

Prompt 3: Othering

Beauvoir & Fanon: On Othering

In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir draws on Hegel — what he claims to be a fundamental hostility in consciousness to another consciousness — to give an account of “Woman’s Situation and Character”: the woman is oppressed in her situation, with practical and cognitive limitations. Similarly, in *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon’s account of being black — particularly, in the chapters on “The Black Man and Language” and “The Lived Experience of the Black Man” — focuses on how the body schema collapses into an epidermal-racial schema under the white gaze and use of language. They agree on many basic aspects of the situation of the Other, instantiated oppressively and dialectically in relation to the Subject. However, they diverge in terms of the possibilities of revolt and goals of freedom.

Like her famous line, “One is not born but becomes woman,” Beauvoir’s account of being a woman focuses on this *becoming*, which is in itself a process of othering. She defines “woman” as that which is negative to “man.” In short, man is the Subject and the Absolute, whereas woman is the Other. (6) In such a relation, there is no reciprocity and relativity. Woman is determined and differentiated in relation to man, while he is not in relation to her. How does this happen? How does the Other become the Object that is stuck in an eternal state of inessentiality, relativity, passivity, and particularity (as opposed to the Subject’s, i.e. man, essentiality, absoluteness, autonomy and subjectivity)? As Beauvoir points out, the Other does not spontaneously posit itself as the Other from the outset — the Other is first posited as Other by the One positing itself as One, and then, the Other has to submit to this point of view. (6)

How does the woman's submission occur? Let's break down Beauvoir's account of othering into two. First, how the woman is constructed through the situation that she *lives*, which is a means of patriarchal oppression. Second, how the woman contends the situation and, yet, still submits.

So, how is the situation imposed on the woman? The situation is, first and foremost, a patriarchal one. In a masculine universe, the woman occupies a subordinate position where she is inferior and dependent, remaining "an eternal child" and "a passive opposite" to the subjects (the men) who shape and dominate the universe. (639) The situation that she is "enclosed" in is a monotonous repetition of life in its contingency and facticity — an immanence that she can only, subsequently, "wallow" in (which I will delve into later). (643) Her inferiority and dependence imposes two main areas of limitations: the practical and the cognitive. In the realm of the practical, the world for the woman is neither a "set of tools" halfway between her will and her goals, as Heidegger defines it ("ready-to-hand"), nor a context that is guided or polarized by her particular goals, in the words of Merleau-Ponty ("function of projection"). (639) Rather, the situation is resistant to her — she cannot initiate projects; she lacks practical experience with technology — and dominated by fate that she is passively subjected to. Even when the woman engages in endeavors of use (for instance, homemaking), she is only "producing" or "maintaining" things that are only inessential means, never doing anything that can make ends (the absolute value — Beauvoir suggests truth, beauty, and freedom — of free existence) out of means. (644) In the realm of the cognitive, the woman does not use masculine logic, which is not relevant to the reality she experiences. (640) Since she does not *do* anything, the woman thinks in "a strange jumble in her head" or "an immense and confused mass." (640) Why? While the man possesses autonomy and the knowledge that he can construct institutions, ethics, and codes, the woman's thinking does not flow into any project and she "cannot imagine any hand" making

the masculine world, which seems absolute. (640) In this position of powerlessness and ignorance, the woman thus forgoes criticism, examination, and judgment for herself and acts on the basis of *faith*, not knowledge. As such, alienated from masculine technology and logic, yet taught to accept (or resign herself to) masculine authority, the woman is stuck in a situation of constant recrimination or contention, where she does not have the means to create another situation for herself despite not agreeing with the one that she is in.

Fanon's account of being black also taps on this semi-Hegelian subject-object dichotomy, wherein the black is the Other while the white is the Subject. Under the psychoexistential complex that occurs in the colonial context of black-white relation, the black man (note the masculine perspective that Fanon operates from) internalizes or epidermalizes the inferiority ("to prove at all costs to the Whites the wealth of the black man's intellect and equal intelligence"). (xiv) Beyond this relation of inferiority and superiority, there is something deeper at play in how a black person experiences oneself not as subject. Othered through the white gaze and through the use of language, the black man is in the zone of nonbeing — "a Black is not a man." (xii) (Under the heteronormativity of the old humanism that Fanon deconstructs, human being is white man.) That is, the black man wants to become white because whiteness endows him with being, with humanity. Language, for Fanon, bears "the weight of civilization" — to speak as the colonized is, therefore, to participate in one's own oppression and to reflect the very structures of black alienation in everything from vocabulary to syntax to intonation. (2) The more the black assimilates French, the more he or she is capitulating to whiteness as aspiration, as superior, as desirable — the more profound, then, the sense of nonbeing. In reverse, the white use of language similarly also others the black person. The use of pidgin infantilizes the black man, implicitly classifies ("imprison") the black at an uncivilized and primitive level, and limits him

to his visible appearance — pidgin becomes a tool of oppression that can tell a black person to “stay where you are.” (17) So, how does language construct race and other the black person? Language constructs notions of what is civilized versus primitive, what one ought to speak based on his appearance, and simultaneously makes and marks the contours of the Other.

