

The Poïesis of a Black-Object Person

By

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INTRODUCTION

It is a sunny day in April and I have a seat in the back of the classroom while Rose is teaching. Pupils' cacophony falls and rises following the motions of her piece of chalk. While she and I both look at ease, occasionally, we roll our eyes and shake our heads. It is a habit we developed as student-teachers. This is mostly due to the mismatch of assignments from our teacher training institution and the daily reality of the school where we are learning to become English Foreign Language teachers. For some reason, our teacher education institution assumes they allocate their students the ideal teaching positions and, in return, they expect—which is to say, they feel they are owed—the undying gratitude of their students. Hence, the rolling of eyes and shaking of heads: it is a habit. In front of me I see a panorama of small heads flicking to Rose's gestures and instructions. No severe nagging on their part, just heads darting from left to right, and some brave enough to glance backwards. They are trying to see if I am observing their behaviour. I nod in the affirmative and beckon them to turn around. The daredevils giggle and pay attention to Rose once more. They know the drill. This, too, is a habit.

An interruption occurs. A senior teacher bursts into the classroom and asks if she can take over the class for whatever reason. As student-teachers we are inclined to say yes. Rose quickly sets the class homework and gathers her stuff. The pupils start waving her farewell and yelling their goodbyes. In haphazard manner the senior-teacher begins her class and at this point the cacophony's expanding bubble breaches her threshold of tolerance. "Could you please round this up? Say goodbye and let's begin with today's lesson." And in chorus, the pupils start to sing:

“Goodbye Saint Nicolas, goodbye, goodbye, Black Pete. Goodbye Saint Nicolas, goodbye, goodbye, Black Pete.”¹

By this time Rose has already left the classroom and I have just witnessed something. But what did I witness? Some brave pupils look backwards and giggle. I have gathered my papers, I leave the classroom. What did I witness? Rose is waiting for me in the hallway and I say nothing. Then I ask her if she heard what they were singing and she responds that she had not heard anything. The senior-teacher walks out of the classroom and asks me if I’d like to say something to the class. Rose looks puzzled. She is white. I am black. I say no. It is a habit.

Ten minutes later, I find myself in the teacher’s lobby speaking to the person who is supervising my training at this school. As I tell her what happened, her eyes begin to bulge and her ever present smile melts—not as snow before the sun, it just melts. She is black too, in a way. Last week she made a concerted effort to convince me of her diverse genealogy in percentiles. “I am not just black,” she lectured, she was also “Jewish and Chinese and *Hindoestaans*,” (meaning South-Asian Indian) “and Indian” (meaning Native American). The non-differentiation of black and Indian stands out to me like a sore thumb. I remain puzzled at Jewry as an ethnic identity rather than a religion, but I quickly suspend the habit of rolling my eyes and shaking my head at Surinamese genetics.

In any event, she could not believe her ears and sought out the senior-teacher who burst into Rose’s class to confirm my story. Thus confirmed, three male pupils were selected from the class and brought to me. The chosen ones usually tend to be very rowdy in class, but I wonder what she had in mind, considering that I told her that the entire class had participated in the singing. She told the boys to apologize, because “If they called you a Black Pete,” she said,

¹ Saint Nicholas and Black Pete are two figures of the annual Dutch blackface tradition, in which Black Pete—almost always a white person with a black painted face, red lips, golden earrings and afro wig—is the servant of the white Saint Nicolas who delivers gifts to children in the beginning of December.

“before you know it, they might call me a Black Pete too!” Suffice to say that I was still suspending my habit. I shrugged instead.

I listen to the boys’ apologies: “I am not racist Mr. Jordan, I am Jewish. My classmates say all kinds of things to me all the time.” And: “Mr. Jordan, we didn’t mean to be racist, we just thought it was funny.” This sounds awfully familiar. I suspect that this was also the reason why I declined the senior teacher’s offer to speak to the class. I look at the boys unperturbed while they are speaking and only move to readjust my glasses. They become uncomfortable under my gaze; now that they have spoken they are no longer at ease with my silence. One of them mutters under his breath “What does he want from us? We apologized right?” The other boys nod. The teachers look at me with question marks in their eyes. *Right*. I consider this my cue to leave, so I leave. It would be wrong to assume that forgiveness is a habit that stems from apologies. Was this even a matter of forgiveness? Or was it simply a liberal dress-rehearsal, part and parcel of the travesty of Western blackface?

