

8. Black Skin, White Masks

Fanon initially intended his now seminal work *Black Skin, White Masks* as the final year dissertation for his medical degree at the University of Lyons. Having been born and raised in Martinique, he had served in the Martinican Corps of the French army during the Second World War, then moved to Paris to study dentistry on a scholarship for war veterans, but soon transferred to Lyons to study medicine, specialising in psychiatry. His intended dissertation, 'Essai sur la désaliénation du Noir', drew on his analyses of psychiatric theory, his interests in philosophy and literature, and his personal experience of the differing racisms he had experienced in Martinique, in the army, and in France after the war, to describe a specific psychiatric condition that he claimed affected black people in French society, and to diagnose its causes. His supervisors advised against submitting such an unusual work, so he wrote a new dissertation on a neurophysiological disorder of the spinal column and qualified as a psychiatrist in 1951.

Fanon sought to publish his essay on the 'disalienation' of black colonised people. His manuscript was enthusiastically received by Francis Jeanson in his role as an editor at Éditions du Seuil. It was Jeanson who suggested the title *Peau noire, masques blancs*, which Fanon accepted, and the book was published in 1952 when Fanon was 27 years old. It carried a preface by Jeanson praising the book for disrupting the white intellectual elite's confidence in the adequacy of their own perspective on social reality and lauding the implication of Fanon's work that a revolutionary transformation of the social order is required, rather than individual revolt against it (Jeanson 1952). This was around the time that Jeanson wrote his review of *The Rebel* that, as we saw in chapter 2, ignited the infamous row that ended the friendship between Camus and Sartre.

The contrast is revealing. Jeanson's preface does not explicitly classify *Black Skin, White Masks* as a work of existentialism, but it does make regular reference to Sartre. By drawing attention to the difference between revolution and revolt, an implication of Fanon's thought to which the book does not devote much space, Jeanson implicitly contrasts Fanon

with Camus. Where his review of *The Rebel* is a decisive rejection of Camus by the existentialist establishment, his preface to *Black Skin, White Masks* subtly situates Fanon within their movement. It was nine years later that Sartre first met Fanon and agreed to write a preface to his new book, *The Wretched of the Earth*. But this only cemented an intellectual affinity that Jeanson had already seen in the manuscript he had been sent. It is impossible to tell, however, quite how much of Fanon's existentialism Jeanson had recognised, for *Black Skin, White Masks* is a thoroughly existentialist work, as we will see, but its existentialism is distinctive in both its theoretical details and in their application.

1. Eclecticism and Theoretical Unity

The most striking features of *Black Skin, White Masks* on first reading are its wide range of reference points and its apparently chaotic literary style. Fanon presents critical analyses of the novels of Mayotte Capécia and Richard Wright and the poetry of Leopold Senghor and Aimé Césaire, among many other works, alongside his theoretical responses to highly influential works of European anthropology, philosophy, and psychoanalysis. His writing is often lyrical and occasionally poetic, but regularly adopts the drier voice of standard academic prose. He switches between the detached, objective perspective of abstract theorising and the engaged, first-personal perspective of confessional or meditative literature. This eclecticism of both substance and style makes the book a very challenging read. In particular, it can make it difficult to discern the logical progression of the thought embodied in the book or any underlying theoretical unity to the various claims that it makes.

Indeed, the book has been read as intending to demonstrate the impossibility of capturing the social structures of colonialism in any unified way. Homi Bhabha argues that its haphazard progression represents 'a desperate, doomed search for a dialectic of deliverance' from colonial subjection, one that explores different perspectives on colonialism largely through the interactions between them and finds them all wanting (Bhabha 1986: x-xi). Such a reading might seem to ascribe to Fanon only a relatively shallow intellectual contribution as a comparative critic of other people's thought rather than as an originator of valuable ideas. But to draw this conclusion would be to forget that Fanon is a psychiatrist. For it would prioritise philosophy's ambition of formulating internally consistent and robust theories over psychiatry's ambitions of treating psychological distress and safeguarding against people suffering that distress. Since the goals of psychiatry are treatment and prevention, what matters is what works. If we read

Fanon as eschewing theoretical unity, therefore, we should see his original contribution as the development of a pragmatic eclecticism for psychiatry in place of what were then its traditional attempts at more systematic conceptual frameworks.

If we read Fanon in this way, then we can accept his eclecticism as fundamental to his theoretical outlook without ascribing to him what Lewis Gordon calls 'a subordinated theoretical identity' (2015: 5). For we would be reading his critical reflections on other thinkers as his vehicle for elaborating his own idea. However, this reading might be criticised for committing a different error that Gordon finds in the literature on Fanon, the 'disciplinary decadence' of prioritising one of Fanon's intellectual concerns to the exclusion of others (2015: 17). Bhabha can be accused of losing sight of the psychiatric ambition of *Black Skin, White Masks* by reading it exclusively through its concern with the sociological analysis of colonialism. But conversely, if we read the book as fundamentally advocating pragmatic eclecticism in psychiatry and demonstrating its use through diagnoses of psychiatric problems generated by colonialism, then we risk occluding the ethical, social, and political dimensions of the book.

