

Wit's End: Frantz Fanon, Transnationalism, and the Politics of Black Laughter

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“What is fitting is always based on some reason of propriety, as improper deeds lack of propriety or in other words, the ridiculous is based on some failure of reason.”

--Anonymous Letter on *Tartuffe* ¹

“The native knows all this, and laughs to himself every time he spots an allusion to the animal world in the other's words. For he knows that he is not an animal; and it is precisely at this moment he realizes his humanity that he begins to sharpen the weapons with which he will secure its victory.”

--Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*

In chapter five of *Black Skin, White Masks*, “L'expérience vécue du Noir,” Frantz Fanon narrates an experience involving himself, a small child, and the child's mother that confronts him with the inescapability of his Blackness—an experience which Fanon uses as a way to contemplate the incompatibility of Blackness with the western world. The situation centers on the tension produced by the “unfamiliar weight” of the white gaze, distilled in the boy's exclamation, “Look, a Negro!” and Fanon's outspoken resolution of the conflict (62). Interpretations abound. In her reading of the chapter, Sara Ahmed grounds an analysis of how racialization occurs along an axis of fear-induced object relations. She begins with the following epigraph from Fanon:

“Look, a Negro!” It was an external stimulus that flicked over me as I passed by. I made a tight smile.

“Look, a Negro!” It was true. It amused me.

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“Look, a Negro!” The circle was drawing a bit tighter. I made no secret of my amusement.

“Mama, see the Negro! I’m frightened!” Frightened! Frightened! Now they were beginning to be afraid of me. I made up my mind to laugh myself to tears, but laughter had become impossible. (62)

Ahmed focuses on the ways fear structures the political mappings of the scene, recognizing the ocular-centric constructions of race and sociocultural difference in “the surface that surfaces through the encounter” between a subject and that which he or she fears (Ahmed 63). The affective politics of fear produce and sustain the fearing subject’s sense of self via a complex set of object relations. These relations highlight the ways new connections between signs generate the object of fear and how “the movement between signs allows others to be attributed with emotional value, as ‘being fearsome’” (67). Understanding how fear informs politics, Ahmed goes on, can explain early twenty-first century confluences between Arab and terrorist as that which evokes fear today.

Curiously, although her epigraph ends with Fanon’s reference to laughter, Ahmed never alludes to laughter throughout her chapter. While Fanon’s repetition of “frightened” certainly justifies her attention to the affective politics of fear, one might just as easily note Fanon’s increasingly “tight smile” and the repetition of “amuse” as justifications for an inquiry into the affective politics of Black laughter. Fanon himself underscores the importance of laughter when he confronts the boy’s mother and follows his infamous retort – “Kiss the Handsome Negro’s ass, madam” – with the declaration “Now one would be able to laugh” (BSWM 86). By privileging the ways in which the affective politics of fear shape space and define bodies, Ahmed eschews how laughter contributes to Fanon’s resolution of this widely read conflict. In other words, while fright and fear certainly animate the scene, there is more to be said concerning Fanon’s use of laughter. Fanon scholar Lewis Gordon situates this moment as a kind of therapeutic catharsis within a longer trajectory leading towards the pathos of Fanon’s tears at the end of the chapter. His reading, however, elides distinctions between laughter and humor, sidestepping any question of laughter’s phenomenology and instead offering us an image of laughter that is little more than a coping mechanism en route to greater insights.²

Taking up the question of laughter in Fanon’s writing directly, this article participates in what Jean Khalifa calls a “renewed flow of critical studies on Fanon” (527). The success of this enlivened return to Fanon

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has been due in part to the diversity of scholarship that has emerged, as scholars working from a variety of disciplines and continents turn to Fanon's work for inspiration.³ Gordon organizes what he calls "several stages" of academic engagement with Fanon as moving "from that of ideological critique to postcolonial anxiety to engagement with his thought" ("Hellish Zone" 5). Concerned less with Fanon's thoughts, work such as Ahmed's and John E. Drabinski's article on shame engages more with how Fanon intersects with discussions of affect. Given Fanon's continued influence over scholars working on questions of Blackness and political life, this article grounds a discussion of Black laughter in Fanon's ideas and delineates a Fanonian theory of laughter. We can glean insights into Fanon's thoughts on laughter by reading momentary references to it across his career. These fragments, when read in concert, provide a stable foundation from which to discern an anti-colonial theory of Black laughter.

Beyond the scope of Fanon studies, an understanding of laughter contributes to conversations concerning Black transnationalism. Laughter induces the type of bodily disarticulation similar to that which characterizes the "transnational turn" in literary studies, in which the amorphous fluidity of the sea becomes "fundamentally a space of dispersion, conjunction, distribution, contingency, heterogeneity, and of intersecting and stratified lines" that constitute a "new spatial order of the modern period" (Boelhower 92-3). It is not because laughter transgresses boundaries constantly or that Fanon—the Martinique-born Afro-Caribbean whose occupations included psychiatrist, writer, and revolutionary—fits readily into a Black transnational framework that I place both together here. It is not even that Fanon's influence has transcended national borders, although all of these reasons stand. Examining laughter offers us the space to think critically about the management of feelings in the Black diaspora as a lived reality in the present, and engaging that present necessitates examining its history within a transnational context.