Two weeks after this incident, the only black pupil of that same class will yell at the top of his lungs that the people who were brought to the Americas were niggers. And he will say this with pride and a bit of swagger in his pubescent voice. After all, he knows his history. To him, this is who we were—what we are. When I try to explain to this group of thirteen and fourteen year olds why the word “nigger” is problematic, the white pupils in the classroom will resist my historicization as censorship. To them, it will be about the freedom of speech—if black Americans may use the word, they should be allowed to do so too. These Dutch children want to use the word “nigger” freely. Six weeks after this incident, my supervisor will write in my final evaluation, amongst other niceties, that I am too concerned about discrimination and racism; she

will write that I need to lighten up. This is future-speak, and I am not clairvoyant. But, this is habit and this is what happened. But *what* just happened to *me*? What is happening around *me*?

Note that the word nigger projects the human as pure object, the antonym of the pure ostensible autonomously willing "figure of man." If the mad functioned to signify its opposite as normal reason, the nigger does so to signify its opposite as normal being.

~ Sylvia Wynter, "On Disenchanted Discourse"

I

Black folk, people of African descent, are hailed ad infinitum and sometimes ad nauseam. Consider William Edward Burghardt DuBois' question of the Negro hiding in the undertones of white enunciation in *The Souls of Black Folk*; or Janie's/Alphabet's 'colored' becoming through Zora Neale Hurston's ekphrastic photograph in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*; or the horrified gaze which subjects the black female body to a Kafka-esque metamorphosis in Audre Lorde's "Eye to Eye"; or, simply, the foreign tongue that gives Mary pause and occasion to look around in Ama Ata Aidoo's *Our Sister Killjoy*. Sadly enough, the aforementioned list is far from exhaustive.

Attention to the generality of racial interpellation—often spiteful—is an ethical imperative which may be ignored only at one's peril. When a habit such as racial hailing extends itself in past and future directions—that is, it reveals itself as a cultural trope—one must query about the status of such a phenomenon, the attendant experience of the participants involved as well as its function within a structure of sociality. The ubiquity of the phenomenon perhaps leads one to attend to examine its conditions of possibility. That is to say, one could delve into the requirements which make possible the appearance of a phenomenon. Such a move would be transcendental according to Ernesto Laclau, because it "involves a retreat from an object to its

conditions of possibility” (2). The conceptual yield of such a move is to bring out in the open the constructedness and contingency of that which makes possible the manifestation of the object. If Laclau is right, the consequence of such a move to make available the horizon of possibilities within the social, rather than accepting the structural givens (3). I think it is pertinent to approach the racial hail in such a manner; conducting oneself otherwise when black leaves you at the mercy of habit and a blissful ignorance that may prove to fatal to black intellectual traditions.

In order to approximate and understand these conditions of possibility, I will attend to an instance in which a black person is hailed racially. And this brings me—firstly, but not exclusively since we hold into view the heterogeneity of black experience—to Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967) and in particular the chapter titled “The Fact of Blackness.” As Frantz Fanon’s first book—a rejected dissertation project for his doctoral studies as a psychiatrist—*Black Skin, White Masks* analyzes the effects of colonialism on the black *and* white psyche in general, and folk from his native Martinique in particular. His text surveys, among other things, black populations’ conflicted relationship with language, recognition, sexuality and psychopathology.

Thus, Fanon’s thinking in *Black Skin, White Masks* raises for me a set of interrelated problems pertaining to black identity formation, namely the facticity of race, the relation between the (white) universals and (black) particulars, the tension between subject and object, and the role of desire in the efficacy of resistance. Perhaps in anticipation to my anecdote, Fanon opens “The Fact of Blackness” in the following manner:

“Dirty nigger!” Or simply, “Look, a Negro!”

