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Eros in Infinity and Totality

A Reading of Levinas and Fanon

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Emmanuel Levinas and Frantz Fanon, two thinkers with vast biographical differences, share some central impulses in their thinking. One such impulse is the movement between totality and infinity, configured as philosophical concepts that become useful in pressing further, the more natural, mental processes or intellectual procedures prevalent in twentieth century thought, particularly within French philosophy. Fanon's short life (1925–1961) and Levinas's long one (1906–1995) put their respective writings in very different frameworks, allowing us to see how these concepts played out in divergent ways in the case of two intellectuals whose sensibilities and aspirations as thinkers place them quite close together from the vantage point of hindsight. Both of these thinkers give primacy to the notion of otherness in their thought about humanity and existence, and in both cases that notion is intricately linked to the way they were "othered" in French culture and society: Levinas as a Jew and Fanon as a black subject under French colonialism. Yet in each case, while otherness is linked to the (knowable) totality that French nationhood constructed both in Europe and well beyond, as an integral part of the civilized world, the hopes for true liberation of thought and existence lie in movement toward (an unknowable) infinity.

Levinas's understanding of erotic love provides an important theoretical move for actualizing, philosophically, a transcending of totality toward infinity—something that Fanon's thought implicitly strained to achieve as well. Certainly, Fanon could be appropriated in order to accomplish a postcolonial reading of Levinas and to critique the latter's thought through a postcolonial lens.¹ However, here I explore Levinas's conception of infinity and its relationship to totality, terms that enjoy a theoretical sophistication in his thought. And while these terms are apparently not available in Fanon, at the same time Fanon's thought is punctuated with the same preoccupations, visible in the oscillation between these two poles that appear in his dual roles as a revolutionary and an intellectual.

Fanon had an urgent need to establish some form of primacy for humanity and subjectivity within the totalized form of the colonial order that encompassed the world as he knew it. Some of this pertains to his implicit dialogue with Sartre, who interwove the subjective with objective reality, and indeed, established an interdependence between the two. Fanon recognized that because colonialism so easily crushed the subjectivity of colonized peoples, the simultaneous objectification of those subjects needed to be systematically addressed by the colonized peoples in their own liberation. Levinas's recourse to the primacy of the face-to-face, similarly, intervenes in a world that, for him, holds the potential to erupt into a totalized form of war. The nakedness and singularity of the face of the other, becomes the grounds for the self to hear a commandment as it is interpellated as a human being. While Fanon's affective ability to think from other spaces becomes evident in the narrative tactics of his major texts, it also remains in fidelity to a Sartrean model of thought that posits collectivity as proceeding (at its best and most successful moments) from reciprocity within an ultimately totalizable reality. It is not that Sartre (nor Fanon) was unable to anticipate the limits of such a model: the notion of "humanism" in them both is precisely such recognition. Although Fanon did not, arguably, have

the opportunity to develop the shortcomings of what Levinas would take as a definable form of humanism—thus open to totalizability and intelligibility but also susceptible to totalitarianism—we find in his thought the intimations of a sometimes intuitive and sometimes more explicit attempt to access spaces outside that knowable totality beyond his more programmatically stated goals of transformation or revolution.

At the same time, Fanon's notion of love remained yoked, theoretically, to the possibility of being other in the sense of a content: the native wants to be the colonialist; the intellectual thinks as the people. Making this the very method for his thought became the powerful impetus for his revolutionary life and for the extraordinary influence that he, as one human being, has exerted on the thought and reality of varied parts of humanity. His conception of solidarity must never be simplified into a bland brotherhood because it is more radical than that; its demand goes beyond empathy. As one of its results, his sharp understanding of the native bourgeoisie and the failure of the intelligentsia remains one of the treasures that will be forever instructive to new social formations of all kinds.²

Levinas's long career as a philosopher gives his work a different register and gives his concepts a different weightiness. For Levinas, infinity can be God, but it is by definition radically and absolutely other, such that it cannot be known, named by any specific term, nor totalized by thought. Fanon's various movements as an intellectual, writer, and activist—and ultimately, his early demise—simply did not allow for these nascent concepts to develop. Yet in the end, it is Fanon's refusal to speak about love as profane that short circuits his access to the very concept of infinity, while it is the direction in which much of his thought strains at crucial moments. An understanding of the way Levinas uses the erotic moment illuminates Fanon's avoidance of it and allows us to press some of the identified moments of transcendence as it occurs in his thought more productively.

