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The Suitability of Sartre's Dialectical Analysis of the Negritude Movement

The *Negritude Movement* is a literary and philosophical movement developed by French-speaking African and Caribbean intellectuals (notably Léopold Senghor, Aimé Césaire, and Léon Damas) that celebrated African heritage, and cultural pride as a response to colonial dehumanization. Through poetry, they challenged the French colonial pressure to "civilize" Black people by erasing their languages, religions, and traditions. Two key works that engage with this movement are Jean-Paul Sartre's *Black Orpheus* (1948) and Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), each addressing the philosophical issues related to Black subjectivity at the tail end of French colonialism.

Sartre wrote *Black Orpheus* as a preface to Senghor's *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française* (Anthology of New Black and Malagasy Poetry in the French Language). In this essay, Sartre supports poetry as a form of existential revolt against colonial oppression. He advances two central arguments: first, by closely reading selected poems from the anthology, he shows how Black poets reappropriate the French language to express a distinctively African or Caribbean sensibility, reclaiming it as a tool of resistance. Second, he positions the Negritude Movement within a Hegelian dialectical framework, positioning it as a necessary stage in the development of a race-blind society.

Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* turns from historical abstraction to the lived experience of colonization. In Chapter 5, "The Fact of Blackness," Fanon offers a phenomenological account of racial embodiment under colonial rule. He describes the moment he becomes aware that he is not simply *black-skinned*, but *Black*—reduced to a set of behaviors and ideas imposed by a racist society. The chapter unfolds through fragmented, first-person reflections

that trace the psychic violence of racialization. Fanon also reflects on his encounter with *Black Orpheus*, a moment he describes as feeling "robbed" (Fanon 102). While he shares Sartre's admiration for Black poetry and the Negritude Movement, he resists Sartre's dialectical framing.

This essay explains Hegel's dialectic, unpacks Sartre's theorization of the Negritude Movement through the dialectic, and then turns to Chapter 5 of *Black Skin, White Masks* to analyze Fanon's critique of Sartre.

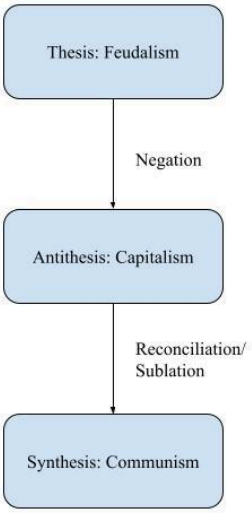
Hegel's Dialectic

To lay the groundwork for Sartre's analysis, we begin with an exposition of Hegel's dialectic. The dialectic is a method of analyzing historical development that proceeds through contradiction and resolution in a three stage process:

1) **Thesis** – An initial state
2) **Antithesis** – An opposing state that challenges the thesis
3) **Synthesis** – A resolution, a new state that reconciles the tension between thesis and antithesis

One of the dialectical models Sartre invokes by way of analogy is Marx's theory of the development of class consciousness. Marx adapts Hegel's dialectic to material conditions by interpreting class struggle as the engine of historical change. In feudal society, social roles are fixed: the feudal lord owns the land, and the serf works it in exchange for protection or a share of the harvest. This is the **thesis**. Over time, the bourgeoisie—an emerging capitalist class—challenges the authority of the aristocracy, advocating for private property, wage labor, and economic freedom. This appears to break the rigid hierarchy of feudalism, forming the **antithesis**, but it introduces a new contradiction. The proletariat, or working class, must

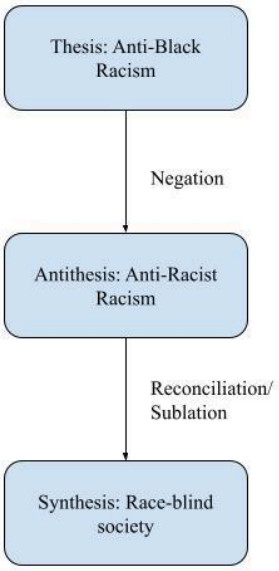
now sell their labor to survive, yet they have no control over the means of production or the conditions of their work. Exploitation persists, now through economic rather than legal structures. As this contradiction intensifies, the working class becomes conscious of its collective position and struggles to overthrow the capitalist system. In Marx's vision, this culminates in a classless society where production is organized around human need rather than profit—class distinctions resolve into a **synthesis** that transcends both feudalism and capitalism.



