16 Racism is a system: how existentialism became dialectical in Fanon and Sartre

In the United States of America today, as in many other places, there is a tendency to locate racism primarily in the mind: one is racist only if one thinks racist thoughts. This means that because speech is thought to be the only clear proof of what someone is thinking, one can only be called a racist if one says something explicitly racist. The result is that the fight against racism has been largely reduced to the policing of racist language by the media. Meanwhile, less and less attention is given to addressing the question of whether the continuing massive differences in education, health, wealth, as well as educational and other opportunities – not just in the United States, but above all globally – are a perpetuation of past racisms in the present, a perpetuation which would call into question our commitment to the eradication of racism. We hear much less than we once did about institutional, structural, or systemic racism. For example, segregation in the schools, which was once unambiguously racist when sustained by laws, is tolerated when the segregation becomes merely de facto. Because the culture of the United States is dominated by individualism and legalism, the effects of past racisms that survive intact within the system are rendered virtually invisible because nobody is willing to own them or take responsibility for them: the problem is said to be non-imputable. This same culture appears to be spreading, so this is far from being a localized problem.

In this context there is still much to be learned from the analyses of Jean-Paul Sartre and Frantz Fanon, who both used the resources of existentialism in their struggle against colonialism to expose a systemic racism that transcends individual actions. What began in their work as phenomenological accounts of the experience of anti-Semitism and racism, became, as a result of what they learned in

the course of their active attempts to combat racism, a critique of the racist structures of society that remains unsurpassed, albeit, relatively speaking, largely neglected. Their early phenomenological accounts showed how oppressed racial minorities find their identities in the experience of being seen as raced, and these are far from forgotten: they are central to the philosophical movement known today as critical philosophy of race. But the descriptions are largely understood as accounts of individual experience, with insufficient attention being given to the important role social structures play in shaping those experiences. Sartre's *Anti-Semite and Jew* and "Black Orpheus" did not neglect the societal dimension of racism, and that is even more true of Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, but it has not been the focus of how these early works have been read. Furthermore, although Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* is now finally recognized as an existentialist classic, his later book, *The Wretched of the Earth*, is largely read only for its account of violence.

And yet it is only in those parts of *The Wretched of the Earth* that Fanon completed last that he fully addressed the problem already identified in *Black Skin, White Masks* and began to frame an adequate response to it. Similarly, many readers of *Anti-Semite and Jew* are unaware, for example, of the revision that the account given there undergoes in *Critique of Dialectical Reason* on precisely this point. Part of the explanation for the neglect of Sartre's account of racism and Fanon's response to it in *The Wretched of the Earth* lies simply in the sheer difficulty of the *Critique* as a whole. It is the aim of the present essay to make Sartre's mature account of racism more accessible and to show that it, together with *The Wretched of the Earth*, represents a continuation of existential philosophy, a philosophy rooted in experience, directed toward the concrete, and committed to freedom.

The idea that post-war existentialism can and should be seen as a political movement directed against the ills of society is foreign to many people, particularly in the English-speaking world, where existentialism is tied to the image of the self-obsessed adolescent ruminating over the question of the absurdity of existence. People tend to forget that *Being and Nothingness*, with its account of freedom as responsibility,[1] was conceived by Sartre in a prisoner-of-war camp and published while the Nazis were still occupying France.

And even more importantly in this context, people are also all too ready to ignore the way that existentialism in the 1950s was shaped not just by the Cold War, but also by wars of liberation fought by colonized peoples. In this essay I argue that the fight against racism and colonialism shaped the development of this central branch of existential philosophy in the 1950s. The importance of this context would not be news to philosophers in Africa and other parts of the so-called Third World, where Sartre never went out of fashion and where Fanon was early acknowledged as an important thinker, but this story has still not been fully integrated into the history of existentialism as it is told in Europe and North America.

After briefly rehearsing the better-known part of the story, where Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* takes up the tools supplied by Sartre only to turn them against the master, I will highlight their remarkable convergence toward the end of Fanon's life. Fanon's reservations about Sartre's "Black Orpheus" are much debated, as is Sartre's praise for Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* in his Preface to the book, but what happened in the intervening period is less well known, and parts of the story may always be unclear. We should certainly not exclude the possibility that Sartre was influenced by Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, but as there is, so far as I am aware, no clear indication that Sartre ever read the book, let alone read it early, I have chosen not to assume that he must have done so, although it would not be surprising if he had.[2] However, as we do have evidence of Fanon's admiration for Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason* I will explore that connection here, particularly as Fanon's relation to that book has received much less attention than it deserves. Apparently when already suffering from leukemia, he visited the Algerian–Tunisian border to meet with FLN combatants engaged in fighting the French colonists and spoke to them about, among other things, the importance of Sartre's book.[3] One goal of the present essay is to help clarify why Fanon might have responded to the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* so positively, as well as to investigate what reservations he might nevertheless have developed.

