

# Fanon as Reader of African American Folklore

by

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## Abstract

This essay explores Fanon's overt and covert uses of African American folk hero, Brer Rabbit in *Black Skin White Masks* by following up on Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s call for "properly contextualized readings of Fanon's opus in relation to other germinal works of his era." Examining Fanon's relationship to Black American culture as distilled in the pages of *Les temps modernes* exposes some interesting anomalies in his identity politics vis-à-vis Black America. His manipulation of "The Malevolent Rabbit" trope identified by Bernard Wolfe creates a complex dialogue between oral and print sources which enabled him to employ rhetorical strategies derived from the folk culture of Africans in the Americas to plead his case before the white metropolitan audience even as he resisted earlier Négritude writers' pretensions to pan-diasporic identity.

## Introduction

In his 1991 essay, "Critical Fanonism," Henry Louis Gates, Jr. called for "properly contextualized readings of Fanon's opus in relation to other germinal works of his era."<sup>1</sup> This study will therefore take Gates' methodological cue and focus on Fanon's relationship to Black American culture as distilled in the pages of *Les temps modernes*. Over the first ten years of its existence from 1946-56 the writers who contributed to *Les temps modernes* frequently offered critical analyses of contemporary American society. The combined August/September issue for 1946 was devoted exclusively to consideration of the USA, its situations, myths, and people.

The articles in this issue include excerpts from James Weldon Johnson's *American Book of Negro Spirituals* as well as extensive selections from St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton's *Black Metropolis*. Thus, in addition to his familiarity with the literary works of Black American writers in translation, Fanon also had the opportunity to absorb the themes and methods of Black American cultural critics several years before he published *Black Skin White Masks*. While Fanon refers to Black American culture in articulating his theories on the psychology of oppression, there are some interesting anomalies in his identity politics vis-à-vis Black America. More specifically, Fanon resisted earlier Négritude writers' pretensions to pan-diasporic identity even while he employed rhetorical strategies derived from the folk culture of Africans in the Americas to plead his case before the white metropolitan audience. This essay will explore Fanon's overt and covert uses of African American folk hero, Brer Rabbit in *Black Skin White Masks*.<sup>2</sup>

### **The Malevolent Rabbit**

Ostensibly, Fanon's primary source of knowledge about Brer Rabbit is an article by Bernard Wolfe, which appeared in the May 1949 issue of *Les temps modernes*. In "Uncle Remus and the Malevolent Rabbit," Wolfe initially explores the ubiquity of the grinning Negro in American consumer culture. He questions why whites find figures like Aunt Jemima and Uncle Ben so reassuring and whether in real life the black grin might not mask the hostility of an oppressed people. Next, he traces the grinning Negro back to Joel Chandler Harris' creation of Uncle Remus. Wolfe regards Harris as a masochistic racist who understood the revenge fantasies embedded in the Brer Rabbit cycle but identified with the Negro in spite of himself. Wolfe argues that Harris' stammer and social discomfort were signs of a central paradox in white American identity:

Harris, the archetypical white Southerner, sought the Negro's love, and pretended he had received it (Remus' grin). But he sought the Negro's hate too (Brer Rabbit), and reveled in it in an un-conscious orgy of masochism – punishing himself, possibly, for not being the Negro, the stereotypical Negro, the unstinting giver. Harris's inner split – and the South's, and white America's – is mirrored in the fantastic disparity between Remus's beaming face and Brer Rabbit's acts.<sup>3</sup>

The *Temps modernes* version of Wolfe's article predates the English *Commentary* version by two months, but neither journal acknowledges a prior copyright. The *Temps modernes* version incorporates more Freudian analysis than the version which appeared in the July 1949 issue of *Commentary*, yet it omits Wolfe's foray into the Herskovits / Frazier controversy over the extent to which survivals from African cultures influenced the development of African American culture in the United States. Herskovits, an anthropologist, documented extensive African survivals in the New World in an effort to counter racist assertions that Negroes had no culture and no history.

African American sociologist, E. Franklin Frazier downplayed the influence of African survivals on the development of African American culture in order to bolster his case that Negroes were as American as any other group and deserved full citizenship. The two scholars differed more in their emphasis than in their aims.

