

Japanon
black
skin
white
masks

Introductions by
Homi Bhabha and Ziauddin Sardar

GET  POLITICAL

Black Skin, White Masks

black skin white masks

FRANTZ FANON

Translated by Charles Lam Markmann

Forewords by
Ziauddin Sardar and Homi K. Bhabha

PLUTO PRESS
www.plutobooks.com



Originally published by Editions de Seuil, France, 1952 as *Peau Noire*,
Masques Blanc

First published in the United Kingdom in 1986 by Pluto Press

345 Archway Road, London N6 5AA

This new edition published 2008

www.plutobooks.com

Copyright © Editions de Seuil 1952

English translation copyright © Grove Press Inc 1967

The right of Homi K. Bhabha and Ziauddin Sardar to be identified as the authors of the forewords to this work has been asserted by them in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 7453 2849 2 Hardback

ISBN 978 0 7453 2848 5 Paperback

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental standards of the country of origin. The paper may contain up to 70% post consumer waste.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Designed and produced for Pluto Press by

Chase Publishing Services Ltd, Sidmouth, EX10 9QG, England

Typeset by Stanford DTP Services, Northampton

Printed and bound in the European Union by

CPI Antony Rowe, Chippenham and Eastbourne

CONTENTS

<i>Foreword to the 2008 edition</i> by Ziauddin Sardar	vi
<i>Foreword to the 1986 edition</i> by Homi K. Bhabha	xxi
<i>Translator's Note</i>	xxxviii
 Introduction	 1
 1 The Negro and Language	 8
2 The Woman of Color and the White Man	28
3 The Man of Color and the White Woman	45
4 The So-Called Dependency Complex of Colonized Peoples	61
5 The Fact of Blackness	82
6 The Negro and Psychopathology	109
7 The Negro and Recognition	163
8 By Way of Conclusion	174
 <i>Index</i>	 182

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

I would like to acknowledge the contributions made to this translation by André Leveillé of Rome, Italy, and Doctors Ruth M. and William F. Murphy of Lincoln and Boston, Massachusetts. To M. Leveillé I am indebted for many clarifications of French terms and slang, on certain events of the postwar period that received more attention in France than in America, on relevant details of daily life in France, and on matters Antillean and Algerian. To the Doctors Murphy I am grateful for help with the terminology of psychology and psychiatry and elucidations on European practices in the field.

—C.L.M.

THE NEGRO AND LANGUAGE

I ascribe a basic importance to the phenomenon of language. That is why I find it necessary to begin with this subject, which should provide us with one of the elements in the colored man's comprehension of the dimension of *the other*. For it is implicit that to speak is to exist absolutely for the other.

The black man has two dimensions. One with his fellows, the other with the white man. A Negro behaves differently with a white man and with another Negro. That this self-division is a direct result of colonialist subjugation is beyond question. . . . No one would dream of doubting that its major artery is fed from the heart of those various theories that have tried to prove that the Negro is a stage in the slow evolution of monkey into man. Here is objective evidence that expresses reality.

But when one has taken cognizance of this situation, when one has understood it, one considers the job completed. How can one then be deaf to that voice rolling down the stages of history: "What matters is not to know the world but to change it."

This matters appallingly in our lifetime.

To speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization. Since the situation is not one-way only, the statement of it should reflect the fact. Here the reader is asked to concede certain points that, however unacceptable they may seem in the beginning, will find the measure of their validity in the facts.

The problem that we confront in this chapter is this: The Negro of the Antilles will be proportionately whiter—that is, he will come closer to being a real human being—in direct ratio to his mastery of the French language. I am not unaware that this is

one of man's attitudes face to face with Being. A man who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language. What we are getting at becomes plain: Mastery of language affords remarkable power. Paul Valéry knew this, for he called language "the god gone astray in the flesh."¹

In a work now in preparation I propose to investigate this phenomenon.² For the moment I want to show why the Negro of the Antilles, whoever he is, has always to face the problem of language. Furthermore, I will broaden the field of this description and through the Negro of the Antilles include every colonized man.

Every colonized people—in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality—finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country. The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards. He becomes whiter as he renounces his blackness, his jungle. In the French colonial army, and particularly in the Senegalese regiments, the black officers serve first of all as interpreters. They are used to convey the master's orders to their fellows, and they too enjoy a certain position of honor.