I came into the world imbued with the will to find a meaning in things, my spirit filled with the desire to attain to the source of the world, and then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects. (Fanon 109)

Was I not sung into a particular existence—incorporated within the Dutch nation as a black-faced caricature—akin to Fanon’s “I” who is hailed? In “The Fact of Blackness” Fanon explicitly concerns himself with the racial hail and a series of developments which reveals the object to itself; the rest of the chapter details the narrator’s quest to redeem blackness and overcome racial prejudice—attempts that seemingly fail if we take the overwhelming sense of hopelessness that the narrator expresses at the end of the chapter as the final word on the matter.

But let us not rush to end yet. I wish to pause for a moment and emphasize the following: the “I” discovers itself as “an object in the midst of other objects” (ibid.) after the racial interpellation. In our post-civil rights era, in which the refrain of the universal Subject’s demise sounds like a faint eulogy that mutes the cacophonous death cries of people of color; in a time and place that confounds the proliferation of particular subject positions and practices of liberal self-making and consumption; in our current postracial—a term that remains under-theorized and falls prey to habitual unthought; and, we who are dark, therefore, fall prey to it, too, as a consequence—predicament, what could it mean to sit with the opening paragraph that Fanon proffers?

This is also to say that, after we have gone through the necessary, dogmatic and sometimes erotic rehearsals of poststructuralist *answers*, of which anti-essentialism is probably the most vaunted prize,² what could it mean to sit with the opening paragraph as a fundamentally political *question*, and meditate on the black *object-person* as an answer, rather than the obvious recourse to the black *subject*? This is not simply a denial of agency, or a move toward nihilism (and even nihilism can’t be dismissed out of hand). How does the Fanonian black object signify

² Here I take my cue from the work of David Scott in *Refashioning Futures: Criticism after Postcoloniality* and Nahum Chandler’s *X: The Problem of the Negro as the Problem for Thought*. In proffering fashionable, trans-historical answers we leave unattended the specificity, contingency and urgency of black historical questions. The hasty dismissal of those who have thought before us only demonstrates just that—speed, and not thought.

in relation to the conditions of its possibility? What are the stakes and opportunities afforded by Fanon's formulation?³

In narrating the black object, Fanon explores failure in threefold: the failure of ethical address (part II), the failure to become neither thing nor subject (III), and the failure to be delimited and determined fully by racial interpellation (IV). In short, I contend that Fanon theorizes a poïesis of the black-object: his narration is a small drama of words that details the *making* of a black object-person by delineating constitutive failures as the conditions of the black object-person's appearance. Thus, I read "The Fact of Blackness" as a *quasi*-transcendental analysis, since it retreats from a cultural phenomenon—the black object-person—as a self-evident thing and scrutinizes its racial formation. However, it does not abandon the object of investigation entirely to muse about abstract conditions, and the conditions of these conditions.⁴ Furthermore, it is my contention that precisely *because* Fanon's quasi-transcendentalism is grounded in lived black experience, it opens the way for a pragmatic critique of the facticity of race, and universal categories which purport to explain the logics of black being, as well as the way in which black resistance can be depoliticized by white hegemonic forces. In the last instance, however, I also show that Fanon's quasi-transcendental analysis belies its narrative content about the efficacy from racism's oppressive totality. As the dramatic poïesis of a black object-person "The Fact of Blackness" is anything but mere fact.

³ Fortunately, others engaged in social critique have trod this path before me. I am thinking in particular about the exchange between Fred Moten and Jared Sexton about social life and social death. But while I underwrite the conceptual value of Moten's black optimism, and Jared Sexton's afropessimism, I pursue the elaboration of another strand of thinking in Frantz Fanon's "The Fact of Blackness."

⁴ In *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (2002), Graham Harman critiques contemporary philosophers' endless chain of musings on the conditions of possibility after Martin Heidegger's: "The belief seems to be that *entities* are the source of our philosophical problems, and that the solution is to retreat ever deeper into the conditions underlying these entities, into the very conditions of these conditions, an even back into the "clearing-opening play" in which these conditions emerge" (6).

II

Let us return to the opening paragraph of “The Fact of Blackness”:

“Dirty nigger!” Or simply, “Look, a Negro!”

