



F a i r D e a l i n g (S h o r t E x c e r p t)

Reading: Ch. 5. The Lived Experience of the Black Man (*Black Skin, White Masks*)

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Chapter Five

THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF THE BLACK MAN

“Dirty nigger!” or simply “Look! A Negro!”

I came into this world anxious to uncover the meaning of things, my soul desirous to be at the origin of the world, and here I am an object among other objects.

Locked in this suffocating reification, I appealed to the Other so that his liberating gaze, gliding over my body suddenly smoothed of rough edges, would give me back the lightness of being I thought I had lost, and taking me out of the world put me back in the world. But just as I get to the other slope I stumble, and the Other fixes me with his gaze, his gestures and attitude, the same way you fix a preparation with a dye. I lose my temper, demand an explanation. . . . Nothing doing. I explode. Here are the fragments put together by another me.

As long as the black man remains on his home territory, except for petty internal quarrels, he will not have to experience his being for others. There is in fact a “being for other,” as described by Hegel, but any ontology is made impossible in a colonized and acculturated society. Apparently, those who have written on the subject have not taken this sufficiently into consideration. In the weltanschauung of a colonized people, there is an impurity or a flaw that

prohibits any ontological explanation. Perhaps it could be argued that this is true for any individual, but such an argument would be concealing the basic problem. 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. Some people will argue that the situation has a double meaning. Not at all. The black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man. From one day to the next, the Blacks have had to deal with two systems of reference. 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.

In the twentieth century the black man on his home territory is oblivious of the moment when his inferiority is determined by the Other. Naturally, we have had the opportunity to discuss the black problem with friends and, less often, with African-Americans. Together we proclaimed loud and clear the equality of man in the world. In the Antilles there is also that minor tension between the cliques of white Creoles, Mulattoes, and Blacks. But we were content to intellectualize these differences. In fact, there was nothing dramatic about them. And then . . .

And then we were given the occasion to confront the white gaze. An unusual weight descended on us. The real world robbed us of our share. In the white world, the man of color encounters difficulties in elaborating his body schema. The image of one's body is solely negating. It's an image in the third person. All around the body reigns an atmosphere of certain uncertainty. I know that if I want to smoke, I shall have to stretch out my right arm and grab the pack of cigarettes lying at the other end of the table. As for the matches, they are in the left drawer, and I shall

have to move back a little. And I make all these moves, not out of habit, but by implicit knowledge. A slow construction of my self as a body in a spatial and temporal world—such seems to be the schema. It is not imposed on me; it is rather a definitive structuring of my self and the world—definitive because it creates a genuine dialectic between my body and the world.

For some years now, certain laboratories have been researching for a “denegification” serum. In all seriousness they have been rinsing out their test tubes and adjusting their scales and have begun research on how the wretched black man could whiten himself and thus rid himself of the burden of this bodily curse. Beneath the body schema I had created a ~~historical~~ racial schema. The data I used were provided not by “remnants of feelings and notions of the tactile, vestibular, kinesthetic, or visual nature”¹ but by the Other, the white man, who had woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, and stories. I thought I was being asked to construct a physiological self, to balance space and localize sensations, when all the time they were clamoring for more.

“Look! A Negro!” It was a passing sting. I attempted a smile.

“Look! A Negro!” Absolutely. I was beginning to enjoy myself.

“Look! A Negro!” The circle was gradually getting smaller. I was really enjoying myself.

“*Maman*, look, a Negro; I’m scared!” Scared! Scared! Now they were beginning to be scared of me. I wanted to kill myself laughing, but laughter had become out of the question.

1. Jean Lhermitte, *L'image de notre corps*, Éditions de la Nouvelle Revue Critique, p. 17.

I couldn't take it any longer, for I already knew there were legends, stories, history, and especially the *historicity* that Jaspers had taught me. As a result, the body schema, attacked in several places, collapsed, giving way to an epidermal racial schema. In the train, it was a question of being aware of my body, no longer in the third person but in triple. In the train, instead of one seat, they left me two or three. I was no longer enjoying myself. I was unable to discover the feverish coordinates of the world. I existed in triple: I was taking up room. I approached the Other . . . and the Other, evasive, hostile, but not opaque, transparent and absent, vanished. Nausea.

I was responsible not only for my body but also for my race and my ancestors. I cast an objective gaze over myself, discovered my blackness, my ethnic features; deafened by cannibalism, backwardness, fetishism, racial stigmas, slave traders, and above all, yes, above all, the grinning *Y a bon Banania*.

Disoriented, incapable of confronting the Other, the white man, who had no scruples about imprisoning me, I transported myself on that particular day far, very far, from my self, and gave myself up as an object. What did this mean to me? Peeling, stripping my skin, causing a hemorrhage that left congealed black blood all over my body. Yet this reconsideration of myself, this thematization, was not my idea. I wanted quite simply to be a man among men. I would have liked to enter our world young and sleek, a world we could build together.

I refused, however, any affective tetanization. I wanted to be a man, and nothing but a man. There were some who wanted to equate me with my ancestors, enslaved and lynched: I decided that I would accept this. I considered this internal kinship from the universal level of the intellect—I was the grandson of slaves the same way President

Lebrun was the grandson of peasants who had been exploited and worked to the bone.

The alert was soon over, in fact.