INFINITY, TOTALITY, AND EROTIC LOVE

The most salient moment in Fanon for this purpose is when he invokes infinity by name in *Black Skin, White Masks*. Fanon is writing during colonialism, expressing the shock of arriving in France from colonial Martinique and realizing his cultivated Frenchness amounts to nothing before the facticity of his blackness within French culture: "I feel in myself a soul as immense as the world, truly a soul as deep as the deepest of rivers, my chest has the power to expand without limit. I am a master and I am advised to adopt the humility of the cripple. Yesterday, awakening to the world, I saw the sky turn upon itself utterly and wholly. I wanted to rise, but the disemboweled silence fell back upon me, its wings paralyzed. Without responsibility, straddling Nothingness and Infinity, I began to weep" (BS 140). In this oft-noted moment, Fanon's tragic anguish is highlighted by weeping. However, this anguish emerges fully as we recognize that the narrator is confronted by the impossibility of what he desires since its experience is quickly extinguished. Although desire in this excerpt is not framed within eroticism, the idea of intense feeling, and particularly of wanting, is crushed before it can take form. Fulfilling the fate of the Sartrean subject, which is ever under threat of objectification by the other or by a third entity, Fanon's narrative subject, despite various promising moments for transcendence, seems to be ultimately recuperated into its knowable selfhood through objectification.

Levinas's notion of totality as tied to being uses infinity as an antidote to the real and eventual possibility of total war. In contrast, for Heidegger, Dasein is ultimately or at least ideally intelligible, given ("thrown," *geworfen*), and therefore finite. Dasein is bound to the world if not reducible to it, and human beings only participate in being. Fanon identified this tension very well when he criticized a similar structure of thought in Sartre, who validated the poets of Négritude by proclaiming that their creation, by dint of historical circumstance, became *the* poetry of the moment. Fanon writes, "And so it is not I who make a meaning for myself, but it is the meaning

that was already there, preexisting, waiting for me. It is not out of my bad nigger's misery, my bad nigger's teeth, my bad nigger's hunger that I will shape a torch with which to burn down the world, but it is the torch that was already there, waiting for that turn of history" (BS 134). Here, time only condemns the "nigger" to belatedness, something that Fanon seizes upon with clarity. However, Sartre's notion of freedom precedes meaning by the consciousness of the self of its own freedom (for-itself), through its separation from its implication in the world (in-itself). Richard Cohen sums up the problem: "This bifurcated and abstract universe of the for-itself opposed to the in-itself, of pure freedom opposed to pure being, explains why the question of humanism is pressing for Sartre" (HO xvii). Levinas's effort to radically humanize such a conception of being involves the primacy of the face-to-face; however, his own sense of the difficulty of grasping the relationship with otherness led him to postulate that "the erotic relationship furnishes us with a prototype of it" (TI 76). Both fecundity and filiality/paternity intersect the erotic relationship and provide context to its absolute uniqueness in Levinas's work.

In many ways, the erotic relationship remains so central to Levinas's thought that even his notion of the social is in the end conceived from the understanding of that most "asocial" of relationships: as a series of what he might term "successive infidelities" (CPP 31)! But beyond this, "erotic love oscillates between being beyond desire and being beneath need, [and this is] why its enjoyment takes its place among all the other pleasures and joys of life. But in addition it takes place beyond all pleasure, all power, beyond all war with the freedom of the other, for the amorous subjectivity is transsubstantiation itself" (TI 271). In the erotic encounter, Levinas finds a model for ethics that is impossible to generalize. It is this impossibility and the effort of the ethical subject, in the erotic moment, to take that self beyond the former, that constitutes Goodness. Erotic love for Levinas is the space for the subject's return to truth, to self-fashioning, and to the possibility of Goodness. It is the ultimate space of the subject's

touching infinity from its implication in totality and offers nothing less than that subject's redemption.

Totality is not to be renounced for Levinas but transcended. This entails a thorough recognition of its limits, its finitude, without which the idea of infinity would be impossible. It is in knowing totality and going beyond it to be oriented toward infinity that a true ethics beyond reciprocity can be forged. Since infinity is by definition unknowable by the intellect, it must be sought outside the conceptual. One of the remarkable ways in which Levinas "explains" or opens up our thinking of this unknowable entity is by describing in the form of a phenomenology, the encounter of otherness beyond the other's self, in the tenderness of the caress actualized in erotic love.