I came into the world imbued with the will to find a meaning in things, my spirit filled with the desire to attain to the source of the world, and then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects. (Fanon 109)

After being hailed the questing, desiring Self discovers that he was “an object in the midst of other objects.” Subsequently, the glances of the other fix him. The “I” becomes indignant and demands an explanation; he bursts apart as a result of the non-response. There is a Self which picks up the shards and puts them back together again. I can only imagine a Self with bleeding hands in this moment of reconstitution. What did we just witness? Not quite hate speech, since neither appellation (“nigger” or “negro”) is prohibited by law—then or now. But the terms are quite performative, that is to say, effective in their inauguration of Fanon’s narrative. To the extent that we can remain faithful to the narrative structure of the chapter, it is firstly because the world outside inflicts a harm. And in order to revisit the scene of subjection the injured must pass this story on, even though it is not a story to pass on. This interpellation seemingly arrives *ex nihilo*, out of nothing. It is a voice that constitutes the black object, and insofar as this voice is at first disembodied, it is an echo. In *Excitable Speech*, Judith Butler proffers a means of engaging this opening:

The illocutionary speech act performs its deed at the moment of the utterance, and yet to the extent that the moment is ritualized, it is never merely a single moment. The “moment” in ritual is a condensed historicity: it exceeds itself in past and future directions, an effect of prior and future invocations that constitute and escape the instance of utterance. (Butler 3)

The deed of the racial interpellation is not simply a naming, it is also a making; particularly, it is the making of a consciousness that will discover that it was an object in the

midst of other objects. Butler suggests that illocutionary speech act exceeds itself in past and future directions; the moment in which Fanon's narrator is hailed is a form of condensed historicity. Coincidentally, historicity is a topic Fanon's "I" "learned about from [Karl] Jaspers" (112). The act of naming, in its very occurrence integrates itself in a chain of reactions with the past and the future. The invocation of Jaspers, suggests that the narrator must deal with it in the concreteness of his experience even when such experiences enter the realm of myth and stereotype—the latter two must be contended with because they shape the reality of the lived experience. Wherever the "I" thought he was, he is vulnerable to the hail that places him within a *concrete* history. And that moment of the hail is never a single moment, insofar as it continues to be repeated: the young black boy in the Netherlands who was learning to speak English evidenced this in my introduction, more than fifty years later after Fanon's racial interpellation is published in *Black Skin, White Masks*.

The echo cascades further within "The Fact of Blackness":

"Look, a Negro!" It was an external stimulus that flicked over me as I passed by. I made a tight smile.

"Look, a Negro!" It was true. It amused me.

"Look, a Negro!" The circle was drawing a bit tighter. I made no secret of my amusement.

From the above it can be seen that the other in Fanon is not the self, but precedes it in repetition. Its repeatability allows for it to be considered a ritual, a sustained cultural practice that follows a patterned sequence: Echo⁵ chants "Look, a Negro!" and the black Self responds. The black self looks for Echo and sees no-body. By this I do not mean to suggest that the voice is always disembodied within Fanon's narrative, because it is not. There are several occasions in

⁵ I draw part of my inspiration from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay "Echo" (1993). She shows the limitations of the wholesale application of European, authoritative texts to postcolonial problems and which insights can be gained from this friction. My appropriation of Echo shares less fidelity to Echo proper (in the absence of citing Ovid's *Metamorphosis*) and is more thematic.

which the voice gets attached to the body of a young white boy and the body of a white woman. For instance, the young white boy who is terrified of Fanon's narrator's look because he fears he will be eaten (112). I do suggest that these are "nobodies" since the problem of performative illocution of "nigger" remains after their concrete bodies have withered away; the problem existed before they were born, that is to say, they are not the originators. Another form of escape, is of course the retreat into disclaimers-"Understand, my dear boy, color prejudice is something I find utterly foreign [...] Quite, the Negro is a man just like ourselves." (113). In this ritual, one of the elements which escapes is white culpability and white normativity. One cannot be held accountable for one's whiteness as soon as one subjects color prejudice to disavowal. Or differently, whiteness escapes in its naming of the Negro as aberrant being, as being different but "like" ourselves. The irony of it all, does not escape Fanon's narrator: "When people like me, they tell me it is in spite of my color. When they dislike me, they point out that it is not because of my color. Either way, I am locked into the infernal circle" (116). The quandary here is being named and being marked by as different, yet being told that there is no difference. The infernal circle that corrals the black object, is the condition for whiteness' escape. Thus, Echo's voice lingers long after her body has disappeared. Her words, their words, reiterate a violent refrain that reverberates in black lived experiences and the formation of black objects. The tonality may change, the chant remains.

