

A Permanent State of Carnival – Frantz Fanon on Language, Subjectivity and Violence

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Frantz Fanon's thinking—as elaborated everywhere from his early plays to his later dissertations—cuts through wide and complex fields of knowledge, ranging from specialized medicine to basic sociology and philosophy. Yet however great the variety of Fanon's questions and problems might be in this regard, there is one certain problematic that arguably continues to engage him throughout his entire *oeuvre*: the question of subjectivation. In *Peau noire, masques blancs* (1952) this problem could be said to be elaborated through a certain understanding of the notion of the *carnival*. The concept of carnival, I argue, could even be posited as a sort of nodal point in Fanon's thinking, relating notions such as language and violence to subjectivation as a continuous or permanent process of individuation and alienation, while at the same time displacing and differentiating our understanding of these concepts within Fanon's work in general.

When Robert-François Damiens, a French domestic servant, attempts to assassinate the ruling king of France, Louis XV, he achieves but a mere scratch on the king. Yet on the second of March in 1757 Damiens is to make an *amende honorable*, wearing nothing but a shirt, in front of the main entrance to Notre Dame. At the other side of the Seine, at the Place de Grève, awaits what remains of his sentence. After the public apology “flesh will be torn from his breasts, arms, thighs and calves with red-hot pincers.”¹ Damiens' right hand, holding the “knife” with which he committed the “parricide”, is to be burnt with sulphur and where flesh is torn away, “molten lead, boiling

¹ *Pièces originales et procédures du procès fait à Robert-François Damiens, 1757*, part III, p. 372–74, cited in Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish—The Birth of Prison*, transl. Alan Sheridan, New York, Vintage Books, 1977 (*Surveiller et punir*, 1975), p. 3.

oil, burning resin, wax and sulphur melted together” is to be poured.² The body of Damiens is after this to be torn into pieces by four horses, each “drawing,” as it were, in opposite directions.³

The horses used in the verdict’s enforcement were not, however, accustomed to “drawing”. Subsequently, “instead of four, six were needed; and when that did not suffice, they were forced, in order to cut off the wretch’s thighs, to sever the sinews and hack at the joints...”⁴ The use of sulphur would prove problematic too: “The sulphur was lit, but the flame was so poor that only the top skin of the hand was burnt, and that only slightly.”⁵ An executioner, allegedly “strong” and “sturdy” was thus forced to take further measures.⁶ He “took the steel pincers, which had been especially made for the occasion, and which were about a foot and a half long, and pulled first at the calf of the right leg, then at the thigh, and from there at the two fleshy parts of the right arm; then at the breasts.”⁷ Only after this intervention could the execution continue according to plan, and thus the boiling potion be poured over each of the wounds, now the size of “a six-pound crown piece.”⁸

Thus begins Michel Foucault’s work on the history of the penal systems, *Discipline and Punish* (1975). The painstaking depiction of Damiens’ execution, retrieved from newspaper articles as well as police reports, animates not only every detail of a historic example of governmental brutality—in-ferred by Foucault into a larger historical framework—but it also outlines the background to a specific type of regime, characteristic of the *carnival*,

“[P]ublic torture and execution must be spectacular, it must be seen by all almost as [the governing powers] triumph. The very excess of the violence employed is one

² Foucault 1977, p. 3.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., p. 4.

⁷ Ibid., p. 3 f.

⁸ Ibid., p. 4.

of the elements of its glory: the fact that the guilty man should moan and cry out under the blows is not a shameful side-effect, it is the very ceremonial of justice being expressed in all its force. Hence no doubt those tortures that take place even after death: corpses burnt, ashes thrown to the winds, bodies dragged on hurdles and exhibited at the roadside. Justice pursues the body beyond all possible pain.⁹

Yet, it is not the carnal punishment, nor the spectacular execution, that constitutes the carnivalesque moment for Foucault, but rather the event of *substituting* the “punishment-as-spectacle” with what is perhaps best characterized as punishment-as-carnival. Much like the carnival itself, the new regime of punishment is marked by one trait in particular: the mask, or even better, the principle of masking. Thus, the carnivalesque punishment signifies, more precisely, the radical shift, change, or transformation of the moral regime represented by Damians’ execution, on the one hand, and the radically new concepts of punishment, truth, and subjectivity that follow this shift or transformation, on the other.