Sartre's Dialectical framing of Negritude

In *Black Orpheus*, Sartre dives deeper into the dialectic of class consciousness for the white French worker, which he then uses as a point of reference to build, through distinctions, an analysis of the dialectic for black liberation. For Sartre, the black individual is "(l)ike the white worker, a victim of the capitalist structure of our society" (Sartre 18). For "three thousand years", Sartre writes, "the white man has enjoyed the privilege of seeing without being seen" (Sartre 13). Through various forms of colonization, white people have cast the black individual as the "other", as Beauvoir would say. When black individuals in colonies collectively identify this oppression and agree to work towards alleviating their suffering,

Sartre claims that they move into a “moment of separation or negativity” which he calls “anti-racist racism”. This state, which is characterized by the Negritude Movement, celebrates black traditions and affirms their own set of values that are independent of those imposed by their colonizers. In the dialectics, this state of affirmation that opposes the oppressive racism is the antithesis. For Sartre, this isn’t an end in itself, but merely a stepping stone to what he imagines is the goal of all black people: “a privilege-less society in which skin pigmentation will be considered a mere fluke” (Sartre 18). In dialectical terms, the “racism” and “anti-racist racism” will sublate into the stable synthesis of a race-blind society.



However, the similarities between the dialectics of class consciousness and Negritude ends there for Sartre. He argues that the transformations from the thesis and antithesis are fundamentally different for the two schemes. For the white workers in France, they can obtain liberation only by “gaining professional, economic, and scientific know-how (to) control business management” (Sartre 16). Their struggle requires “political calculation, precise forecasting, discipline, (and) organization of the masses” (Sartre 17). In other words, they need to identify the **objective** circumstances of their oppression, and look for external

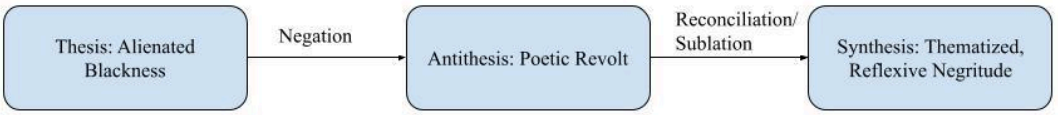
resources to move to the antithesis. Since liberation rests on materialism and technical mastery, the intellectual atmosphere of the proletariat's struggle is inherently unpoetic.

On the other hand, Sartre argues that black individuals must find its source of change in the **subjective** because their oppression is "aimed at the deepest recesses of the heart" (Sartre 19). Race is an *embodied* characteristic as opposed to class, and so race consciousness is founded on "the black soul" rather than objective circumstances (Sartre 19). Sartre argues that anti-Black racism is more intimate than class oppression and attacks the inner self — one's soul and dignity — in addition to one's labor or wages. Poetry, then, becomes the appropriate medium for their cause since it disrupts the rational language, which he associates with French colonization. Black poets, by reshaping the French language, turn the colonizer's tool into a weapon of resistance. His conclusion that the black subject is alienated spiritually helps Sarte build his broader argument that the Negritude Movement, with its attempt to reconnect black subjects with their inner life and affirm a shared Black experience through poetry, is the only way to achieve the moment of negativity in the dialectic.

However, the view that Sartre conceived of Negritude as simply as a necessary step in the dialectical process towards a race-blind society is incomplete. Later in the essay, Sartre expounds on the revolutionary role of Negritude in a way that seemingly contradicts this view: "Negritude—like liberty—is a point of departure and an ultimate goal" (Sartre 29). How can Negritude be a means to an end and also be an ultimate goal? This raises a puzzling tension that warrants further analysis of Sartre's conception of Black affirmation.