In the United States, Blacks are segregated. In South America, they are whipped in the streets and black strikers are gunned down. In West Africa, the black man is a beast of burden. And just beside me there is this student colleague of mine from Algeria who tells me, "As long as the Arab is treated like a man, like one of us, there will be no viable answer."

"You see, my dear fellow, color prejudice is totally foreign to me." "But do come in, old chap, you won't find any color prejudice here." "Quite so, the Black is just as much a man as we are." "It's not because he's black that he's less intelligent than we are." "I had a Senegalese colleague in the regiment, very smart guy."

Where do I fit in? Or, if you like, where should I stick myself?

"Martinican, a native from one of our 'old' colonies."

Where should I hide?

"Look, a Negro! *Maman*, a Negro!"

"Ssh! You'll make him angry. Don't pay attention to him, monsieur, he doesn't realize you're just as civilized as we are."

My body was returned to me spread-eagled, disjointed, redone, draped in mourning on this white winter's day. The Negro is an animal, the Negro is bad, the Negro is wicked, the Negro is ugly; look, a Negro; the Negro is trembling, the Negro is trembling because he's cold, the small boy is trembling because he's afraid of the Negro, the Negro is trembling with cold, the cold that chills the bones, the lovely little boy is trembling because he thinks the Negro is trembling with rage, the little white boy runs to his mother's arms: "*Maman*, the Negro's going to eat me."

The white man is all around me; up above the sky is tearing at its navel; the earth crunches under my feet and sings white, white. All this whiteness burns me to a cinder.

I sit down next to the fire and discover my livery for the first time. It is in fact ugly. I won't go on because who can tell me what beauty is?

Where should I put myself from now on? I can feel that familiar rush of blood surge up from the numerous dispersions of my being. I am about to lose my temper. The fire had died a long time ago, and once again the Negro is trembling.

"Look how handsome that Negro is."

"The handsome Negro says, 'Fuck you,' madame."

Her face colored with shame. At last I was freed from my rumination. I realized two things at once: I had identified the enemy and created a scandal. Overjoyed. We could now have some fun.

The battlefield had been drawn up; I could enter the lists.

I don't believe it! Whereas I was prepared to forget, to forgive, and to love, my message was flung back at me like a slap in the face. The white world, the only decent one, was preventing me from participating. It demanded that a man behave like a man. It demanded of me that I behave like a black man—or at least like a Negro. I hailed the world, and the world amputated my enthusiasm. I was expected to stay in line and make myself scarce.

I'll show them! They can't say I didn't warn them. Slavery? No longer a subject of discussion, just a bad memory. My so-called inferiority? A hoax that it would be better to laugh about. I was prepared to forget everything, provided the world integrated me. My incisors were ready to go into action. I could feel them, sharp. And then . . .

I don't believe it! Whereas I had every reason to vent my hatred and loathing, they were rejecting me? Whereas

I was the one they should have begged and implored, I was denied the slightest recognition? I made up my mind, since it was impossible to rid myself of an *innate complex*, to assert myself as a BLACK MAN. Since the Other was reluctant to recognize me, there was only one answer: to make myself known.

In *Anti-Semite and Jew* Sartre writes: "They [the Jews] have allowed themselves to be poisoned by the stereotype that others have of them, and they live in fear that their acts will correspond to this stereotype. . . . We may say that their conduct is perpetually overdetermined from the inside" (p. 95).

The Jewishness of the Jew, however, can go unnoticed. He is not integrally what he is. We can but hope and wait. His acts and behavior are the determining factor. He is a white man, and apart from some debatable features, he can pass undetected. He belongs to the race that has never practiced cannibalism. What a strange idea, to eat one's father! Serves them right; they shouldn't be black. Of course the Jews have been tormented—what am I saying? They have been hunted, exterminated, and cremated, but these are just minor episodes in the family history. The Jew is not liked as soon as he has been detected. But with me things take on a *new* face. I'm not given a second chance. I am overdetermined from the outside. I am a slave not to the "idea" others have of me, but to my appearance.

I arrive slowly in the world; sudden emergences are no longer my habit. I crawl along. The white gaze, the only valid one, is already dissecting me. I am *fixed*. Once their microtomes are sharpened, the Whites objectively cut sections of my reality. I have been betrayed. I sense, I see in this white gaze that it's the arrival not of a new man, but of a new type of man, a new species. A Negro, in fact!

I slip into corners, my long antenna encountering the various axioms on the surface of things: the Negro's clothes smell of Negro; the Negro has white teeth; the Negro has big feet; the Negro has a broad chest. I slip into corners; I keep silent; all I want is to be anonymous, to be forgotten. Look, I'll agree to everything, on condition I go unnoticed!

"Hey, I'd like you to meet my black friend . . . Aimé Césaire, a black *agrégé* from the Sorbonne . . . Marian Anderson, the greatest black singer . . . Dr. Cobb, who discovered white blood cells, is black . . . Hey, say hello to my friend from Martinique (be careful, he's very touchy)."

Shame. Shame and self-contempt: Nausea. When they like me, they tell me my color has nothing to do with it. When they hate me, they add that it's not because of my color. Either way, I am a prisoner of the vicious circle.

I turn away from these prophets of doom and cling to my brothers, Negroes like myself. To my horror, they reject me. They are almost white. And then they'll probably marry a white woman and have slightly brown children. Who knows, gradually, perhaps . . .