Punishment-as-carnival

On the most fundamental level the term *carnival* has but two denominations: the term either denominates a historical or contemporary phenomenon marked by a certain number of—at least supposedly—shared traits; or the conceptual understanding of particularly the historical phenomenon of carnival, perhaps best associated with Mikhail Bakhtin’s understanding of François Rabelais’ authorship (1965). The etymology of the term is contested, however, as is every conceptual understanding of the carnival’s function and essence. It is believed nevertheless that the carnival in medieval times “was part of an organic cycle of discipline and liberation. For a day the fool or the fattest glutton in the town became ‘king’, and, to a lesser extent, or at least by implication, the ‘king’ (i.e., the local baron or the mayor

⁹ M. Foucault 1977, p. 34.

or other leading burgher) became a ‘fool’”.¹⁰ While some, following mainly Bakhtin and Levi Strauss, understand the carnival in terms of negativity, inversion or suspension, others claim that carnivals, “instead of leading to actual liberation,” are “politically useful to the powerful as a harmless escape valve for oppressed people.”¹¹ But regardless of whether the carnival is posited as the event in which the usual order of things are overthrown, unhinged and disturbed, or as a means to reinstitute and reinforce the very order it is meant to overthrow—or, as is also suggested, as an event qualified to “do both”—it continues to designate an event that is, if not calendrically determined, then at least temporally defined.¹² Yet the title of Frantz Fanon’s first major work, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), suggests an understanding of the carnivalesque as a *permanent* rather than a *temporary* mode.¹³ The combination of singular and plural in the title (or rather, the singularity of the Black man and the plurality of the white masks) implies an understanding of subjectivation where singularity, or subjectivity, is offered only by means of masquerade. In what follows the implications of this permanency will be examined through Foucault’s work on the mechanisms behind the western phase out of the “punishment-as-spectacle.”

Carnem levare

The Latin terms for *carnem levare*, from *caro* (flesh) and *levare* (lighten, raise, remove etc.) offer—although an uncertain etymological background to the concept of carnival—a good understanding of the mechanisms behind the historical shift that Foucault provides a background to. For the macabre spec-

¹⁰ Michaeline A. Crichlow & Piers Armstrong, “Carnival praxis, carnivalesque strategies and Atlantic interstices” in *Social Identities: Journal for the Study of Race, Nation and Culture*, 16:4, 2010, 399–414, p. 400.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² David A.B. Murray, “Defiance or Defilement? Undressing Cross-dressing in Martinique’s Carnival”, *Sexualities*, 1998 1: 343, pp. 343 - 354, p. 344.

¹³ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, transl. Richard Philcox, New York, Grove Press, 2008, p. xvi.

tacle marking Damiens' execution will in less than a century from its enforcement undergo a series of radical changes. The punishment will no longer consist in the art of inflicting unbearable bodily pain, but instead encompass "an economy of suspended rights."¹⁴ The body will no longer serve as the primary object of the penal system, but will be replaced by the *soul*: "the thoughts, the will, the inclinations."¹⁵ And parallel to this shift in law enforcement—the shift from body to soul—is a shift in meaning in the juridical concepts of truth and knowledge. The three conditions upon which the truth had up until this historical moment been grounded: "[k]nowledge of the offence, knowledge of the offender, knowledge of the law" were now substituted by questions implicating a radically new notion of *truth*: "The question is no longer simply: 'Has the act been established and is it punishable?' But also: 'What is this act, what is this act of violence or this murder? To what level or to what field of reality does it belong? Is it a phantasy, a psychotic reaction, a delusional episode, a perverse action?' It is no longer simply: 'Who committed it?' But: 'How can we assign the causal process that produced it? Where did it originate in the author himself? Instinct, unconscious, environment, heredity?'"¹⁶