Should we conclude that there are simply distinct lenses through which we can read *Black Skin, White Masks* and ourselves renounce any ambition to resolve the apparent disagreements that arise from comparing readings taken through these different lenses? If we do this, we risk losing some of the most valuable intellectual contributions that this book has to offer. We would be filtering Fanon's thought through our understanding of the relations between his intellectual concerns and through our understanding of the relations between his influences, rather than aiming to uncover his own views of these relations. If we instead read the book as having the more ambitious aim of developing a unified theory addressing Fanon's various intellectual interests, then we stand to gain significant insights into the deep structural relations between these interests. To get the most out of this work, then, we should accept Gordon's description of the book as offering a 'metatheoretical' analysis of how its various theoretical concerns and influences fit together, as well as pursuing those concerns through analyses of those influences (2015: 17). We should ascribe fragmentation or incompleteness only where we cannot explain how this aim has been achieved.

One of the reasons Bhabha gives for his reading of *Black Skin, White Masks* as conceptually disunified is that Fanon draws on both existentialism and psychoanalysis, or both 'a phenomenological affirmation of Self and Other and the psychoanalytic ambivalence of the

Unconscious' as he puts it (1986: x). We have already seen in chapter 5 that existentialism is not in fact antagonistic towards psychoanalysis, since Beauvoir and Sartre developed their forms of existentialism as grounding a kind of psychoanalysis that retained many of Freud's insights. In this chapter, we will see that Fanon's use of psychoanalysis similarly aims to integrate its insights into an existentialist theory. Indeed, we will see that the fundamental theoretical purpose of *Black Skin, White Masks* is to argue for a form of existentialism that provides a conceptual framework for psychiatry and an ethical, social, and political outlook. The book's progression is unified as a single line of argument for this existentialism and its literary style exemplifies this existentialism. This is not to deny that Fanon employs an eclectic approach to psychiatry, but to uncover his deeper idea that motivates and constrains that eclecticism. To see exactly what this means, we need first to trace the book's line of argument for Fanon's form of existentialism.

2. The Dilemma of White Masks

One aspect of the book where we must acknowledge an incompleteness is Fanon's use of the terms 'black' and 'white' to refer to groups of people. He often treats these terms as synonymous with 'colonised' and 'coloniser', suggesting that he intends his analysis to apply specifically within a colonial context. This is not to say that he considers it to apply equally to all colonial systems. His analysis rests on details of the French colonial rule in the Caribbean, as we will see in section 4, though he does consider it to apply to relations between people in mainland France as a result of this colonial rule. But he does not seem to intend his analysis to be wholly restricted to this context. At one point, he refers to resistance to French colonial rule in southeast Asia (BSWM: 201). In an article published in the same year as *Black Skin, White Masks*, he describes a behavioural syndrome among Arabic men in the French colonies of north Africa, briefly suggesting a diagnosis similar to his analysis of life under French colonialism in the Caribbean (NAS: 15).

Who, then, are the 'black' and 'white' people he describes in the book? His text does not provide a complete answer to this question. We should read his use of these terms primarily as applying within French culture, in mainland France and in its colonies, at the time when Fanon was writing, to people classified as 'black' and 'white'. Unless we keep that specific meaning in view, Fanon will seem to be generalising too broadly from a narrow evidential base. But we should also bear in mind his intention that this analysis has broader application, especially given that its deep structure is a form of existentialism and therefore rests on an understanding of human existence itself. Translating his thought

out of the specific colonial context he details is therefore legitimate, but requires careful attention to the differences between that context and the time and place to which his thought is then applied.

With that specific context in mind, the opening chapters of the book present a puzzle. These present an initial description of an inferiority felt by the colonised black people and analyses the attempt to overcome this feeling by identifying with the white colonisers. Perhaps because of the prominence of Fanon's analysis of this strategy in his book, readers have often taken the book's title to refer entirely to this strategy. The book's title refers, on this understanding, to the attempt by black colonised people metaphorically to wear a mask that identifies them with the white colonisers (e.g. Cauter 1970: 11; Bhabha 1986: xv-xvi; Nayar 2013: 50). This strategy is doomed to failure, according to Fanon. The colonised black person cannot escape their feeling of inferiority in this way because they cannot fully identify with the white coloniser. At best, their behaviour can be mere impersonation of the white person (BSWM: 18-19, 21-23). But why should this be so? We might continue with the metaphor and say that it is because the mask occasionally slips, or the mask is ill-fitting. But why should these metaphors necessarily apply?