I was dreaming.

"You must understand that I am one of Lyon's biggest fans of black people."

The proof was there, implacable. My blackness was there, dense and undeniable. And it tormented me, pursued me, made me uneasy, and exasperated me.

Negroes are savages, morons, and illiterates. But I knew personally that in my case these assertions were wrong. There was this myth of the Negro that had to be destroyed at all costs. We were no longer living in an age when people marveled at a black priest. We had doctors, teachers, and statesmen. OK, but there was always something unusual about them. "We have a Senegalese history teacher. He's very intelligent. . . . Our physician's black. He's very gentle."

Here was the Negro teacher, the Negro physician; as for me, I was becoming a nervous wreck, shaking at the slightest alert. I knew for instance that if the physician made one false move, it was over for him and for all those who came after him. What, in fact, could one expect from a Negro physician? As long as everything was going smoothly, he was praised to the heavens; but watch out—there was no room whatsoever for any mistake. The black physician will never know how close he is to being discredited. I repeat, I was walled in: neither my refined manners nor my literary knowledge nor my understanding of the quantum theory could find favor.

I insisted on, I demanded an explanation. Speaking softly, as if addressing a child, they explained to me that some people have adopted a certain opinion, but, they added, “We can only hope it will soon disappear.” And what was that? Color prejudice.

It [color prejudice] is nothing more than the unreasoning hatred of one race for another, the contempt of the stronger and richer peoples for those whom they consider inferior to themselves and the bitter resentment of those who are kept in subjection and are so frequently insulted. As colour is the most obvious outward manifestation of race it has been made the criterion by which men are judged, irrespective of their social or educational attainments. The light-skinned races have come to despise all those of a darker colour, and the dark-skinned peoples will no longer accept without protest the inferior position to which they have been relegated.²

I was not mistaken. It was hatred; I was hated, detested, and despised, not by my next-door neighbor or a close

2. Sir Alan Burns, *Colour Prejudice*, Allen and Unwin, London, 1948, p. 16.

cousin, but by an entire race. I was up against something irrational. The psychoanalysts say that there is nothing more traumatizing for a young child than contact with the rational. I personally would say that for a man armed solely with reason, there is nothing more neurotic than contact with the irrational.

I felt the knife blades sharpening within me. I made up my mind to defend myself. Like all good tacticians I wanted to rationalize the world and show the white man he was mistaken.

In the Jew, Jean-Paul Sartre says, there is

a sort of impassioned imperialism of reason: for he wishes not only to convince others that he is right; his goal is to persuade them that there is an absolute and unconditioned value to rationalism. He feels himself to be a missionary of the universal; against the universality of the Catholic religion, from which he is excluded, he asserts the "catholicity" of the rational, an instrument by which to attain to the truth and establish a spiritual bond among men.³

And, the author adds, though there may be Jews who have made intuition the basic category of their philosophy, their intuition

has no resemblance to the Pascalian subtlety of spirit, and it is this latter—based on a thousand imperceptible perceptions—which to the Jew seems his worst enemy. As for Bergson, his philosophy offers the curious appearance of an anti-intellectualist doctrine constructed entirely by the most rational and most critical of intelligences. It is through argument that he establishes the existence of pure duration, of philosophic intuition; and that very intuition which discovers duration or life, is itself universal, since anyone may

3. *Anti-Semite and Jew*, pp. 112–113.

practice it, and it leads toward the universal, since its objects can be named and conceived.⁴

I set about enthusiastically making a checklist and researching my surroundings. As times changed, we have seen how the Catholic religion justified, then condemned slavery and discrimination. But by reducing everything to the notion of human dignity, it had gutted prejudice. Scientists reluctantly admitted that the Negro was a human being; in vivo and in vitro the Negro was identical to the white man: same morphology, same histology. Reason was assured of victory on every level. I reintegrated the brotherhood of man. But I was soon disillusioned.

Victory was playing cat and mouse; it was thumbing its nose at me. As the saying goes: now you see me, now you don't. Everyone was in agreement with the notion: the Negro is a human being—i.e., his heart's on his left side, added those who were not too convinced. But on certain questions the white man remained uncompromising. Under no condition did he want any intimacy between the races, for we know "crossings between widely different races can lower the physical and mental level. . . . Until we have a more definite knowledge of the effect of race-crossings we shall certainly do best to avoid crossings between widely different races."⁵

As for me, I would know full well how to react. And in one sense, if I had to define myself I would say I am in expectation; I am investigating my surroundings; I am interpreting everything on the basis of my findings. I have become a sensor.

4. Ibid., p. 115.

5. Jon Alfred Mjoen, "Harmonic and Disharmonic Race-Crossings," Second International Congress of Eugenics (1921), *Eugenics in Race and State*, vol. 2, p. 60, quoted in Burns, op. cit., p. 120.

At the start of my history that others have fabricated for me, the pedestal of cannibalism was given pride of place so that I wouldn't forget. They inscribed on my chromosomes certain genes of various thickness representing cannibalism. Next to the *sex linked*, they discovered the *racial linked*.⁶ Science should be ashamed of itself!

But I can understand this "psychological mechanism," for everyone knows that it is not just psychological. Two centuries ago, I was lost to humanity; I was a slave forever. And then along came a group of men and declared that enough was enough. My tenacity did the rest; I was rescued from the civilizing deluge. I moved forward.