The disappearance of public executions consequently marks not only the "decline of the spectacle," or a "slackening of the hold on the body", but equally so a tightening of the grip on the soul: *the thoughts, the wills, the inclinations*.¹⁷ And in addition, a new concept of public space: "The old partners of the spectacle of punishment, the body and the blood, gave way. A new character came on the scene, *masked*. It was the end of a certain kind of tragedy; comedy began, with shadow play, faceless voices, impalpable entities. The apparatus of punitive justice must now bite into this bodiless reality."¹⁸ The historical shift that Foucault delineates literally consists in hence, *the removal of flesh*. At least from a public scene. And it furthermore marks a

¹⁴ M. Foucault 1977, p. 11.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 16 - 17. My italics.

radically new kind of masquerade: not only does “justice” cease to take “public responsibility for the violence that is bound up with its practice”¹⁹ at this historical moment, but it subsequently becomes, as will the punishment itself, invisible to the public eye. Paralleling the development of a new penal system where justice now acts upon actions rather than bodies, is thus the conception of a new subject: a subject now the subject of a whole series of new ‘sciences’. And it is within this context—of the invisible rather than the visible order of violence, on the basis of disciplinary rather than prohibiting powers—that the nature, function or potentiality of violence is posited as a philosophical problem, question and field of inquiry. The circumstances under which this particular problem is modelled and modulated are thus worth further consideration. The fact that the question of violence presents itself as a *philosophical* (and not a solely juridical) problem *only after* “justice”—the abstraction denominating the state—ceases to take “public responsibility for the violence that is bound up with its practice” gives a hint of the problematic that the question, or problem, of violence harbours. Different efforts to conceptualize violence all stand before the challenge raised by the historical development outlined by Foucault: the invisibility of state-governed violence. Georges Sorel, who is one of the first to engage with this problematic, handles the problem by examining the *potentialities* of violence in *Reflections on Violence* (1908); Walter Benjamin, the first to further this inquiry, attempts to broaden this field by examining the *functions* of violence in “Critique of Violence” (1921); Fanon seeks to further the scopes of both these inquiries by examining the *effects* of violence in *Black Skin, White Masks* as well as *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), and Foucault writes the history of violence in *Discipline and Punish* (1975), five years after Hannah Arendt publishes her work on the *essence* of violence, in 1970.

Hence, Sorel posits the problem in terms of long-term respective short-term *outcome* or *result*; Benjamin modulates the problem in terms of *function*, namely a “lawmaking,” and a “law-preserving function”; while Fanon, by introducing the question of *who?*, at least by implication, examines the—for some—invisible, or masked, violence inherent in the colonial status

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

quo.²⁰ For Fanon, the question of violence is never a question of what violence *is*, as for Hannah Arendt after him, but instead a question of what violence *does*, to *and* for those who are subject to it. As such, Fanon's understanding of violence is intimately connected with his understanding of the modes and temporalities of the carnival. Fanon's "carnavalesque position" should accordingly be understood against the historical backdrop that Foucault provides: as a way to make the seemingly invisible visible. Fanon's first engagement with the concept of carnival—and, by extension, the notion of violence—takes place in his first published work, *Black Skin, White Masks*.

Carnival, Violence and Becoming-skin

Black Skin, White Masks, the treatise presented as an analysis of the "psychopathology of colonialism", was completed during Fanon's time of study in Lyon, where he earned three degrees: a bachelor in arts, a bachelor in sociology, and a doctorate in medicine.²¹ By merging these disparate lines of inquiry Fanon elaborates a style of writing and a mode of thinking in this work that indicates what is really at stake in his authorship (a manifestation equally visible in the treatise's original title, namely *Essay on the De-Alienation of the Black Man*): the all-encompassing liberation of the so called wretched of the earth.²² But what is freedom in Fanon's sense, and perhaps more importantly, how is it achieved? Furthermore, what or who constitutes the subject of liberation in *Black Skin, White Masks*? While the first question is elaborated throughout the whole argument of the book, the latter question

²⁰ Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence" in *Reflections – Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, transl. Edmund Jephcott, New York, Schocken Books, 1986, p. 284.

²¹ Joby Fanon, Frantz Fanon, *My Brother – Doctor, Playwright, Revolutionary*, transl. Daniel Nethery, Lanham & Boulder, Lexington Books, 2014, p. 44; Fanon 2008, p. xii.