One response to this question might be to suggest that there are essential differences between the black colonised people and their white colonisers that prevent the former from behaving exactly like the latter. But this is precisely what Fanon is going to reject. As we will see in more detail in section 5, Fanon is an existentialist. Another response would be to suggest that the black colonised people have deeply internalised a cultural identification through their upbringing that is distinct from the culture of the white colonisers. But this cannot be Fanon's answer either. For, as we will see in more detail in section 4, Fanon argues that the root of the inferiority complex that the colonised black person suffers from is in part that they have deeply internalised a cultural identification with the white Europeans. As the book's title suggests, the reason why the colonised cannot wear perfectly the mask presenting them as white is not that they have some innate or acquired psychological properties, but because they have 'black skin'. How does 'black skin' itself have this effect?

To answer this, we need first to recognise that the adjective 'white' in the phrase 'white masks' indicates not a visible feature of the masks, but rather their origin. White masks are white in the same way that French philosophy is French. White masks are masks produced by white colonisers and their features manifest the cultural background of those creators,

just as works of French philosophy have features that manifest the French cultural background of their creation. The confusion arises because a subset of these white masks are indeed designed for the white colonisers to wear and Fanon does describe the attempt by people of 'black skin' to wear these masks. But to see clearly why this can never be more than impersonation, we need to contrast this set of white masks, which we will call (w), with the set that the white colonisers have designed for the black colonised to wear, which we will call (b). 'Making him speak pidgin', for example, is 'tying him to an image, snaring him, imprisoning him as the eternal victim of his own essence, of a *visible appearance* for which he is not responsible' (BSWM: 18).

The difference between the two kinds of masks lies in the kind of control that the white colonisers have over them: the features of (w) are defined simply by the behaviour of the white colonisers, so that when the behaviour of that category of people changes the features of (w) change with it; but the features of (b) are defined by the view that the white colonisers have of the black colonised people. Somebody classified as black in this system can adopt masks of kind (w), but they cannot stand in the same relation to (w) as the coloniser stands. This is why their wearing of this kind of mask can only be a kind of impersonation. It is both subjection and alienation for the same reason: it requires the colonised black person to follow behavioural norms over which they are denied any influence. The other option is to wear masks of kind (b). But these too are controlled by the white colonisers, whose outlook belittles and dehumanises the colonised black people. This, therefore, is the initial form of the dilemma of white masks: the colonised black person is forced to choose between wearing (w) and wearing (b), both of which are forms of subjection and alienation.

3. The Strategy of Negritude

It is in the context of this dilemma that we should read Fanon's critical response to the Negritude movement, which aimed to explore and enrich the cultural identities of black people through historical investigations of African cultures and through art, literature, and music embodying African aesthetic forms. This movement had grown up in Paris in the 1930s to emphasise the similarities between African cultures and the new movements in French philosophy and art (Haddour 2005: 287-9). One of its leading lights, the poet Aimé Césaire, became one of the teachers at the high school Fanon attended as a student and Fanon had then worked on Césaire's successful campaign to be elected mayor of Fort-de-France in 1945 (Gordon 2015: 13, 52). Fanon even opens his book with a quotation from

Césaire that encapsulates one important part of the analysis developed in the book. But by the time of writing *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon had come to see the Negritude movement as a response to the dilemma of white masks that ultimately cannot succeed in overcoming the problem.

Within the context of that dilemma, Negritude is a strategy that exploits the difference in the power the coloniser has over the two kinds of mask. Since masks of kind (w) are defined by the behaviour of the coloniser, there is nothing the colonised can do to alter those masks. But if (b) are defined only by the colonisers' expectations of the colonised, then the colonised can confound those expectations and thereby shape (b) by their own behaviour. To confound those expectations by behaving like the coloniser, of course, is to adopt masks of kind (w), so is not a way of escaping the dilemma. But by emphasising aspects of their pre-colonial history and culture, the colonised can change the features of masks (b). By identifying as black people and then defining what that means independently of the expectations of the white colonisers, the colonised can take control of masks (b) without subjection to the colonisers' expectations and therefore without the alienation of being forced to live up to those expectations.

Fanon deepens his conception of the dilemma of white masks through his critical analysis of this strategy of responding to it. Ultimately the problem with wearing masks (b), he argues, is not that the coloniser controls the features of those masks, but that the coloniser classifies as inferior whatever features those masks have. They do this at first by defining the features of masks (b) in a way that belittles the colonised. But faced with the independent assertion of a black identity by the colonised, faced with a loss of control over the features of (b), the white coloniser simply classifies the new set of features as representing 'the childhood of the world', as exemplifying humanity's pre-scientific, pre-industrial sensitivity, a 'naive, ingenuous, and spontaneous' outlook that has been lost to the formal, polite, civilised European coloniser (BSWM: 111). Indeed, this relationship to the colonised is justified in the mind of the coloniser by the very fact of colonisation: the superior social and technological sophistication of the Europeans is evidenced, they think, by their conquest and rule of these colonies (BSWM: 161-3). Negritude cannot overcome the subjection and alienation of wearing masks (b), because that subjection and alienation are ultimately caused by the colonisers' belittlement of the colonised, rather than by their control of the features of those masks (BSWM: 14; compare Sartre A&J: 82).