There is the city, there is the country. There is the capital, there is the province. Apparently the problem in the mother country is the same. Let us take a Lyonnais in Paris: He boasts of the quiet of his city, the intoxicating beauty of the quays of the Rhône, the splendor of the plane trees, and all those other things that fascinate people who have nothing to do. If you meet him again when he has returned from Paris, and especially if you do not know the capital, he will never run out of its praises: Paris-city-of-light, the Seine, the little garden restaurants, know Paris and die. . . .

The process repeats itself with the man of Martinique. First of all on his island: Basse-Pointe, Marigot, Gros-Morne, and, opposite, the imposing Fort-de-France. Then, and this is the important point, beyond his island. The Negro who knows the mother country is a demigod. In this connection I offer a fact that must have struck

1. *Charmes* (Paris, Gallimard, 1952).

2. *Le langage et l'agressivité*.

my compatriots. Many of them, after stays of varying length in metropolitan France, go home to be deified. The most eloquent form of ambivalence is adopted toward them by the native, the one-who-never-crawled-out-of-his-hole, the *bitaco*. The black man who has lived in France for a length of time returns radically changed. To express it in genetic terms, his phenotype undergoes a definitive, an absolute mutation.³ Even before he had gone away, one could tell from the almost aerial manner of his carriage that new forces had been set in motion. When he met a friend or an acquaintance, his greeting was no longer the wide sweep of the arm: With great reserve our “new man” bowed slightly. The habitually raucous voice hinted at a gentle inner stirring as of rustling breezes. For the Negro knows that over there in France there is a stereotype of him that will fasten on to him at the pier in Le Havre or Marseille: “Ah come fom Mahtinique, it’s the fuhst time Ah’ve eveh come to Fance.” He knows that what the poets call the *divine gurgling* (listen to Creole) is only a halfway house between pidgin-nigger and French. The middle class in the Antilles never speak Creole except to their servants. In school the children of Martinique are taught to scorn the dialect. One avoids *Creolisms*. Some families completely forbid the use of Creole, and mothers ridicule their children for speaking it.

My mother wanting a son to keep in mind
 if you do not know your history lesson
 you will not go to mass on Sunday in
 your Sunday clothes
 that child will be a disgrace to the family
 that child will be our curse
 shut up I told you you must speak French
 the French of France
 the Frenchman’s French
 French French⁴

3. By that I mean that Negroes who return to their original environments convey the impression that they have completed a cycle, that they have added to themselves something that was lacking. They return literally full of themselves.

4. Léon-G. Damas, “Hoquet,” in *Pigments*, in Leopold S.-Senghor, ed., *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache* (Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1948), pp. 15–17.

Yes, I must take great pains with my speech, because I shall be more or less judged by it. With great contempt they will say of me, "He doesn't even know how to speak French."

In any group of young men in the Antilles, the one who expresses himself well, who has mastered the language, is inordinately feared; keep an eye on that one, he is almost white. In France one says, "He talks like a book." In Martinique, "He talks like a white man."

The Negro arriving in France will react against the myth of the R-eating man from Martinique. He will become aware of it, and he will really go to war against it. He will practice not only rolling his R but embroidering it. Furtively observing the slightest reactions of others, listening to his own speech, suspicious of his own tongue—a wretchedly lazy organ—he will lock himself into his room and read aloud for hours—desperately determined to learn *diction*.

Recently an acquaintance told me a story. A Martinique Negro landed at Le Havre and went into a bar. With the utmost self-confidence he called, "Waiterrr! Bing me a beeya." Here is a genuine intoxication. Resolved not to fit the myth of the nigger-who-eats his-R's, he had acquired a fine supply of them but allocated it badly.

There is a psychological phenomenon that consists in the belief that the world will open to the extent to which frontiers are broken down. Imprisoned on his island, lost in an atmosphere that offers not the slightest outlet, the Negro breathes in this appeal of Europe like pure air. For, it must be admitted, Aimé Césaire was generous—in his *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*. This town of Fort-de-France is truly flat, stranded. Lying there naked to the sun, that "flat, sprawling city, stumbling over its own common sense, winded by its load of endlessly repeated crosses, pettish at its destiny, voiceless, thwarted in every direction, incapable of feeding on the juices of its soil, blocked, cut off, confined, divorced from fauna and flora."⁵

Césaire's description of it is anything but poetic. It is understandable, then, when at the news that he is getting into France

5. *Cahiers* (Paris, Présence Africaine, 1956), p. 30.