Levinas attempts to go beyond the notion of reciprocity found in Sartre (most often as the failure of pure reciprocity), which become the chains in which Fanon will bind himself. But Levinas addresses himself more specifically to Martin Buber, who best theorizes this reciprocity in the I-Thou relationship. For Levinas, reciprocity and the very anticipation of reciprocity are not useful in ethics because reciprocity "no longer involves generosity but the commercial relation, the exchange of good behavior" (AT 101). Such relations are required for a notion of justice and therefore not to be excluded, but they are somehow inferior to something we might call love in the realm of ethics. Justice (separate from but also inseparable from the law) is, therefore, a movement away from ethics. In this vein, as in Jacques Derrida's reading of Levinas, "Law [*droit*]... would betray ethical uprightness [*droiture*]."³ Levinas, in seeking out a route for ethics, thus returns to Plato's idea of the Good. It "is not consciousness that establishes the Good, but the Good which calls forth consciousness" (EN 204).

However the real problem of preserving ethics arises when we go beyond the self and other to enter the social. "If there were two of us in the world, there wouldn't be any problem: it is the other who goes before me" (EN 106). Levinas retains from Franz Rosenzweig

a central notion, which is also a fundamental critique of Hegel: that "certain formal notions are not fully intelligible except in a concrete event, which seems even more irrational than they are, but in which they are truly thought" (118). This core belief in returning philosophizing to the concrete event also becomes the basis for looking for ethics (for the place to understand ethics, or infinity in and beyond its relationship to totality) in structural relationships, which provide the space for events we can identify. Erotic love is one of those relationships that he explores in some detail.

EROTIC LOVE AND INFINITY

Levinas's description of erotic love, his pursuing the phenomenological understanding of it, stands as the most effective place from where he is able to break out of totality. Derrida appreciates in Levinas the philosophical solution to the impossibility, found in Husserl among others, of getting beyond the knowing subject, which could be arrived at "if the ethical relationship were recognized as the original face-to-face, as the emergence of absolute alterity, the emergence of an exteriority infinitely overflowing the monad of the ego cogito."⁴ Although erotic love does not occupy such a particularly significant place within Levinas's vast writings, there is a return to the phenomenology of erotic love at various moments in order to register infinity. The erotic enables a transcendence of the fatal flaws in totality, where ethics become impossible and war imminent. Levinas indicates to us the importance of eros in understanding the possibilities of the face-to-face:

Against [Heidegger's] collectivity of the side-by-side, I have tried to oppose the "I-you" collectivity, taking this not in Buber's sense, where reciprocity remains the tie between two separated freedoms and the ineluctable character of isolated subjectivity is underestimated. I have tried to find the temporal transcendence of the present toward the mystery of the future. This is not a participation in a third term,

whether this term be a person, a truth, a work, or a profession. It is a collectivity that is not a communion. It is the face-to-face without intermediary, and is furnished for us in the eros where, in the other's proximity, distance is integrally maintained and whose pathos is made of both this proximity and this duality. (TO 93–94)

For Levinas, the paradoxical nature of the self-other relationship is highly evident within the experience of eros, because the union explodes its limits, the physical upon which it is based questions materiality, and the self so intimately known is also simultaneously lost in the other to be transported out of that very material binding. Eros might escape gender specification or racial categories—all material or knowable verifiability—but only because of its dependency on precisely the material, the tactile, the knowable.

On the other hand, Fanon's use of gender is completely wed to male and female as known within black and white culture of his time, and his foray into eroticism remains too firmly rooted in the totality he knows so it remains more or less sexual. Fanon's revolutionary impulse makes him impatient with himself to heed something like the tenderness of the caress, whose whisper is, nevertheless, ever present behind his words. As Levinas explains, "What the caress seeks is not situated in a perspective and in the light of the graspable" (TI 258). Fanon knew too well both instinctively and rationally that what he sought lay outside of what he could know in the historically bound totality of which he was a part. In fact, in his analysis of the relationship of the black man to the white woman, he writes: "In the domain of psychoanalysis as in that of philosophy the organic, or constitutional, is a myth only for him who can go beyond it" (BS 80). The meaningfulness of myths of interpretation only emerges from transcendence of the very structures that produced them. Fanon cannot be faulted for his indefatigable dedication to the view that instead of considering his color a flaw, "Another solution is possible. It implies a restructuring of the world" (TI 82). Yet, the very act of seeking what is not-yet, and what is not within the totality in which one is found is the very essence of his thought. This involves being in touch

with transcendence in every version of totality. Following Levinas, it is in desire, then, whose profanity Fanon avoids at all costs, that the conceptual possibilities lie, of an understanding of transcendence. However, it is beyond clear that Fanon's return to the "body" in his various texts involves a crucial recognition that within and beyond the experience of the very materiality of that body, is paradoxically held a deliverance from the terrific weight of the totality of colonial reality, as inscribed in the closing words of *Black Skin*: "O my body, make of me always a man who questions!" (BS 232). Reduction of the black man to his body, objectification, and erasure of his subjectivity, all return the black man to knowing his body in particular ways that Fanon describes with poignancy. Above all, knowledge of the body is to serve the black subject's liberation in Fanon's urgent agenda.