There are, of course, similarities between the fluidity of the sea and laughter's volatility. Scholars often interpret laughter through its tendency for transgression. For instance, some argue that laughter disrupts the stability of the physical body or provokes moments of manageable, benign social disorder.⁴ Yet, despite an acknowledgement of laughter's proclivity to transgress, theorists of laughter simultaneously uphold an Aristotelian laughing animal thesis that maintains laughter as an undeniably human phenomenon, which is to say, for them, some lines remain impassable.⁵ Whether as a psychical defense mechanism or self-regulatory social phenomenon, the critical consensus privileges laughter as a sign of a universal human spirit.⁶ This belief, however,

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postpones a sustained analysis of laughter issuing from subjects for whom access to the category of “Human” remains perpetually deferred, those whose laughter marks them as buffoon, boisterous, and uncivilized.⁷ Put differently, what occurs at the impasse in which laughter becomes the simultaneous locus of one’s in/Humanity? How do enduring legacies of racism thus inform cultural understandings and practices of laughter?

In pursuing answers to these questions, we can chart the conditions that make something called “Black laughter” even possible. To examine Black laughter in this way means asking, “how it became black?” as Alex Weheliye asks more broadly of Black culture (“Engendering” 183). To consider the transnational, and transhistorical, ways in which Blackness is ascribed certain types of laughter is to situate this study of Black laughter within the intellectual, ethical, and political imperatives of Black Studies. Describing the theoretical and political scope of Black Studies, Weheliye writes elsewhere, “In sum, black studies illuminates the essential role that racializing assemblages play in the construction of modern selfhood, works toward the abolition of Man, and advocates the radical reconstruction and decolonization of what it means to be human” (*Habeas Viscus* 4). As some scholars working in Black Studies have illustrated, the development of Western civilization depended on the violent, repeated repudiation of Blackness and of Black subjectivity – observed in both the centuries-long enslavement of Africans and in the continued structural disenfranchisement of Black and other marginalized peoples the world over. A Black transnational perspective, then, offers the necessary foundation for examining laughter’s role in securing the boundaries of the Human.

Laughter and the Superiority of Man

Indebted to the Aristotelian premise that laughter is “essentially human,” most theories of comedy and laughter produce explanatory models that safeguard the stability of the Human. Consequently, this approach ignores an impasse that occurs when laughter is made the evidence of a subject’s supposed inhumanity or of a sub-human status. We know, for instance, that images of laughing “darkeys” have helped extend imperialistic reaches, that performing blackface minstrelsy exteriorized and soothed nineteenth-century working class white anxieties regarding the precariousness of their claims to whiteness, and that slave dealers forced playfulness and laughter out of the enslaved at the auction, yet in their pursuit of universal explanations, most theories of laughter consistently ignore the bulk of these examples.⁸ Noting these

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erasure from considerations of laughter, however, is not to suggest that simply including these examples would remedy the situation; rather I want to suggest that the exceptions made by theories of laughter give rise to a structure premised on the subordination of Black laughter. To illustrate what I mean, the following section looks at how one theory (superiority) produces a racializing assemblage that devalues and circumscribes Black laughter in order to maintain a particular status quo.

The superiority theory states that laughter signals a laughing subject's feeling of superiority over an object, situation, or person. Most critics trace the superiority theory to ancient Greece – Plato says that Socrates acknowledged laughter at self-ignorance in another or in oneself, and Aristotle associated comedy with the imitation of “lower types” in chapter two of *Poetics*. Yet, a more recognizable articulation of superiority takes shape during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In 1650, Thomas Hobbes associated laughter with a “sudden glory” that precipitates feelings of self-importance attained “by comparison with the infirmities of others, or with our own formerly” (65). Describing the consequences of social hierarchies, the superiority theory upholds a status quo by facilitating an egotistical perspective of one's superiority in the world – a not surprising consequence of an expanding British Empire, which, in turn, benefitted from the traffic in human beings.

Drawing this correlation between superiority and the rise of transatlantic slavery helps explain why the theory reemerges in the early 1700s. Joseph Addison, writing as Mr. Spectator, addresses laughter in one of his many essays. In *Spectator* No. 47, Mr. Spectator praises Hobbes, paraphrasing the political philosopher's thoughts: “every one [*sic*] diverts himself with some person or other that is below him in point of understanding, and triumphs in the superiority of his genius” (Addison 82). The example he uses to prove this “triumph” is the Dutch “Gaper,” which refers to carved heads with gaping mouths that adorn buildings on the streets of the Netherlands. Mr. Spectator describes this gargoyles-like embellishment as “the head of an idiot dressed in a cap and bells . . . gaping in a most immoderate manner” (82). A connection between the superiority theory of laughter and anti-Black superiority emerges when we attend to the sign's broader historical context. Associated with pharmacies and pharmaceuticals, the phenotypic and cultural markers of these carved heads varied, yet they most often resembled a turbaned African Muslim. One apocryphal account suggests that these heads in particular refer to a (possibly quack) doctor's assistant whose first role would be to “draw a crowd to their master's tent by making faces and other antics, and then to entertain in order to allow the medicine man and customers more privacy” (Blakely 56).⁹

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Eschewing this history almost entirely, Mr. Spectator instead maintains that simply laughing at the Gapers proves beneficial to the Dutch.