Fanon's early critique of Sartre is largely to be found in "The Lived Experience of the Black," which with minor changes became the fifth chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks*.[4] In *Being and Nothingness* Sartre had famously described how the gaze of another

can strip me of my transcendence or subjectivity, as in the famous example of being caught looking through a keyhole.[5] Sartre employed this figure of the objectifying gaze in a number of works that followed, including his existential studies of Baudelaire and Genet.[6] In *Anti-Semite and Jew* he proposed that it was the anti-Semitic gaze which makes the Jew as such.[7] Sartre himself later acknowledged in response to critics that he was wrong to ignore how Jews received their self-understanding more from their own history and traditions than from anti-Semites.[8] But there was another troubling feature of the account: the fact that anti-Semitism had apparently left the Jews without any good options other than to await a classless society, which as such would have no place for anti-Semitism (*AS*, p. 149).

Fanon was impressed by Sartre's phenomenological description of anti-Semitism in *Anti-Semite and Jew*: it presented him with a rich philosophical framework within which to examine his own experiences when, arriving in France from Martinique, he found that he was always seen first and foremost as a Black man. With explicit reference to Sartre's account of anti-Semitism, Fanon declared: "It is the racist who creates the inferiorized."[9] To be sure, Fanon's primary concern at this point was neither with trying to develop a positive account of his racial identity, nor with offering a description of the lived experience of racism. The question was how to live authentically in such a society. It was the question that Sartre raised at the end of *Anti-Semite and Jew*, albeit without addressing it satisfactorily. Fanon's comment that Sartre's account of anti-Semitism in *Anti-Semite and Jew* was among the most powerful texts he had ever read, and that parts of it moved him to his core (*BSWM*, p. 158), did not relate to Sartre's proposed solution for the Jews but to their dilemma in a hostile society. These are among the lines about Jews that Fanon quoted from Sartre with admiration:

> His life is nothing but a long flight from others and from himself. He has been alienated even from his own body; his emotional life has been cut in two; he has been reduced to pursuing the impossible dream of universal brotherhood in a world that rejects him. (*AS*, p. 136; quoted *BSWM*, p. 159n.)

Fanon recognized himself in this description.

Fanon's problems with Sartre seem to have begun when he examined Sartre's attempt in "Black Orpheus" to develop an account

of how Blacks should respond to this situation. "Black Orpheus" should not be read in isolation from the anthology of the so-called negritude poets to which it was the Preface.[10] In fact, Fanon's question of how to respond to the everyday racism suffered by a Black person living in France was addressed, not just to Sartre's Preface, but to the whole volume of poetry, especially the poems of Aimé Césaire and Leopold Sédar Senghor. Fanon was at least as critical of Senghor for being backward looking as he was critical of Sartre for closing off the future by determining it in advance, which was how Fanon saw Sartre's claim that negritude must renounce itself for the sake of a future universalism. Sartre argued that "Negritude is dialectical," by which he meant it was only a stage Blacks had to go through, and, in an unmistakable echo of the resolution offered at the end of *Anti-Semite and Jew*, that its surpassing was necessary to bring about a classless society.[11] He did not impose this idea dogmatically from outside the negritude movement. He was able to cite a line of the poetry included in the volume by a Black Communist, Jacques Roumain, which read: "I want to be only of your race / peasant workers of all countries."[12] But as Fanon pointed out there are many Black voices to choose from (*BSWM*, p. 115). The implication was that Sartre had to answer for his interpretation.

Fanon's main objection was that by placing the racial identity of Blacks within a dialectic, Sartre had already looked beyond the concrete moment in history in which they were living. The objection was not to dialectical reason as such, which neither of them seems to have had a good understanding of at this point, in spite of the frequency of references to dialectic in the works of both of them. Fanon's objection was that Sartre had used the dialectic to revert to a kind of Hegelianism that devalued and lost sight of concrete experience. His point was not that Sartre was wrong, but that he, Fanon, "needed not to know" (*BSWM*, p. 114): "Consciousness committed to experience knows nothing, has to know nothing, of the essence and determination of its being" (*BSWM*, p. 113). In effect, Fanon was complaining that Sartre had lost sight of existential philosophy. Fanon was presenting himself as a better existentialist than Sartre. And there was another point: Sartre, in the process of trying to appropriate the poetry of Césaire and Senghor for his political philosophy, had distorted the Black experience in a way that no Black person could. Fanon's famous line is that Sartre had forgotten

how Blacks suffer in their bodies. Of course, in reality he could forget the experience only because he never truly knew it in the first place (*BSWM*, p. 117). In the course of criticizing Sartre, Fanon had identified with precision at least one aspect of what separates Blacks from Whites within a racist society: the fact that they experienced racism in their bodies in a way that those not targeted would never fully understand.[13]