Sartre writes that Negritude must "pass from the immediate to the mediate, a matter of *thematicising* it. The black man must therefore find death in white culture in order to be reborn with a black soul" (Sartre 29). He characterizes this "rebirth of the black soul"—the affirmation of Black identity and culture—as requiring a method that is both "dialectical and

mystical" (Sartre 29). What we see is that Sartre is not contradicting himself, but is operating across two registers of dialectical movement. On the macro-historical level, Negritude functions as the antithesis to the racist, colonial thesis, a negation that prepares the ground for a future synthesis in a race-blind society. Yet within the movement of Negritude itself, Sartre discerns a second-order, internal dialectic. In this new dialectic there is at first, an "alienation that a foreign way of thinking imposes" on the black subject in the white cultural hegemony (Sartre 29). This is the **thesis.** Then, through a poetic revolt, the **antithesis**, the black subject negates the passivity of the thesis and defines itself in opposition to the white world. Importantly, blackness is affirmed over here through negation, but is still shaped by the very thing it rejects. This tension leads to a sublation to a **synthesis**, where the affirmation of a Black subjectivity is self-defined (reflexive) and reinterpreted in its own terms instead of being defined as opposed to white culture.



Thus, Negritude simultaneously occupies two positions—externally, as an antithesis in the broader dialectic of liberation, and internally, as a synthesis within its own cultural trajectory. Sartre's analysis therefore reveals a nested dialectical structure, where the micro-dialectic of Black affirmation is embedded within the macro-dialectic towards race-blindness.

Fanon's Critique of Sartre

From the beginning of Chapter 5 of Black Skin, White Masks, we see how Fanon's perspective and approach to understanding Negritude differs from that of Sartre. He begins with a violent jolt:

> "Dirty nigger!" Or Simply, "Look, a Negro!"
>
> I came into the world imbued with the will to find a meaning in things… and then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects' (Fanon 82)

Fanon offers no preamble—he throws the reader directly into the raw experience of racial confrontation. The structure of this opening is deliberately destabilizing: the abrupt shift from an external voice to inward reflection mirrors the shock of becoming aware that one is being seen not as a person but as a thing. The language dramatizes a collapse of subjectivity—the "I" who enters the world in pursuit of understanding is suddenly made into a spectacle, stripped of agency. Right from the outset, we see that Fanon is less interested in theorizing blackness and the Negritude Movement as Sartre is, but is more concerned with a phenomenological description of his lived experience confronting the issues of blackness in a colonial world.

In between his personal experiences of encountering racism, he provides an account of the overarching difficulties facing black communities. In the passage beginning in the middle of page 88, Fanon paints a vivid picture of the psychological toll of racial prejudice on the Black subject. He describes the position of the Black professional—the "Negro physician"—who, despite his qualifications, exists under constant scrutiny, unable to escape the shadow of racial judgment. His knowledge of quantum theory or literature offers no protection against the racial prejudice that reduces him to a symbol of his race, rather than an individual capable of intellectual or professional excellence. Fanon's reflection on color prejudice as an "unreasoning hatred" adds a psychological dimension to this experience. The passage reveals Fanon's internalized conflict as he attempts to reconcile this hatred with his rationality. He describes the encounter with color prejudice as a confrontation with "unreason," underscoring the cognitive dissonance of trying to rationalize the irrational force of racism. This encounter

deeply disturbs him, as he realizes that no amount of reason or achievement can shield him from the racialized gaze. From this analysis, we can see that Fanon is in agreement with Sartre that in the face of the futility of the objective, black subjects need to have recourse to the subjective to push back against oppression. Fanon would agree that poetry is the most appropriate and effective means to carry out the Negritude Movement.

Through the rest of the chapter, Fanon describes his attempts to "reclaim his negritude". Just when he feels like he's about to make some progress, he says with a sudden shift in tone, that "it was snatched away from (him)" when he read Sartre's Black Orpheus (Fanon 101). He told his friends "(t)he generation of the younger black poets has just suffered a blow that can never be forgiven" (Fanon 102). But why did Fanon have such an emotionally charged reaction to Sartre's dialectical analysis?