The benefit, I would argue, stems from constant and consistent reminders of Dutch superiority refracted through laughter's superiority. Imagine the Gapers' seemingly innocuous appearance on the streets of the Netherlands. Adorning various buildings, these gaping mouths would appear rather common, passing from noticeable sign to quotidian marker. Their decontextualized ubiquity, perhaps, is what leads Allison Blakely to write, "The use of a human head with mouth agape and tongue sticking out has never been fully explained . . . *For some reason* it became especially popular in the northern Netherlands" (54, emphasis added). Her analysis cannot imagine a possible reason, I think, in part because it remains too rooted within a nationalist framework focused on the Netherlands. After all, one reason for the Gapers' popularity might be that it normalized Dutch superiority over nonwhite bodies toward which the Gapers make reference without requiring much thought. Indeed, the success of laughter as a mode of experiencing superiority lies in generating uninterrogated pleasure removed from any suffering such pleasure might necessitate, an "innocent amusement" whose everyday banality serves to obfuscate insidious forms of violence (Hartman 47). This would make things such as Dutch enslavement and exploitation of Africans springing from northern ports such as Amsterdam and Rotterdam more palatable through architecturally-inspired feelings of superiority. This correlation between superiority and slavery remains absent in Mr. Spectator's analysis of laughter, or is rather violently unspoken in his passing appreciation for Dutch "industry and application" (82).

Thinking about the selective amplification of historical elements over others, what I am talking about here with regard to laughter is an organization of knowledge across borders that shaped a socio-cultural understanding of Black laughter. It's no stretch to see how Mr. Spectator justifies his thoughts on laughter along racially biased ideologies. These undertones come to the surface in No. 35, in which Mr. Spectator pursues a distinction between true humor and nonsense. He begins with two fictional genealogies describing the separate lineages of "Humour" and "False Humour." The personification of humor connects each lineage to certain groups of people, and those of the false group, he tells us, would "willingly pass" for the supposed original, but fortunately, descendants of False Humour can be identified by their "loud and excessive laughter" (65). The logic follows, then, that any threat a passing subject poses to the stability of the social order can be defused by attending to his or her "excessive laughter," as such

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excessive displays could only pertain to unmannerly, unrefined, and undistinguished members of socially lower classes.

Spectator No. 35 establishes a relationship between the subjective position of laugher and the quality of his or her laughter, shifting the attention away from an internal sense of humor to external manifestations of it. Mr. Spectator writes that False Humor “being entirely void of reason . . . pursues no point, either of morality or instruction, but is ludicrous only for the sake of being so” (65). The pointlessness stands in opposition to the ordered image of society, which Mr. Spectator’s rationalization of laughter works so hard to uphold. A tautology takes shape in his writing, then, that reinforces an association between social inferiority, raucous laughter, and irrationality; the correlative, of course, is that there is a socially beneficial, “good” laughter worth safeguarding. Thus, Spectator No. 35 stages the “parallel” invention of what might be called an *Other laughter* (or Black laughter) as a way to ballast the supracultural ubiquity of laughter as the provenance of “Man” (Wynter 43). It is of little surprise that Mr. Spectator’s descriptions reduce to all manner of dehumanizing, race-tinged epithets. Mr. Spectator writes, “False Humour differs from the True, as a monkey does from a man” (65). Presented as simile, Mr. Spectator establishes an analogy in which False Humour is like a monkey as True Humour is like a man, aligning animal, primitive not only with that which is not man, but also that which is excessively loud.

As this false humor becomes placeholder for non-Human, so, too, must its techniques; Mr. Spectator says, “apish tricks . . . buffooneries,” and a penchant for “mimicry” characterizes false humor. Of course, the western cultural correlation between Blackness, apishness, and primitivism has an enduring history.¹⁰ Addison contributes to this association in producing his classist and racist social commentary. Whether or not he knowingly furthers the association to include an affinity between Blackness and boisterousness matters less than the paradigm it reinforces. The assumed superiority over such boisterousness underwrites the continual positioning of Black laughter as excessive and supports views that perceive excessiveness as threatening to the stability of a status quo.

The management of laughter, then, screens the engineering of a social structure premised on the repudiation of Black laughter. Mr. Spectator’s false humorist soon occupies the position of the unwitting anarchist as the need to stabilize the Social engenders unease over potential uprisings. The unrepentant joker seeks to make light of all moments rather than taking care not to “bite the hand that feeds him” (241). Mr. Spectator criticizes those who do not exercise proper restraint over their wit, who ridicule both friend and foe, and who sup-

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posedly have no sense of social propriety. In establishing a hierarchy that privileges “the hand that feeds,” Mr. Spectator warns those from lower social statuses to exercise not only caution but also deference when making jokes, and positions the humorist, whether false or not, within an inescapable logic. He rationalizes servility, maintaining that those in power remain immune to criticism from those for whom they provide, and justifies regulatory/disciplinary functions to curb potential insurrections that might result from allowing discourteous joking to go on unchecked – important points to stress when one is in the midst of an increasingly globalized economy. Mr. Spectator’s caution is thus more concerned with staving the possibility of sincere criticism than with distinguishing among humorists, outlining parameters in which Black laughter’s negation sustains a vertical, hierarchical social order.