(quite like someone who, in the colloquial phrase, is “getting a start in life”) the black man is jubilant and makes up his mind to change. There is no thematic pattern, however; his structure changes independently of any reflective process. In the United States there is a center directed by Pearce and Williamson; it is called Peckham. These authors have shown that in married couples a biochemical alteration takes place in the partners, and, it seems, they have discovered the presence of certain hormones in the husband of a pregnant woman. It would be equally interesting—and there are plenty of subjects for the study—to investigate the modifications of body fluids that occur in Negroes when they arrive in France. Or simply to study through tests the psychic changes both before they leave home and after they have spent a month in France.

What are by common consent called the human sciences have their own drama. Should one postulate a type for human reality and describe its psychic modalities only through deviations from it, or should one not rather strive unremittingly for a concrete and ever new understanding of man?

When one reads that after the age of twenty-nine a man can no longer love and that he must wait until he is forty-nine before his capacity for affect revives, one feels the ground give way beneath one. The only possibility of regaining one’s balance is to face the whole problem, for all these discoveries, all these inquiries lead only in one direction: to make man admit that he is nothing, absolutely nothing—and that he must put an end to the narcissism on which he relies in order to imagine that he is different from the other “animals.”

This amounts to nothing more nor less than *man’s surrender*.

Having reflected on that, I grasp my narcissism with both hands and I turn my back on the degradation of those who would make man a mere mechanism. If there can be no discussion on a philosophical level—that is, the plane of the basic needs of human reality—I am willing to work on the psychoanalytical level—in other words, the level of the “failures,” in the sense in which one speaks of engine failures.

The black man who arrives in France changes because to him the country represents the Tabernacle; he changes not only because it is from France that he received his knowledge of Montesquieu, Rousseau, and Voltaire, but also because France gave him his physicians, his department heads, his innumerable little functionaries—from the sergeant-major “fifteen years in the service” to the policeman who was born in Panissières. There is a kind of magic vault of distance, and the man who is leaving next week for France creates round himself a magic circle in which the words *Paris, Marseille, Sorbonne, Pigalle* become the keys to the vault. He leaves for the pier, and the amputation of his being diminishes as the silhouette of his ship grows clearer. In the eyes of those who have come to see him off he can read the evidence of his own mutation, his power. “Good-by bandanna, good-by straw hat. . . .”

Now that we have got him to the dock, let him sail; we shall see him again. For the moment, let us go to welcome one of those who are coming home. The “newcomer” reveals himself at once; he answers only in French, and often he no longer understands Creole. There is a relevant illustration in folklore. After several months of living in France, a country boy returns to his family. Noticing a farm implement, he asks his father, an old don’t-pull-that-kind-of-thing-on-me peasant, “Tell me, what does one call that apparatus?” His father replies by dropping the tool on the boy’s feet, and the amnesia vanishes. Remarkable therapy.

There is the newcomer, then. He no longer understands the dialect, he talks about the Opéra, which he may never have seen except from a distance, but above all he adopts a critical attitude toward his compatriots. Confronted with the most trivial occurrence, he becomes an oracle. He is the one who knows. He betrays himself in his speech. At the Savannah, where the young men of Fort-de-France spend their leisure, the spectacle is revealing: Everyone immediately waits for the newcomer to speak. As soon as the school day ends, they all go to the Savannah. This Savannah seems to have its own poetry. Imagine a square about 600 feet long and 125 feet wide, its sides bounded by worm-eaten tamarind trees, one end marked by the huge war memorial (the

nation's gratitude to its children), the other by the Central Hotel; a miserable tract of uneven cobbles, pebbles that roll away under one's feet; and, amid all this, three or four hundred young fellows walking up and down, greeting one another, grouping—no, they never form groups, they go on walking.

"How's it going?"

"O.K. How's it with you?"

"O.K."

And that goes on for fifty years. Yes, this city is deplorably played out. So is its life.

They meet and talk. And if the newcomer soon gets the floor, it is because they were *waiting for him*. First of all to observe his manner: The slightest departure is seized on, picked apart, and in less than forty-eight hours it has been retailed all over Fort-de-France. There is no forgiveness when one who claims a superiority falls below the standard. Let him say, for instance, "It was not my good fortune, when in France, to observe mounted policemen," and he is done for. Only one choice remains to him: throw off his "Parisianism" or die of ridicule. For there is also no forgetting: When he marries, his wife will be aware that she is marrying a joke, and his children will have a legend to face and to live down.