Wolfe's Freudian interpretation adds an interesting twist to the debate. He asserts that white racists needed to believe the Brer Rabbit tales came from Africa in order to deny their symbolic content. If the tales did not arise in response to American experience, then the plantocrats would not have to recognize the anthropomorphic symbolism woven into them. They would not have to acknowledge that the Brer Rabbit stories offered models of subversion and resistance and contained a powerful critique of the plantation system. Wolfe, like Frazier, discounts Herskovits' theses about African survivals in North America. Instead, he proposes a neo-French genealogy for the tales, tracing them from the stories twelfth-century Flemish peasants told about Reynard, the fox, to versions African slaves might have learned from French plantation owners "whether in the Louisiana territory, the Acadian-French sections of North Carolina, or the West Indies."<sup>4</sup>

In common with the antebellum plantocrats, the editors of *Les temps modernes* demonstrated an ideological need to displace and disavow the origins of the Brer Rabbit tales from the site of oppression. The *Temps modernes* version of Wolfe's article eliminated the "reynard" thesis and censored other aspects of Wolfe's analysis which might apply to France's colonial history and racial hegemony. By 1949 the *roman colonial* and travelogue genres had familiarized the French metropolitan audience with certain folkloric elements of colonial local color, but René Guyonnet's translation insistently Europeanizes the antebellum plantation milieu despite the existence of French equivalents from the plantation societies of the French Caribbean.<sup>5</sup> Thus, he changes Brer Rabbit into "Frère Lapin" rather than "Compè Lapin." The "big house" becomes the "maison des maîtres" as if metropolitan readers could not possibly imagine the architectural contrasts between the "case" and "l'habitation." Uncle Remus' endearment, "honey" is rendered as "mignon" although the term "doudou" invokes the same plantation nostalgia in French audiences that "honey chile" does for American whites. Guyonnet even transforms the landscape into rural France. Persimmon trees become plum trees although the French are familiar with "plaquemines de la virginie" as well as "plaquemines du japon." Meanwhile Frère Lapin plunders a bitter apple orchard (coloquintes) instead of a "goober patch" at a time when French farmers were fattening their hogs on groundnuts (arachides) imported from the colonial territories in French West Africa. All in all, this translation carefully shields the French audience from having to apply Wolfe's analysis of American racism to the French colonial context. Wolfe's psychoanalytic exploration of racism nevertheless enriched Fanon's reflections on the psychology of oppression and suggested specific tools for working an ironic revenge on the neo-colonial mentality.

In a footnote, Wolfe suggests that Uncle Remus is the twin of the mythical Romulus who founded Rome:

Of course there isn't a neatly ordered symbolism here but for the Southerner after the Civil War, the story of the biological similarity between races (Romulus and Remus were twins), of the fratricidal character of racism (Romulus killed Remus), the revolt of apparently docile slaves (Romulus founded Rome as a refuge for fugitive slaves), of the sexual fears which motivated and perpetuated racism (lacking women of their own, Romulus and his companions carried off the Sabine women), of racial amalgamation as the foundation of the future society (Romulus' people and the Sabines ended up intermarrying after many bloody battles and the result was the Roman people) must have had some resonances.<sup>6</sup>

As Wolfe admits, the symbolism is not neatly ordered. His analysis of parallels between the mythology of the antebellum South and the mythological origins of Ancient Rome might have been more convincing had he placed it in the context of antebellum naming practices which juxtaposed Greco-Roman civilization with African "barbarism." The presence of Black Pompeys and Scipios was an oxymoronic joke to the southern plantocrats who bestowed these names on their human chattel.

In the subtext of "The Fact of Blackness" and "The Negro and Psychopathology," Fanon takes issue with just such an oxymoronic sobriquet. When Sartre entitled his preface to Leopold S. Senghor's 1948 *Nouvelle anthologie de la poésie nègre et malgache de langue française* "Orphée noir," he probably did not intend to invoke a risible absurdity, but contemporary readers in the métropole would definitely have found the juxtaposition black/Orpheus provocative. Fanon also found the preface provocative in its imposition of eroticized exotic desire onto the Négritude poets: Sartre announces that "Pour nos poètes noirs, au contraire, l'être sort du Néant comme une verge qui se dresse" ("For our black poets being emerges from Nothingness like a penis becoming erect").<sup>7</sup> The rhetorical structure of "The Fact of Blackness" and "The Negro and Psychopathology" indicates that Fanon read lines like these as a homoerotic overture that demeaned his and every Black man's virility. Bernard Wolfe's article reminded him that he could resort to the stratagems of the vernacular culture to exact his revenge.