Within societies structured hierarchically along axes that include race, gender and class, some laughter remains constitutively more suspect and subject to increased surveillance than others. Read in conjunction with Mr. Spectator’s more explicitly racial discourse on laughter, No. 35 offers a direct warning to nonwhites – be careful not to laugh out of place or risk disciplinary correction.¹¹ Legacies framing Black laughter as loud and excessive derive in many ways from these supposedly rational attempts to explain and justify the pleasure of superiority felt from laughing, which is why laughter is only safely pleasurable when it aligns with the interests of a dominant order. Consequently, this relationship establishes the conditions that limit the recognition of Black laughter (from the perspective of the dominant order) as not only loud and excessive but also as unreasonable and as potentially seditious.

Frantz Fanon: Being Derelict

“I can honestly say that nobody ever thought I was totally incorporable! [Laughter] I’m happy, I do agree with them: I would not incorporate myself either, if I were in their shoes!”

--Sylvia Wynter¹²

If we agree that the stabilization of western orders of knowledge included the marginalization of Black laughter as a way to curb any potentially disruptive capabilities, then we can see how Fanon’s rewriting of his relationship to laughter constitutes a necessary component of

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his larger anti-colonial project. In what follows, I trace Fanon's engagement with laughter and the ways it grounds significant aspects of his developing theories. The colloquialism wit's end helps ground and organize this analysis, especially when we consider what it means to be at wit's end. Wit, by itself, can refer to a humorous acuity, a jocular insight associated with "intellectual ability; genius, talent, cleverness; mental quickness or sharpness, acumen" (*OED*). The intelligence, or smartness, associated with wit proves helpful in social interactions. Engaging in a battle of wits means entering an exchange that calls attention to the incisive ways a sharp wit also smarts; and in the end, it is usually the sharpest wit that outwits the rest. Given the early modern use of wit as a substitute for penis, colloquialisms that involve taking or seeing one's point—and the broader mode of intellectual exchange to which they gesture—remain steeped in phallogocentric constructions of meaning. Furthermore, the preposition at (as in one is at their wit's end) implies a location, or a destination at which one arrives; to say you are at your wit's end implies having vetted all possible solutions. Together, we are left with the understanding that wit's end describes an experience of exasperated frustration.

This frustrated sense expressed by wit's end names the position in which Fanon finds himself during chapter five of *Black Skin, White Masks*. Through his dialectical approach Fanon engages and discards one supposedly valid theory after another, experiencing wit's end as he encounters a limit between Reason and Unreason, or what Lewis Gordon calls Fanon's "metacritical reflection on reason" ("Hellish Zone" 7). Part of that reflection requires Fanon's elaboration of the position of Unreason, or nonsense, within his thinking. Wit's end aligns with the "zone of nonbeing" from which one views the fraying of so-called rational discourse (BSWM 2). As Frank Wilderson and others have argued, Blackness represents that which cannot be incorporated but that nonetheless enables the system of western epistemology to work; Blackness, then, only ever coalesces as *perpetual incongruity* from the vantage point of the west. When the racialized subject recognizes his or her position within this order of knowledge, the resulting awareness of one's status as incongruous/anomalous to the stable image of society generates what Fanon calls the "two frames of reference within which he has had to place himself" (83). The relationship here between Fanon and DuBoisian double consciousness – the "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" – is apparent and well-documented (Souls 11).¹³ The question I pursue instead is how we understand laughter when it exposes the incongruous tenets of a so-called rational world. How, to put it differ-

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ently, do we interpret Sylvia Wynter's thinking when she says, "nobody ever thought I was totally incorporable," in relation to her transcribed "[Laughter]" ("Proud Flesh")?