What is the origin of this personality change? What is the source of this new way of being? Every dialect is a way of thinking, Damourette and Pichon said. And the fact that the newly returned Negro adopts a language different from that of the group into which he was born is evidence of a dislocation, a separation. Professor D. Westermann, in *The African Today* (p. 331), says that the Negroes' inferiority complex is particularly intensified among the most educated, who must struggle with it unceasingly. Their way of doing so, he adds, is frequently naive: "The wearing of European clothes, whether rags or the most up-to-date style; using European furniture and European forms of social intercourse; adorning the Native language with European expressions; using bombastic phrases in speaking or writing a European language; all these contribute to a feeling of equality with the European and his achievements."

On the basis of other studies and my own personal observations, I want to try to show why the Negro adopts such a position, peculiar to him, with respect to European languages. Let me point out once more that the conclusions I have reached pertain to the French Antilles; at the same time, I am not unaware that the same behavior patterns obtain in every race that has been subjected to colonization.

I have known—and unfortunately I still know—people born in Dahomey or the Congo who pretend to be natives of the Antilles; I have known, and I still know, Antilles Negroes who are annoyed when they are suspected of being Senegalese. This is because the Antilles Negro is more “civilized” than the African, that is, he is closer to the white man; and this difference prevails not only in back streets and on boulevards but also in public service and the army. Any Antilles Negro who performed his military service in a Senegalese infantry regiment is familiar with this disturbing climate: On one side he has the Europeans, whether born in his own country or in France, and on the other he has the Senegalese. I remember a day when, in the midst of combat, we had to wipe out a machine-gun nest. The Senegalese were ordered to attack three times, and each time they were forced back. Then one of them wanted to know why the *toubabs*⁶ did not go into action. At such times, one no longer knows whether one is *toubab* or “native.” And yet many Antilles Negroes see nothing to upset them in such European identification; on the contrary, they find it altogether normal. That would be all we need, to be taken for niggers! The Europeans despise the Senegalese, and the Antilles Negro rules the black roost as its unchallenged master. Admittedly as an extreme example, I offer a detail that is at least amusing. I was talking recently with someone from Martinique who told me with considerable resentment that some Guadeloupe Negroes were trying to “pass” as Martinicans. But, he added, the lie was rapidly discovered, because they are more savage than we are; which, again, means they are farther away from the white man. It is said that the Negro loves to jabber; in my own case, when

6. Literally, this dialect word means *European*; by extension it was applied to any officer. (Translator's note.)

I think of the word *jabber* I see a gay group of children calling and shouting for the sake of calling and shouting—children in the midst of play, to the degree to which play can be considered an initiation into life. The Negro loves to jabber, and from this theory it is not a long road that leads to a new proposition: The Negro is just a child. The psychoanalysts have a fine start here, and the term *orality* is soon heard.

But we have to go farther. The problem of language is too basic to allow us to hope to state it all here. Piaget's remarkable studies have taught us to distinguish the various stages in the mastery of language, and Gelb and Goldstein have shown us that the function of language is also broken into periods and steps. What interests us here is the black man confronted by the French language. We are trying to understand why the Antilles Negro is so fond of speaking French.

Jean-Paul Sartre, in *Orphée Noir*, which prefaces the *Anthology de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache*, tells us that the black poet will turn against the French language; but that does not apply in the Antilles. Here I share the opinion of Michel Leiris, who, discussing Creole, wrote not so long ago:

Even now, despite the fact that it is a language that everyone knows more or less, though only the illiterate use it to the exclusion of French, Creole seems already predestined to become a relic eventually, once public education (however slow its progress, impeded by the insufficiency of school facilities everywhere, the paucity of reading matter available to the public, and the fact that the physical scale of living is often too low) has become common enough among the disinherited classes of the population.

And, the author adds:

In the case of the poets that I am discussing here, there is no question of their deliberately becoming "Antilleans"—on the Provençal picturesque model—by employing a dead language which, furthermore, is utterly devoid of all external radiance regardless of its intrinsic qualities; it is rather a matter of their asserting, in opposition to white men filled with the worst racial prejudices, whose arrogance is more and more plainly demonstrated to be unfounded, the integrity of their personalities.⁷

7. "Martinique-Guadeloupe-Haiti," *Les Temps Modernes*, February, 1950, p. 1347.

If there is, for instance, a Gilbert Gratiant who writes in dialect, it must be admitted that he is a rarity. Let us point out, furthermore, that the poetic merit of such creation is quite dubious. There are, in contrast, real works of art translated from the Peul and Wolof dialects of Senegal, and I have found great interest in following the linguistic studies of Sheik Anta Diop.