Too late. Everything had been predicted, discovered, proved, and exploited. My shaky hands grasped at nothing; the resources had been exhausted. Too late! But there again I want to know why.

Ever since someone complained that he had arrived too late and everything had already been said, there seems to be nostalgia for the past. Could it be that paradise lost described by Otto Rank? How many of those, apparently focused on the womb of the world, have devoted their lives to the intellection of the Delphic oracle or have endeavored to rediscover the voyages of Ulysses! The pan-spiritualists, seeking to prove the existence of a soul in animals, argue as follows: a dog lies down on its master's grave and starves to death. It was left to Janet to demonstrate that said dog, unlike man, was quite simply incapable of eliminating the past. We speak of the glory that was Greece, says Artaud; but, he adds, if people today can no longer understand the *Choephoroi* by Aeschylus, it's Aeschylus who is at fault. It's in the name of

6. Translator's note: In English in the original.

tradition that the anti-Semites base their "point of view." It's in the name of tradition, the long, historical past and the blood ties with Pascal and Descartes, that the Jews are told: you will never belong here. Recently, one of these good French folks declared on a train where I was sitting: "May the truly French values live on and the race will be safeguarded! At the present time we need a national union. No more internal strife! A united front against the foreigners [and turning to me] whoever they may be."

It should be said in his defense that he stank of cheap red wine. If he could, he would have told me that as a freed slave my blood was incapable of being inflamed by the names of Villon or Taine.

Disgraceful!

The Jew and I: not satisfied with racializing myself, by a happy stroke of fate, I was turning more human. I was drawing closer to the Jew, my brother in misfortune.

Disgraceful!

At first glance it might seem strange that the attitude of the anti-Semite can be equated with that of the negrophobe. It was my philosophy teacher from the Antilles who reminded me one day: "When you hear someone insulting the Jews, pay attention; he is talking about you." And I believed at the time he was universally right, meaning that I was responsible in my body and soul for the fate reserved for my brother. Since then, I have understood that what he meant quite simply was that the anti-Semite is inevitably a negrophobe.

"You have come too late, much too late. There will always be a world—a white world—between you and us: that impossibility on either side to obliterate the past once and for all." Understandably, confronted with this affective ankylosis of the white man, I finally made up my mind to shout my blackness. Gradually, putting out pseudopodia

in all directions, I secreted a race. And this race staggered under the weight of one basic element. *Rhythm!* Listen to Senghor, our bard:

It is the most sensory and least material of things. It is the vital element par excellence. It is the essential condition and the hallmark of Art, as breathing is to life; breathing that accelerates or slows, becomes regular or spasmodic according to the tension of the individual and the degree and nature of his emotion. Such is rhythm primordial in its purity; such it is in the masterpieces of Negro art, especially sculpture. The composition of a theme of sculptural form in opposition to a sister theme, like breathing in to breathing out, is repeated over and over again. Rhythm is not symmetry that produces monotony but is alive and free. . . . That is how the tyranny of rhythm affects what is least intellectual in us, allowing us to penetrate the spirituality of the object; and that lack of constraint which is ours is itself rhythmic.⁷

Have I read it correctly? I give it an even closer reading. On the other side of the white world there lies a magical black culture. Negro sculpture! I began to blush with pride. Was this our salvation?

I had rationalized the world, and the world had rejected me in the name of color prejudice. Since there was no way we could agree on the basis of reason, I resorted to irrationality. It was up to the white man to be more irrational than I. For the sake of the cause, I had adopted the process of regression, but the fact remained that it was an unfamiliar weapon; here I am at home; I am made of the irrational; I wade in the irrational. Irrational up to my neck. And now let my voice ring out:

7. Senghor, "Ce que l'homme noir apporte," *L'Homme de couleur*, pp. 309–310.

Those who have invented neither gunpowder nor compass
 Those who have never known how to subdue either steam
 or electricity
 Those who have explored neither the seas nor the sky
 But those who know all the nooks and crannies of the coun-
 try of suffering
 Those whose voyages have been uprootings
 Those who have become flexible to kneeling
 Those who were domesticated and christianized
 Those who were inoculated with bastardization . . .

Yes, all those are my brothers—a “bitter brotherhood”
 grabs us alike. After having stated the minor premise, I hail
 something else overboard:

But those without whom the earth would not be the earth
 Gibbosity all the more beneficial as the earth more and
 more
 Abandons the earth
 Silo where is stored and ripens what is earthiest about the
 earth
 My negritude is not a stone, its deafness hurled against
 the clamor of day
 My negritude is not an opaque spot of dead water over
 the dead eye of the earth
 My negritude is neither a tower nor a cathedral
 It reaches deep down into the red flesh of the soil
 It reaches deep into the blazing flesh of the sky
 It pierces opaque prostration with its straight patience.⁸

Eia! The drums jabber out the cosmic message. Only
 the black man is capable of conveying it, of deciphering
 its meaning and impact. Astride the world, my heels dig-
 ging into its flanks, I rub the neck of the world like the

8. Césaire, *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land*, trans. Rosello
 and Pritchard, pp. 110–114.

high priest rubbing between the eyes of his sacrificial victim.

