining man outside the limits of his capacity for accepting or denying a given situation,” but to demonstrate the “interrelations of objective historical conditions,” unseparated from the “human attitudes toward these conditions” (84). Mannoni, however, betrays his own purpose when he allows “objectivity” to be overdetermined from the outside. Despite his debt to Merleau-Ponty, who theorized situation as the expression of “the ultimate unity of man with his surroundings” (Mallin, 7), Fanon’s notion of situation bears an even closer affinity to the Marxian dialectic which comprehends the relations between human beings as mediated by the instrumentality of their historical material situation. In other words, Fanon, like Marx, is concerned with the conflict brought into question by the “historical objective conditions,” and attitudes, of the situation; a conflict, the permanence of which changes the situation.

III

Marx’s “historical materialism,” though not usually understood in the humanist terms Fanon is working out, nonetheless, developed a concept of situation that signifies more than the so-called “set of facts” that constitute “external circumstances.” Marxist positivism, usually called “orthodoxy,” is the history of the eliding of this “new humanism.” For very different reasons, Fanon’s reading of Mannoni and Merleau-Ponty discloses the archeology of this humanism. For
Fanon, the colonial situation not only constitutes a unique relationship of subject to object, but a thoroughly historicized ontology in which existence itself must be historically reinterpreted. The colonial situation makes everything Manichean; existence is either “civilized” or “primitive” (actually “savage”). Even the hybridities that the colonial situation gives birth to are only understood in Manichean terms.

What Hegel calls internal intuition insures that the immediate sensuousness of this “flesh of the [colonial] world,” i.e., the “fact” of Fanon’s “black skin,” doesn’t remain at the level of perception, but instead elevated, in the sense of its determination to appear, and reflected back in the look of the very subject whose bodily schema had been racialized. Internal intuition breaks down the ontology of the colonial or racialized situation into a process of becoming wherein the inherent defects of the Manichean world are also “endowed with the impulse of self-development” (Hegel, 829). This, in Fanon’s terms, represents the agency of the Negro, or that which becomes the revolutionary process of decolonization in his later works. Internal intuition, in short, is the method and means by which Fanon’s comprehension of the “colonial situation” entails both the logic of its existence, i.e., its phenomenology, and the dialectic of its overcoming.

The counter-factuality of Mannoni’s internal intuition bears out Fanon’s own, inasmuch as, in the face of the 1947 Madagascar revolt and French massacre, Mannoni did not so much feel the liberatory impulse to free man, nor recoil from the “civilizing mission” of the European butchery of men. He instead intuited the confusion of lost dependency and the violence bred by sudden abandonment. His internal intuition was of an African personality desperately and futilely seeking its destiny in a lost authenticity of the past, a Malagasy negritude, if you will. It is to this internal intuition of the European intellectual, and the Europeanized black intellectual, that Fanon directs the passage from Marx’s *Eighteenth Brumaire* that he uses as the epigraph to the last chapter of *Black Skin, White Mask*: “The social revolution . . . cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future. It cannot begin with itself before it has stripped itself of all its superstitions concerning the past” (Fanon, 223). Not unlike the social ontology formed at the inception of the colonial situation, “Earlier revolutions relied on memories out of world history in order to drug themselves against their own content” (ibid.).

Fanon’s thought is that phenomenology of black mind by which twentieth century Third World revolutions “let the dead bury the dead” (223). Much more, then, is involved in his internal intuition of the “colonial situation” than grasping the revolutionary impulses by which colonialism is overthrown. His internal intuition is as much the comprehension of the “new humanism” by which the specters of Europe’s memory of its conquering spirit in world history are finally buried, as it is comprehension of the burial of the African “cult of the dead.”

This is what gives *Black Skin, White Masks* its performative character; it is dramaturgical (here reading Sekyi-Otu 1996) only in this sense, that Fanon is “performing” this twin burial himself. He, however, is less dramaturgical and more theatrical, i.e., performative. His “narrative,” if it is possible to call his thought a narrative, is a phenomenological performance, a poetics, fundamentally aware of its own praxis of burying the dead, including Mannoni’s cult of the “cult of the dead.” I would be remiss were I not also to note that this obviously entails Fanon trucking with that other “cult of the dead”—negritude—in order to bury it. Fanon is, according to Marx’s term for the revolutionary occupation of the unemployed proletariat, a “gravedigger.”

Richard Wright was himself engaged in this revolutionary internment. Fanon and Wright were nonetheless not involved in a Foucauldian archeology of dead discourses, but, instead, in the very alive and revolution-
ary pursuit of burying them. The interdisciplinary character of their thought is constitutive of that phenomenology of black mind I have suggested. Psychoanalytical theories, existentialist philosophy, Marxian (and in Fanon’s case, Hegelian) dialectics, social psychology, literary discourses such as Surrealism and Negritude, as well as anthropology, were all sources, critiques, and dialectics of Wright’s and Fanon’s phenomenological performances of the modern black mind. Indeed, in Wright and Fanon one sees that the dialectic that differentiates the mind as “black” is its performativity, whether as reason or as revolution. And in their performances the two are inseparable.

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