

Black Skin, White Masks
a dramaturgical reading

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Research for the dance piece *Unrestricted Contact*
by Grupo Oito (Premiere: 9th Dec 2017),
part of the Republik Repair Festival (23rd Sept -13th Dec. 2017)
in Ballhaus Naunynstrasse, Berlin.

Black skin, white masks by Frantz Fanon was published in 1952.

Fanon had jotted down notes on a psychological-philosophical essay as early as 1947, and the full text started as a dissertation for a psychiatry program that Fanon was attending in Lyon in 1951.

In 1952 Fanon is working in the psychiatrics department of the Saint-Alban hospital in central France, alongside Dr. Tosquelle who is initiating a new approach to treating "alienated" patients: the socio-therapeutic approach, which aims at treating patients with dignity and allowing them to be heard and roam freely around the hospital, rather than isolate them. Tosquelle's practices resonate strongly with Fanon critical view of the then most common approach, which was to consider the alienation as essential to the patient and in need of containment rather than understanding.

Fanon wanted for the book the title *An Essay on the Disalienation of Black people*. This active title -- how to disalienate, is it possible to disalienate? -- gives the direction of the book: in each chapter, Fanon explores a different aspect of the experience of Black people and draws from it conclusions inspired from socio-economics and Marxism, philosophy and psychoanalysis. What makes it such a striking read is that he describes with a vivid and poetic language very precise episodes from either his own life or the one of a Black person and these episodes are the basis for the research of the mechanisms at work in every Black person brought up in a society dominated by white colonial principles:

"What I want to do is help the Black man to free himself of the arsenal of complexes that has been developed by the colonial environment." p.19

My reading of his work is a dramaturgical one. That means, if the narratives present in the book were a movement in space, what movements would they describe and in what order? What visual relations are created between different elements and people through his analysis of their coexistence?

Because it is a reading of the book rather than a commentary, it does not look for exhaustivity in laying out all the arguments of Fanon -- which would mean rewriting the book itself -- or for lacks in the text that could be completed. Fanon's work is also a dense philosophical essay where he calls for a New Humanism, as Humanism was destroyed by the white man and denounces how the white man has put himself in a position of transcendence vis-à-vis the Black man.

What I try to do is to thread my way through his writing to highlight what I think would be useful for our research for a dance piece, so I try to find impulses in the book for movements. In the middle of his prose, I try to see where a movement, displacement, surfaces, literally (description of gestures, gait etc.) and, if I find a ground for it, metaphorically.

I also need to add that a part of Fanon's writing is addressing what he describes as pathological in

Black people, based on his practice of psychoanalysis. He describes how the white world creates this pathology, what he refers to when he talks about (ab)normality.

By inscribing pathology as an inherent part of the experience of a Black person, he digs into the psyche of his patients and friends and exposes patterns that he's witnessed. He talks as a doctor. It is in itself a standpoint, a legitimate one because based on his own clinical experience and the urgency he felt to address those who shared his experience. But it can also be felt as a dangerous exposure as soon as it is taken out of the book's context.

Therefore, as I quote him, I keep in mind that he gives diagnosis based on experience and observation, but that I am not myself allowed to impose this diagnosis, as I am neither a Black person nor a psychoanalyst.

Note on the translation:

in French, there's only one word for both "Negro" and the N-word: "nègre". The movement of "négritude" defined by francophone Black intellectuals in the 30s reclaimed the term, which was both common language and insult.

Fanon uses two terms, either "nègre", when he's using the point of view of the coloniser and generally uses it in a pejorative way. Or "Noir" (Black), when he is using his own point of view and that "Black" talks back to "White".

He uses once the word "négro", which sounds like slang. And would have been much rarer.

I disagree with some of the choices made by the translator of the work, who uses in the same sentence in English the distinction between Negro and the N-word, when Fanon uses only one term.