Fanon greatly admired the Civil Rights struggles of the American Negro:

In the United States, the Negro battles and is battled. There are laws that, little by little, are invalidated under the Constitution. There are other laws that forbid certain forms of discrimination. And we can be sure that nothing is going to be given free. There is war, there are defeats, truces, victories.<sup>8</sup>

Fanon, like Sartre, believed that the Self is defined through violent struggle with the Other. Therefore, the Black American's fight for freedom allowed him to dignify himself as a man. In contrast, despite the history of Martinican slave revolts and slave resistance, despite the looming shadow of the Haitian Revolution, Fanon regarded freedom in the Antilles as something that had been bestowed by legislative fiat. The Black American was forging his manhood in blood while the French Negro was "unable to be sure whether the white man considers him consciousness in-itself-for-itself, he must forever absorb himself in uncovering resistance, opposition, challenge."<sup>9</sup> The phrase "consciousness in-itself-for-itself" of course reprises Sartre's phenomenological speculations, but there was no room within Sartre's dialectical vision of Négritude for Fanon to compel the "master" to recognize him. As Hegel had argued long before, the "slave" had a more holistic view of the master/slave dialectic but lacked the power to make the "master" see the reality of either the enslaved position or the master's privileged position within the hierarchy.

Instead, appropriating the rhetoric of the Brer Rabbit tales allowed Fanon to effect an ironic reversal of the master/slave dialectic which Sartre's patronizing preface perpetuated despite its liberal intent. First of all, in keeping with the necessity dictated by his subaltern position, Fanon laid this trap as a covert strategy of resistance. His initial assertion that "The folklore of Martinique is meager, and few children in Fort-de-France know the stories of 'Compè Lapin,' twin brother of the Br'er Rabbit of Louisiana's [sic] Uncle Remus" is a posture similar to that of Joel Chandler Harris's informants who claimed not to know any Brer Rabbit stories.<sup>10</sup> Harris would then tell a Brer Rabbit story that he had previously collected. This technique usually overcame suspicion of him as an outsider and prompted informants to share more subversive tales. The fact that Fanon displaces Brer Rabbit from Anglophone Georgia to Creole Louisiana reveals that he knew more about the trickster than he wanted to admit. For while Joel Chandler Harris's contemporary, Alcée Fortier did collect Compè Lapin stories on the Lara Plantation in Louisiana and published them as *Louisiana folk-tales in French dialect and English translation* in 1894, Fanon most likely heard the exploits of Compè Lapin in the original Creole during his boyhood days in Martinique. Wolfe's article freed him to elaborate his own versions of the tales' subversion. Indeed, Fanon proved himself a consummate manipulator of narrative masks.

### **Fanon as *Conteur***

Throughout most of *Black Skin White Masks*, Fanon narrates through the first person plural pronoun, "nous." This device has many probable origins. It invests Fanon with the "objective" authority of the scientific observer. It reflects the phenomenological style Sartre used when exploring the problem of intersubjectivity in *Being and Nothingness*. It also manifests Fanon's claim to speak to and about a collective experience of oppression and empowers him to speak for the oppressed. Markmann's translation uniformly renders Fanon's shifting narrative personas through the pronoun "I." This reduces readers' ability to recognize Fanon's pervasive irony and phenomenological reflection on subjectivity. It also obscures Fanon's rhetorical roots in the *conteur* tradition.

A good storyteller has to make all the characters come to life by adopting a different vocal quality and set of gestures for each one. Consequently the storyteller inhabits many different points of view in succession. Fanon was a master of this technique. In his biography of Fanon, Peter Geismar documents this aspect of Fanon's personality:

In Algeria I asked one of Fanon's closest friends to give me a description of the man. He seemed perplexed, answering, 'It's hard. His face was always changing, especially when he talked. You know, as he told stories he'd act out the parts of the people he was describing. He could be like Marcel Marceau.'<sup>11</sup>