EROS: LEVINAS AND FANON

The caress, for Levinas, consists of a ceaseless movement, without intention, fed by desire to know desire. It goes, in following what escapes its form "toward a future never future enough, [and solicits] what slips away as though it *were not yet*. It is not an intentionality of disclosure but of search: a movement unto the invisible. In a certain sense it expresses love, but suffers from an inability to tell it. . . . The desire that animates it is reborn in its satisfaction, fed somehow by what is not yet, bringing us back to the virginity, forever inviolate, of the feminine" (TI 257–58). Fanon's relentless battle against the effects and realities of colonialism allowed him to forget what his text tells of despite itself: that, in Levinas's words, "The not-yet-being is not to be ranked in the same future in which everything I can realize already crowds scintillating in the light, offering itself to my anticipations and soliciting my powers" (259): As a revolutionary, ready to die for a future that has to be in some way dreamed, Fanon's work might seem to embrace more readily the kind of vision of the future that can be realized and solicits our powers as they are known within the structures that bind us.⁵ Fanon's writing, in terms of its content,

surely dwells on the encounter as it happens rather than privileging the voice of the ethical self that we find prevalent in Levinas.

Yet the whisper of tenderness [*attendrissement*], in Levinas's terms, is often heard throughout Fanon's work. The other's gaze, at first, "was a liberation, running over my body suddenly abraded into non-being, endowing me once more with an agility that I had thought lost, and by taking me out of the world, restoring me to it" (BS 109). For Levinas, it is not that the self is constituted and then recognizes the other; rather, the self becomes an ethical (authentic) self only in the face-to-face, which is the pure moment of humanity because the other begs not to be killed. But of course, no sooner than that self is returned to the historical reality of Fanon's subject's world, colonial culture simplifies him, *avant la lettre*, to his facticity: he is "fixed" as if "by a dye." The only solution is an explosion: "I burst apart" (ibid.). Thus Fanon shows that racial difference and denigration on its basis introduce more weighty obstacles to spontaneity than Levinas might have recognized in his notion of ethics: "The strangeness of the Other, his irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and my possessions, is precisely accomplished as a calling into question of my spontaneity, as ethics" (TI 43). To this, Fanon might have replied: "I came into the world imbued with the will to find a meaning in things, my spirit filled with the desire to attain to the source of the world, and then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects" (BS 109). Fanon shows how the notion of hospitality that Derrida seized upon in Levinas to attend to the primacy of the Other⁶ becomes a quite different matter within the experience of the black man in colonial culture. "I cannot go to a film without seeing myself. I wait for me. The people in the theater are watching me, examining me, waiting for me. A Negro groom is going to appear. My heart makes my head swim" (140). Fanon does not reach the strangeness of the Other, which for Levinas is a key concept and even a condition for his ethics that allows for transcendence. Fanon's subject, instead, is confronted relentlessly and continuously with the strangeness of the self, whose otherness is constantly returned in the form of an object. It will lead

him to state in defiance: "I am my own foundation" (239), thus following very closely on Sartre's heels in a conception of being and nothingness, and enclosing himself in the totalized view of the black man and the concurrent impossibility of his transcendence. In such a situation, desire arises quite differently while the idea of the feminine, which does not come to light, is not exposed in future time but is accomplished "in modesty" (TO 88), and has no space in his justifiably virile response to the chains of his facticity.