For instance, Fanon writes:

À la maison ma mère me chante, en français, des romances françaises où il n'est jamais question de *nègres*. Quand je désobéis, quand je fais trop de bruit, on me dit de ne pas « faire le *nègre* ».

And the translator chooses:

When I am at home my mother sings me French love songs in which there is never a word about *Negroes*. When I disobey, when I make too much noise, I am told to "stop acting like a *nigger*."

Which I think is not accurate. Because it is precisely the ambiguity of having a single word to both insult and describe that, in the context of the Martinique and other French-speaking colonies, made the decision to reclaim the word both possible, if not entirely successful. Whereas we have seen that in the US, the fight appealed for the disparition of both the words "Negro" and the N-word to address Black people (which is also now the case, in France).

Therefore, when the translator was using the N-word, I replace it with "negro" and point at it with a *.

Another modification I do is that in Fanon's vocabulary, the noun "Negro" is never capitalised, but "Black (person/man/woman)" is. I think it reflects better his philosophy to keep the lower case, because the lower-cased word is always also an adjective. It doesn't give way to an essentialisation of the word "Negro", which was used in racist pamphlets with a capital letter. In comparison, the capitalisation of the word "Black", as the reappropriated term to talk about oneself as racialised, gains a dignity that looks back at the term "White" (always capitalised) as equally construed. It's signaled by **.

The translator also chose at times to use the term "negro" when Fanon was using "black". I reverse to using "black" as I see no reason he should be corrected on that. ***

A note on Martinique, where Fanon was from:



Martinique (French pronunciation: [maʁtɛnik]) is an insular region of France located in the Lesser Antilles in the eastern Caribbean Sea, with a land area of 1,128 square kilometres (436 sq mi) and a population of 385,551 inhabitants as of January 2013. First inhabitants of the island seem to have been the hunter-gatherers Ciboney, later decimated by the Arawak people - originating from South America - 5000 AD, before Carib people arrived and pushed away some of the Arawak groups, probably in the late 14th century.¹ Martinique became a settlement for successive European powers (Spain, England, France) after Columbus arrival in 1493. Cane plantations owned by displaced Huguenots as a result of religious wars later developed, using Black people enslaved in West Africa until the end of slavery was pronounced in 1848. It had the status of colony of France from 1815 until 1946 then became a department of the French territory in 1947. As part of France, Martinique is part of the European Union, and its currency is the euro. The official language is French, and virtually the entire population also speaks Antillean Creole (*Créole Martiniquais*).

Now, here's the reading I would like to offer to you.

I first need to say what I understand from dance and I hope you can complete, correct, discuss this with me.

It seems to me dance is the presence of bodies in a space, where movement (the absence or presence of a movement) becomes a language. Rhythm, shapes, relations in that space make the body appear as something new.

The experience of having a racialised body makes it precisely so that it is never new to others. Even before one speaks, the body offers itself to prejudices. It is always coded, and this is what for me makes Fanon so relevant to our research.

Impulse - The beginning - childhood

What Fanon describes in his book, is how, through a myriad of experiences, the body is imprisoned in the representation that others have from it and impose on it.

Fanon describes this as a movement and, although he himself doesn't use the term, as a performance:

¹ *Before the Europeans came*: <http://www.discoveringbristol.org.uk/slavery/routes/places-involved/west-indies/before-europeans/>

Yes, the black man is supposed to be a good negro*; once this has been laid down, *the rest follows of itself*. To make him talk pidgin is to fasten him to the effigy of him, to snare him, to imprison him, the eternal victim of an essence, of an appearance for which he is not responsible. p.22

Being a Black man is for Fanon something close to an inevitable and self-sustaining performance. It is enough that a man is born in an environment that tells him he is Black and everything that it entails, for him to become it: it is a movement that is impulsed from outside and then interiorised and fed by the individual himself³.

He describes different stages and episodes of the life of the Black man that can be read as the story of the movement of its body.

