Will Barlow

ENGL 379

Professor Jefferess

Critical Engagement Assignment

4 October 2021

Re-Righting *Black Orpheus*

I would like to begin this essay by first acknowledging my place as a twenty-three-year-old white male from the United States. My goal among fulfilling the prompt of this essay is to elevate the voice of Frantz Fanon and deconstruct the struggle he speaks about in this text. Before I summarize the Fanon’s critical reclamation of black existence and experience, I would like to highlight this excerpt from the text:

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’ (Fanon 114).

The chapter, “The Lived Experience of the Black Man” from *Black Skin, White Masks* by Franz Fanon contains within its intricate exposé of black subjectivity a reclamation of the racialized black experience and the meaning of black existence. In this vein, Fanon reclaims what it means to be racialized as black by criticizing Sartre’s Black Orpheus and establishes important groundwork for deconstructing racist ideologies.

The moment in the narrative where Fanon announces, “I put the white man back in his place… and hurled in his face: accommodate me as I am; I’m not accommodating anyone… The white man was visibly growling. His reaction was a long time coming. I had won…”, is where Fanon’s reclamation begins (110-111). This announcement follows Fanon’s realization that he is not subhuman because of his race and that his race has a rich history and culture and—using the white man’s rhetoric— “had already been working silver and gold 2,000 years ago” (Fanon 109).

The chapter continues to reveal that this perceived victory is but a mirage when another speaker interjects and counters this declaring, “Lay aside your history, your research into the past, and try to get in step with our rhythm” where the speaker’s rhythm is “mastering integrals and atoms to industrialize and dominate with science” (Fanon 111). At this point, Fanon has been robbed of his previous victory of intellect to which he says, “they were countering my rationality with the ‘true rationality’… when I tried to claim my negritude intellectually as a concept, they snatched it away from me” (Fanon 111). This prompts a reveal of a section from *Black Orpheus* where Sartre claims, “The Negro creates an anti-racist racism… without a doubt the most ardent of apostles of Negritude are at the same time militant Marxists” and that “Negritude is dedicated to its own destruction as a transition or a means not the result or the ultimate goal” (Fanon 111-112).

Fanon then expresses his dismay, “...they had robbed me of my last chance” and he divulges a criticism of Sartre’s *Black Orpheus*, highlighting how it marginalizes people by means of “sapping the intellectual wellspring of intellectualized black existence dry” (Franz 113). The narrative then ricochets between a metaphysical representation of the back-and-forth argument between Sartre’s faction and Fanon’s, “they argue our assertions do not take into consideration the historical process… we will reply; the black experience is ambiguous, for there is not *one* Negro—there are *many* black men” (114-115). Fanon continues sparring with Sartre’s ideology, emphasizing that it ultimately dehumanizes him for being a black man, “Jean-Paul Sartre forgets that the black man suffers in his body quite differently from the white man…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” (117-118). The chapter solemnly concludes with Fanon weeping, knowing that he is not responsible for his actions, but still held accountable for them: “Not responsible for my acts, at the crossroads between Nothingness and Infinity, I began to weep” (119).

The following part of this paper will engage with a close reading analysis of the previously summarized text in relation to the concepts of re-reighting and re-writing, colonialism as an experience, and overdetermination from the outside. In order to analyze Fanon’s reclamation and deconstructive groundwork, I will begin with his conclusion and highlight the aspects of the narrative that contribute to it. Fanon’s conclusion, where I believe he cements the groundwork for deconstructing Sartre’s work and thus work of similar nature, is incredibly emotive. In fact, it is the climax of an emotional narrative where Fanon finds himself “in between Nothingness and Infinity”. Now, what is Nothingness and Infinity? Earlier in the passage, Fanon expresses existential distress while he processes *Black Orpheus*: “Without a black past, without a black future, it was impossible for me to live my blackness” (117). What pushed Fanon to this existential crisis? What makes it impossible to “live his blackness”? It may seem like a simple answer, however the answers I will explore are merely the tip of the iceberg—an indication of the work that still needs to be done.

While clearly, Sartre’s words from *Black Orpheus* are to blame for Fanon’s existential crisis, there is an entire history encompassed by this narrative that should not go unacknowledged. I chose to summarize this concept from the point in the chapter where Fanon expresses an early victory because that victory was brought forth by discovering his race’s past outside of the white gaze. That victory was a rational reassertion of his place as a black man in this world in language that was to be respected by “the white man”. For Fanon it was progress where he was never expected to make any. This is why Sartre’s words cut so deep. Though they do not say so explicitly, Sartre’s words echo those of the unnamed speaker who says, “Lay aside your history, your research into the past, and try to get in step with our rhythm” (Fanon 111). And this is where Fanon’s narrative begins its rhetorical work. Clearly, within the narrative, Fanon has found purpose and hope in examining his past outside of the white gaze: “The white man was wrong, was not a primitive or subhuman…” (109). So why must he be subject to Sartre? Here, we must examine Sartre’s ideology expressed in *Black Orpheus*. Sartre writes:

But there is something more serious. The Negro, as we have said, creates an anti-racist racism. He does not wish to dominate the world; he wishes the abolition of racial privileges wherever they are found… At a blow the subjective, existential ethnic notion of Negritude ‘passes’, as Hegel would say, into the objective, positive, exact notion of the *proletariat*… And without a doubt it is not by hazard that the most ardent of apostles of Negritude are at the same time militant Marxists… Negritude is dedicated to its own destruction, it is transition and not result, a means and not the ultimate goal (Fanon 112).

Sartre effectively lays the framework for confining any proprietors of “Negritude” (a better word for this might be black activism) to be nothing more than toilers, that are perpetually in pursuit of “transition” and “means” with no “ultimate goal”. Likewise, he racially condemns “Negritude”-ists as “*militant* Marxists” thus aligning these people who are merely seeking to be esteemed as human equals to impulsive, racist ant-racists.

Fanon then proceeds to elicit his deconstruction of Sartre, however in a rhetorical narrative fashion as opposed to the classical manner of argumentation. He engages with Sartre’s destructive words as a person, not as an academic. The emotions that transcend argumentation are purposeful and the line, “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’” is a deconstructive call to action (Fanon 114). This call to action is brought forth by Fanon’s engagement with Sartre.

Fanon first reflects on Sartre by describing “black impulsiveness” and emphasizing how Sartre’s essay “destroyed black impulsiveness” (113). He then expresses his need to “lose [himself] totally in negritude” (113). This correlates to the conclusion of the chapter where Fanon says, “the black man is a toy in the hands of the white man, so on order to break the vicious circle, he explodes” (119). In other words, Fanon’s human response to Sartre is to engulf himself fully in “Negritude” and “explode”. This seemingly extreme reaction, through Fanon’s narrative now becomes understandable and this is the crux of his deconstructive groundwork. Fanon reclaims his existence as a black man and what it means by laying this deconstructive groundwork through conveying his experience of being black in a narrative form by emphasizing historical moments and intellectual discourses that are critical to his experience and self-identity.

Work Cited

Fanon, Frantz, *Black Skin, White Masks*. Grove Press 2008.