We begin with Fanon's representation and thoughts concerning moments of laughter. Evidence of conceptual similarities between Fanon's methodology as a type of strategic humor appear early. In the opening pages of *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon writes, "It is good form to introduce a work in psychology with a statement of its methodological point of view. I shall be derelict. I leave methods to the botanists and the mathematicians. There is a point at which methods devour themselves" (5). Parodying the style of other supposedly similar works, Fanon interrupts the pomposity of the first sentence full stop with the second—"I shall be derelict." This curious word holds many meanings. As an adjective, derelict refers to a deplorable or dilapidated condition; it also refers to something (or in Fanon's case someone) forsaken by an owner. As a noun, derelict refers to a person without a home, job, or property. In other words, derelict refers to an individual who renounces multiple stabilizing pillars of civil society such as domestic life, labor for another, and property ownership. Connecting this placeless condition back to laughter, we might understand the constant movement implied as the bodily movements induced by laughter, which enact the "constant motion" Alenka Zupančič says characterizes the comic engine (3). The body reels and gesticulates as it laughs, and in choosing to be derelict, Fanon opts for a discursive register and mode of being that can be said to remain similarly elusive. This perspective affords him the distance necessary to consider Blackness and its status as "outlaw" within the rational world (BSWM 82). As a figure whose movements were transnational, and for whom national affiliation mattered less in comparison to Pan-African alliance, being derelict offered strategic benefits within the struggle for decolonization. "The impulse to take the settler's place implies a tonicity of muscles," Fanon writes of the desire for decolonization in *The Wretched of the Earth* (53). Besides referring to muscular tone and strength, "tonicity" also refers to stress patterns in speech that could be indicative of one's constant laughter. As a term, tonicity bridges the body and speech to an anti-colonial impulse to be read and heard on/through the body. Further, this "impulse" bridges the relationship between the muscular-physical and the cognitive-psychic by gesturing to a psychic tonicity matching the muscular. Laughter thus provides a useful mechanism through which to explore this bridge, especially since *Wretched* marks the moment Fanon's use of laughter grows more explicit in its engagement of the body and its consciousness.¹⁴

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Fanon's pivot from body to mind uses the language of tension and release to describe the psychic processes, mental symptoms, and physical responses of colonized patients' mental disorders. A trained psychiatrist conversant in psychoanalysis, Fanon's thinking in *Wretched* stems from his work with subjects who were living and fighting through the Algerian Revolution. He outlines the results of this work in his chapter "Colonial War and Mental Disorders." Fanon lists such physical symptoms as "stomach ulcers," "menstruation trouble," accelerated heart rate, and "generalized contraction with muscular stiffness" among the "psychiatric symptoms" experienced by the native (291-2). We see how physical symptoms remain necessarily connected to the experience of oppression at the psychic level.

As a way of further bridging the mind/body split, Fanon appeals to interpreting the colonized subject's dreams. A correlation between muscular tension and attendant feelings of stuck-ness results in native dreams regarding "muscular prowess" characterized by "action and aggression" (52). Ventriloquizing a native patient, Fanon writes, "I dream I am jumping, swimming, running, climbing; I dream that I burst out laughing, that I span a river in one stride, or that I am followed by a flood of motorcars which never catch up with me" (52, emphasis added). Laughter might seem at odds with the more active actions listed, but we know already that Fanon emphasizes the physicality in laughing, as the "burst" of laughter calls to mind similar bursts of artillery fire during clashes in the colonies.

This transition from the psychic dimensions of colonialism to one's struggle for decolonization and liberation turns on a moment of laughter. More than symbolizing a colonized subject's desire for power, that burst of laughter pivots between everyday physical actions and superhuman achievement, facilitating a transition that renders the seemingly impossible something always already achieved. The grammar, in translation, anchors this pivot; the use of "or" over "and" emphasizes an unconscious correlation between laughing, spanning a river with one stride, and outrunning a "flood of motorcars" that renders each action synonymous. Also, the verb tense shift from gerunds in the first independent clause to declaratives in the second enacts a rhetorical "burst" of its own. The final tense shift to the present perfect – in the case of "I am followed" – connotes the indeterminacy of unspecified time, as if to say the work of decolonization remains ongoing and indefinite. Whereas Fanon interprets the laughter through a Freudian lens of tension and release, he necessarily differs from Freud in terms of what that release entails. Whereas Freud argues that laughter operates as an individual release that ushers the subject's return to a state of equilibrium (or what we might otherwise call Reason) from a momen-

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tary encounter with an epistemic crisis (Unreason), Fanon's laughter, instead, signals one's ongoing identification with the epistemic crisis.

This identification manifests as one's antithetical stance to all manifestations of colonial violence. For instance, in Fanon's description of Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) member Djamilia Bouhired in *Toward the African Revolution* (1964) we see how certain modes of laughter remain incomprehensible to agents of the State. Bouhired was tried in July 1957 and sentenced to death for her participation in a café bombing that resulted in eleven deaths. Reports suggest that she laughed at her sentencing, to which Fanon alludes, "Djamilia Bouhired's laughter on hearing the announcement of her death sentence is neither sterile bravado nor unconsciousness—let there be no misunderstanding as to this. That smile is rather the quiet manifestation of an inner certainty that has remained unshakable" (*Toward* 73). Rather than delimit precisely what Bouhired's laughter means, Fanon imagines the contours of her laughter by telling us what Bouhired's laughter is not—"neither sterile bravado nor unconsciousness." When Fanon writes, "let there be no misunderstanding," he addresses how Bouhired's laughter courts misinterpretation. Laughter as "bravado," or audacity, emphasizes an attempt to project hyper self-awareness as defense; laughter appears as a front masking insecurities or as a lack of substance, neither of which in Fanon's estimation describes Bouhired. "Unconsciousness," on the other hand, implies that her laughter reveals some general imbecility or misunderstanding of her situation and silences her conscious decision to take part in the bombing. Either misinterpretation has its appeal. After all, to identify with the actual reason for her laughter would mean identifying with its heresy, which in this case would mean supporting anti-colonial resistance; it proves easier to ascribe alternate interpretations to her laughter than share her unmistakable belief in the justness of her actions.