Remarkably, Fanon understands very well that the notion of the face-to-face includes something more instinctive, and that this must be brought to bear on the people's demand for justice. Justice and the state must be burst open by an ethics that, for him, must be social. Once the people find that injustice need not be white, but that exploitation can wear a black face, or an Arab one, they cry "Treason!" He writes: "But the cry is mistaken; and the mistake must be corrected. The treason is not national, it is social. The people must be taught to cry 'Stop thief!'" (WE 145). Fanon brings liberation out of its national context into the social in a move that is impressive for a commitment to ethics (beyond "judgment" in Levinas's terms) within the exigencies of revolutionary writing, which was tied to a very specific historical context into which he was implicated in such a material way. While "Treason" is a charge that has been thought through at the intellectual level that the people in Fanon's account do not fail to recognize, Fanon is calling for a more subjective or visceral accounting in which the instinctive, bodily reaction to being violated by a thief calls forth the cry. It should be noted, given Fanon's overindebtedness to Sartre, that the return to the bodily and ultimately erotic self is not absent from Sartre either. For Sartre, sexual relations are the skeletons of all other relations. The various attitudes the self takes on in its relation to a sexual other "are the fundamental projects by which the For-itself *realizes* its being-for-others and tries to transcend this factual situation."⁷ But Fanon's wish to recuperate the national context, which is the space of judgment as well as of his revolutionary activism, to the bodily self gives his final prayer from

Black Skin a more weighty meaning. It signals Fanon's commitment to viewing revolutionary politics and the formation of the new state for which he fought as to be always informed by the more subjective and therefore ethical attention of the self's encounter with the other leading beyond the other and the self. Levinas, for his part, showed that such ethics in its most radical form can be found in the erotic.

In turning his attention to the "native" and the "settler," Fanon knew very well that the native's "morality is very concrete; it is to silence the settler's defiance, to break his flaunting violence—in a word, to put him out of the picture" (*WE* 44). Once the native "discovers that his life, his breath, his beating heart are the same as those of the settler" (45), his minimum demand becomes that "the last shall be first" (46). In this understanding there is a suggestion that the total system established is not what will be changed, but rather that a substitution within that system will take place. But, as we have seen, Fanon understood very well that the idea of liberation, of revolution is all about transcending the system, not merely engaging in substitutions within it, that while the future had to be somehow conceived and "given" to the masses who fought for it, future in revolutionary time is always future because it never arrives.

Rejecting white culture, Fanon's native intellectual is conscious of liberation and gives expression to it in a

harsh style, full of images, for the image is the drawbridge which allows unconscious energies to be scattered on the surrounding meadow. It is a vigorous style, alive with rhythms, struck through and through with bursting life; it is full of color, too, bronzed, sunbaked, and violent.... This style... expresses above all a hand-to-hand struggle and it reveals the need that man has to liberate himself from a part of his being which already contained the seeds of decay. Whether the fight is painful, quick, or inevitable, *muscular action must substitute itself for concepts.* (*WE* 220; my emphasis)

Clearly, Fanon has a strong awareness of the totality that has to be overcome in real terms by removal of the colonizer. Revolution needs to activate the native's dream to replace the white man within the

totality that he knows. However, the intellectual, who draws from the people, observes the people, and expresses their will, indicates from his style that it is not simply a matter of replacing the colonizer but rather that liberation has to be conceived as the liberation of man in general: the native, intellectual, and colonizer are all included in this decay together. The place that is proper to such a liberation has to be the body, which in its turn leads to forms of thinking that go beyond existing concepts. The totalizable reality articulated in concepts can only lead to substitution and thus, ultimately, to preservation of the totality that is to be revolutionized. In Fanon's quest for the liberatory power in the people, he therefore interpellates them in their visceral and bodily knowledge. In his terms, as they come into national consciousness, they give form to the struggle when "everything [will] be called into question," because they dwell in the "zone of occult instability" (227). This reads much like Levinas's understanding of the caress, in which the body denudes itself of form and breaks the stability of the very materiality of that form through a movement beyond itself.

It is therefore surprising that Fanon never turned his attention to desire between the black man and the black woman to explore what the erotic might have held in his exploration of selfhood. When he writes, "Today I believe in the possibility of love; that is why I endeavor to trace its imperfections, its perversions" (*BS* 42), he falls into Sartre's pit of the impossibility of "authentic" love. First the early Martiniquean female writer, Mayotte Capécia is chastised for her desire for "lactification" (47). Capécia's autobiographical narrative and her pathological desire for whiteness as a mulatto in colonized Caribbean culture becomes the basis for Fanon's diatribe against "all these frantic women of color in quest of white men" (49). Clearly this becomes a stumbling block for any movement of his thought toward desire. Conversely, examining the man of color and his functioning within whiteness, Fanon concludes that René Maran and his character Jean Veneuse are "neither more nor less than black abandonment neurotic[s]" (79)! Repudiating desperation and neurosis in the

examples he seizes upon of desire in the black subject leads Fanon away from his more positive intuitions about a rediscovery of the black body through desire.