In childhood, he describes:

A normal Black*** child, having grown up within a normal family, will become abnormal *on the slightest contact* with the white world. p.111

The black child will read stories where the white man is the hero and learn to identify with him, to then realise that he will be identified to the villain. For Fanon, no one is born Black or White. The child learns about his colour through a contact which is always a physical and symbolical one. Sight : he thinks he is the white hero, then the sight of others makes him realise his mistake. Hearing: he may speak French, as soon as he will try to pronounce a correct "R", he will be pointed at as not-French.

(...) the Black man*** knows that over there in France there is a stereotype of him that will fasten on to him at the pier in Le Havre or Marseille: "Ah come from Martinique, it's the fuhst time Ah've eveh come to Fance." He knows that what the poets call the divine gurgling (listen to Creole) is only a halfway house between pidgin-nigger and French. The middle class in the Antilles never speak Creole except to their servants. In school the children of Martinique are taught to scorn the dialect. One avoids Creolisms. Some families completely forbid the use of Creole, and mothers ridicule their children for speaking it.

My mother wanting a son to keep in mind
if you do not know your history lesson
you will not go to mass on Sunday in y
our Sunday clothes
that child will be a disgrace to the family
that child will be our curse
shut up I told you you must speak French
the French of France
the Frenchman's French
French French⁴ p.10

4. Léon-G. Damas, "Hoquet," in Pigments, in Leopold S.-Senghor, ed., Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache (Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1948), pp. 15–17.

The departure - The rite of passage

The child then grows up and the movement continues. Fanon describes how one of the first movements of the young man, having grown up in the Antilles to think he is French despite not being white, is to leave the Martinique and go to the metropole, where he will be "confirmed", "completed". And the bare prospect of this rite of passage, and upon his return, the confirmation that it was successful, Fanon translates it in movement:

2 all italics are mine.

3 I use "himself" rather than an inclusive her*himself because Fanon refers throughout his book to the "the Black man" and whether he considered every experience of "a Black man" applying to women as well -- which he possibly did and may therefore have had a blindspot about the specificity of discrimination about Black women -- I prefer to stick to his words.

The Black man who has lived in France for a length of time returns radically changed. To express it in genetic terms, his phenotype undergoes a definitive, an absolute mutation.³ *Even before he had gone away, one could tell from the almost aerial manner of his carriage that new forces had been set in motion. When he met a friend or an acquaintance, his greeting was no longer the wide sweep of the arm: With great reserve our "new man" bowed slightly. The habitually raucous voice hinted at a gentle inner stirring as of rustling breezes.*

p.10

3. By that I mean that Negroes who return to their original environments convey the impression that they have completed a cycle, that they have added to themselves something that was lacking. They return literally full of themselves.

This new attitude is part of a process of "whitening" oneself. A rejection of one's roots, language, hometown, is translated in how the body moves, how gestures soften. To be white equals to be educated, from the city, in the know. Fanon writes that the temptation of exile, of putting a distance between oneself and one's roots, is very strong.

He insists that most Black people from the Martinique refuse to be Black:

Not long ago Etienneble described one of his disillusionments: "I was stupefied, as an adolescent, when a girl who knew me quite well jumped up in anger because I had said to her, in a situation where the word was not only appropriate but the one word that suited the occasion: 'You, as a Negress—.' 'Me? a Negress? Can't you see I'm practically white? I despise Negroes. Negroes* stink. They're dirty and lazy. Don't ever mention negroes* to me.'"⁸

p.35

I read into this passage, both the denial of one's Blackness "I'm practically white", but also the only logical reaction, to someone who has understood the metaphorical and construed aspect of Blackness - particularly in this situation of a conversation between Etienneble -- a white man -- and a Black woman: if Black means being dirty and lazy in the common language, defined by you, then I don't want to be identified with it. The movement of *standing up*, of breaking out of the conversation, is a movement of defence -- a reaction --, but also the rejection of a vocabulary -- an action.