Bouhired's laughter parallels her legal council's (Jacques Vergès) now famous *défense de rupture* or "rupture defense," which attempts to disrupt court proceeding by challenging the logic upon which the case is being tried. Instead of claiming her innocence, Vergès acknowledges Bouhired's actions and places them within the context of resistance to France's violent presence in Algeria, challenging the State to consider its ability to remain objective and still pursue a legitimate case against Bouhired. The result precipitated an impasse between the court's fidelity and Bouhired's fidelity to their respective stances upon the same action. Vergès, perhaps fond of summing up the logic of his strategy, recounts the story of Bouhired's laughter and the judge's response: "Don't laugh miss, this is serious!" (qtd. in Lambert "#Law///Jaques").

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Lèopold Lambert rightly observes that her “laughter is the most dramatic evidence of the impossibility of a dialogue between the accuser and the accused” (“#Law///Jaques”). Laughing in the face of her fate, Bouhired embodies the essence of Vergès’s defense and regards the status of the court as nonsense. Returning to the episode with which we began, I will show how Fanon stages his own identification with Unreason as an eruption of laughter: “Since no agreement was possible on the level of reason, I threw myself back toward unreason” (93).

You will remember how a child’s exclamation -- “Look, a Negro!” -- produces a crisis of subjectivity. Fanon writes, “I made a tight smile . . . ‘Look! A Negro!’ the circle was drawing a bit tighter. I made no secret of my amusement” (84). At last, Fanon admits, “I made up my mind to *laugh* myself to tears, but *laughter* had become impossible” (84, emphasis added). This prohibition of laughter can be read as an inability to produce sound outside of a racialized matrix of meaning. Fanon’s reluctance (and/or inability) to laugh has to do with his recognition of the “legends, stories, history, and above all *historicity*” circumscribing his subjective position, in particular with the ways in which Black laughter has been tethered to constructed myths of primitivism and inferiority that “[have] woven [him] out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories” that include “tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial-defects, slave-ships, and above all else, above all: ‘Sho’ good eatin’” (84-5). The repetition of “above all” emphasizes the importance of this last element in this longer list. Lewis Gordon changes the last bit of Markmann’s translation back to Fanon’s original “Y a bon banania” (Peau Noire 90). According to Gordon, the reference is to a popular breakfast cereal, Banania, which features a caricatured Senegalese soldier depicted on the box to sell the product. Bonhomme Banania and his “so-called ‘African French’” slogan debuted in 1917; over time the advertisement came to “[resemble] a smiling monkey wearing a fez” (“Through the Zone” 17). Gordon introduces his translation decision with an awkward joke: “The Markmann translation ended this passage with “Sho’ good eatin’” to signify a breakfast cereal” (17).

At a time without Google, however, the racism and caricature suggested by “Y a bon banania” would have appeared out of context and much harder for many of Markmann’s non-Francophone readers to comprehend. The translation does not aim to “signify a breakfast cereal” as much as draw attention to a history of using dialect in caricatured depictions of Blackness. This use of dialect in English stands in for the very issues of consumption that Fanon puts forward with his reference to Banania in a way that would register with an American, Anglophone audience. Both highlight the commercialization of Black amusement to promote the consumption of products whose manu-

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facture is based upon the consumption of Black bodies vis-à-vis Black labor. The smiling or laughing face is coopted into a system of racial capitalism that both erases the labor of Black people and closes a circuit of production in which this erasure performs its own form of cultural work—like the “Gapers” beckoning to potential customers, the static image amplifies the constitutive sense of superiority that made it possible in the first place.

As the only quoted element in Fanon’s list, the phrase draws further attention to the ways in which Black speech can be made to participate in white supremacist mappings of Blackness – much in the way Banania as an abstraction furthers the original extraction of labor in the colonies. The representation of affected dialect speech (in both English and French) stands in for a broad assortment of white dominant representations of Blackness, most notably rural dialect speech and the minstrel performances that made use of it. The implication is that any laughter accompanying these representations invariably justifies a Black subject’s supposed inferiority as both ancillary and complementary. Indeed, speaking at all risks giving credence to this dialectic, as one enters a sonic soundscape constructed by the white gaze. As Fanon smiles at this blunt child on the train, the tightening of his lips suggests one thought: keep your mouth shut.

Fanon often attends to the ways in which sound and listening about ocular-centric constructions of meaning. In *A Dying Colonialism* (1959), Fanon’s description of an exchange during an examination between a colonial doctor and a “native” patient highlights both the visual and audible elements concerning their interaction. When confronted by the linguistic, cultural, social, political, and economic impasse created by the “colonial situation,” the doctor turns to the colonized body for diagnostic purposes (126). The “contracted” muscles of a colonized body yield nothing, having become “equally rigid” (126). Despite the doctor’s inability to gather information visually, the encounter serves a didactic purpose for the reader, as Fanon underscores the importance of listening. Speaking in terms of sound and listening, he writes, “One must, of course, lend an ear to the observations made by the European doctors . . . But one must also hear those of the patients themselves when they left the hospital” (127). Symbolically, Fanon’s depiction of the doctor underscores how the racialization in medical diagnoses hides behind words such as “protopathic” – a reference to the nerve stimuli of the skin that are only capable of broad, coarse discrimination; the implication, from the perspective of the doctor, is that the patient’s illness stems from a real or imagined relationship between his skin and the outside world. The patient’s humorous, pithy comment exposes the doctor’s verbosity by comparison: “They asked me