Those who open themselves up, enraptured, to the essence
of all things
Ignorant of surfaces but enraptured by the movement of
all things
Indifferent to subduing but playing the game of the world
Truly the eldest sons of the world
Porous to all the breaths of the world
Brotherly zone of all the breaths of the world
Undrained bed of all the waters of the world
Spark of the sacred fire of the world
Flesh of the flesh of the world palpitating with the very
movement of the world!⁹

Blood! Blood! . . . Birth! Vertigo of tomorrow! Three-quarters foundering in the stupefaction of daylight, I feel myself flushed with blood. The arteries of the world, shaken, pulled up and uprooted, have turned toward me and enriched me. "Blood! Blood! All our blood moved by the male heart of the sun."¹⁰

Sacrifice served as an intermediary between creation and me—it wasn't the origins I rediscovered, but the Origin. Nevertheless, beware of rhythm, the Mother Earth bond, and that mystic, carnal marriage between man and the cosmos.

In *La vie sexuelle en Afrique noire*, a book with a wealth of observations, De Pédrals implies that in Africa, whatever the field, there is always a certain magical social structure. And, he adds, "all these elements can be found on a greater scale in secret societies. Insofar as the circumcised

9. Ibid., p. 115.

10. Ibid.

adolescents of either sex are bound under pain of death not to divulge to the uninitiated what they have undergone, and insofar as the initiation into a secret society always calls for acts of *sacred love*, there are grounds for considering circumcision and excision and their rites as constituting minor secret societies."¹¹

I am walking on hot coals. Sheets of water threaten my soul on fire. These rites make me think twice. Black magic! Orgies, Sabbaths, pagan ceremonies, gris-gris. Coitus is an occasion to invoke the family gods. It is a sacred act, pure and absolute, bringing invisible forces into action. What is one to think of all these manifestations, of all these initiations, and of all these workings? From every direction I am assaulted by the obscenity of the dances and propositions. Close by, a song rings out:

Our hearts once burned hot
Now they are cold
All we think of is Love
On our return to the village
When we meet a huge phallus
Oh! Then we shall make love
For our sex will be dry and clean.¹²

The ground, up till now a bridled steed, begins to rock with laughter. Are these nymphomaniacs virgins? Black magic, primitive mentality, animism and animal eroticism—all this surges toward me. All this typifies people who have not kept pace with the evolution of humanity. Or, if you prefer, they constitute third-rate humanity. Having reached this point, I was long reluctant

11. De Pédrals, *La vie sexuelle en Afrique noire*, Payot, p. 83.

12. A. M. Vergiat, *Les rites secrets des primitifs de l'Oubangui*, Payot, Paris, 1951, p. 113.

to commit myself. Then even the stars became aggressive. I had to choose. What am I saying? I had no choice.

Yes, we niggers are backward, naive, and free. For us the body is not in opposition to what you call the soul. We are in the world. And long live the bond between Man and the Earth! Moreover, our writers have helped me to convince you that your white civilization lacks a wealth of subtleness and sensitivity. Listen:

Emotive sensitivity. *Emotion is Negro as reason is Greek.*¹³ Water wrinkled by every breeze? Soul exposed beaten by the winds whose fruit often drops before maturity? Yes, in one sense, the black man today is richer *in gifts than in works.*¹⁴ But the tree thrusts its roots into the earth. The river runs deep, churning precious specks of gold. And the African-American poet, Langston Hughes, sings:

I have known rivers
Ancient dark rivers
My soul has grown deep
Like the deep rivers.

The very nature of the black man's emotion and sensitivity, moreover, explains his attitude confronted with objects perceived with such an essential violence. It's a need for uninhibitedness, an active attitude of communion, indeed identification, provided the action, I was about to say the personality of the object, is powerful. Rhythmic attitude: remember the word.¹⁵

So here we have the Negro rehabilitated, "standing at the helm," governing the world with his intuition, rediscovered, reappropriated, in demand, accepted; and it's not

13. My italics.

14. My italics.

15. Senghor, op. cit., p. 205.

a Negro, oh, no, but the Negro, alerting the prolific antennae of the world, standing in the spotlight of the world, spraying the world with his poetical power, "porous to every breath in the world." I embrace the world! I am the world! The white man has never understood this magical substitution. The white man wants the world; he wants it for himself. He discovers he is the predestined master of the world. He enslaves it. His relationship with the world is one of appropriation. But there are values that can be served only with my sauce. As a magician I stole from the white man a "certain world," lost to him and his kind. When that happened the white man must have felt an aftershock he was unable to identify, being unused to such reactions. The reason was that above the objective world of plantations and banana and rubber trees, I had subtly established the real world. The essence of the world was my property. Between the world and me there was a relation of coexistence. I had rediscovered the primordial One. My "speaking hands" tore at the hysterical throat of the world. The white man had the uncomfortable feeling that I was slipping away and taking something with me. He searched my pockets, probed the least delineated of my convolutions. There was nothing new. Obviously I must have a secret. They interrogated me; turning away with an air of mystery, I murmured:

Tokowaly, uncle, do you remember the nights gone by
 When my head weighed heavy on the back of your pa-
 tience or
 Holding my hand your hand led me by shadows and signs
 The fields are flowers of glowworms, stars hang on the
 grass and the trees
 Silence is everywhere
 Only the scents of the bush hum, swarms of reddish bees
 that drown the crickets' shrill sounds,

And muffled drums, the distant breathing of the night,
 You Tokowaly, you listen to what cannot be heard, and
 you explain to me what the ancestors are saying in the
 sea-like serenity of the constellations,
 The familiar bull, the scorpion, the leopard, the elephant
 and the fish,
 And the milky brilliance of the Spirits in the shell of celestial infinity,
 But here comes the complicity of the goddess Moon and
 the veils of the shadows fall,
 Night of Africa, my black night, mystical and bright, black
 and shining.¹⁶

So here I was poet of the world. The white man had discovered poetry that had nothing poetic about it. The soul of the white man was corrupted, and as a friend who taught in the United States told me: "The Blacks represent a kind of insurance for humanity in the eyes of the Whites. When the Whites feel they have become too mechanized, they turn to the Coloreds and request a little human sustenance." At last I had been recognized; I was no longer a nonentity.