Fanon's narrator makes no secret of his amusement, but laughter in the face of such a structure of sociality is longer possible because "there were legends, stories, history, and above all *historicity*" (Fanon 112, emphasis original). Laughter becomes impossible for the black object, because if the black object laughs at Echo, echo will simply re-bound his laughter and laugh with him. The black object will not be able to distinguish between Echo's sardonic

laughter and his own. And this is what it means to laugh in black and white: to have one's body "surrounded by an atmosphere of certain uncertainty" (110-111). This is an ambiguity which is not at all revolutionary or subversive because it is part and parcel of the structure of sociality which makes possible the "nigger" or "Negro" as an object. It is a kind of ambiguity which the narrator experiences as "solely a negating activity" (110) since the body becomes hypervisible even when its hypervisibility is denied of having an effect on the way blacks are treated.

In Fanon, I would argue that the echo of "Look, a Negro!" represents a profound moment of ethical failure within the social. It represents the foreclosure of the other who presumes to know the black self and participates actively in the making of a black object. This presumption is dependent on the "legends, stories, history" that Fanon's narrator mentioned before. The content of these accounts is filled with racial stereotypes for the "I": "I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetichism, racial defects, slave ships, and above all else, above all: "Sho' good eatin'" (112).

Thus, between "Dirty Nigger!" and "Look, A Negro!" I perceive a small economy in which injury proceeds from nigger to Negro. The sequential difference between the "nigger" and the "Negro" posits an equivalence which may be jarring to the reader, because the connotative power of each respective term is lost. But for the Fanon's narrator, these terms are two roads that lead to the same conclusion, namely the black object. It seems, that *meaning* is not the determining factor for the making of the black object. Considering the heterogeneity of experiences, it is not surprising that some black persons are able to assume positive valences to the word "nigger" or "Negro." The point, however, is to acknowledge that Fanon's account has little use for those who ignore the racial hail as inconsequential and reside in a happy consciousness. He is aware that "[m]any Negroes will not find themselves in what follows" (12).

Arguably, those who ignore the hail do not understand themselves as black objects and as such the analysis that Fanon proffers is of no relevance to them.⁶ Differently put, insofar as that they are black objects, a necessary condition of possibility of its emergence is vulnerability. Here, vulnerability is not to be read as naïveté or weakness, but in a sense, the ability to be in the world and be affected by it.

III

Fanon writes “As long as the black man is among his own, he will have no occasion [...] to experience his being through others” until, we they are “given occasion to confront the white gaze” (109-110). It has been established by biographers that Frantz Fanon attended the public lectures of Jacques Lacan. Where Fanon and Lacan meet we find the gaze.

In Jacques Lacan’s *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, the gaze “where something slips, passes, is transmitted, from stage to stage, and is always to some degree eluded in it” (73). The thing that Lacan perceives as elusive is in fact the function of the gaze, as the mechanism that governs the gaze, the thing “that circumscribes us, and which in the first instance makes us beings, who are looked at, but without showing this” (74). He adds that in “the scopic relation, the object on which depends the phantasy from which the subject is suspended in an essential vacillation is the gaze” (83). Before I proceed it might be useful to draw out some salient points.