²² Fanon 2014, p. 63; David Macey, *Frantz Fanon: A Life*, London, Granta, 2001, p. 155. (In *Black Skin, White Masks* Fanon claims that it was he who, by means of a dialectic process, came to revise this decision, but as several biographers state, this was not the case. Fanon earned his doctorate with a thesis on Friedreich's ataxia entitled, *Mental disturbances, changes in character, psychic troubles and intellectual deficiency in spinal-cerebral degeneration in a case of Friedreich's disease with delusions of possession*).

is answered through the very first question Fanon poses: “What does man want?”²³ Or, as he has it in what follows: “What does the black man want?”²⁴ The questions Fanon posits to answer this question do not concern then, nor do they take into account, what the black man *is*, in and for himself, but rather what he *becomes*, converts into, in and through others. Consequently, the black man in *Black Skin, White Masks* does not denominate an essence or substance defined by one or another supposedly inherent trait, but rather a multitude of *wills, desires and inclinations*, in short, what Foucault would call the *souls* of men. The black man, in *Black Skin, White Masks* thus *is*, more than *has*, his wills, inclinations, and desires. A simple answer to this question, Fanon writes, and the “black question would lose all relevance.”²⁵

The liberation of the “black man from himself”, as Fanon puts it in what follows, does not entail an analysis of the economical and political circumstances marking the colonial economy—even though these, of course, are of great importance.²⁶ Rather it is the *wills, desires and inclinations* of the black man that are really at stake here: “The white man is locked in his whiteness. The black man in his blackness”.²⁷ Yet the weight of this “double narcissism” is not equally apportioned. The “theories which represent the black man as the missing link in the slow evolution from ape to man”²⁸ joint with the *affective* economy where, as Fanon states in *The Wretched of the Earth*: “[t]he cause is the consequence; you are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich”, gives rise to a “double narcissism” that in terms of symptoms bears radically different traits in the black man, than it does in the white.²⁹ The schema for these disparate arrangements of affects is strat-

²³ F. Fanon 2008, p. xii.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., p. xii.

²⁶ Ibid., p. xii.

²⁷ Ibid., pp. xiii–xiv.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 1.

²⁹ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, transl. Constance Farrington, New York, Grove Press, 1963, p. 40.

ified in a two folded process: the first being “economic,” and the second being the “internalization or rather epidermalization” of either complex.³⁰

The second strata of this process—the process of internalization “or rather epidermalization”—presents itself as somewhat contradictory in *Black Skin, White Masks*: while the concept of internalization generally evokes a notion of interiority, like that of Foucault’s soul, *epidermalization*, which also translates as *a becoming-skin*, on the contrary evokes a notion of exteriority. The shift in meaning is, however, of great importance to Fanon’s concept of subjectivity. For even as Fanon’s notion of becoming-skin might resemble James Joyce’s understanding of the modern man, who, according to Joyce, “has an epidermis rather than a soul”, the hierarchical relationship between the notion of internalization and becoming-skin suspends rather than reinforces the distinction between interiority and exteriority that Joyce’s modern man seemingly depends on.³¹ As the hierarchical relationship indicates, the process by which affects are internalized and interiorized is neither interior nor exterior to the *soul* in *Black Skin, White Masks*—but both.³² The concept of becoming-skin thus signifies, more precisely, the process by which the exteriority of the skin internalizes and interiorizes affects—which Fanon’s concept of *scissiparité*, furthers.³³

The meanings and implications of *scissiparité* are complex and remain as of yet far from exhausted. Interpretations in terms of “self-divison” or “self-cleaving” have dominated the understanding of the concept (the concept of “self-division” is seen in the Swedish translation of *Black Skin, White Masks*, *Svart hud, vita masker* from 1995 by Stefan Jordebrandt; as well as in Charles Lam Markmann’s English translation for Pluto Press from 1967, reprinted

³⁰ Fanon 2008, p. xv.

³¹ James Joyce, *James Joyce in Padua*, transl. Louis Berrone, New York, Random House, 1977, p. 21.