Metaphysical desire, to which Fanon never managed to turn his attention more substantially, is the desire for the absolute other. It cannot be satisfied. It is not satisfied by the other that can be encountered, known, even possessed. Metaphysical desire via Levinas is the desire for infinity, which is absolutely other to the self by virtue of the fact that it is by definition transcendence, while humanity in the last instance is facticity. By reducing the feminine to gender with its known flaws in the case of the black woman of his time, in particular, Fanon bypasses how Levinas could have suggested the feminine could function conceptually in order to get past gender. Levinas writes: "It is only by showing in what way eros differs from possession and power that I can acknowledge a communication in eros. It is neither struggle, nor a fusion, nor a knowledge. One must recognize its exceptional place among relationships. It is a relationship with alterity, with mystery—that is to say with the future, with what (in a world where there is everything) is never there, with what cannot be there when everything is there—not with a being that is not there, but with the very dimension of alterity" (TO 88). Since Fanon studiously avoided eros such that the relationship across gender is highly imbued with possession and power, although we find in his writing a sense of that presence of mystery and the future, eros is never quite theorized as specifically lying outside of the knowable totality that was unambiguously oppressive to colonized subjectivity.

Levinas's notion of responsibility for the other, the other's very responsibility, has a similar resonance in Fanon. In the revolutionary armed struggle, "everybody will have to be compromised in the fight for the common good. No one has clean hands; there are no innocents and no onlookers. We all have dirty hands; we are all soiling them in the swamps of our country and in the terrifying emptiness of our brains. Every onlooker is either a coward or a traitor" (WE 199). Such a form of collectivity *as* responsibility rather than responsibility

bringing forth collectivity can be seen as an approximate transposition of the terms of erotic desire we have examined. If nationalism seems easily recuperated to totality, transcendence was key to Fanon's vision of nationalism: "It is of fundamental importance that the soldier should know that he is in the service of his country and not in the service of his commanding officer" (201). But nationalism itself should be made explicit, because "if it is not enriched and deepened by a very rapid transformation into a consciousness of social and political needs, in other words into humanism, it leads up a blind alley" (204). Abandoning the formula for humanism that Europe provides, Fanon's intent is to create "the whole man" that Europe has not yet managed to bear (313). Collectivity and responsibility are cornerstones to Fanon's nationalism, while he places nationalism immediately and even before it is formed within the dynamics of "transformation" registers his attempt to wrest it from the Levinasian concept of totality, which Fanon himself rarely designated as such.

It is quite evident that in Fanon and Levinas, the idea of totality is indispensable as an analytical category, and both intellectuals use infinity as an alternative that could restructure the reality of totality as they see it. For Fanon, the operative, changeable, but inescapable totality within which any notion of self and other takes shape is colonialism. This becomes a stumbling block to the infinite creativity of his narrator's soul. The narrator teaches himself the lesson of a return to the body, to seek transcendence, although a proper pedagogy of the body's possibilities remain scintillating moments that suggest movement of intellect rather than pursued philosophical thought. However, this latency is more productive than might be evident. Fanon carried this implicit lesson, hinted at in the vocabulary of *Black Skin*, to the national context of Algeria as we have seen, for example, in his movement from "Treason!" to "Stop, thief!" or from liberation as a concept to its understanding in muscular response. For Levinas, the mastery of Western metaphysics and religion undergirds all functioning of society such that the relationship of self to other

cannot escape its essential violence, unless through an ethical route: hence first philosophy is an ethics.

What might appear as Levinas's refusal to truly engage the particular is not some form of escape into liberalism. One might say it stems from his vocation as a philosopher, which guards against the inability to generalize the particular, although the very strength of his ethics comes from the uniqueness of the face-to-face. This tension is evident in much of his writing. Fanon's obligations are quite different: for him the exigency of his revolutionary task must balance itself with the exigency of forging truly revolutionary thought.