With regard to the aforementioned I perceive the gaze to be a relation of looking (and more broadly perhaps, a relation of perception) wherein transparency is never fully achieved, and

⁶ Perhaps this is one of the moment in the text in which the *Black Skin, White Masks* fails to proffer an account of black indifference to racism and coloniality as a form of psychopathology. What such an underexamination keeps into view then, is perhaps a certain obviousness that accompanies racial interpellation. Or differently put: must all those who are hailed, become objects?

more specifically, that which we see is not simply an object but a desire that in fact looks at us. The distance between the subject and the object is governed by a desire that disappears in the moment that one looks, and simultaneously is gazed at. Of course, we construct that desire and we are interpellated by that desire placed onto the object. For Lacan, what determines us “is the gaze that is outside. It is through the gaze that I enter light and it’s from the gaze that I receive its effects” (106). In addition to the emotional turmoil the narrator in Fanon experiences, one of the effects of the gaze is the formation of the black object, after its shattering by the racial hail. Let us pay heed that for Lacan, the gaze does not emerge from the subject, but constitutes the subject from the position of the object and the desire. When Fanon argues that he became an object in the midst of objects he departs from Lacan’s perspective insofar as that the gaze in Lacan produces a split subject, whereas for Fanon it produces an object. This is a difference which puts pressure on the dichotomy between subject and object in a psychoanalytic framework. Part of the consequence of this move is to no longer assume comfortably the normative production of subjects as results of practices of subjection and domination. Logically, the body “surrounded by an atmosphere of a certain uncertainty” (110-111) underscores not only the dislocating effects of the narrator’s physical locality, but also something that I will refer to as a sentient locality. Fanon’s poïesis of the black object amidst of other objects leaves as aberrant the position of the black subject. When convention demands we first, prove that blacks were capable of thought and second this therefore proved our subjectivity and humanity, Fanon’s use of the object reconciles the view that a peoples who have been objectified can think and feel, but that such thinking and feeling does not make one a subject.⁷ If thinking does not constitute the transformation from object to subject, it must at least be granted that while sentience is a necessary condition for the

⁷ A future iteration of this paper desires and requires a meditation on the history of subjectivity.

formation of black objects, it does not facilitate an exchange from a position of domination to self-sufficient and self-generative subjecthood. Subjects have disappeared in Fanon's narrative.

Echo's body disappeared, too. In its place we now find a racial caricature, swinging from Eurocentric branches, guffawing and gazing at the black object. "Where am I to be classified? Or if you preferred, tucked away?" Fanon's narrator asks in response to the taxonomizing gaze. The black creature mimics the movements of the object in distortion and this makes "[c]onsciousness of the body solely a negating activity" (110). Is *this* our mirror stage? Is *this* what we have to contend with? Here, too, Fanon's argument is a complicated one. He contends that

for the Antillean the mirror hallucination is always neutral. When Antilleans tell me that they have experienced it, I always ask the same question: "What color were you?" Invariably they reply: "I had no color." (Fanon 162n25)

Fanon posits the neutrality of the Antillean mirror-stage, perhaps a black mirror-stage, against the abruptness of a white mirror-stage wherein the black *imago* features as a disruptive factor. The "Negro" often makes his entry in the white mirror-stage as "satyr or murderer" (ibid.) in contrast to a respectable white self. Neutral for the Antillean mirror-stage signifies in at least two ways: first, the scene of equilibrium; second, the neutralization of one's color to maintain a respectable self.

In Lacan's short treatise of the mirror-stage "the subject anticipates in a mirage the maturation of his power" (Lacan in Gallop, 78). According to Jane Gallop in *Reading Lacan*, the mirror-stage is that turning point "in the chronology of a self, but it also the origin, the moment of constitution of that self" (79). I understand Gallop's writing as an invitation us to regard the mirror-stage as a temporal construct, in which the projected future, diachronically structures the present as well as the past around the locus of a self. It is the image in the mirror as anticipated, desired future self-enter narcissism as a love for future self-that makes one think of the present

self “in bits and pieces” (ibid.). Why does this matter? Let us recall that Fanon’s narrator burst apart after discovering that he was an object in the midst of other objects: “I burst apart. Now the fragments have been put together again by another self” (109). Who has contributed to this fragmentation for Fanon? The white man “who had woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes and stories” (111). Thus the narrator’s desire to become a colorless man among men (112), underscores the dialectic between the future, past and present of the self as black object.