Nothing of the sort in the Antilles. The language spoken officially is French; teachers keep a close watch over the children to make sure they do not use Creole. Let us not mention the ostensible reasons. It would seem, then, that the problem is this: In the Antilles, as in Brittany, there is a dialect and there is the French language. But this is false, for the Bretons do not consider themselves inferior to the French people. The Bretons have not been civilized by the white man.

By refusing to multiply our elements, we take the risk of not setting a limit to our field; for it is essential to convey to the black man that an attitude of rupture has never saved anyone. While it is true that I have to throw off an attacker who is strangling me, because I literally cannot breathe, the fact remains solely on the physiological foundation. To the mechanical problem of respiration it would be unsound to graft a psychological element, the impossibility of expansion.

What is there to say? Purely and simply this: When a bachelor of philosophy from the Antilles refuses to apply for certification as a teacher on the ground of his color, I say that philosophy has never saved anyone. When someone else strives and strains to prove to me that black men are as intelligent as white men, I say that intelligence has never saved anyone; and that is true, for, if philosophy and intelligence are invoked to proclaim the equality of men, they have also been employed to justify the extermination of men.

Before going any farther I find it necessary to say certain things. I am speaking here, on the one hand, of alienated (duped) blacks, and, on the other, of no less alienated (duping and duped) whites. If one hears a Sartre or a Cardinal Verdier declare that the outrage of the color problem has survived far too long, one can conclude only that their position is normal. Anyone can amass references

and quotations to prove that “color prejudice” is indeed an imbecility and an iniquity that must be eliminated.

Sartre begins *Orphée Noir* thus: “What then did you expect when you unbound the gag that had muted those black mouths? That they would chant your praises? Did you think that when those heads that our fathers had forcibly bowed down to the ground were raised again, you would find adoration in their eyes?”⁸ I do not know; but I say that he who looks into my eyes for anything but a perpetual question will have to lose his sight; neither recognition nor hate. And if I cry out, it will not be a black cry. No, from the point of view adopted here, there is no black problem. Or at any rate if there is one it concerns the whites only accidentally. It is a story that takes place in darkness, and the sun that is carried within me must shine into the smallest crannies.

Dr. H. L. Gordon, attending physician at the Mathari Mental Hospital in Nairobi, declared in an article in *The East African Medical Journal* (1943): “A highly technical skilled examination of a series of 100 brains of normal Natives has found naked eye and microscopic facts indicative of inherent new brain inferiority. . . . Quantitatively,” he added, “the inferiority amounts to 14.8 percent.”⁹

It has been said that the Negro is the link between monkey and man—meaning, of course, white man. And only on page 108 of his book does Sir Alan Burns come to the conclusion that “we are unable to accept as scientifically proved the theory that the black man is inherently inferior to the white, or that he comes from a different stock. . . .” Let me add that it would be easy to prove the absurdity of statements such as this: “It is laid down in the Bible that the separation of the white and black races will be continued in heaven as on earth, and those blacks who are admitted into the Kingdom of Heaven will find themselves separately lodged in certain of those many mansions of Our Father that are mentioned in the New Testament.” Or this: “We are the chosen people—look

8. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Orphée Noir*, in *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache*, p. ix.

9. Quoted in Sir Alan Burns, *Colour Prejudice* (London, Allen & Unwin, 1948), p. 101.

at the color of our skins. The others are black or yellow: That is because of their sins."

Ah, yes, as you can see, by calling on humanity, on the belief in dignity, on love, on charity, it would be easy to prove, or to win the admission, that the black is the equal of the white. But my purpose is quite different: What I want to do is help the black man to free himself of the arsenal of complexes that has been developed by the colonial environment. M. Achille, who teaches at the Lycée du Parc in Lyon, once during a lecture told of a personal experience. It is a universally known experience. It is a rare Negro living in France who cannot duplicate it. Being a Catholic, Achille took part in a student pilgrimage. A priest, observing the black face in his flock, said to him, "You go 'way big Savannah what for and come 'long us?" Very politely Achille gave him a truthful answer, and it was not the young fugitive from the Savannah who came off the worse. Everyone laughed at the exchange and the pilgrimage proceeded. But if we stop right here, we shall see that the fact that the priest spoke pidgin-nigger leads to certain observations:

1. "Oh, I know the blacks. They must be spoken to kindly; talk to them about their country; it's all in knowing how to talk to them. For instance. . . ." I am not at all exaggerating: A white man addressing a Negro behaves exactly like an adult with a child and starts smirking, whispering, patronizing, cozening. It is not one white man I have watched, but hundreds; and I have not limited my investigation to any one class but, if I may claim an essentially objective position, I have made a point of observing such behavior in physicians, policemen, employers. I shall be told, by those who overlook my purpose, that I should have directed my attention elsewhere, that there are white men who do not fit my description.