³² It could be argued, however, that Fanon’s concept of becoming-skin reifies the very distinction it seeks to challenge, as the notion of becoming-skin could also imply an understanding of the skin as an interface between interiority and exteriority; or even an understanding of interiority as a privileged space. But these lines of argument would fail to consider the interconnectedness between Fanon’s notion *becoming-skin*, on the one hand, and his concept of *scissiparité*, on the other.

³³ Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1952, p. 8.

again in 2008) and while the concept appears to incite these translations, it also invites, or renders possible, other, close to conflicting interpretations.³⁴ As in the Groove Press edition of *Black Skin, White Masks* from 2008, the concept of *scissiparité* also translates into *fissiparouness*, which designates a *reproductive process by means of fission*.³⁵ Here, the concept's proximity to a medical discourse—where, furthermore, Fanon has his academic training—is kept, which implies a far more intricate understanding of subjectivation—and violence—than the psychoanalytical readings of Fanon acknowledges.

The process of *scissiparité*—having its prerequisites in the "double process" earlier mentioned—could thus be understood as a reproductive rather than a destructive force in Fanon—as a transformative process through which subjects are constituted and consolidated, rather than split into two. The concept furthermore suggests an understanding of the colonial order as a constituting rather than a corrosive force, as a regime wherein subjects are created, rather than irreparably damaged. The concept of *scissiparité* suggests, in other words, an understanding of subjectivation that carries a lot of similarities with the notion of subjectivity that Foucault seeks to elaborate in *Discipline and Punish*.

The affinity of these concepts should perhaps not be overly exaggerated, however, given the Eurocentric emphasis of *Discipline and Punish*. Foucault draws his notion of disciplinary power from the western phase out of the carnal punishment after all, while Fanon, in *Black Skin, White Masks* as well as in *The Wretched of the Earth*, departs from exactly that which Foucault fails to consider in his analysis—the mechanisms behind colonialism. But even as the starting points of these analyses radically differs; and even as the historical shift from carnal to carnivalesque punishment, from spectacular to subtle violence, does not take place simultaneously in the colonies, as in their "motherlands", these understandings of subjectivation are joint by their respective impetuses: to conceptualize the way in which the carnivalesque

³⁴ Frantz Fanon, *Svart hud, vita masker*, transl. Stefan Jordebrandt, Göteborg, Daidalos, 1995. p. 28, [*självklyvning*]; Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, transl. Charles Lam Markmann, Pluto Press, London, 2008, p. 8, [*self-division*].

³⁵ F. Fanon 2008, p. 1.

violence constitutes the grounds for subjectivation. For Fanon, this interrelation is particularly visible in the colonial order.

Fanon's concepts of *scissiparité* and *epidermalization* are thus of great importance to his notion of subjectivity, yet remain largely peripheral in most readings of his works. Not only do these concepts suggest a more procedural understanding of the intricate mechanisms behind individuation in Fanon, but they also put the strong interconnectedness of his concepts of language, violence and subjectivity in relief. Fanon's concepts of becoming even posits language and violence at the heart of his analysis: the concept of becoming-skin offers an understanding not only as to why "[t]he black man who has lived in France for a certain time returns home radically transformed"³⁶; or as to why "[s]peaking pidgin means imprisoning the black man and perpetuating a conflictual situation where the white man infects the black man with extremely toxic foreign bodies;"³⁷ but also as to why addressing a black man in pidgin means: "You, stay in your place".³⁸ The concepts inform, in short, the process through which a *particular* type of becoming is solidified, and the *violence* that solidification implies.

While the efforts to expatiate the nuances of Fanon's concept of subjectivity remain largely unseen, the attempts to expound Fanon's notion of violence are close to countless. The reception of Fanon is in fact marked by a rarely seen diversity. In *Fanon: A Critical Reader* (1996), Lewis R. Gordon, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting and Renée T. White account for the great variety of readings that the reception of Fanon encompasses.³⁹ But while the editors rightly argue that the early translations of Fanon's work paved the way for a certain problematic decontextualized understanding of his thought, the contextual readings of Fanon still leaves a great deal to be desired.⁴⁰ The challenge posed by Henry Louis Gates—to read Fanon in the light of his

³⁶ F. Fanon 2008, p. 3.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 18 – 19.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

³⁹ ed. Lewis R. Gordon, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, Renée T. White, *Fanon: A Critical Reader*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1996.