Fanon's intellectual framework is both enabled and limited by (Sartrean) existentialism. The analytical categories of self and other are further structured by the totality outside of which he himself cannot see from the crushing realities within which the constellations that made up his various positions in colonial society came together: in Martinique, then in France, and then in Algeria. Fanon's *Black Skin*, in particular, casts Sartre's philosophical notions of self and other into the material realities and their attendant psychological entrapments of colonial culture for the elite black man. Fanon's other writings, being more programmatic, sometimes even schematic in their urgent focus, uniformly identify the particular subaltern position where the intellectual/author figures as "other" within colonial culture. Narrating the place and position of that other involves not only an empathetic, but also ethical, and therefore completely intelligible, articulation of that other's needs within the unequal structure of colonial totality. Highly attentive to needs (scarcity and economic inequality), Fanon's narrator also suggests the other's inchoate desires as somehow crucial to his ethical quest. Ultimately what Sartre calls "freedom" is the individual in its infinite potential. However, this freedom becomes almost a contradiction in terms due to the severe and somewhat positivist/rational form that its corollary, responsibility, takes. If "l'enfer, c'est les autres" [hell is others] conclusively suggests that the self-other relationship leads rather to the "néant" [nothingness],

Fanon's many returns to infinity are full of hope, conceived beyond the knowable totality and registered through experience located in the body. Levinas attends to the many dimensions of love in which the relationship to otherness, which he developed more fully, gives keen insights into the movements toward love as it occurs in Fanon's urgent political discourse.

ESCAPED EROS

Fanon's objectives in both his major works find resonance in those of Levinas, when Levinas writes, "I have tried to find the temporal transcendence of the present toward the mystery of the future. This is not a participation in a third term, whether this term be a person, a truth, a work, or a profession. It is a collectivity that is not a communion. It is the face-to-face without intermediary, and is furnished for us in the eros where, in the other's proximity, distance is integrally maintained, and whose pathos is made of both this proximity and this duality" (TO 94). Levinas's notion could have given great hope to Fanon's intuitive return to the body, if he only could have conceived of it as a body in love. But profanity was resisted by Fanon's very situation in colonial culture, whose sexualized images of blacks made the profanity of eros impossible to approach. Eros, as Levinas saw it, "consists in going beyond the possible" (TI 261). This point could have put Fanon theoretically in touch with his body outside of the master-slave dialectic, because "voluptuousness is extinguished in possession," and thus escapes possession. Eros is not a happy dualism, nor a recuperation of other to the self, as Levinas sees it. Eros "goes toward a future which is not yet" but it is one that does not arrive in finite, chronological time. In eros, "the I springs forth without returning, finds itself the self of another," but its making the pain or pleasure of the other its own is "not through sympathy or compassion" (271). Thus the idea of reciprocity is insufficient for an understanding of eros because the nature of the encounter there

lies outside and beyond protocols that can be assessed as mutual or equal.

Clearly, Fanon's conception of collectivity and his dedication to the self was approximate and commensurate with Levinas's way of conceiving responsibility, not as arising out of the encounter but as being the condition for the encounter itself. Levinas's discomfiture before tightly bound totality is its propensity to end in war. "Peace must be my peace, in a relation that starts from an I and goes to the other, in desire and goodness, where the I both maintains itself and exists without egoism" (TI 306). Levinas uses fecundity, filiality, and paternity alongside erotic desire to give greater amplitude to forms of encounter in which the self is not recuperated to the other, nor is the other to the self. His thought seeks a form of absolute difference within absolute relation to allow for an understanding of transcendence.

Fanon brings into sharp focus the difficulty for black subjects of reaching beyond, even in thought, the crushing and all-encompassing forces of colonial culture. Fanon's narrator whose "originality" is torn out of him (BS 129), or amputated (140), ironically responds:

Recently, in a children's paper, I read a caption to a picture in which a young black Boy Scout was showing a Negro village to three or four white scouts: "This is the kettle where my ancestors cooked yours." One will gladly concede that there are no more Negro cannibals, but we should not allow ourselves to forget . . . Quite seriously, however, I think that the writer of that caption has done a genuine service to Negroes without knowing it. For the white child who reads it will not form a mental picture of the Negro in the act of eating the white man, but rather as having eaten him. Unquestionably, this is progress. (203)

As the wrenching irony of the narrator's mirth indicates, Fanon's anguish is from having completely espoused the Hegelian need for recognition: "In order to win the certainty of oneself, the incorporation of the concept of recognition is essential. Similarly, the other is

waiting for recognition by us" (217). It follows that desire becomes a demand for recognition. Rejecting a history of misrecognition, he must conclude with resilience, "I am my own foundation" (231). However, what is revealed in the interval between irony and the reality where Fanon's discourse is situated is an extreme fragility, what is for Levinas a "vulnerability," that is the way of the "tender" and can only be hinted at by references to the body (TI 256).