I was soon to become disillusioned. Momentarily taken aback, the white man explained to me that genetically I represented a phase. "Your distinctive qualities have been exhausted by us. We have had our back-to-nature mystics such as you will never have. Take a closer look at our history and you'll understand how far this fusion has gone." I then had the feeling things were repeating themselves. My originality had been snatched from me. I wept for a long time, and then I began to live again. But I was haunted by a series of corrosive stereotypes: the Negro's *sui generis*

16. Senghor, *Chants d'ombre*, Éditions du Seuil, 1945.

smell . . . the Negro's *sui generis* good nature . . . the Negro's *sui generis* naïveté.

I tried to escape without being seen, but the Whites fell on me and hamstrung me on the left leg. I gauged the limits of my essence; as you can guess, it was fairly meager. It was here I made my most remarkable discovery, which in actual fact was a rediscovery.

In a frenzy I excavated black antiquity. What I discovered left me speechless. In his book on the abolition of slavery Schoelcher presented us with some compelling arguments. Since then, Frobenius, Westermann, and Delafosse, all white men, have voiced their agreement: Segou, Djenné, cities with over 100,000 inhabitants; accounts of learned black men (doctors of theology who traveled to Mecca to discuss the Koran). Once this had been dug up, displayed, and exposed to the elements, it allowed me to regain a valid historic category. The white man was wrong, I was not a primitive or a subhuman; I belonged to a race that had already been working silver and gold 2,000 years ago. And then there was something else, something the white man could not understand. Listen:

What sort of people were these, then, who had been torn away from their families, their country, and their gods with a savagery unparalleled in history?

Gentle people, polite, considerate, unquestionably superior to those who tortured them, that pack of adventurers who smashed, raped, and insulted Africa the better to loot her.

They knew how to erect houses, administer empires, build cities, cultivate the land, smelt iron ore, weave cotton, and forge steel.

Their religion had a beauty of its own, based on mysterious contacts with the city's founder. Their customs were agreeable, built on solidarity, goodwill, and respect for age.

No coercion, but mutual aid, the joy of living, and freely consented discipline.

Order—strength—poetry and liberty.

From the untroubled private citizen to the almost mythical leader there was an unbroken chain of understanding and trust. No science? Yes of course there was, but they had magnificent myths to protect them from fear where the keenest of observations and the boldest of imagination harmonized and fused. No art? They had their magnificent sculpture where human emotion exploded so violently that it set in motion, according to the haunting laws of rhythm, the elements invoked to capture and redistribute the most secret forces of the universe.¹⁷

Monuments in the very heart of Africa? Schools? Hospitals? Not a single bourgeois in the twentieth century, no Durand, no Smith or Brown even suspects that such things existed in Africa before the Europeans came. . . .

But Schoelcher signals their presence as recorded by Caillé, Mollien, and the Cander brothers. And although he mentions nowhere that when the Portuguese landed on the shores of the Congo in 1498, they discovered a rich and flourishing state and that the elders at the court of Ambasse were dressed in silks and brocade, at least he knows that Africa raised itself to a legal notion of state, and midway through this century of imperialism he hints that after all European civilization is but one among many—and not the most merciful.¹⁸

I put the white man back in his place; emboldened, I jostled him and hurled in his face: accommodate me as I am; I'm not accommodating anyone. I snickered to my heart's delight. The white man was visibly growl-

17. Aimé Césaire, Introduction to Victor Schoelcher, *Esclavage et colonisation*, p. 7.

18. Ibid., p. 8.

ing. His reaction was a long time coming. I had won. I was overjoyed.

"Lay aside your history, your research into the past, and try to get in step with our rhythm. In a society such as ours, industrialized to the extreme, dominated by science, there is no longer room for your sensitivity. You have to be tough to be able to live. It is no longer enough to play ball with the world; you have to master it with integrals and atoms. Of course, they will tell me, from time to time when we are tired of all that concrete, we will turn to you as our children, our naive, ingenuous, and spontaneous children. We will turn to you as the childhood of the world. You are so authentic in your life, so playful. Let us forget for a few moments our formal, polite civilization and bend down over those heads, those adorable expressive faces. In a sense, you reconcile us with ourselves."