⁴⁰ D. Macey 2001, pp. 29 – 30.

historical context in order to regain the specificities marking his work—has, when accepted, lead to rather reductive readings.⁴¹ To situate Fanon within a historical framework has, since Gates' critique, meant to situate Fanon's thought in either a Marxist or psychoanalytical tradition, or, albeit more occasionally, against the backdrop of the French-Algerian War. But these contextualizing readings regularly fail to situate Fanon within the framework of his own collected works.

The philosophical problems Fanon engages with in his two major works, *Black Skin, White Masks* and *The Wretched of the Earth*, are both clearly framed by their opening chapters, presented with very explicatory titles: whereas the first chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks* concerns "The Black Man and Language", the opening chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth* engages directly with the question of "violence."⁴² But even though the subject matter in the respective chapters is presented as self-evident or self-explanatory, the discussions are in fact marked by what at first glance appears to be a displacement: in Fanon's discussion of language his concept of the body—the becoming-skin—is given priority, while the discussion of violence privileges language, or as he puts it, colonialist rhetoric. In light of Fanon's collected works, however, this inversion of concepts appears to be far from contingent.

In the opening chapter to *Black Skin, White Masks* Fanon instantly states that he attaches "a fundamental importance to the phenomenon of language."⁴³ The importance of language is of such an extent that the study of language is nothing short of "essential for providing [...] one element in understanding the black man's dimension of being-for-others."⁴⁴ Disparate arguments advanced in favour of this understanding are all based on Fanon's conception of subjectivity, according to which, "to speak is to exist absolutely

⁴¹ Henry Louis Gates, "Critical Fanonism", *Critical Inquiry*, no. 17, Spring, 1991, pp. 457–470, p. 458.

⁴² At least in Richard Philcox' later translation. In Charles L. Markmann's translation the first chapter of *BSWM* is entitled "The Negro and Language." The former translation is, however, closer to the original title, "Le Noir et le langage".

⁴³ F. Fanon 2008, p. 1.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

for the other.”⁴⁵ The meaning and the significance of the *address* does not reside, however, in the conformity to whatever grammatical structure, according to Fanon, but rather in the *relation* manifest in and through language: “To speak means being able to use a certain syntax and possessing the morphology of such and such a language, but it means above all assuming a culture and bearing the weight of a civilization.”⁴⁶ Yet, there exists no grammatical relationship between the being of language and being linguistic, in a colonial setting: “the more the black Antillean assimilates the French language, the whiter he gets—i.e., the closer he comes to becoming a true human being.”⁴⁷ The fact that he “who possesses a language possesses as an indirect consequence the world expressed and implied by this language” is thus heavily complicated—if not compromised—by the colonial situation in the Antilles, where the black man lacks any affirmative place in “the world expressed and implied by [the french] language”.⁴⁸ So while the being of language may present itself as an ontological fact, in *Black Skin, White Masks*, the being *with* language, on the contrary, does not: “[i]n the weltanschauung of a colonized people, there is an impurity or a flaw that prohibits any ontological explanation. [...] Ontology does not allow us to understand the being of the black man, since it ignores the lived experience. For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man.”⁴⁹ One could argue, Fanon continues, that the situation could be reversed, encompassing a becoming-white, but that reversal would entail an absolute neglect of the corporeal reality of the color schema: “The black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man. [...] Their metaphysics, or less pretentiously their customs and the agencies to which they refer, were abolished because they were in contradiction with a new civilization that imposed its own.”⁵⁰ The ontological status of language, although

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., pp. 1–2.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 2.

⁴⁹ Ibid., pp. 89–90.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 90.