Sartre's evocation of the dialectic in "Black Orpheus" was a fiasco because he did not yet have a clear understanding of its operation. Fanon was right to call him on this point. However, during the 1950s Sartre developed a notion of the dialectic that was not only compatible with existentialism, but also, he argued, necessary if existentialism was to fulfill its ambition of being a philosophy of the concrete. His starting point was an account of the limitations of analytic reason, which was already clearly articulated in *Anti-Semite and Jew* when he identified in bourgeois universalism an "analytic spirit" that "resolves all collectivities into individual elements" (*AS*, p. 55). He made a similar point at the beginning of *Search for a Method*, where he blamed the bourgeois analytic spirit of Cartesianism for its atomization of the Proletariat, even while acknowledging its role in undermining the *ancien régime*.[14] In other words, Sartre's view was that analysis had played a liberatory role but that that role was now played out and it had become reactionary. Similarly, on Sartre's account bourgeois universalism is not the corrective of racism but rather racism takes new forms to compensate for the universalism.[15] So, for example, it is only when the slaves are freed in the United States and thus become eligible for the rights that belong to citizens that certain racists decide that they are not human and write books with titles like Charles Carroll's *The Negro a Beast*. At another time and in other circumstances it might have been different, but then and there Sartre was against dissolving concrete collectivities within the category of the human. He objected that the analytic spirit "recognizes neither Jews, nor Arab, nor Negro, nor bourgeois, nor worker, but only man – man always the same in all times and all places" (*AS*, p. 55). Echoing Joseph de Maistre, Sartre wrote "*man* does not exist; there are Jews, Protestants, Catholics; there are Frenchmen, Englishmen, Germans; there are whites, blacks, yellows" (*AS*, pp. 144–45).[16]

Another feature of the analytic spirit that Sartre attacked in *Anti-Semite and Jew* was its tendency to see anti-Semitism – and thus also racism – as one idea among many. He believed that one should not try to separate the racist or anti-Semitic ideas of someone from their other opinions and indeed from other aspects of their character (*AS*, p. 8). Racism and anti-Semitism pervade every aspect of a person's life. The anti-Semitism of the anti-Semite belongs to a "syncretic totality" in the sense that it extends to all aspects of a person and to their conception of the world (*AS*, pp. 10, 17). Hence anti-Semitism was not one opinion among many: "I refuse to characterize as opinion a doctrine that is aimed directly at particular persons and that seeks to suppress their rights or to exterminate them" (*AS*, p. 9). This is important, because, as I will show, the denial that anti-Semitism and racism can be classified as opinions is the starting point for the account Sartre gives of them later in *Critique of Dialectical Reason*.

Already when he wrote *Anti-Semite and Jew* Sartre concluded that because anti-Semitism is not an opinion it is useless to combat it by education or legal interdictions (*AS*, pp. 10, 147). His account of the way forward relies heavily on the existentialist notion of the situation. Recalling the account of freedom in *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre wrote that anti-Semitism "is a total choice that a man in a situation makes of himself and of the meaning of the universe" (*AS*, p. 148). He concluded that the only way to battle anti-Semitism was to change the situation that produced the perspective from which someone chooses anti-Semitism: "Thus we do not attack freedom, but bring it about that freedom decides on other bases, and in terms of other structures" (*AS*, p. 148). The limitations of this account are obvious, particularly if one broadens the focus to racism and understands the situation in terms of colonialism. One needs more than a will to change the situation when the racist not only has an ideology to support it but also an economic interest in maintaining it. This is why the struggle against colonialism was the occasion for existential philosophy to develop new philosophical tools.

Fanon took the first steps in *Black Skin, White Masks* at a time when Sartre, in discussions of the class struggle in France, still relied on the concept of situation at crucial moments in his argument.[17] The transformation of human existence that would be necessary to change the situation would need, as Fanon recognized,

to be predicated on a "restructuring of the world" (*BSWM*, p. 63). The gaze was only a symptom. In the context of a discussion of Octave Mannoni's *Prospero and Caliban*, Fanon already argued that an understanding of "the colonial situation" (*BSWM*, p. 74) calls for a structural account of racism. He criticized Mannoni's attempt to think of racism as "the work of petty officials."[18] A place like South Africa has "a racist structure" (*BSWM*, p. 68). The same is true of France, which is a racist country where the racism is located in the collective unconscious (*BSWM*, p. 72). Furthermore, in the same place, again against Mannoni, Fanon insisted that colonial racism is the same as racism everywhere: "all forms of exploitation are the same" (*BSWM*, p. 69). The shift in focus away from the individual to society not only is important to Fanon in his argument concerning the limitations of Freudian psychoanalysis (*BSWM*, p. xv); it is also central to the very project of *Black Skin, White Masks* (*BSWM*, pp. 84–85). This is what forces the shift from situation to structure and his attempt to show that "the real source of the conflict" lies not in individuals as such but in social structures (*BSWM*, p. 80).