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what was wrong with me, as if I were the doctor; they think they're smart and they aren't even able to tell where I feel pain" (127). As with Bouhired's laughter, Fanon requires his audience to attune their auditory understanding and reorient their spatial relationship to colonialism away from the sanitized hospital. After all, to hear the words of the patient one must step outside of the examination room, exit the symbolic site of sterile knowledge and reimagine their perspective on the situation. Fanon's implicit criticism of ocularcentrism succeeds, then, by restructuring his audience's relationship to the auditory dynamics organizing the scene.

Fanon's retort to the woman on the train in *L'expérience vécue du Noir* requires a similar shift in auditory perception. The chapter calls attention to the importance of laughter insofar as Fanon represents himself moving from an inability to laugh to finally staking a claim on laughter through the following declaration, here presented in its original French and the two official English translations:

— Regarde, il est beau, ce nègre...

— Le beau nègre vous emmerde, madame!

La honte lui orna le visage. Enfin j'étais libéré de ma rumination. Du même coup, je réalisais deux choses : j'identifiais mes ennemis et je créais du scandale. Comblé. On allait pouvoir s'amuser. (Peau 92)

"Look how handsome that Negro is! . . ."

"Kiss the handsome Negro's ass, madame!"

Shame flooded her face. At last I was set free from my rumination. At the same time I accomplished two things: I identified my enemies and I made a scene. A grand slam. Now one would be able to laugh. (BSWM 86, emphasis added)

"Look how handsome that Negro is."

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

Her face colored with shame. At last I was freed from my rumination. I realized two things at once: I had identified the

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enemy and created a scandal. Overjoyed. We could now have some fun. (Philcox 94, emphasis added).

Fanon tells us he has accomplished two things through his response, *j'identifiais mes ennemis et je créais du scandale*: he identifies his enemies and he “[makes] a scene.”¹⁵ Yet, the assurance, “Now one would be able to laugh,” appears as proof positive, suggesting that his action has accomplished something else. Fanon recognizes a possibility for his laughter where it had been impossible; but how can he, and by extension we, be certain? His declaration is surprising, as he provides no attempted laughter from which to draw this conclusion. In fact, there is very little about the scene that would suggest the more traditional mechanisms of comedy and very little to identify as laughable. Indeed, there is no proof of laughter’s possibility until we have reevaluated our conceptions of laughter to understand his retort itself as a mode of laughter, one that evinces its performativity. When Fanon says, “Le beau nègre vous emmerde, madame” he performs the “subversive laughter” Wynter says belongs to “all the rogues/fools/clowns that ever brought the priestly forms of ‘high seriousness’ down to earth” (“After Humanism” 55). The grounding moment here is the result of Fanon announcing explicitly the very problem of ontology in relation to Blackness, though this gets somewhat lost among available translations. Markmann’s translation substitutes a euphemistic “kiss [my] ass” for the French “vous emmerde” while Richard Philcox comes closer in his translation: “The handsome Negro says, ‘Fuck you,’ madame.” Yet, what this more literal translation makes up for in terms of accuracy it misses in nuance. There are no quotation marks around the French to justify Philcox’s decision, and it is not so much what one “says” but what one does. This distinction between saying and doing is crucial when one considers the significance Fanon places on being “actional” as a mode of self-inscription grounded in the actions of the body (119).

Black laughter affords Fanon a mode of articulation that is not beholden to ocular-centric, sensorial constructions of knowledge production; the perception of laughter (visually on the body, aurally through one’s hearing, or even haptically as felt vibrations) does not account for all cognitive and subjective dynamics made possible by the disruptive structure introduced by laughter. At the limit of what is knowable, Black laughter precipitates an epistemic crisis, compelling us to rethink what we mean when we say “laughter.” The indefinite, unknowable shape of Black laughter proves its most valuable asset, denying any type of definitive reformulation and reconstruction of its derelict movement. This is the insight that Fanon brings forward through

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this retrospective identification of Black laughter in *Black Skin, White Masks* and throughout his work.

Lastly, consider how the presence of laughter in Fanon's writing correlates to his increased work within anti-colonial movements, which is to say with an increased attention to the transnational. While the internal struggle had in dreams might be the psychic ground upon which some individual battles are waged, Fanon is clear throughout much of his work that anti-colonial struggle and decolonization only ever works as collective activity. Pseudo-releases of internal aggressions only benefit the individual, obscuring the ongoing oppressions of colonialism. As an alternative, Fanon lauds the "African institution" of "communal self-criticism," which settled quarrels between members of the same group or community (*Wretched* 48). This collective act, which he writes is always done "with a note of humor" generates an atmosphere in which "everybody is relaxed" (48). As such, this communal self-criticism operates along the lines of laughter and produces an alternative mode of social exchange. By designating this mode an "African institution," Fanon flouts the national boundaries separating people, envisioning a Black transnational network premised on the power of laughter.