The Antillean mirror-stage trades in this colorless future and makes it seem as if it came after the body burst apart, but it actually retroactively brings forth the unstable body: “it is the source not only for what follows but also for what precedes” (Gallop 80). The ideal-black-I, the figure of maturation in the mirror, is denuded of color. The unbearable blackness of being has disappeared from the mirror and becomes part of the lived experience of the black and the past which led up to that experience. As “nigger,” the racial caricature is as much a part of the black object as it is of the colorless figure of Man against which it is defined as normative being, a normative being which Fanon perceives as inherently pathological. Thus, the racial caricature is the shadow sutured between the melanin-free ideal-I and the black object. In its anticipatory mode, the mirror stage for the black self anticipates the racial interpellation as well as a so-called postracial horizon.

What I am trying to sketch here is the formation of the black object as Black Narcissus. Black Narcissus, like Echo, is two-directional: he moves in past and future directions. Narcissus proper falls in love with himself and dies, upon seeing himself in the water: he comes to know himself as an object among other objects and this knowledge of self is deadly. In contrast, Black

Narcissus persists and endures as an object among other objects.⁸ Yet this endurance is not a mark of success, but a mark of survival.

In *Persons and Things*, Barbara Johnson is concerned with Narcissus in relation to self, persons, things and the mirror-stage. For Johnson, Lacan's mirror-stage helps to explain further Narcissus predicament, because unlike human babies-Lacan's protagonist in the mirror-stage-whose interest increases as they view themselves in the mirror, Narcissus "made the mistake of the ape he fell in love with his image as if it were another, and his tragedy was that his love was impossible if it were not" (Johnson 54). Consequently, Johnson articulates Narcissus' tale as the inability to become human (ibid.). Narcissus' identification with his image in the water is a refusal to identify with the imperfection of his own life. Hence, "the subject comes into being in the gap of inferiority between a flawed viewer and the anticipated wholeness of an armor of fiction, and armor of inanimateness [...] the definition of "person" would then be: the repeated experience of failing to become a thing" (59).

For Narcissus the image in the mirror is a statue of perfection; in the Antillean mirror-stage it is black object who aspires to be a colorless figure. The black object is a person insofar as that he fails to become colorless, again and again. The failure to become to the thing-like colorless figure of Man in the mirror is that which constitutes the black object as person. "The Fact of Blackness" shows this repeated attempt to become colorless and pace Johnson therefore underscores a form of black personhood. Yet, at the same time, the torturous route to this end puts pressure on the concept of the person. Let us bear in mind that to be a person is not the same as being a human or to be without oppression; corporate entities can be persons too. And if the thing in the mirror signifies the impossible teleological endpoint of the black object-person, then

⁸ It is more than likely that in a future revision of this text, that I will attend here to Orlando Patterson's concept of social death.

this also underscores the condition of black as object, rather than as subject, since sovereignty of and self-generation of the subject can only be a fictional attribute of the coherent, colorless figure of Man.

IV

In linguistics, a sentence fragment is considered to be part that has *no subject or predicate*. What this suggests to me is that the fragment can only be understood when it is brought outside of the relation of a subject and the predicate which modifies that subject. More importantly, a fragment can then perhaps be understood as that form of being which escapes naming. What do I have in mind here? If we pay attention to Fanon's chapter, even in the moment that he is named and sealed into that crushing objecthood, the position of the "I" which narrates his experience is not from a perspective that can be attributed to what which he is named by Echo, namely, a "nigger" or "Negro." I perceive these words as terms which attempt to determine in advance the way the black object should regard itself, its meaning. But they are not a guarantee for the object's knowledge of self or the operations that seek to governs it. All the molds crack.

I read Fanon's narrative as a discontinuous straddling of the limits between object, nonbeing and language; his text is a diagnostic, not a performative illocution.⁹ Fanon gives an account that does not emergence from the perspective of the gaze or the sound of the echo which constitute the narrator as black object. From these two positions there is a process of naming and fixing which attempt to represent the self as a unity under the heading of "nigger" and "Negro."