To these objections I reply that the subject of our study is the dupes and those who dupe them, the alienated, and that if there are white men who behave naturally when they meet Negroes, they certainly do not fall within the scope of our examination. If my patient's liver is functioning as it should, I am not going to take it for granted that his kidneys are sound. Having found the liver

normal, I leave it to its normality, which is normal, and turn my attention to the kidneys: As it happens, the kidneys are diseased. Which means simply that, side by side with normal people who behave naturally in accordance with a human psychology, there are others who behave pathologically in accordance with an inhuman psychology. And it happens that the existence of men of this sort has determined a certain number of realities to the elimination of which I should like to contribute here.

Talking to Negroes in this way gets down to their level, it puts them at ease, it is an effort to make them understand us, it reassures them. . . .

The physicians of the public health services know this very well. Twenty European patients, one after another, come in: "Please sit down. . . . Why do you wish to consult me? . . . What are your symptoms? . . ." Then comes a Negro or an Arab: "Sit there, boy. . . . What's bothering you? . . . Where does it hurt, huh? . . ." When, that is, they do not say: "You not feel good, no?"

2. To speak pidgin to a Negro makes him angry, because he himself is a pidgin-nigger-talker. But, I will be told, there is no wish, no intention to anger him. I grant this; but it is just this absence of wish, this lack of interest, this indifference, this automatic manner of classifying him, imprisoning him, primitivizing him, decivilizing him, that makes him angry.

If a man who speaks pidgin to a man of color or an Arab does not see anything wrong or evil in such behavior, it is because he has never stopped to think. I myself have been aware, in talking to certain patients, of the exact instant at which I began to slip. . . .

Examining this seventy-three-year-old farm woman, whose mind was never strong and who is now far gone in dementia, I am suddenly aware of the collapse of the *antennae* with which I touch and through which I am touched. The fact that I adopt a language suitable to dementia, to feeble-mindedness; the fact that I "talk down" to this poor woman of seventy-three; the fact that I condescend to her in my quest for a diagnosis, are the stigmata of a dereliction in my relations with other people.

What an idealist, people will say. Not at all: It is just that the others are scum. I make it a point always to talk to the so-called *bicots*¹⁰ in normal French, and I have always been understood. They answer me as well as their varying means permit; but I will not allow myself to resort to paternalistic “understanding.”

“G’morning, pal. Where’s it hurt? Huh? Lemme see—belly ache? Heart pain?”

With that indefinable tone that the hacks in the free clinics have mastered so well.

One feels perfectly justified when the patient answers in the same fashion. “You see? I wasn’t kidding you. That’s just the way they are.”

When the opposite occurs, one must retract one’s pseudopodia and behave like a man. The whole structure crumbles. A black man who says to you: “I am in no sense your boy, Monsieur. . . .” Something new under the sun.

But one must go lower. You are in a bar, in Rouen or Strasbourg, and you have the misfortune to be spotted by an old drunk. He sits down at your table right off. “You—Africa? Dakar, Rufisque, whorehouse, dames, café, mangoes, bananas. . . .” You stand up and leave, and your farewell is a torrent of abuse: “You didn’t play big shot like that in your jungle, you dirty nigger!”

Mannoni has described what he calls the Prospero complex. We shall come back to these discoveries, which will make it possible for us to understand the psychology of colonialism. But we can already state that to talk pidgin-nigger is to express this thought: “You’d better keep your place.”

I meet a Russian or a German who speaks French badly. With gestures I try to give him the information that he requests, but at the same time I can hardly forget that he has a language of his own, a country, and that perhaps he is a lawyer or an engineer there. In any case, he is foreign to my group, and his standards must be different.

When it comes to the case of the Negro, nothing of the kind. He has no culture, no civilization, no “long historical past.”

10. Vulgar French for *Arab*. (Translator’s note.)

This may be the reason for the strivings of contemporary Negroes: to prove the existence of a black civilization to the white world at all costs.