Although Fanon had already presented an account of colonization in terms of structure in 1952, it was not until 1956 that a similar depth of insight can be found in Sartre in a speech that was subsequently published under the title "Colonialism is a System." It is no longer the gaze of the Other that fabricates identities, but the rigor of the system introduced by the French Republic. It fabricates "the indigenous" and colonists through the functions and interests it imposes on them (*CN*, pp. 41, 44). Under these conditions, "the purest of intentions, if conceived within this infernal circle, is corrupted at once" (*CN*, p. 31), albeit Sartre exempts minor public officials and European workers who are "at the same time innocent victims and beneficiaries of the system" (*CN*, p. 32n.). Fanon was not so forgiving of Whites who, as he saw it, shirked their responsibility (*BSWM*, pp. 84–85), and he quoted Sartre in support of his view. Fanon included in the lengthy citation from *Anti-Semite and Jew* that I referred to earlier that "there is not one of us who is not totally guilty and even criminal; the Jewish blood that the Nazis shed falls on all our heads" (*AS*, p. 136). This is in keeping with Sartre's insistence in *Being and Nothingness* that the responsibility that derives from his existentialist conception of freedom means

that I am responsible for everything except for the fact that I am responsible.[19]

In any event, Sartre took the decisive step not in "Colonialism is a System" but in a brief review of Albert Memmi's *The Colonizer and the Colonized* in the following year, 1957, insofar as it was there that Sartre thematized the shift in his view of racism.[20] Memmi's book provides a brilliant description of the colonial situation from the point of view of experience, specifically the experience of an Arab Jew in Tunisia. Memmi identified the privileges of the colonizer that accrue to them whether they want them or not. He highlighted their standard of living, which was better than they would have in their home countries. While all people in the so-called developed world benefit from low wages in the Third World, the benefits are even greater for those who have gone there. Nevertheless, these privileges which are not chosen and are simply lived give rise to attitudes that constitute "colonial racism." Memmi contrasted it with the doctrinal racism of Europeans who develop racist theories at a distance.[21] It is perhaps not surprising that Sartre latched onto its central idea that "colonization fabricates the colonized as it fabricates the colonizers,"[22] as it sounds so very Sartrean, but his response was revealing: "he [Memmi] sees a situation where I see a system" (*CN*, p. 51n.). Or, as Sartre put it in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, the colonized "was produced by the colonial system."[23] If one can say that Fanon had criticized Sartre for not being Sartrean enough, Sartre attacked Memmi for being too Sartrean, or, more precisely, Sartrean according to the old style. Sartre was announcing a development in his thinking in the context of the fight against colonialist racism as a system.

Sartre fully recognized that the integration of a notion of system into a framework that was purportedly existentialist would present a challenge to some of his readers, particularly those whose idea of existentialism was shaped by Søren Kierkegaard, whose rejection of the Hegelian system was legendary. Sartre tried to address such qualms in *Search for a Method*, which proclaims the marriage of existentialism to Marxism.[24] More important here than any internal dispute among existentialists is Sartre's advocacy of dialectical reason, which can be seen as a consequence of the rejection of the analytic spirit that was already pervasive throughout *Anti-Semite and Jew*. This is not to be confused with the rejection of analytic reason.

Sartre was clear that analytic reason was an indispensable moment within dialectical reason, but insufficient on its own (*CDR*, p. 93).

Although the term "dialectical" sounds somewhat daunting and might even evoke ideas of mechanical necessity, Sartre used the word to refer to something familiar to everyone: the fact that the actions of individuals and groups receive their intelligibility from an objective, albeit one that is not usually set at the level of thought but of practice. In particular, as he put it toward the end of the *Critique*, the dialectic reveals itself in "the practical consciousness of an oppressed class struggling against its oppressor, is a reaction which is produced in the oppressed by the divisive tendency of oppression – but not at any arbitrary time or place" (*CDR*, p. 803). It is a reaction, but not just any reaction. It is a transformative reaction, a transcendence whose intelligibility derives from the fact that the pursuit of the objective takes place within an inherited system of relations which it modifies. This helps to explain why Sartre preferred the term "system" to "structure" and why we would do better to understand him as presenting an account of what I call "systemic racism" than of "structural racism," although it is also true that he employs the word "structure" with great frequency in the *Critique*. But he insisted there that "structure" lends itself to analytic rationality and tends to convey the sense of an external or even alien framework, whereas with the notion of "system" he wanted to direct us to the whole, a relational whole to which we belong and in which we participate, and which is only accessible to dialectical reason (*CDR*, pp. 498–504).