The attraction - and being lost

The process of whitening that Fanon describes, is one of purification, he even talks of "lactefication", in this excerpt of the novel *Je suis Martiniquaise* by Mayotte Capécia:

I found that I was proud of it. I was certainly not the only one who had white blood, but a white grandmother was not so ordinary as a white grandfather.⁵ So my mother, then, was a mixture? I should have guessed it *when I looked at her light color*. I found her prettier than ever, and cleverer, and more refined. If she had married a white man, do you suppose I should have been completely white? . . . p.32

According to him, women from the Martinique feel the need to protect their whiteness through blood. The metaphors are always ones of elevation and progress: the White is higher, further. *They need to sustain a movement up and further*, to not be dragged back into Blackness. That's why, quoting the novel *Nini* from Abdoulaye Sadju he says "The great dream that haunts every one of them is to be the bride of a white man from Europe." p.41

The contact that was initiated in childhood, this contact that made the child "abnormal", in adulthood becomes sought for, and is sought for, just as French and white people reject them or try to gather them "Oh, I want you to meet my Black friend..." (p.88). Using a psychoanalytical theory of the time, Fanon diagnoses an "abandonment-neurosis" that may prevent him from loving and being loved.

Affective self-rejection invariably brings the abandonment-neurotic to an *extremely painful and obsessive feeling of exclusion, of having no place anywhere, of being superfluous everywhere in an affective sense*. . . . "I am The Other" is an expression that I have heard time and again in the language of the abandonment-neurotic. To be "The Other" is to feel that *one is always in a shaky position, to be always on guard, ready to be rejected* and . . . unconsciously doing everything needed to bring about exactly this catastrophe. 23 p.55

G. Guex, *La Névrose d'abandon* (Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1950)

He describes the Black adult in a state of instability, uncertainty, that equals being lost in space. The movement never stops and cannot find its momentum, it's always about falling from one deception to another.

The rejection - Fear and "negrophobia"

Fanon talks at length of the fear that white people develop of Black people. This phobia is in the book one of the few traces of the movements of the white body in front of a Black body. In this excerpt, it is all the more unbelievable that it happens in dreams, Fanon talks about one of his patients:

In addition, her brothers and sisters, who had discovered her weak point, amused themselves by scaring her. Lying in bed and hearing the tom-toms, she virtually saw negroes. *She fled under the covers, trembling*. Then smaller and smaller circles appeared, blurring the negroes**. These circles are easily recognizable as a land of defense mechanism against her hallucinosis. Later, the circles appeared without the negroes** —the defense mechanism had taken over without reference to what had brought it on. I talked with the girl's mother, who corroborated what the patient had said. The girl was very emotional, and at the age of twelve *she had often been observed to tremble in her bed*. My presence on her ward made no perceptible difference in her mental state. By now it was the circles alone that produced the motor reactions: *outcries, facial tics, random gesticulation*.

A chapter of Fanon is called "The lived experience of the Black man" and is I think the most powerful part of the book. It really grasps in its writing, its pace and images something always unfathomable about a lived experience.

It is because of its poetic and lyrical quality (it's one of the chapters where the "I" is the most present) that I picture this chapter as a form of choreography. I will send the book to you and I encourage you to read this one chapter, as I think any sum-up makes it a disservice, but I try to give you some anchors in the text and its movements:

The encounter (as Fanon, the poet, goes to Lyon then the metropole to study):

I could no longer laugh, because I already knew that there were legends, stories, history, and above all historicity, which I had learned about from Jaspers. Then, *assailed at various points*, the corporeal schema crumbled, its place taken by a racial epidermal schema. In the train it was no longer a question of being aware of my body in the third person but in a triple person. *In the train I was given not one but two, three places*. I had already stopped being amused. It was not that I was finding febrile coordinates in the world. *I existed triply: I occupied space. I moved toward the other . . . and the evanescent other, hostile but not opaque, transparent, not there, disappeared*. Nausea. . . .