When Fanon reads that "negritude is the root of its own destruction, it is a transition and not a conclusion, a means and not an ultimate end", he feels as though Sartre had exercised a form of epistemic violence—a rationalization that drains Negritude of its existential, self-determining quality (Sartre 49, Fanon 101). There is clear tension between Fanon's desire to generate meaning from within his own suffering, rage, and anguish, and Sartre's move of imposing a meaning from the outside and labelling it as a historical necessity through the (larger) dialectic. Fanon laments "And so it is not I who make meaning for myself, but it is the meaning that was already there, pre-existing, waiting for me", which is at odds with the existential nature of defining oneself (Fanon 103). Moreover, it undermines the emotional and reflexive power of the Black revolt that Fanon thought it had by framing it as a mere stepping stone towards a more essential end goal.

Fanon doesn't suggest that Sartre is wrong to say that the struggle of the Negritude Movement might eventually culminate in a race-blind society. Rather, he takes issue with the historical determinism that the dialectic imposes on the movement: "I needed to lose myself completely in negritude… The dialectic that brings necessity into the foundation of my freedom drives me out of myself. It shatters my unreflected position" (Fanon 103). Fanon wants space for the full immersion in Blackness, including its pain and poetry and space for a refusal to have that experience already explained or rationalized by an outside system, especially one that is framed by white thinkers. He does not want to be denied the depth of the experience he is in the midst of.

Moreover, he expresses disgust at Sartre's view that Negritude isn't an end in itself and affirms the opposite: "I am not a potentiality of something, I am wholly what I am. I do not have to look for the universal. No probability has any place in me" (Fanon 103). His view that a present, immanent Black subjectivity is an end in itself suggests that he rejects Sartre's larger dialectic analysis, but might be okay with his second-order dialectic that positions Negritude as the synthesis rather than the antithesis. The affirmation of black traditions and values that are not defined in opposition to white culture, which is the culmination of the micro dialectic, is precisely what Fanon is searching for in the Chapter.

At the end, Fanon becomes even more defiant by "refus(ing) accept that amputation", where amputation likely refers to Sartre's larger dialectic (Fanon 108). Where does that leave him? Fanon writes that "Without responsibility, straddling Nothingness and Infinity, (he) begins to weep" (Fanon 108). This poetic outcry is ambiguous and layered. Through an existential reading, Nothingness could refer to the absence of an inherent essence, while Infinite represents the boundless potential or absolute freedom of being. So, in the wake of resisting

Sartre's definition, he finds himself in a position of the unbearable weight of existential freedom that leaves him overwhelmed. Through a Colonial lens, we can conceptualize the Nothingness as a loss of rootedness, language, and cultural memory imposed by colonial structures that he is embedded in. Thus, the tension between his realization of existential freedom as a subject and the racism and colonialism that have prohibited the exercise of this freedom through objectification leaves him tormented. It's the torment of being suspended between a destroyed past and an unrealized future.

In conclusion, Sartre's dialectical framings of the Negritude Movement offer powerful philosophical structures for understanding Black poetry as both a revolt and a moment within a broader historical arc. His nested dialectics capture the dual role of Negritude as a cultural affirmation and as part of a future-oriented struggle for a race-blind society. Yet, as Fanon forcefully argues, this framing risks neutralizing the lived urgency and emotional weight of Black subjectivity by transforming revolt into a stage in an abstract process. Fanon's critique underscores the tension between theorizing oppression and living through it—between explaining Blackness as history and experiencing it as subjectivity. In rejecting Sartre's historical determinism, Fanon demands that Black existence be allowed to define itself on its own terms, not as a means to some later synthesis but as an end in itself. This analysis raises the question of whether philosophical abstraction can accurately and beneficially account for the lived, embodied experience of Blackness—or whether such experience resists being subsumed into any overarching theory.

References

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