Fanon also made occasional use of folkloric material to authenticate his observations. For example, he recounts the following joke in "The Man of Color and the White Woman": "Some thirty years ago, a coal-black Negro in a Paris bed with a 'maddening' blonde, shouted at the moment of orgasm, 'Hurrah for Schoelcher!'"<sup>12</sup> In the national mythos of Martinique, Schoelcher is revered as the liberator of the enslaved population. Hence Fanon's narrative technique forces the reader to savor the tale before he acknowledges that it is merely an anecdotal expression of "the spirit of the group." Fanon's storytelling prowess is also evident in the "Look, a Negro!" sequence from "The Fact of Blackness." In this passage he uses direct citation and interior monologue to shift rapidly between the perspectives of the small boy cringing at the sight of a "savage Negro," the boy's embarrassed mother, and the Negro narrator of the sequence. Other passages where this technique is at work include the patronizing voice of the white official addressing blacks and Arabs in pidgin: "'Sit there, boy...What's bothering you?' 'Where does it hurt, huh?' 'You not feel good, no?'"<sup>13</sup>

In addition to his mastery of characterization, Fanon demonstrates true artistry in embedding vernacular rhetoric within his ideological quarrels with Sartre. Wolfe cites the story of how Brer Rabbit made Brer Fox his riding horse as an example of the revenge function the tales serve in vernacular black culture. In the original story, Brer Rabbit boasts to the "ladies" at Miss Fields' establishment that he can make Brer Fox into his riding horse. He then feigns illness and convinces Brer Fox to carry him on his back. Pleading weakness, he persuades Brer Fox to put on a saddle and bridle so that he (Brer Rabbit) won't fall off before they reach their destination. When they pass by Miss Fields' house, however, Brer Rabbit applies the spurs and demonstrates his dominance over his rival. The admiring female audience for this exploit further sexualizes Brer Rabbit's ironic reversal of the master/slave power dynamic. Close reading of Fanon's response to "Orphée noir" reveals that this tale serves as the deep structure organizing principle of both "The Fact of Blackness" and "The Negro and Psychopathology" in *Black Skin White Masks*.

Fanon closes “The Fact of Blackness” with the beleaguered Negro narrator’s confession “Without responsibility, straddling Nothingness and Infinity, I began to weep”.<sup>14</sup> This line is even more powerful in the original French as “à cheval entre le Néant et l’Infini” more directly evokes the sexual connotations of our slang “in the saddle.” The invocation of Sartre’s famous title (*Being and Nothingness*) then indicates that Frer Fanon has mounted J-P as his riding horse. In “The Psychopathology of the Negro,” he applies the spurs, using Wolfe’s analysis of whites’ masochistic pleasure in the Brer Rabbit stories as the foundation of his argument that the white negrophobe is really motivated by homosexual desire. Having called Sartre on the homoerotic overtones of his “Orphée noir” preface, Fanon’s vernacular rhetoric simultaneously exposes the underlying racism in the text.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates the need for archival research on the sources that informed Fanon’s work. “Properly contextualized,” Fanon’s manipulation of “The Malevolent Rabbit” reveals a complex dialogue with both oral and print sources. Yet persistent negligence in this area of scholarship threatens to turn Fanon studies into an off-shore enterprise for manufacturing “multi-culturalism” at minimal social or psychic cost to the status quo.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. "Critical Fanonism," *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 17, No.3 (Spring, 1991), pp. 457-70.

<sup>2</sup> Presented at the College Language Association conference in Atlanta, Georgia, April, 1997.

<sup>3</sup> Bernard Wolfe, "Uncle Remus and the Malevolent Rabbit," *Commentary*, (July, 1949), pp. 40-41.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>5</sup> The *roman colonial* or novel of the colonies was a distinct genre in 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century French letters. There were specific literary prizes awarded for works in this genre and Pierre Loti was elected to the Académie française on the strength of his contributions to the genre.

<sup>6</sup> Bernard Wolfe, "L'Oncle Rémus et son lapin," René Guyonnet, trans. *Les temps modernes* (Mai, 1949), p. 910.

<sup>7</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, "Orphée noir," preface to *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française*, by Léopold Sédar Senghor (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1948), p. xxxiii.

<sup>8</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks*, Charles Lam Markmann, trans. (New York: Grove Press, 1967), p.221.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 222.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 153.

<sup>11</sup> Peter Geismar, *Fanon: A biography* (New York: Dial Press, 1971), pp. 9-10.

<sup>12</sup> Fanon, p. 63.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 140.