I was responsible at the same time for my body, for my race, for my ancestors. I subjected myself to an objective examination, I discovered my Blackness**, my ethnic characteristics; and I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetichism, racial defects, slave-ships, and above all else, above all: "Sho' good eatin'."

On that day, *completely dislocated*, unable to be abroad with the other, the white man, who unmercifully imprisoned me, *I took myself far off from my own presence, far indeed, and made myself an object*. *What else*

*could it be for me but an amputation, an excision, a hemorrhage that spattered my whole body with Black** blood? But I did not want this revision, this thematization.*

All I wanted was to be a man among other men. I wanted to come lithe and young into a world that was ours and to help to build it together.

But I rejected all immunization of the emotions. I wanted to be a man, nothing but a man. p.84

The affirmation (as he researches the history of Black people):

All of that, exhumed from the past, spread with its insides out, made it possible for me to find a valid historic place. The white man was wrong, I was not a primitive, not even a half-man, I belonged to a race that had already been working in gold and silver two thousand years ago.

I put the white man back into his place; growing bolder, I jostled him and told him point-blank, "Get used to me, I am not getting used to anyone." I shouted my laughter to the stars. The white man, I could see, was resentful. His reaction time lagged interminably. . . . I had won. I was jubilant.

p.99-100

The disillusion (on a line read in Sartre's book *Black Orpheus*)

From time to time one would like to stop. To state reality is a wearing task. But, when one has taken it into one's head to try to express existence, one runs the risk of finding only the nonexistent. What is certain is that, at the very moment when I was trying to grasp my own being, Sartre, who remained The Other, gave me a name and thus shattered my last illusion. While I was saying to him:

"My negritude is neither a tower nor a cathedral,
it thrusts into the red flesh of the sun,
it thrusts into the burning flesh of the sky,
it hollows through the dense dismay of its own pillar
of patience . . ." (David Diop, "Le Renégat.")

while I was shouting that, in the paroxysm of my being and my fury, he was reminding me that my Blackness** was only a minor term⁴. In all truth, in all truth I tell you, *my shoulders slipped out of the framework of the world, my feet could no longer feel the touch of the ground.* Without a negro** past, without a negro** future, it was impossible for me to live my Negrohood. Not yet white, no longer wholly Black**, I was damned. Jean-Paul Sartre had forgotten that the negro** suffers in his body quite differently from the white man.²⁴

p.105-106

The Negro is a toy in the white man's hands; so, in order to shatter the hellish cycle, he explodes. I cannot go to a film without seeing myself. I wait for me. In the interval, just before the film starts, I wait for me. *The people in the theater are watching me, examining me, waiting for me.* A negro groom is going to appear.

My heart makes my head swim.

p.107

There's no conclusion to this movement initiated at the beginning of the book, or rather, Fanon shows that this movement is to be owned "O my body, make of me always a man who questions!".

I copy here the last pages of the book:

The black man wants to be like the white man. For the black man there is only one destiny. And it is white. Long ago the black man admitted the unarguable superiority of the white man, and all his efforts are aimed at achieving a white existence.

Have I no other purpose on earth, then, but to avenge the negro*** of the seventeenth century?

In this world, which is already trying to disappear, do I have to pose the problem of Black** truth?

Do I have to be limited to the justification of a facial conformation?

I as a man of color do not have the right to seek to know in what respect my race is superior or inferior to another race.

I as a man of color do not have the right to hope that in the white man there will be a crystallization of guilt toward the

4 According to Sartre, racial struggle was only a step towards class struggle. He acknowledged the specificities of it, but made it clear it was of lesser relevance.

past of my race.

I as a man of color do not have the right to seek ways of stamping down the pride of my former master.

I have neither the right nor the duty to claim reparation for the domestication of my ancestors.

There is no negro** mission; there is no white burden.

I find myself suddenly in a world in which things do evil; a world in which I am summoned into battle; a world in which it is always a question of annihilation or triumph.

I find myself—I, a man—in a world where words wrap themselves in silence; in a world where the other endlessly hardens himself.