It is with this understanding of the motivation and prospects of Negritude that Fanon turns to his famous critique of Sartre's 'Black Orpheus', his preface to a poetry anthology edited by Leopold Senghor, another leading light on the Negritude movement, that we considered in the last chapter (7.7). In this essay, Sartre characterises Negritude as unable to establish the superiority or equality of a black culture, but nonetheless as paving the way to dissolving the distinction between the white colonisers and the black colonised (BO: 320). Fanon's response is very subtle. He argues that in describing Negritude as an inevitable stage in the unfolding of a logical historical process, Sartre has undermined the status of the Negritude movement as an achievement of black people. 'I did not create a meaning for myself; the meaning was already there, waiting', if Sartre is right (BSWM: 113). What is more, according to Fanon, Sartre effectively belittles Negritude by characterising it as a developmental phase on the way to the mature position that he must himself already occupy in order to recognise this development (BSWM: 114). To this, we may add that in addressing 'Black Orpheus' to a white readership, Sartre inadvertently belittles black colonised people by talking about them without talking to them.

And yet Fanon does not think that what Sartre says is wrong. Sartre, he tells us, 'by naming me shattered my last illusion' (BSWM: 116). By correctly describing this project of Negritude, that is to say, Sartre has made it impossible for black colonised people to attempt to wrest control over the meaning of masks (b) through establishing a richer and more positive image of black culture. Fanon agrees with Sartre that Negritude cannot liberate the black colonised simply through control of masks (b), as we have seen, and that Negritude has an important role to play in dissolving racial categories, as we will see in section 5. Sartre has undermined, however, the possibility of Negritude playing that role through aiming to take control of masks (b), in Fanon's view. For this strategy could be pursued only under the illusion that establishing the equality of black people independently of the power of the white colonisers, taking control of masks (b), is something that the black colonised can themselves achieve. This is the illusion that Sartre has shattered, by pointing out the historical inevitability of the Negritude movement and its inability to achieve control over the meaning of masks (b). But why does Fanon consider this belief, this 'illusion', necessary for the strategy of wresting control over masks (b)? The answer to this question lies in Fanon's theory of the inferiority complex.

4. The Inferiority Complex

Fanon's criticism of Sartre's characterisation of the Negritude movement rests fundamentally on his claim that 'Sartre forgets that the black man suffers in his body quite differently from the white man' (BSWM: 117). Fanon adds in a footnote that this is because Sartre's basic model of antagonism between people is his account of 'the look', which assumes that the two antagonists see one another as equals and that the antagonism is driven by bad faith. Within contexts that fit this assumption, Fanon is happy to accept Sartre's theory of the look. But its 'application to a black consciousness proves fallacious' because here that assumption is false; 'the white man is not only "the Other", but also the master, whether real or imaginary' (BSWM: 117 n24; see also BSWM: 24).¹ Fanon immediately goes on to describe this suffering of the black colonised, this relationship to the white coloniser as to a real or imaginary master, as a deep feeling of inferiority to the point of not fully existing, and of being guilty of some profound sin without knowing what the sin is (BSWM: 118). Fanon then turns, in the next chapter, to analysing the origins of this suffering.

He develops his view in critical dialogue with the psychoanalytic tradition. If there is a psychic difference between the white colonisers and the black colonised, then according to classical psychoanalysis this ought to be traceable to childhood traumas of the black people. Freud looked for the originary trauma within each patient's family upbringings, because he was aiming to diagnose psychic conditions that were abnormal in the patient's society. Fanon, by contrast, considers the inferiority complex to be normal among black colonised people. It is not in the differences between their families that the cause is to be found, therefore, but in the wider social context that they all share. Freud thought, in a white European context, that a 'normal child brought up in a normal family will become a normal adult', but Fanon argues that this does not apply in the colonial context: a 'normal black child, having grown up with a normal family, will become abnormal at the slightest contact with the white world' (BSWM: 121-2). Fanon retains the classical psychoanalytic idea that childhood upbringing is central to the formation of the conditions conducive to

¹ Fanon has here assumed that Sartre's 'Black Orpheus' is philosophically continuous with his *Being and Nothingness*, but as we saw in the last chapter this essay is the first place where Sartre adopts the idea of sedimentation that he had resisted in his earlier works. We will not consider here, however, whether Sartre's adoption of sedimentation entails a transformation of his theory of 'the look' that would invalidate Fanon's criticism.

psychological distress and retains the classical psychoanalytic idea that traumatic incidents play a central role, but in the case of the inferiority complex of black colonised people, he argues, the traumatic events need not be incidents in childhood.