Willy-nilly, the Negro has to wear the livery that the white man has sewed for him. Look at children's picture magazines: Out of every Negro mouth comes the ritual "Yassuh, boss." It is even more remarkable in motion pictures. Most of the American films for which French dialogue is dubbed in offer the type-Negro: "Sho' good!"

In one of these recent films, *Requins d'acier*, one character was a Negro crewman in a submarine who talked in the most classic dialect imaginable. What is more, he was all *nigger*, walking backward, shaking at the slightest sign of irritation on the part of a petty officer; ultimately he was killed in the course of the voyage. Yet I am convinced that the original dialogue did not resort to the same means of expression. And, even if it did, I can see no reason why, in a democratic France that includes sixty million citizens of color, dubbing must repeat every stupidity that crosses the ocean. It is because the Negro has to be shown in a certain way; and from the Negro in *Sans Pitié*—"Me work hard, me never lie, me never steal"—to the servant girl of *Duel in the Sun* one meets the same stereotype.

Yes, the black man is supposed to be a good nigger; once this has been laid down, the rest follows of itself. To make him talk pidgin is to fasten him to the effigy of him, to snare him, to imprison him, the eternal victim of an essence, of an *appearance* for which he is not responsible. And naturally, just as a Jew who spends money without thinking about it is suspect, a black man who quotes Montesquieu had better be watched. Please understand me: watched in the sense that he is starting something. Certainly I do not contend that the black student is suspect to his fellows or to his teachers. But outside university circles there is an army of fools: What is important is not to educate them, but to teach the Negro not to be the slave of their archetypes.

That these imbeciles are the product of a psychological-economic system I will grant. But that does not get us much farther along.

When a Negro talks of Marx, the first reaction is always the same: "We have brought you up to our level and now you turn against your benefactors. Ingrates! Obviously nothing can be expected of you." And then too there is that bludgeon argument of the plantation-owner in Africa: Our enemy is the teacher.

What I am asserting is that the European has a fixed concept of the Negro, and there is nothing more exasperating than to be asked: "How long have you been in France? You speak French so well."

It can be argued that people say this because many Negroes speak pidgin. But that would be too easy. You are on a train and you ask another passenger: "I beg your pardon, sir, would you mind telling me where the dining-car is?"

"Sure, fella. You go out door, see, go corridor, you go straight, go one car, go two car, go three car, you there."

No, speaking pidgin-nigger closes off the black man; it perpetuates a state of conflict in which the white man injects the black with extremely dangerous foreign bodies. Nothing is more astonishing than to hear a black man express himself properly, for then in truth he is putting on the white world. I have had occasion to talk with students of foreign origin. They speak French badly: Little Crusoe, alias Prospero, is at ease then. He explains, informs, interprets, helps them with their studies. But with a Negro he is completely baffled; the Negro has made himself just as knowledgeable. With him this game cannot be played, he is a complete replica of the white man. So there is nothing to do but to give in.¹¹

After all that has just been said, it will be understood that the first impulse of the black man is to say *no* to those who attempt to build a definition of him. It is understandable that the first action of the black man is a *reaction*, and, since the Negro is appraised

11. "I knew some Negroes in the School of Medicine ... in a word, they were a disappointment; the color of their skin should have permitted them to give *us* the opportunity to be charitable, generous, or scientifically friendly. They were derelict in this duty, this claim on our good will. All our tearful tenderness, all our calculated solicitude were a drug on the market. We had no Negroes to condescend to, nor did we have anything to hate them for; they counted for virtually as much as we in the scale of the little jobs and petty chicaneries of daily life." Michel Salomon, "D'un juif à des nègres," *Présence Africaine*, No. 5, p. 776.

in terms of the extent of his assimilation, it is also understandable why the newcomer expresses himself only in French. It is because he wants to emphasize the rupture that has now occurred. He is incarnating a new type of man that he imposes on his associates and his family. And so his old mother can no longer understand him when he talks to her about his *duds*, the family's *crummy joint*, the *dump* . . . all of it, of course, tricked out with the appropriate accent.

In every country of the world there are climbers, "the ones who forget who they are," and, in contrast to them, "the ones who remember where they came from." The Antilles Negro who goes home from France expresses himself in dialect if he wants to make it plain that nothing has changed. One can feel this at the dock where his family and his friends are waiting for him. Waiting for him not only because he is physically arriving, but in the sense of waiting for the chance to strike back. They need a minute or two in order to make their diagnosis. If the voyager tells his acquaintances, "I am so happy to be back with you. Good Lord, it is hot in this country, I shall certainly not be able to endure it very long," they know: A European has got off the ship.