So they were countering my irrationality with rationality, my rationality with the "true rationality." I couldn't hope to win. I tested my heredity. I did a complete checkup of my sickness. I wanted to be typically black—that was out of the question. I wanted to be white—that was a joke. And when I tried to claim my negritude intellectually as a concept, they snatched it away from me. They proved to me that my reasoning was nothing but a phase in the dialectic:

But there is something more serious. The Negro, as we have said, creates an anti-racist racism. He does not at all wish to dominate the world; he wishes the abolition of racial privileges wherever they are found; he affirms his solidarity with the oppressed of all colors. At a blow the subjective, existential, ethnic notion of *Negritude* "passes," as Hegel would say, into the objective, positive, exact notion of the *proletariat*. "For Césaire," says Senghor, "the 'White' symbolizes

capital as the Negro, labor. . . . Among the black men of his race, it is the struggle of the world proletariat which he sings."

This is easier to say than work out. And without doubt it is not by hazard that the most ardent of apostles of Negritude are at the same time militant Marxists.

But nevertheless the notion of race does not intersect with the notion of class: the one is concrete and particular, the other is universal and abstract; one resorts to that which Jaspers names comprehension and the other to intellection; the first is the product of a psycho-biological syncretism and the other is a methodical construction emerging from experience. In fact, Negritude appears as the weak stage of a dialectical progression: the theoretical and practical affirmation of white supremacy is the thesis; the position of Negritude as antithetical value is the moment of negativity. But this negative moment is not sufficient in itself and the Blacks who employ it well know it; they know that it serves to pave the way for the synthesis or the realization of the human society without race. Thus Negritude is dedicated to its own destruction, it is transition and not result, a means and not the ultimate goal.¹⁹

When I read this page, I felt they had robbed me of my last chance. I told my friends: "The generation of young black poets has just been dealt a fatal blow." We had appealed to a friend of the colored peoples, and this friend had found nothing better to do than demonstrate the relativity of their action. For once this friend, this born Hegelian, had forgotten that consciousness needs to get lost in the night of the absolute, the only condition for attaining self-consciousness. To counter rationalism he

19. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Orphée Noir*, preface to *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache*, translated by S. W. Allen as *Black Orpheus*, Présence Africaine, Paris, 1976, pp. 59–60.

recalled the negative side, but he forgot that this negativity draws its value from a virtually substantial absolutivity. Consciousness committed to experience knows nothing, has to know nothing, of the essence and determination of its being.

Black Orpheus marks a date in the intellectualization of black *existence*. And Sartre's mistake was not only to seek the source of the spring, but in a certain way to drain the spring dry.

Will the source of Poetry silence itself? Or indeed will the great black river, despite all, color the sea into which it flows? No matter; to each epoch its poetry, for each epoch the circumstances of history elect a nation, a race, a class, to seize again the torch, by creating situations which can express or surpass themselves only through Poetry. At times the poetic élan coincides with the revolutionary élan and at times they diverge. Let us salute today the historic chance which will permit the Blacks to "raise the great Negro shout with a force that will shake the foundations of the world" (Césaire).²⁰

And there you have it; I did not create a meaning for myself; the meaning was already there, waiting. It is not as the wretched nigger, it is not with my nigger's teeth, it is not as the hungry nigger that I fashion a torch to set the world alight; the torch was already there, waiting for this historic chance.

In terms of consciousness, black consciousness claims to be an absolute density, full of itself, a stage pre-existent to any opening, to any abolition of the self by desire. In his essay Jean-Paul Sartre has destroyed black impulsiveness. He should have opposed the unforeseeable to historical destiny. I needed to lose myself totally

20. Ibid., p. 65.

in negritude. Perhaps one day, deep in this wretched romanticism . . .

In any case *I needed* not to know. This struggle, this descent once more, should be seen as a completed aspect. There is nothing more disagreeable than to hear: "You'll change, my boy; I was like that too when I was young. . . . You'll see, you'll get over it."

The dialectic that introduces necessity as a support for my freedom expels me from myself. It shatters my impulsive position. Still regarding consciousness, black consciousness is immanent in itself. I am not a potentiality of something; I am fully what I am. I do not have to look for the universal. There's no room for probability inside me. My black consciousness does not claim to be a loss. It is. It merges with itself.

But, they will argue, your assertions do not take into consideration the historical process. Listen, then:

Africa I have kept your memory Africa
 You are inside me
 Like the splinter in the wound
 Like a guardian fetish in the center of the village
 Make me the stone in your sling
 Make my mouth the lips of your wound
 Make my knees the broken pillars of your abasement
 AND YET
 I want to be of your race alone
 Workers peasants of every land. . . .
 . . . white worker in Detroit black peon in Alabama
 Countless people in capitalist slavery
 Destiny ranges us shoulder to shoulder
 Repudiating the ancient maledictions of blood taboos
 We trample the ruins of our solitudes.
 If the flood is a frontier
 We will strip the gully of its inexhaustible flowing locks
 If the Sierra is a frontier

We will smash the jaws of the volcanoes
 Establishing the Cordilleras
 And the plain will be the playground of the dawn
 Where we regroup our forces sundered
 By the deceits of our masters
 As the contradiction of the features
 Creates the harmony of the face
 We proclaim the unity of suffering
 And revolt
 Of all the peoples over the face of the earth
 And we mix the mortar of the age of brotherhood
 In the dust of idols.²¹

Precisely, we will reply; the black experience is ambiguous, for there is not *one* Negro—there are *many* black men. What a difference, for example, in this other poem:

The white man killed my father
 Because my father was proud
 The white man raped my mother
 Because my mother was beautiful
 The white man wore out my brother in the hot sun of the
 roads
 Because my brother was strong
 Then the white man turned to me
 His hands red with blood
 Spat black his contempt into my face
 And in his master's voice:
 "Hey boy, a pastis, a towel, some water."²²

And this one:

My brother with teeth that glisten at the compliments of
 hypocrites
 My brother with gold-rimmed spectacles

21. Jacques Roumain, *Bois d'ébène*, "Prelude."

22. David Diop, *Trois Poèmes*, "Le temps du martyre."

Over your eyes turned blue by the Master's voice
 My poor brother in a dinner jacket with silk lapels
 Cheeping and whispering and swaggering through the
 drawing rooms of Condescension

How pathetic you are

The sun of your native country is nothing more than a
 shadow

On your serene, civilized face

And your grandmother's hut

Brings blushes to a face whitened by years of humiliation
 and mea culpa

But when gorged with empty, lofty words

Like the box on top of your shoulders

You step again on the bitter red earth of Africa

These words of anguish will beat rhythm to your uneasy
 walk

I feel so alone, so alone here!²³

From time to time you feel like giving up. Expressing the real is an arduous job. But when you take it into your head to express existence, you will very likely encounter nothing but the nonexistent. What is certain is that at the very moment when I endeavored to grasp my being, Sartre, who remains "the Other," by naming me shattered my last illusion. While I was telling him:

My negritude is neither a tower nor a cathedral
 It reaches deep down into the red flesh of the soil
 It reaches deep into the blazing flesh of the sky
 It pierces opaque prostration with its patience.

While I, in a paroxysm of experience and rage, was proclaiming this, he reminded me that my negritude was nothing but a weak stage. Truthfully, I'm telling you, I

23. David Diop, *Le Renégat*.

sensed my shoulders slipping from this world, and my feet no longer felt the caress of the ground. Without a black past, without a black future, it was impossible for me to live my blackness. Not yet white, no longer completely black, I was damned. Jean-Paul Sartre forgets that the black man suffers in his body quite differently from the white man.²⁴

Between the white man and me there is irremediably a relationship of transcendence.²⁵

But we have forgotten my constancy in love. I define myself as absolutely and sustainedly open-minded. And I take this negritude and with tears in my eyes I piece together the mechanism. That which had been shattered is rebuilt and constructed by the intuitive lianas of my hands.

My shout rings out more violently: I am a nigger, I am a nigger, I am a nigger.

And it's my poor brother living his neurosis to the extreme who finds himself paralyzed:

The Negro: I can't ma'am.

Lizzie: Why not?

The Negro: I can't shoot white folks.

Lizzie: Really! They have no qualms doing it!

The Negro: They're white folks, ma'am.

Lizzie: So what? Maybe they got a right to bleed you like a pig just because they're white?

The Negro: But they're white folks."

24. Though Sartre's speculations on the existence of "the Other" remain correct (insofar as, we may recall, *Being and Nothingness* describes an alienated consciousness), their application to a black consciousness proves fallacious because the white man is not only "the Other," but also the master, whether real or imaginary.

25. In the sense meant by Jean Wahl, *Existence humaine et transcendance*, "Being and Thinking."

A feeling of inferiority? No, a feeling of not existing. Sin is black as virtue is white. All those white men, fingering their guns, can't be wrong. I am guilty. I don't know what of, but I know I'm a wretch.

The Negro: That's how it goes, ma'am. That's how it always goes with white folks.

Lizzie: You too? You feel guilty?

The Negro: Yes, ma'am.²⁶

It's Bigger Thomas who is afraid, terribly afraid. But afraid of what? Of himself. We don't yet know who he is, but he knows that fear will haunt the world once the world finds out. And when the world finds out, the world always expects something from the black man. He is afraid that the world will find out; he is afraid of the fear in the world if the world knew. Like this old woman who begs us on her knees to tie her to the bed:

"I just know, Doctor. Any minute that thing will take hold of me."

"What thing?"

"Wanting to kill myself. Tie me down, I'm scared."

In the end, Bigger Thomas acts. He acts to put an end to the tension, he answers the world's expectations.²⁷

It's the character in *If He Hollers Let Him Go*²⁸ who does precisely what he did not want to do. That voluptuous blonde who is always in his path, succumbing, sensual, sexually available, fearing (desiring) to be raped, in the end becomes his mistress.

26. Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Respectful Prostitute*. See also *Home of the Brave*, film by Mark Robson.

27. Richard Wright, *Native Son*.

28. Chester Himes.

The black man is a toy in the hands of the white man. So in order to break the vicious circle, he explodes. I can't go to the movies without encountering myself. I wait for myself. Just before the film starts, I wait for myself. Those in front of me look at me, spy on me, wait for me. A black bellhop is going to appear. My aching heart makes my head spin.

The crippled soldier from the Pacific war tells my brother: "Get used to your color the way I got used to my stump. We are both casualties."²⁹

Yet, with all my being, I refuse to accept this amputation. I feel my soul as vast as the world, truly a soul as deep as the deepest of rivers; my chest has the power to expand to infinity. I was made to give and they prescribe for me the humility of the cripple. When I opened my eyes yesterday I saw the sky in total revulsion. I tried to get up but the eviscerated silence surged toward me with paralyzed wings. Not responsible for my acts, at the crossroads between Nothingness and Infinity, I began to weep.

29. *Home of the Brave*.