To explain this, Fanon appropriates the idea of a 'collective unconscious' common to all members of society. Rather than agree with Carl Jung that this collective unconscious is innate, internal, and invariable, an inescapable basic content of the mind, Fanon argues that 'it is cultural, i.e., it is acquired'; the cause of the inferiority complex is a 'habit', not an 'instinct' (BSWM: 165). All children in the French-speaking world at the time, he points out, are raised on European story books, comics, and films, in which the heroes are white and the only black characters are belittled and dehumanised (BSWM: 124-33; see also BSWM: 17). This view of black people as inferior then pervades the culture through adult life, most especially in the continual use of blackness to symbolise evil and death (BSWM: 165-7; compare Sartre BO: 282). Black colonised children are raised on these same stories and positively encouraged to identify with the conquering, civilising, white explorers of their stories and to see the real historical colonisers of their region as their true ancestors (BSWM: 126, 168-9). The view of black colonised people as inferior is a collective unconscious because it is encoded in the cultural fabric, from which every individual acquires it through continual habituation to the point at which it shapes their outlook.

This is why the black colonised person suffers trauma, in Fanon's view, on contact with the wider white world. The black colonised person has internalised a view of black people as inferior to the white colonisers, with whom the colonised person identifies. But 'at the first white gaze, he feels the weight of his melanin' (BSWM: 128). For the white colonisers too view people of 'black skin' as inferior, since they share in the same collective unconscious, and this means that they view the black colonised as inferior even though the colonised identify with the white colonisers. The inferiority complex is this combination of being racialised as black by the white colonisers while also having internalised the shared cultural classification of black people as inferior. Because this classification is part of the collective unconscious, deeply engrained and continually reaffirmed in myriad subtle ways in the wider culture, this inferiority complex cannot be overcome simply by rational thought that denies the inferiority of black people. This is what Fanon means by the term 'negrophobia' (BSWM: 138, 168-9). Like a phobia, this collective unconscious classification of black people shapes the outlook and behaviour of each individual without being responsive to their own rational thought. 'In the phobic, affect has a priority that defies all rational thinking' (BSWM: 133).

We can now see why Fanon thought that the strategy of Negritude as a response to the dilemma of white masks required the illusion that the black colonised people could reconfigure the meaning and value of masks (b) by their own agency. By emphasising the sophisticated belief systems, social organisations, and aesthetic forms of pre-colonial black cultures, the Negritude movement can change the representation of black people in the collective unconscious. But addressing the inferiority complex requires more than a change in the particular forms of behaviour expected of black people. It requires that the expected behaviour is not classed as inferior to the ways of white people. If the Negritude movement could substantially change the collective unconscious through research, scholarship, and linguistic and aesthetic articulation achieved by black people, then this very achievement would itself help to efface the idea of black inferiority. But if this process is seen as simply an historical inevitability, rather than as the achievement of black people, then it will lack this performative aspect. To overcome the inferiority complex, the strategy of Negritude would have to be understood as clearly produced by the agency of black people, rather than merely as a historical process.

5. Black Skin and the Dilemma of White Masks

Through his analysis of this inferiority complex, Fanon again deepens his conception of the dilemma of white masks. 'I have two ways of experiencing the problem' of the inferiority complex, he writes. 'Either I ask people not to pay attention to the colour of my skin; or else, on the contrary, I want people to notice it' (BSWM: 174). The first of these is an attempt to escape the feeling of inferiority by wearing masks (w), which by its nature is a form of subjection and alienation. The second is an attempt to wear masks (b) while taking control of their features. But 'I then try to esteem what is bad – since, without thinking, I admitted that the black man was evil' (BSWM: 174). The inferiority complex cannot be overcome this way, that is to say, not simply because the white colonisers insist on associating blackness with evil, but more deeply because the wearers of those masks have themselves internalised that association. This association in the collective unconscious is 'phobic' in the sense that it is not responsive to the individual's rational rejection of it, so an attempt to value positively a mask of kind (b) is effectively an attempt to esteem something associated with evil.

The dilemma of white masks is therefore generated by a prior division of people into two categories, those of 'white skin' and those of 'black skin'. The association between the

latter category and inferiority is not incidental. Rather, the relation between superiority and inferiority is the essence of this categorisation. Fanon is clear that there is no unity to the category of 'black person' other than this construction in the collective unconscious by the white coloniser (BSWM: 149-50). Indeed, there is no unity to the category of 'white person' either beyond this construction (BSWM: 204). 'The black man is not. No more than the white man' (BSWM: 206). The strategy of Negritude is mistaken ultimately because it operates within this categorisation; 'what is called the black soul is a construction of white folk' (BSWM: xviii). 'In order to put an end to this neurotic situation' of the dilemma of white masks, therefore, 'there is but one answer', which is to 'rule out these two elements that are equally unacceptable', to refuse the initial categorisation of black skin and white skin that produces and governs the dilemma (BSWM: 174).