In a more limited group, when students from the Antilles meet in Paris, they have the choice of two possibilities:

—either to stand with the white world (that is to say, the real world), and, since they will speak French, to be able to confront certain problems and incline to a certain degree of universality in their conclusions;

—or to reject Europe, "Yo,"¹² and cling together in their dialect, making themselves quite comfortable in what we shall call the *Umwelt* of Martinique; by this I mean—and this applies particularly to my brothers of the Antilles—that when one of us tries, in Paris or any other university city, to study a problem seriously, he is accused of self-aggrandizement, and the surest way of cutting him down is to remind him of the Antilles by exploding into dialect. This must be recognized as one of the

12. A generic term for *other people*, applied especially to Europeans.

reasons why so many friendships collapse after a few months of life in Europe.

My theme being the disalienation of the black man, I want to make him feel that whenever there is a lack of understanding between him and his fellows in the presence of the white man there is a lack of judgment.

A Senegalese learns Creole in order to pass as an Antilles native: I call this alienation.

The Antilles Negroes who know him never weary of making jokes about him: I call this a lack of judgment.

It becomes evident that we were not mistaken in believing that a study of the language of the Antilles Negro would be able to show us some characteristics of his world. As I said at the start, there is a retaining-wall relation between language and group.

To speak a language is to take on a world, a culture. The Antilles Negro who wants to be white will be the whiter as he gains greater mastery of the cultural tool that language is. Rather more than a year ago in Lyon, I remember, in a lecture I had drawn a parallel between Negro and European poetry, and a French acquaintance told me enthusiastically, "At bottom you are a white man." The fact that I had been able to investigate so interesting a problem through the white man's language gave me honorary citizenship.

Historically, it must be understood that the Negro wants to speak French because it is the key that can open doors which were still barred to him fifty years ago. In the Antilles Negro who comes within this study we find a quest for subtleties, for refinements of language—so many further means of proving to himself that he has measured up to the culture.¹³ It has been said that the orators of the Antilles have a gift of eloquence that would leave any European breathless. I am reminded of a relevant story: In the election campaign of 1945, Aimé Césaire, who was seeking

13. Compare for example the almost incredible store of anecdotes to which the election of any candidate gives rise. A filthy newspaper called the *Canard Déchainé* could not get its fill of overwhelming Monsieur B. with devastating Creolisms. This is indeed the bludgeon of the Antilles: *He can't express himself in French.*

a deputy's seat, addressed a large audience in the boys' school in Fort-de-France. In the middle of his speech a woman fainted. The next day, an acquaintance told me about this, and commented: "*Français a té tellement chaud que la femme là tombé malcadi*."¹⁴ The power of language!

Some other facts are worth a certain amount of attention: for example, Charles-André Julien introducing Aimé Césaire as "a Negro poet with a university degree," or again, quite simply, the expression, "a great black poet."

These ready-made phrases, which seem in a common-sense way to fill a need—for Aimé Césaire is really black and a poet—have a hidden subtlety, a permanent rub. I know nothing of Jean Paulhan except that he writes very interesting books; I have no idea how old Roger Caillois is, since the only evidence I have of his existence are the books of his that streak across my horizon. And let no one accuse me of affective allergies; what I am trying to say is that there is no reason why André Breton should say of Césaire, "Here is a black man who handles the French language as no white man today can."¹⁵

And, even though Breton may be stating a fact, I do not see why there should be any paradox, anything to underline, for in truth M. Aimé Césaire is a native of Martinique and a university graduate.

Again we find this in Michel Leiris:

If in the writers of the Antilles there does exist a desire to break away from the literary forms associated with formal education, such a desire, oriented toward a purer future, could not take on an aspect of folklore. Seeking above all, in literature, to formulate the message that is properly theirs, and in the case of some of them at least, to be the spokesmen of an authentic race whose potentials have never been acknowledged, they scorn such devices. Their intellectual growth took place almost exclusively within the framework of the French language, and it would be artifice for

14. "*Le français (l'élégance de la forme) était tellement chaud que la femme est tombée en transes*" [His French (the refinement of his style) was so exciting that the woman swooned away].

15. Introduction to *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, p. 14.

them to resort to a mode of speech that they virtually never use now except as something learned.¹⁶

But we should be honored, the blacks will reproach me, that a white man like Breton writes such things.

Let us go on. . . .

16. Michel Leiris, *op. cit.*