“real” and “existing”, simply does not resonate with the lived experience of the black man: “The black man possesses two dimensions: one with his fellow Blacks, the other with the Whites. A black man behaves differently with a white man than he does with another black man. There is no doubt whatsoever that this fissiparousness is a direct consequence of the colonial undertaking.”⁵¹ Quoting Paul Valery, Fanon then goes on to suggest that ‘language’, in the experience of the black man, is “The god gone astray in the *flesh*”.⁵² He furthermore proposes “to study this phenomenon,” in a piece still “in progress”.⁵³ In the footnote attached to this assertion Fanon cites the title of the intended study: “Language and Aggressiveness” [*Le langage et l’agressivité*].⁵⁴

Although no excerpts of this study have been found, the title is worth dwelling on.⁵⁵ Here, Fanon proposes a study on language and *aggressiveness* and not—which could have been expected given his body of work—language and *violence*. The etymologies of this term obviously offer little to no certainty as to the sense on which Fanon draws—the etymology of the noun *aggression* translates into “unprovoked attack”, and the Latin terms *ad* (to, unto, up, to, etc.) and *gradi* (step) signifies “to step”—yet they still manage to pose several questions on the status of language in Fanon’s thought. If an expression of aggression entails a form of movement, or a physical advancement, towards the object of affect, does “to speak” then mean to “move” or be “moved”? What is, furthermore, the relation between aggressiveness and language? Is it conditioned socially and politically, or is it rather of an ontological nature, in the sense Fanon gives the term? And if “to speak” according to Fanon indeed means “to step”, or “to act”, in a literal as well as a symbolic sense, does his concept of language depend on a notion of performativity? The context of this concept obviously offers no substantial point of entry to

⁵¹ F. Fanon 2008, p. 1.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 2. My italics.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 2, footnote.

⁵⁵ D. Macey 2001, p. 161.

these questions, but Fanon's concept of "epidermal racial schema" might give a hint of what might really be at stake here.⁵⁶

The concept of epidermal racial schema in *Black Skin, White Masks* is elaborated primarily in contrast to Fanon's concept of "the body schema", which occupies a neutral position in this work. In short, the epidermal racial schema signifies the event of a bodily self, or a bodily schema, "collapsing" into a third person consciousness. When *attacked*, as Fanon has it in what follows, the body schema gives way to an epidermal racial schema, by which the sense of the body is not only heavily complicated or compromised but equally so duplicated or rather multiplied.⁵⁷ The image of a body under attack—however suggestive it may be—simply denotes thus, the collapse of an ontological "purity" in the process of becoming. Of note is the attack Fanon provides as an example: a child repeating "*Maman*, look, a Negro; I'm scared!" when confronted with Fanon's apparition.⁵⁸

Fanon's concept of "third person consciousness" bears some obvious similarities with concepts such as "second sight" and "double-consciousness", elaborated already in 1903, by W.E.B Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk*.⁵⁹ The vast majority of the concepts Fanon elaborates to explicate the process of subjectivation—the two-dimensionality of the black man; the "epidermal racial schema", the "third person consciousness", "epidermalization", "fissiparousness", etc.—even seem intricately intertwined with this particular work of Du Bois',

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, — a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks

⁵⁶ F. Fanon 2008, p. 92.

⁵⁷ F. Fanon 2008, p. 92. My italics.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

⁵⁹ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, New York, Barnes & Noble Classics Series, 2003, pp. 48–49.

on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.⁶⁰

There exists, however, irreconcilable differences—to quote Du Bois—between the Du Boisian and the Fanonian point of departure. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, a concrete split or caesura seems to constitute the “two-ness” of the Du Boisian subject, whereas the Fanonian subject, in *Black Skin, White Masks*, is characterized by a coherent and complete constitution. The Du Boisian subject furthermore strives to “attain self-conscious manhood,” to merge the “double self into a better and truer self”, while the Fanonian subject is marked—if by anything—by a lack of such impulses.⁶¹ The so-called “black soul,” Fanon states, is but “a construction by white folk.”⁶² Fanon’s position is, accordingly, much more constructivist than Du Bois’. And in addition, orientated towards the “body” to a much higher degree. For even as the child’s outburst occupies a specific place within a social and political landscape founded on colonial violence, it does not only operate by means of the historical weight it carries. Rather, it operates by means of the interrelation between subjectivity, language and violence. Fanon’s concept of becoming-skin simply renders every distinction between verbal and physical aggressiveness impossible: the consequences of the child’s outburst are after all even though unintended, corporeal. Perhaps this is why different forms of violence are not easily discernable for Fanon. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, violence is that which resides in the status quo *as well* as the means by which the status quo is challenged: violence is the process by which becoming becomes a becoming-white, as well as the process by which an ontological “purity” can be obtained anew. Hence, violence is as much the economic, social and psychological consequences of the colonial undertaking, as the counter-violence that Fanon seemingly advocates.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Du Bois 2003, p. 49.