Notes

1. According to translator Ruby Cohn, Molière probably wrote the letter himself.
2. Gordon writes, "That Fanon concludes [the chapter] by confessing that he wept reveals the therapeutic dimension of the chapter. Recall his reference to laughter. Laughter enabled him to cope with his situation, to move on. The role of humor in oppressed communities is well known. There is not only the form of humor in which the oppressor is ridiculed, but there is also self-deprecating humor, humor that creates a paradoxical distance and closeness with their situation" ("Through the Zone" 19).
3. See also *The Fact of Blackness: Frantz Fanon and Visual Representation* (1996; edited by Alan Read) for thorough discussions concerning Fanon's influence on art-making practices.
4. Bakhtin, 1965; Parvulescu, 2010. McGraw, 2014.
5. Recent studies by Marina Davila-Ross consider whether animals, in particular primates, laugh. Her findings (2009; 2015) suggest that distinctly human facets related to laughter are "traceable to characteristics of shared ancestors with great apes." By tickling rodents, Jaak Panksepp (2007) hopes to someday map neurological pathways associated with emotion. The tenor of these studies, however, presupposes a definition of human laughter that is unambiguous.

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6. Freud, 1916, and Bergson, 1900.
7. I follow Rinaldo Walcott's example here of capitalizing Human when it refers to "its post-Columbus orientation," which is to say the Human as a technology and consequence of imperialism. Similarly, I use a lower-case when discussing being human in modes that attempt to either disrupt or move beyond Europe's definitions (Walcott 93).
8. Silver, Andrew. *Minstrelsy and Murder: The Crisis of Southern Humor 1835-1925*. LSUP, 2006, p. 172; Lott, Eric. *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*. Oxford UP, 1995; and Hartman, Saidiya. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. Oxford UP, 1997.
9. For more on Gapers and their apocryphal histories, see Allison Blakely's *Blacks in the Dutch World: The Evolution of Racial Imagery in a Modern Society*. Indiana UP, 2001. In particular, see pp. 54-57.
10. In 1758, Dutch anatomist and anatomical illustrator of the mid-eighteenth century Petrus Camper performed a public dissection of an Angolan boy to disprove "that Negroes and the Blacks had originated from white people's intercourse with large Apes or Orang Utans" (Camper qtd. in Meijer 39). Meijer, Miriam Claude. "Cranial Varieties in the Human and Orangutan Species," in *The Invention of "Race": Scientific and Popular Representations*. Edited by Nicolas Bancel, Thomas David, and Dominic Thomas. Routledge, 2014. An article published in 2008 revealed "how this association influences study participants' basic cognitive processes and significantly alters their judgments in criminal justice contexts" (292). See Phillip Atiba Goff, Melissa J. Williams, Jennifer L. Eberhardt, and Matthew Christian Jackson. "Not Yet Human: Implicit Knowledge, Historical Dehumanization, and Contemporary Consequences." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* vol. 94, no. 2, 2008, pp. 292-306. Note, too, that simian imagery was used in Victorian England to dehumanize Irish populations. For examples, see Curtis, L.P. *Apes and Angels: Irishman in Victorian Caricature*. David and Charles P, 1971.
11. Sylvia Wynter makes a similar point when she considers how the need for the stereotype of the "rebellious' Nat" functions to "[legitimate] the use of force as a necessary mechanism for ensuring regular steady labor" ("Sambo and Minstrels" 151).
12. "Proud Flesh Inter/Views: Sylvia Wynter."
13. See Henry, Paget. "Africana Phenomenology: Its Philosophical Implications." *The C.L.R. James Journal*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2005, pp. 79-112; Moore, T. Owens. "A Fanonian Perspective on Double Consciousness." *Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 35, no. 6, July 2005, pp. 751-762; Rabaka, Reiland. "Introduction: The Five Forms of Fanonism: Deconstructing and Reconstructing Africana Studies, Radical Politics, and Critical Social Theory in the Anti-imperialist Interests of the Wretched of the Earth." *Forms of Fanonism: Frantz Fanon's Critical Theory and the Dialectics of Decolonization*. Lexington Books, 2010, pp. 1-48.

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14. Scholars in more cognition-centered fields have recently sought to test this connection. Evolutionary psychologist Robin Dunbar, in his paper correlating increased pain thresholds with increased laughter, argues in favor of laughter's physical benefits over its cognitive benefits. Dunbar, R.I.M. "Social laughter is correlated with an elevated pain threshold." *Proceedings of the Royal Society of London Series B, Biological Sciences*, 2012, pp. 279, 1161-1167. See also Dunbar, R.I.M. "Bridging the bonding gap: the transition from primates to humans" *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London Series B, Biological Sciences*, 2012, pp. 367, 1837-1846.

15. Note the similarities between Markmann's translation here and Constance Farrington's translation of the colonized subjects' initial moves toward decolonization in *Wretched*: "the native identifies his enemy and recognizes all his misfortunes, throwing all the exacerbated might of his hate and anger into this new channel" (71).

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