Sartre confronted the standard account of racism directly in a long footnote in *Critique of Dialectical Reason* from which Fanon quoted in *The Wretched of the Earth*.[25] His major claim was that "the essence of racism" is not a system of thought or even a thought at all (*CDR*, p. 300n.). Race laws, as well as racist doctrines and racist remarks, are mere symptoms of something deeper that is produced by the colonial system: "racism is a passive constitution in things before being an ideology" (*CDR*, p. 739). At first sight it might be hard to reconcile that formulation with Sartre's association of racism with the Idea, even though he alerts us that he is not returning to Hegel but rather to Marx's reworking of Hegel (*CDR*, p. 171n.). In fact his explanation of "the Idea" is based on his reading of Ferdinand Braudel's account of Spain's exploitation of the gold

mines in Peru in his classic historical study *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*. Sartre learned from Braudel that gold as materiality "transforms human praxis into *antipraxis*, that is to say, into a *praxis without an author*" (*CDR*, p. 166).[26] The phrase needs some unpacking, but I introduce it to distance Sartre from the kind of social constructionism that is often attributed to him by some of the more prominent exponents of that position.[27] Sartre did not think of gold coins as "an invention of the mind," but as "a petrification of action," which he also called "the practico-inert." The point is that the gold produced its own Idea through the actions that it provoked, which actions subsequently came to reverberate through it (*CDR*, p. 171). Again, this does not mean that it has an existence only in thought. Sartre said of the Idea that it "has the materiality of a fact because no one thinks it" (*CDR*, p. 301n.).

Sartre presented colonization as a practico-inert field just like the world of gold coins: past actions have contributed to make the colony and its people appear to the colonizers as a land of opportunity. Hence he used the phrase "practico-inert system" (*CDR*, p. 720) to describe a system in which "the activity of others" is embedded "in so far as it is sustained and diverted by inorganic inertia" (*CDR*, p. 556). Even though the colonists are constantly competing against each other to see who can make the most of the opportunity, the success of any one of them depends on all of them recognizing that they have a common interest, which involves not only keeping the indigenous population down and maintaining their difference from them, but also seeing that population in a way that legitimates their exploitation. In other words, they must be seen as subhuman. It is in this way that colonialism takes on a life of its own and gives rise to a theoretical racism.

This helps us understand what Sartre meant when he wrote of colonialism that it produces its own Idea as Other, an idea that remains "an Idea of stone" whose "strength derives from its ubiquity of absence" (*CDR*, p. 300n.). The phrase "the Idea of stone" is best explained with reference to the review of Memmi's book, where Sartre explained that the racist dehumanization of the oppressed that is necessary for the persistence of the system leads inextricably to the dehumanization of the oppressor. Racism is an implicit affirmation of the humanity of the other because, as Sartre

always insisted, to treat a man like a dog one must first consider him "as a man." It is only by being rigid and refusing humanity in oneself that one can continue to deny it to the oppressed: "as they deny it [humanity] to others, they find it everywhere like an enemy force. To escape from this, they must harden, give themselves an opaque consistency and impermeability of stone; in short they in turn must dehumanize themselves" (*CN*, pp. 52–53). This is the "pitiless reciprocity" of the colonial system. Fanon would have agreed. He also employed the notion of reciprocity, for example in an effort to explain the escalation of violence as colonizer and colonized respond to each other: "The violence of the colonized regime and the counterviolence of the colonized balance each other and respond to each other in an extraordinary reciprocal homogeneity" (*WE*, p. 46).

The violence that the colonized direct against each other in a "very real collective self-destruction" (*WE*, pp. 17–18) must also be understood dialectically, even though insight into a group's self-destruction had been prepared for earlier in *Black Skin, White Masks* under the label "a reactional phenomenon" (*BSWM*, p. 160). Fanon again generously attributed an understanding of this phenomenon to Sartre, although with a reference this time not to *Anti-Semite and Jew*, but to the novel *The Reprieve*, which Fanon understood to show that "in reaction against anti-Semitism, the Jew [in this case Birnenschatz] becomes an anti-Semite" (*BSWM*, p. 160).[28] According to Fanon, "the black man's first action is a reaction" (*BSWM*, p. 19). Reaction is a theme he returned to in the final paragraphs of the penultimate chapter when he attempted to point the way forward: "To induce man to be *actional*, by maintaining in his circularity the respect of the fundamental values that make the world human, that is the task of ultimate urgency for he who, after careful reflection, prepares to act" (*BSWM*, p. 197).