⁶² F. Fanon 2008, p. xviii.

Fanon's examination of violence should thus be read in this light: as an effort to expatiate the mechanisms behind individuation—an impetus uniting the thought of Fanon with that of Foucault's, in *Discipline and Punish*. The conceptual framework elaborated by Fanon—internalization, epidermalization, fissiparousness, etc.—not only encompasses the themes that continuously engage his thought (the relationship between body, violence and language) but also highlights the interrelatedness and connectedness of these concepts—an affinity is explored already in *Parallel Hands*,

Take the words of the vagabond and renew their teeth. Words have fangs and must do harm. Soft, supple words must vanish from this hell. Man speaks too much. He must be taught to reflect. For that, he must be made to fear. To be very afraid. For that, I have bow-words, bullet-words, saw-words, ion-beam words. Words which are words. And before I pronounce a word, I want to see a mask of suffering, a mask of searching, of disappointment. Because words must be agile, cunning. They must appear, take a good look around and disappear without leaving a trace.⁶³

The theme of the play—the corporeality of the words—harbours, however, what presents itself as an intractable dilemma. While the words of the “vagabond” are toothless, in need of “renewal” or sharpening, words themselves, “words which are words”, have fangs or teeth *by definition*, and consequently, the faculty to bite and injure. They do this, however, in a clandestine manner: “without leaving a trace”. Hence, the *inherent* faculty to wound presents itself as a trait exclusive to the word, which is further suggested by the reversed relation between the words and their addressee. While the “word” expresses a bodily reality, and as such something “agile, cunning”, the addressee is but a mask, a veil, of “suffering”, “searching”, “disappointment”. Suggested here is thus an inversion of the already existing inversion; an inversion of the permanent state of carnival.

But even as seminal concepts in Fanon's thought—language, subjectivity, etc.—all seem informed by this particular take on carnival, Fanon's understanding of the carnivalesque is nevertheless not easily fixed. If it assumes the form of a trope in one argument, it functions as a model for resistance

⁶³ Cited in J. Fanon 2014, p. 58.

in another, and even as a style of writing in yet another. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, for example, Fanon turns Hegel against Hegel himself when he examines the “so-called dependency complex of the colonized”. The critique Fanon both calls for and sets in motion is not grounded outside the textual frameworks from which he departs, but within. In the introduction to *The Wretched of the Earth* Sartre quite literally invites the reader “to be very afraid”, presumably to sustain the carnival Fanon calls for in *Parallel Hands*. The “soft, supple words” predestined to vanish under hellish circumstances, are here replaced by the “agile, cunning” words, adept to breathe new life—and movement—into solidified concepts.

The ambiguity of the term thus implies an inversion of the carnivalesque within various strata: where the status quo in fact requires masking, an inversion implies a parallel masking and unmasking, a change of roles between masked and unmasked, of marked and unmarked bodies.

I need words wearing boots that have walked seven leagues. / I need words. But words the color of trembling skin, / words the color of mountains of fire, / cities on fire, / words risen from the dead. / I need words, yes, but words as standards, as gladiator swords. / One word, / but a word strangled by life, embittered by life, / a thirsty word, / a hungry word, / that cries out, / cries, / calls out, / gives itself up / and loses itself.⁶⁴

So while words, masks and carnivals appear to concurrently constitute the cause and the consequence of “the black problem”, they also presents themselves as the cure. Perhaps this is why the only way *out* of the carnival, the only way to institute what the heroes and heroines of *Parallel Hands* seem to suggest—a state of *peau blanche, masques noires*—is *through* the carnival.

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⁶⁴ Cited in J. Fanon 2014, p. 58.

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