Fanon encapsulates this problem in the claim that 'there is but one destiny for the black man. And it is white' (BSWM: xiv; echoed at BSWM: 202). Once one has accepted the categorisation of being a black person, that is to say, one is trapped in a dilemma controlled by those categorised as white. 'The black man is a toy in the hands of the white man' for the same reason (BSWM: 119). Because these categorisations are part of the shared collective unconscious, they also constrain those categorised as white. This is why Fanon is confident that the Negritude movement will only be understood by the white colonisers as exploring 'the childhood of the world': the belittlement of black people is deeply instilled in their outlook through cultural habituation. White people who do not want to treat black people as inferior are caught in a dilemma that parallels the dilemma of white masks. Although the book is focused on the problem faced by those racialised as black, Fanon is clear that he thinks the dissolution of these categories will liberate everyone (BSWM: xvi, 12; Bernasconi 2005: 103, 108-9).

How are these categories of 'black skin' and 'white skin' to be removed from the collective unconscious? Fanon says very little about this in *Black Skin, White Masks*. He does say that 'through the particular' we should 'reach for the universal' (BSWM: 174). We should recognise our own particular situation, but define ourselves in terms of our common humanity. We should each see ourselves as heirs to all of the aspects of human history that have shaped our upbringing and cultural surroundings, not just to the achievements of people of our own skin colour. Fanon thus lays equal claim to each of the Peloponnesian War, the invention of the compass, and the slave revolt in Saint Domingue. The importance of the Negritude movement, in this perspective, lies in its countering the Eurocentric bias that colonialism has introduced to the historical and cultural record of humanity (BSWM:

200-1). But this liberation from the classifications of black skin and white skin is not something that can be achieved instantly simply by deciding on it. 'Before embarking on a positive voice', Fanon tells us at the end of the book, 'freedom needs to make an effort at disalienation', because 'man is always congested, drowned in contingency' (BSWM: 206). The classifications of white skin and black skin are deeply engrained in the collective unconscious. They can be removed only gradually through 'a permanent tension' (BSWM: 206).²

Fanon ends the book without giving any more detail about how this is to be achieved. This is hardly surprising. There can be no simple formula to be applied across all of the situations in which the collective unconscious divides people into the superior and the inferior, the white and the black, the coloniser and the colonised. Strategies that work for the medical doctor from Martinique are unlikely to liberate the construction worker in Abidjan or the children working in the sugar fields of Guadeloupe (BSWM: 198-9, 205). Not only are these situations different, but the people suffering in them are not suffering precisely the same problems. Whether his diagnosis of an inferiority complex can be applied to a particular person or group of people will depend on the degree to which the collective unconscious in which they participate resembles the French colonial context that Fanon has described. There may even be, as Fanon acknowledges, people racialised as black from our perspective who suffer no such problem at all (BSWM: xvi). Even so, the question of how the collective unconscious he has diagnosed is to be changed remains. It is a central theme of his later book *The Wretched of the Earth*, though it is a further question how far Fanon retains the analysis of *Black Skin, White Masks* in that book.

² It is sometimes argued that Fanon here contradicts his argument earlier in the book that Sartre's abstract, schematic, intellectualised characterisation of Negritude fails to recognise its true nature and emancipatory potential. If the Negritude movement 'has a profound psycho-existential significance that Sartre should not have cut short', argues Kruks, 'then neither should Fanon have finally abandoned it' at the end of *Black Skin, White Masks* (1996: 132; see also Haddour 2005: 291-3). Fanon does not, however, criticise Sartre's characterisation of Negritude, but explains that Sartre inadvertently brought him to realise that liberation could not be achieved through taking control of masks (b). Neither does he 'abandon' Negritude; he accords it a new role in a struggle for liberation through dissolving the racial categories underlying the dilemma of white masks. In this sense, Sartre's description of Negritude as a moment in a historical dialectic is itself a moment in the dialectical development of Fanon's thought (Judy 1996: 64).