If one wants to locate a direct impact of Fanon on the writing of the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, it might as well be located here, where Sartre's rich account of the internalization of racism seems to reflect Fanon's rich account of Black experience. Sartre had already introduced the idea of the inferiority complex into his account of freedom in *Being and Nothingness*,[29] and of the Jew in *Anti-Semite and Jew* (*AS*, p. 94), so he would have been receptive to Fanon's appropriation of the term throughout *Black Skin, White*

Masks, even if one can also understand Fanon's challenge to the suggestion that one makes oneself inferior. The suggestion that one is "inferiorized" (*BSWM*, p. 127) is perhaps intended, among other things, as a criticism of Sartre's conception of freedom. However, in the *Critique* Sartre abandoned his account of anti-Semitism in terms of the *idea* of the Jew (*AS*, p. 17) in order to present being-Jewish as what he called "a serial unity" (*CDR*, p. 267). That is to say, one's internalization of being-Jewish takes the form of a responsibility for all other Jews in such a way that there is a "perpetual being-outside-themselves-in-the-other" (*CDR*, p. 268). Sartre explained that this meant that if anti-Semites target Jews for getting all the best jobs, then every Jew with a good job comes to see the other Jews with good jobs as dispensable. So each Jew sees the other Jews as the problem getting in the way of his or her acceptance in society, much as, following Sartre's famous example of seriality, the people who arrive at a bus stop ahead of me are potentially an obstacle to my getting on the next bus (*CDR*, pp. 256–67). Sartre highlighted this analysis as one which helped to differentiate his approach from that of a standard Marxist analysis: there are no forces organizing this state of affairs that resist transformation but rather a resistance in matter itself that, since *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre, borrowing a phrase from Gaston Bachelard's critique of phenomenology, had called the coefficient of adversity in objects.[30] Whether Sartre knew it at this stage, Fanon had contributed a rich understanding of the experienc e of racism that illuminated this account because it highlights how society's racism makes one reactional.

Sartre's break with the standard account of racism is further marked by his statement that "racism is the colonial interest lived as a link of all the colonialists of the colony through the serial flight of alterity" (*CDR*, p. 300n.). He understood colonialism as "the common interest of the colonists" (*CDR*, p. 300n.), by which he meant that there was no direct conspiracy, but rather a distribution of resources such that colonialists of all classes benefit from an arrangement which systemically exploits the colonized: "This interest common to all classes is manifested to all the colonialists in the simple fact that in Algeria the average income of the colonialists is ten times higher than that of the natives" (*CDR*, pp. 726–27n.). In society one tends to adopt one's role in a spirit of conformity: the colonist beats his servants because this is what colonists do, and

the servants accept it, whether they are guilty of an offense or not, because they know the beating is not addressed to them personally but through them to the colonized in general (*CDR*, p. 731n.).

A racist does not necessarily own his or her racism or even have to proclaim it. It is enough simply to acquiesce in the racism of the others. To take a simple example, I only have to believe as a White person that other Whites will be reluctant to buy a house in the street in which I live if there are a number of Black families living there, for me to think about putting my house on the market after the first Black family has moved in, for fear that the prices will decline if other Black families follow suit. I might have nothing against Black people, in which case I would not suspect myself of racism. I would persuade myself it is the other Whites who would now refuse to buy on that street who are the racists. In trying to sell my house early I am simply acting rationally, trying to get the best price I can. But the point is that the effect – another step toward de facto segregation – is the same whether or not there are any White families who object to living near Black people. It is enough that some White people believe in the existence of some other White people who might object. It is in this sense that one can think even here of what Sartre called a "serial flight of alterity." The seriality of racism means that my racism is in fact the racism of the Other. This is why acquiescence in racism is already racism and how Sartre can present racism both as an Idea and as "a passive constitution in things before being an ideology" (*CDR*, p. 739). To say that racism is a system is to say that violent inequalities are inscribed in worked matter (which Sartre calls the practico-inert) in such a way that they are internalized by all parties and thus are constantly reproduced.

These ideas are reshaped in *The Wretched of the Earth*. Fanon began his essay "On Violence," which was expanded to become the famous first chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth*, with two gestures that signaled the book's continuity with Sartre. First, he endorsed the language of Sartre's response to Memmi when he wrote: "It is the colonist who fabricated and continues to fabricate the colonized subject. The colonist derives his validity, i.e., his wealth, from the colonized system" (*WE*, p. 2). To be sure, the basic idea was already in Fanon in 1952, but by embracing the language of system, where he had earlier written of structure, he indicated at the outset, as would become clear in what followed, a fully dialectical account. Parts of

the book predate Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, such as the chapter "On National Culture," which was a speech delivered to the Second Congress of Black Writers and Artists in Rome in 1959. But the preceding chapters, "The Trials and Tribulations of National Consciousness," which would be better rendered as "The Misadventures of National Consciousness" ("Mésaventures de la conscience nationale"), and the chapter on violence, both of which seem to have been written later, have numerous references to dialectic, "the dialectic which governs the development of an armed struggle for national liberation" (*WE*, p. 80). Second, Fanon highlighted, as Sartre had done in "Black Orpheus,"[31] the gaze that the colonized direct toward the colonizer, although in *Black Skin, White Masks* Fanon had been somewhat dismissive of this idea (*BSWM*, pp. 12–13). This changed when Fanon specifically identified the look as "a look of envy" whose basis lay in hunger and deprivation.