In reading Levinas "after Fanon," the hint of the tender in Fanon becomes the epiphany of the beloved. For Levinas, in the erotic tender, in the exhibition of the body's nudity, "*the essentially hidden throws itself toward the light, without becoming signification*" (TI 256). The suspicion of tenderness we sense before Fanon's irony, our inability to follow it coherently because the text silences it, signals the erotic but not by a literary procedure of metaphorizing the text as body. Rather, the extreme tenderness of the reader witnessing the fragility of that narrator's self causes a movement [*attendrissement*] that though it has been commented upon as tragic, poetic, or heroic by Fanon's many commentators, is, in the end, erotic. It is erotic because in those gaps, somewhere within and between Fanon's strident and describable anguish, his ferociously sharp analyses, his relentless ability to step outside himself, his response to the "face" of the other, and his sense of justice, the erotic body arises. It is erotic in that it becomes the desiring vehicle for knowing transcendence as outlined by Levinas.

The hints of the space for tenderness, as Levinas recognized can be best described from the unstructured and nonhierarchical space of the erotic, are given to the reader by Fanon, particularly in *Black Skin* but also in *Wretched*. Fanon lives closely in his body and knows the language of the body can take the native beyond the shackles of his condition just as it was the source of questioning colonial culture. The muscular response that Fanon writes about in *Wretched* as ultimately transcendence is reminiscent of the escape known in the realm of the erotic caress, because the body, material by definition,

when in tenderness is the opposite of materiality and facticity: "In the carnal given to tenderness, the body quits the status of an existent" (TI 258).

When Fanon skims the tender caress in his text, when he seems to evoke the body momentarily only to escape into irony or despair, those movements suggest an alertness to that body which desires not the other (body), but in Levinas's terms the other's desire. The body is awakened to itself in the act of desire and taken beyond itself, escaping itself as material or even as foundation. But to expose the body as desiring is to approach the profane, something instinctively avoided by Fanon. For Levinas, the profane, although an arresting concept, does not carry the valences it does for a black subject in colonial reality. The profane in Levinas does not allow us to see the exhibited body because we lower our eyes in shame. Fanon's experience of the black body is one of exposure, mistreatment, exploitation, and objectification. Therefore, nudity does not carry the same promises as it does for Levinas: "The erotic nudity says the inexpressible, but the inexpressible is not separable from this saying in the way a mysterious object foreign to expression is separated from clear speech that seeks to circumscribe it. The mode of 'saying' or of 'manifesting' itself hides while uncovering, says and silences the inexpressible, harasses and provokes" (TI 260). Still, behind the most important moments in Fanon, the body lurks as a possibility for the inexpressible even though he avoids the profane through irony, veils the erotic through explosion, and simply hints at the carnal through poetry. And yet in hiding, the possibility of that nude and erotic body says and silences the inexpressible. That longing in the text for the erotic body is avoided as theme but appears as form: most notably as metaphors and similes such as the "color" of the native intellectual's thoughts, or the narrator's soul being a river, or the sky becoming personified, his ellipses and silences, hints and rhetorical devices, like juxtapositions. These become hints that speak like the whisper of a caress through the many moments of tenderness (as movement of thought) that no attentive reading of Fanon can resist.

Levinas, Sartre, and the Question of Solidarity

Kris Sealey

Precisely what kinds of selves come together in acts of political solidarity? Stated differently, what must we presuppose of ourselves (of the structures that give rise to the phenomena of selves), given the acts of solidarity to which history has been privy? These are questions for which the work of Jean-Paul Sartre and Emmanuel Levinas are fruitful resources. Without making the claim that there exist certain "one size fits all" conditions for the possibility of solidarity in general, Levinas's conception of identity is helpful in understanding how racially embodied selves participate in acts of (racially grounded) solidarity, very much like the kind of which Sartre's *Black Orpheus* serves as an exposition. The experience of being racialized (or of having an embodiment that signifies racially) renders particularly pertinent those structures of the Levinasian self, which identify phenomenologies of corporeality (or materiality) and suffering as primordial to the human condition. To be sure, Levinas's work does not offer explicit insight to the task of navigating questions of race and racial justice. But he does formulate an account of identity whereby the rivetedness to our bodies is pivotal, and quite frankly, central to how we relate to ourselves and each other. Thus, Levinas's conception of identity may be useful for grounding the possibility of moments of racial solidarity. In so doing, we see the sense in which such moments include a collection of selves in critical stance with respect to themselves, and precisely not in the self-affirmative stance of race-based essentialization.