6. Why Fanon is an Existentialist

We have seen that *Black Skin, White Masks* is structured as a unified argument concluding that the dilemma of white masks can be resolved only by overcoming the inferiority complex that grounds it, which requires gradually changing the cultural collective unconscious so that people are no longer classified as black or white. This argument makes extensive use of the psychoanalytic tradition, especially through its focus on the manifestation of psychic problems in sexual desire. Fanon criticises Sartre's theory of social relations for failing to take account of cases like the inferiority complex he diagnoses through this psychoanalysis. Rather than being driven by the individual's bad faith, the problems that arise for the black colonised person under the gaze of the white coloniser are rooted in a deeply internalised negrophobia that cannot be removed simply by a change in the sufferer's projects. Because his appropriation of ideas from the psychoanalytic tradition allows Fanon to articulate a form of social alienation that contrasts sharply with the theory of 'the look' in Sartre's initial form of existentialism, it can seem that Fanon here opposes the existentialism that he draws on elsewhere in the book.

Fanon's overall position, however, is profoundly existentialist. He does not simply adopt psychoanalytic concepts as they already are, but translates them into his paradigmatically existentialist conception of the human individual. This conception rejects the idea that there can be any essential difference, any difference in fixed nature, between black people and white people, as we have seen. 'There are from one end of the world to the other men who are searching' (BSWM: 204). This is an application of his deeper rejection of any human nature at all. 'In the world I am heading for', he tells us, 'I am endlessly creating myself' (BSWM: 204). This is an endorsement of the idea that existence precedes essence, the tenet that Beauvoir and Sartre both identified as the core claim of existentialism when they gave that term its definition, as we saw in chapter 1. It is because Fanon holds this existentialist conception of the human individual that he cannot accept Jung's idea of the collective unconscious as an innate, internal, invariable instinct. Since there are no such instincts, according to existentialism, any collective unconscious must be encoded in the cultural situation.

Fanon's disagreement with Sartre, therefore, is not grounded in his endorsing aspects of psychoanalysis inconsistent with existentialism. His disagreement is rather within the

ambit of existentialism itself. Fanon sees this cultural collective unconscious as operating through the sedimentation of a cultural representation of black people that becomes so engrained that it is not responsive to rational decision. Sartre, in *Being and Nothingness*, cannot accept this idea of sedimentation. For it is inconsistent with his idea of radical freedom as the ability to overthrow any project, or any value, so long as one is willing to pay the price of doing so. This is why, in Fanon's view, Sartre's theory of social relations simply cannot explain the problems faced by the black colonised. This is also why Fanon thinks that these problems can be resolved only gradually through social change, rather than through the kind of 'radical conversion' that Sartre describes as an outcome of existentialist psychoanalysis. Far from agreeing with Sartre that one can 'through sheer commitment, leap beyond the bounds of historical situation', as Kruks (1996: 132) claims, Fanon develops a form of existentialism that explains the constraints that historical situations place on the individual's freedom to change their own outlook.

At the time Fanon was writing *Black Skin, White Masks*, Sartre was writing *Saint Genet*, in which his existentialism is transformed by the inclusion of the idea of sedimentation. The only work of Sartre's available to Fanon that indicated this transformation was 'Black Orpheus', as we saw in chapter 7, but read only against the backdrop of Sartre's preceding works this essay's indications of this development are perhaps too slight to be noticed. In these two contemporaneous books, Fanon and Sartre each articulate a form of existentialism that is at its core the same as Beauvoir's in *She Came To Stay* and *The Second Sex*. This is why Fanon's prescription of social change resembles Beauvoir's recommendation that changes to the cultural representation of women are required for their 'metamorphosis' away from inferiority and subjection. Fanon does not cite Beauvoir anywhere in *Black Skin, White Masks* and stands accused of 'epistemic sexism' in failing to acknowledge his debt to her (Gordon 2015: 32). However, such a debt would be very difficult to establish, given their many influences in common. The appearance of the phrase '*l'expérience vécue*' ('lived experience') in the titles of both the second volume of *The Second Sex* and the pivotal chapter 5 of *Black Skin, White Masks*, for example, is hardly surprising, given that it had been coined by Beauvoir's good friend Merleau-Ponty, whose lectures Fanon had attended while studying for the degree for which *Black Skin, White Masks* was intended as the final dissertation (Judy 1996: 53-4; Gordon 2015: 13, 47). The emphasis on sedimentation in Merleau-Ponty's work, especially in *Phenomenology of Perception* which Fanon cites (BSWM: 200 n2), likewise accounts for this similarity between Beauvoir's thought and Fanon's thought, irrespective of the direction of influence between Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty here.

Focusing on the agreement of Fanon with Beauvoir, moreover, risks occluding important differences between them. Fanon is not primarily advancing a theory of racial identity that parallels Beauvoir's theory of gender. He is a psychiatrist with clinical experience of distress analysing what he sees as a widespread neurosis. Beauvoir does suggest that her theory of gender can have this kind of application (SS: 779). But as she has no experience as a psychiatrist or a psychoanalyst, it is hardly surprising that this is not the focus of her concerns. Fanon and Beauvoir do have in common the idea of the inferiority complex as a culturally transmitted feature of a social group rather than an individual's particular problem. But only Fanon links it to cultural representations of evil and death, analysing it as a kind of irrational phobia as well as a representation of lesser abilities. This exemplifies a profound difference between their uses of the idea of symbolism. Beauvoir argues that social meanings are symbolised in desires and behaviour that embody them, but Fanon argues that symbolism is already part of the structure of those social meanings. In order to ensure that we do not overlook such differences between these two thinkers, we should not focus on the similarities between them. We should accept the ambiguity of influence here, as in the case of Beauvoir, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre (see 4.7, above). We should position Fanon alongside Beauvoir and Sartre as the primary exponents of existentialism, without worrying about relations of priority or derivation between them.