> Looking at the immediacies of the colonized context, it is clear that what divides this world is first and foremost what species, what race one belongs to. In the colonies the economic infrastructure is also a superstructure. The cause is effect: You are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich. (*WE*, p. 5)

The terms on which Fanon appropriated the later Sartre are clear, and they were terms that he had already clearly set in *Black Skin, White Masks*: economic exploitation of one race by another (*BSWM*, p. 199). By the time of the *Critique* Sartre had come to share with Fanon a recognition of the importance of the mediation of materiality between oppressed and oppressor. In Sartre's *Critique* this insight was marked by the introduction of the critical notion of scarcity.

Fanon expressed a belief in humanity that went beyond anything one would find in Sartre at this time. The closing lines of *The Wretched of the Earth* read: "For Europe, for ourselves, and for humanity, comrades, we must cast the slough, develop a new way of thinking, and endeavor to create a new man" (*WE*, p. 239, trans. modified). Nor would Sartre have put his faith in nationhood to the extent that Fanon did, but the latter's participation in the decolonization movement led him to advocate the following proposal: "to embrace the nation as a whole, to embody the constantly dialectical truth of the nation, and to will here and now the triumph of man in his totality" (*WE*, p. 141). Just as Sartre employed dialectical reason

to see beyond the abstract individual to the concrete totality, so did Fanon. He saw this happening through the nation: "Since individual experience is national, since it is a link in the national chain, it ceases to be individual, narrow and limited in scope, and can lead to the truth of the nation and the world" (*WE*, pp. 140–41). This is very far from the individualizing moment of anxiety that some people see as the quintessence of existentialism, but it was nevertheless conceived in terms of experience: "To politicize the masses is to make the nation in its totality a reality for every citizen. To make the experience of the nation the experience of every citizen" (*WE*, p. 140). Whereas Sartre's insight into the system arose in the context of a growing recognition of the constraints on freedom, Fanon's insights developed through the awareness that decolonization was leading to new opportunities for those who had previously been colonized.

For Fanon, the decisive category in the movement toward postcolonialism was not race, but nation. Already in an essay contemporaneous with *Black Skin, White Masks* Fanon wrote that racial histories were a superstructure, "an obscure ideological emanation concealing an economic reality."[32] And as he warned in "On National Culture": "This historical obligation to racialize their claims, to emphasize an African culture rather than a national culture leads the African intellectuals into a dead end" (*WE*, p. 152). Nevertheless he reaffirmed in texts written subsequently that during the process of decolonization race would remain a central issue. It would not simply be put to one side: "it is clear that what divides this world is first and foremost what species, what race one belongs to" (*WE*, p. 5). Hence he embraced a phrase introduced by Sartre in "Black Orpheus" that had proved controversial: "anti-racist racism" (*WE*, p. 89; "Black Orpheus," pp. 118, 137).[33] For both Sartre and Fanon it is the fight against racism rather than the promotion of an idea of race that provided the motivation for action, but neither of them in 1960 understand by "racism" the same thing that they had meant by it eight to ten years earlier.

One measure of this change that allows us to take stock of the distance they had traveled is the way in which Fanon adopted the phrase "anti-racist racism" only to go beyond it: "Racism, hatred, resentment, and 'the legitimate desire for revenge' alone cannot nurture a war of liberation" (*WE*, p. 89). Involvement in the struggle had

taught Fanon that one must look beyond anti-racist racism. In the context of a discussion of the awakening of the people, he insisted that "people must know where they are going and why" (*WE*, p. 135), to which he added in the same place that "this lucidity must remain deeply dialectical." This discussion – particularly with the introduction of that last phrase – might sound like a concession to the Sartre of "Black Orpheus," but it is not. Not only did Fanon not go back on his rejection of negritude, but in promoting the idea that decolonization is dialectical and by insisting that the people cannot be preoccupied by the moment and must look beyond it to know where they are going, he also had not become Hegelian in the sense that he had accused Sartre of being ten years earlier. Along with a transformation of the notion of racism so that it is now thought of as a system, there is a deeper appreciation of what is meant by dialectical reason. It is true that there is a humanism here – "there must be a concept of man, a concept about the future of mankind" (*WE*, p. 143) – but at the end of the book Fanon united this creation of the nation with the creation of a new humanity in what he calls a "dialectical requirement" (trans. modified): "When the nation in its totality is set in motion, the new man is not an a posteriori creation of this nation, but coexists with it, matures with it, and triumphs with it" (*WE*, p. 233). In other words, Fanon was not talking about a stage in the dialectic that one could already look beyond, as Sartre had done in "Black Orpheus."