⁹ In the introduction of *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon mentions that he hopes that his analysis will lead to the destruction of racism. But his hope shows also that he knows that there is a difference between saying something and achieving that thing fully.

Fragmentarity, then, is perhaps the fugitive suspension of this unity. What fragmentarity offers as an opportunity is the possibility of being reassembled by oppression but not being fully captured.

Paul de Man writes elsewhere that language posits and language means, but language cannot posit meaning: “the figure is not naturally given or produced but it is posited by an arbitrary act of language” (62). A notion of a quest and the continuous effacement of a question seems to be the nature of the fragment. In “The Fact of Blackness” we recognize this in the way the black object is questing for the meaning in things, the meaning of black identity. There is a continuous effacement in the identity of the narrator when he is introduced to a new idea that helps him salvage blackness. In contrast to the “Negro,” the caricature woven from a thousand details that lacks any interiority, we find in “The Fact of Blackness” a narrative that refutes this, even in its lamentation on its object status.

Thus, what Fanon’s narrative ironically brings into view perhaps is the fundamental and particular constructedness that resists race as racial governance. Against Fanon’s reading of race as property (“I was responsible at the same time for my body, for my race, for my ancestors” 112), I think of the historico-racial schema he sketched “below the corporeal schema” (111) as a relation. And this relation signifies the constitutive antagonism between the black man and white man, the reason why “the black man must be black in relation to the white man (110). Fanon’s formulation suggests to me that any notion of Being cannot be predicated on the skin or body as final ground for understanding race conceptually. Through Fanon’s narration of the various instances of where his bodily comportment is fixated by the gaze and named by voice through a racial hail, he brings to the reader’s attention the way these problematic positions try to conceal race as natural. So here I would argue that Fanon’s narrator in part disrupts the facticity¹⁰ of race

¹⁰ G.W.F. Hegel refers to facticity as follows: “the thing *is*; and it is merely because it *is*...and this simple immediacy constitutes its truth.” In a sense, the immediacy of race is constituted by our ability to see it, to read it off the skin. Colorblindness suggests

as presented through the science of his contemporary moment. Race does not equal the body for Fanon, hence his sketch of the historic-racial scheme underneath the corporeal. For the narrator, race cannot be reduced to the body and is not a bodily property—notice again a retreat from the object to the conditions of its appearance as such—but a relation.

By means of his narration of the poïesis of the black object-person, Fanon draws attention to the gaze and the voice and thereby scrutinizes them. This scrutiny does not erase them, since the black object does not have to performative power to simply overthrow by means of stating problems. However, Fanon’s articulation does show that the black object is a contested terrain. And such contestations are testament to the fact that racial governance while oppressive, fails to do completely what it sets out to do: it fails to evacuate the black object from its interiority and the limited freedom it has.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have tried to use Fanon’s “The Fact of Blackness” to accomplish a few goals: to make an argument for the black object as valid criterion of cultural analysis; to show the failure of ethical address in racial slurring; and how the mirror-stage of the black object has as its telos the thingly figure of Man the black object fails to become and thereby demonstrates its personhood; the failure of racial governance even when it seems like the black object can only be vulnerable. A future paper must situate further Fanon’s account as one account among many. Some of the texts I mentioned at the beginning would provide me with ample material to explore, refine and revise some of the claims I make in this paper. One such future endeavor may

the inability to read race of the skin. To be postracial, according to the common view, suggests that race no longer matters. But one cannot say this is very different from the white refutations that Fanon notes in “The Fact of Blackness.” What Fanon invites us to think about it, quite simply is the following: what is your concept of race and what are the implications for your concept of race for the analysis that you develop?

include the writing of Ama Ata Aidoo in *Our Sister Killjoy*, whose protagonist also experiences racial encounters but does not seem to succumb to Fanon's tragedy. In tandem with this line of reasoning, we must also consider that *Black Skin, White Masks* is an account of Black pathology. However, I think it would be problematic to think of black object-persons as only having a pathological existence. By and large, I have tried to show Fanon theorizes the poiesis-the making-of a black object-person. And what must follow in a future revision from Fanon's unconcealment is an elaboration of black politics that engages pragmatically and radically with our postracial present.

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