7. An Existentialist Eclecticism

Existentialism is more than a theory of the nature of human existence. It is the theory that all value is grounded in the structure of what it is to be human, as we saw in chapter 1. It is the attempt to enshrine in an ethical, social, and political outlook the existential premise that existence precedes essence. Fanon devotes *Black Skin, White Masks* to arguing for this premise through an analysis of the roots of deep existential problems faced by colonised black people. The form of existentialism that he develops understands the individual's perspective as fundamentally shaped through the sedimentation of culturally mediated ideas, which form the collective unconscious of that individual's wider society. At the end of the book, it becomes clear that Fanon intends this insight not only to inform psychiatric practice, but also to have profound ethical, social, and political implications. Far from being a 'banal' moral coda written 'as if Fanon is fearful of his most radical insights' concerning the impossibility of an integrated and complete theory, as Bhabha (1986: xx-xxi) claims, Fanon's form of existentialist humanism is the conclusion that his whole book is designed to establish.

It is this existentialism that both motivates and constrains Fanon's eclecticism. For it requires Fanon, as he points out, to see himself as equally heir to all the intellectual and literary traditions that shaped his cultural background (BSWM: 200-6). To restrict himself to drawing on only those traditions associated with the colonised or only those associated with the coloniser would be to fail to live up to this existentialist ideal in the development of his own thought. This is why he analyses African and Caribbean poetry alongside European phenomenology and psychoanalysis. And by presenting these analyses through a juxtaposition of distinct literary registers, including both lyrical poetry and standard academic prose, in both the objective voice of detached analysis and the subjective autobiographical voice, Fanon manages to exemplify this existentialism in the very textual form of the book.

Fanon's writing has been described as 'creolised', as synthesising elements of disparate literary and intellectual traditions in a way that inaugurates a new form of distinctively Caribbean literature (Gordon 2015: 73-4, 166 n56). We should recognise, however, that he sees this not as a literary project distinct from the content of the thought that it expresses, but as demanded of him by his existentialism, which would demand a different literature from a writer with different cultural influences. In particular, we should recognise that Fanon's existentialism constrains the ways in which he can draw on his influences. To look for insights into a particular aspect of human life exclusively in one particular tradition could be justified only by some feature of that tradition's cultural context that is lacking in the cultural contexts of his other influences. And conversely, the claims made by particular thinkers cannot be accepted without consideration of their relation to mistaken ideas in the collective unconscious of their cultural context. This is why a concern with a writer's relation to their wider cultural context is a prominent feature of Fanon's critical analyses: his existentialism requires that appropriation of the ideas of other thinkers take account of this.

We should see the eclecticism of Fanon's approach to psychiatry in the same way. It is an application of his existentialism, rather than simply the pragmatism of a practitioner who will deploy any tool that will get the job done. His existentialism entails that many authors from different backgrounds, writing with different aims and in different literary genres, will all provide insights into the fundamental human condition through the condition of people in their cultural context. For according to Fanon's existentialism, whatever claims his sources make, they have arrived at their views in response to the universal human

condition as it is expressed in their own cultural context. Fanon does not read Capécia or Freud, for example, simply for their ideas about race or the mind. He derives insights useful to his psychiatric goal from the facts that these people, from their particular cultural backgrounds, have developed these particular ideas. That is what helps him to diagnose an inferiority complex among black colonised people and to trace its origins to a cultural collective unconscious.

Fanon's eclecticism of styles and sources is therefore a demonstration of the existentialism that it is deployed to articulate and substantiate. The performative implication that psychiatry should eschew adherence to any specific theoretical tradition of writing is underwritten by that same existentialism, which determines not the range of admissible sources of insight but the approach for uncovering useful insights from any source. Sartre looked forward to the time when existentialist psychoanalysis had a theoretician of equal stature to Freud, as we saw in chapter 5, and hoped himself to become that figure. Fanon, by contrast, recognises that his existentialism entails that psychiatry neither needs nor could have a single central theoretician of the forms of psychiatric distress. For the psychological difficulties that people suffer are not simply produced by the basic structure of the mind. Because they are grounded in the collective unconscious, they can be uncovered through literature from the relevant cultural context. But no individual thinker could hope to cover all cultural realities.

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