In sum, Sartre and Fanon still did not agree on everything, and not only because they did not fully understand each other. But it is fitting that in what were probably some of the last words of *The Wretched of the Earth* that Fanon dictated, he came back to his early disagreement with Sartre and modified his position. Where Fanon had earlier said that he needed not to know where he was going so he could inhabit the moment, he now identified it as what people must know – and it is not a determination of his being but a possibility for humanity. He could readily do this, because, whereas he believed that Sartre had attempted to determine his being from outside, he, Fanon, could now embrace a future which was both his own and a possibility for all of humanity. It was not the colonized but the colonizers who needed to learn renunciation. Nothing was going to be snatched away from him and his comrades, and perhaps this conviction and this commitment more than anything else

separated Fanon from Sartre in 1960, leading one to suspect that he was still the better existentialist.

NOTES

1. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, pp. 707–11.
2. Ciccariello-Maher, "Internal Limits," p. 156, has argued that I have missed the influence of Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* on Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. I have gone back and re-examined the evidence and am *not yet* convinced that Fanon led Sartre "by the hand until he was made to see" ("Internal Limits," p. 163). It seems to me that one does not need this hypothesis to explain Sartre's steep learning curve during the 1950s on the issue of colonialism. In any event, the truly important philosophical issues raised by the debate between Sartre and Fanon are not captured by the notion of "influence." Nor is there much at stake: Fanon might have been keen to get Sartre's endorsement in 1961; Fanon does not need it now. On Fanon's relation to Sartre by someone who knew him well, as well as Sartre's misunderstanding of Fanon, see Cherki, *Frantz Fanon*, pp. 160–64 and pp. 181–82, and Cohen-Solal's report of Claude Lanzmann's testimony that to Fanon Sartre was a god (*Sartre*, p. 431).
3. Cohen-Solal, *Sartre*, p. 431.
4. Fanon, "The Lived Experience of the Black." Originally published as "L'expérience vécue du Noir" (1951).
5. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, pp. 347–54.
6. See Sartre, *Baudelaire*, pp. 144–45; Sartre, *Saint Genet*, p. 17.
7. Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, p. 97; henceforth cited in the text as *AS*.
8. Judaken, *Jean-Paul Sartre*, pp. 241–44.
9. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 73; henceforth cited in the text as *BSWM*.
10. Sartre, "Orphée noir," in Senghor, *Anthologie*, pp. xi–xliv.
11. Sartre, "Black Orpheus," p. 138.
12. Roumain, "Bois-d'Ébène," in Senghor, *Anthologie*, p. 116. Cited in Sartre, "Black Orpheus," p. 137.
13. This debate is more complex than need be shown here. For a fuller account, see Bernasconi, "The European Knows" and "On Needing Not to Know."
14. Sartre, *Search for a Method*, p. 5.
15. Sartre, *Colonialism and Neocolonialism*, p. 45; henceforth cited in the text as *CN*.
16. "In my lifetime I have seen Frenchmen, Italians, Russians, etc.; thanks to Montesquieu, I even know that *one can be Persian*. But as

for *man*, I declare that I have never in my life met him." De Maistre, *Considerations*, p. 97. Sartre was not underwriting a biological notion of race, but a notion of race as facticity, which he shared with Fanon. See Bernasconi, "Can Race Be Thought Of in Terms of Facticity?"

17. Sartre, *Communists and Peace*, pp. 97, 229, 273.
18. See Mannoni, *Prospero and Caliban*, p. 24.
19. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, pp. 555–56.
20. What is almost universally known as Sartre's Preface to Memmi's book was in fact only added later. It was first a book review in *Les Temps Modernes* 137–38 (1957), pp. 291–92.
21. Memmi, *Colonizer and Colonized*, pp. 69–70.
22. Memmi, *Colonizer and Colonized*, p. 56.
23. Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, p. 739; henceforth cited in the text as *CDR*.
24. Sartre, *Search for a Method*, pp. 124–7.
25. Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, p. 43n.; henceforth cited in the text as *WE*.
26. See Braudel, *The Mediterranean*, vol. 1, pp. 536–42.
27. For example, Hacking, *Social Construction*, pp. 14–17. For a critique, see Marcano, "Sartre and the Social Construction of Race."
28. Fanon probably had in mind the discussion in which Birnenschatz insists that he was French and was loyal to the French, not the German Jews. See Sartre, *Reprieve*, pp. 83–84.
29. See, for instance, Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, pp. 459, 471.
30. Bachelard, *Water and Dreams*, p. 159.
31. Sartre, "Black Orpheus," p. 115.
32. Fanon, *Toward the African Revolution*, p. 18n. The essay from which this quotation is taken, "Antillais et Africains," first appeared in *Esprit*, February 1955.
33. "Anti-racist racism" corresponds to what is more frequently called today "affirmative action" or "positive discrimination."