No, I do not have the right to go and cry out my hatred at the white man. I do not have the duty to murmur my gratitude to the white man.

My life is caught in the lasso of existence. My freedom turns me back on myself. No, I do not have the right to be a negro**.

I do not have the duty to be this or that. . . .

If the white man challenges my humanity, I will impose my whole weight as a man on his life and show him that I am not that “sho’ good eatin’” that he persists in imagining.

I find myself suddenly in the world and I recognize that I have one right alone: That of demanding human behavior from the other.

One duty alone: That of not renouncing my freedom through my choices.

I have no wish to be the victim of the Fraud of a Black** world.

My life should not be devoted to drawing up the balance sheet of negro values.

There is no white world, there is no white ethic, any more than there is a white intelligence.

There are in every part of the world men who search.

I am not a prisoner of history. I should not seek there for the meaning of my destiny.

I should constantly remind myself that the real leap consists in introducing invention into existence.

In the world through which I travel, I am endlessly creating myself.

I am a part of Being to the degree that I go beyond it.

And, through a private problem, we see the outline of the problem of Action. Placed in this world, in a situation, “embarked,” as Pascal would have it, am I going to gather weapons?

Am I going to ask the contemporary white man to answer for the slave-ships of the seventeenth century?

Am I going to try by every possible means to cause Guilt to be born in minds?

Moral anguish in the face of the massiveness of the Past? I am a Negro, and tons of chains, storms of blows, rivers of expectoration flow down my shoulders.

But I do not have the right to allow myself to bog down. I do not have the right to allow the slightest fragment to remain in my existence. I do not have the right to allow myself to be mired in what the past has determined.

I am not the slave of the Slavery that dehumanized my ancestors.

To many colored intellectuals European culture has a quality of exteriority. What is more, in human relationships, the Negro may feel himself a stranger to the Western world. Not wanting to live the part of a poor relative, of an adopted son, of a bastard child, shall he feverishly seek to discover a negro** civilization?

Let us be clearly understood. I am convinced that it would be of the greatest interest to be able to have contact with a negro*** literature or architecture of the third century before Christ. I should be very happy to know that a correspondence had flourished between some Negro philosopher and Plato. But I can absolutely not see how this fact would change anything in the lives of the eight-year-old children who labor in the cane fields of Martinique or Guadeloupe.

No attempt must be made to encase man, for it is his destiny to be set free.

The body of history does not determine a single one of my actions.

I am my own foundation.

And it is by going beyond the historical, instrumental hypothesis that I will initiate the cycle of my freedom.

The disaster of the man of color lies in the fact that he was enslaved.

The disaster and the inhumanity of the white man lie in the fact that somewhere he has killed man.

And even today they subsist, to organize this dehumanization rationally. But I as a man of color, to the extent that it becomes possible for me to exist absolutely, do not have the right to lock myself into a world of retroactive reparations.

I, the man of color, want only this: That the tool never possess the man. That the enslavement of man by man cease forever. That is, of one by another. That it be possible for me to discover and to love man, wherever he may be.

The negro*** is not. Any more than the white man.

Both must turn their backs on the inhuman voices which were those of their respective ancestors in order that authentic communication be possible. Before it can adopt a positive voice, freedom requires an effort at disalienation. At the beginning of his life a man is always clotted, he is drowned in contingency. The tragedy of the man is that he was once a child.

It is through the effort to recapture the self and to scrutinize the self, it is through the lasting tension of their freedom

that men will be able to create the ideal conditions of existence for a human world.

Superiority? Inferiority?

Why not the quite simple attempt to touch the other, to feel the other, to explain the other to myself?

Was my freedom not given to me then in order to build the world of the You ?

At the conclusion of this study, I want the world to recognize, with me, the open door of every consciousness.

My final prayer:

O my body, make of me always a man who questions!

I hope you see the movements I tried to highlight in Fanon's text and that they can inspire you for the piece.