But that’s not all there is to the process of othering that constructs the lived experience of being black. Fanon plays with Sartre’s notion of “the Other” and problematizes that. Chapter Five of *Black Skin, White Masks* begins with “Look! A Negro!” This instance of white use of language (by a little white boy) is a brilliant, baptismal moment of recognition and lack, visibility and invisibility, and of becoming and being *fixed* under the white gaze. At home, in his own territory, the black man is the subject. The moment he has to confront the white gaze is when the process of othering begins. The white gaze apprehends and traps him within the facticity of his black skin, his very subjectivity reduced to this blackness — the black man becomes “an object among other objects.” (89) Under this attack, the black man’s body schema collapses — a peeling, stripping, and hemorrhage that left “congealed black blood” all over — to give way to an *epidermal racial schema*. (92) The moment of objective reification reduces and fixes him to his epidermal skin. Now, the black man is “overdetermined” from the outside, engulfed by his body, and enslaved to his skin. (95)

Beauvoir and Fanon’s accounts of othering in these two texts are uncannily similar in many respects. Just as one becomes woman, one is not born black but becomes black. Upon the woman and the black, a situation of inferiority, inessentiality, and objectification is imposed. For both, the white masculine world is a transcendent reality and an absolute. The infantilization (“an eternal child” in the words of Beauvoir) of both the black and the woman draws attention to their powerlessness and passivity in the situation, as well as a shared cognitive limitation — in terms

of expectations, the woman cannot master the masculine logic of action and autonomy, while the black cannot master the civilizing language of the white. More interestingly, both accounts implicitly use the Heideggerian concept of an inauthentic mode of being. For Fanon, the black man who struggles to master French or assimilate into life in Paris is radically transformed — he wears a white “mask.” But embodiment limits this inauthentic whitening — to be black is to have an epidermal skin that the process of othering constantly fixates one to. Similarly, Beauvoir makes it clear that the woman knows how to be as active, effective, and ascetic “as a man” when engaged in an undertaking worthy of “a human being.” (644) But, lacking the concrete means to use freedom, the woman wallows in immanence, engaging in the sensual, indolent, monotonous exploits that are ultimately “artificial.” (656) What then is authentic for the Other? Both Beauvoir and Fanon see a revolution made possible by the freedom that is fundamental to human experience.

Here is wherewith they diverge. Indeed, both operate with the view that the basic structure of human experience is situation (what Beauvoir will often call “immanence”) and freedom (“transcendence”). While I briefly mention the zone of nonbeing in *Black Skin, White Masks* earlier in the essay, the distinction between negation (woman in relation to man) and nonbeing (the black in relation to white) still needs to be drawn. For despite the fact that both Beauvoir and Fanon see their respective modes of being as oppressively instantiated by the situation, the situation for Fanon is “Nothingness” (119) — “A feeling of inferiority? No, a feeling of not existing.” (118) — while the situation for Beauvoir is an existence that is “a waiting” (649) that is halfway between revolt and slavery. On one hand, the black and the woman are both the Other and the Object. On the other hand, the black is not just the opposite of white, not just not a man, but also nonbeing. The woman, though not man, is allied with Nature

and Life — her existence is not denied, but she is *deprived* of concrete opportunities to use her freedom. For Fanon, therefore, the authentic is to claim the human being's right to demand human behavior from the other. For Beauvoir, the woman needs to stop justifying her individual existence within her own immanence, and to instead revolt in collective liberation.

Both offer convincing accounts of othering though they can both be strengthened (especially intertextually). For Beauvoir's account, her exploration of the ambiguity in the woman's relation to man provides nuance, complicating an easy reading of the woman's situation as the utterly passive, unfulfilled Other. The ambiguity lies in their constant refusal by acceptance of the male world — the woman submits against her will, contesting and protesting the patriarchal situation without seeking to escape from it. Why? Because she lacks the concrete means; but also because she often derives satisfaction from her role as the Other, deprived of freedom but also of responsibility and consequential choices. Here, Beauvoir balances a repudiation of the deprivations of the woman's freedom by the patriarchal situation with an acknowledgement of the material and ideological realities that make this deprivation still fulfilling for some (bearing in mind that this avenue of fulfillment may be the only one available for the woman). As for Fanon's account, what is especially convincing is his focus on the epidermal. While Beauvoir does talk about the woman's bodily being in terms of physiology and the practical limitations imposed on her, she does not venture as much into in epidermal schema as Fanon does.

What could be strengthened is the lacuna that each poses for the other. For Beauvoir's account, the vantage point of the woman that she embarks from is implicitly "white." Though, in a charitable reading, she could have been trying to create the foundations for solidarity, the situation for the non-white woman would have provided much more grounds for analysis. This

omission comes at the risk of the loss of gender difference for the black woman, subjected to a patriarchalized femininity in which “woman” comes to signify the white woman and the black female body is relegated to an ungendered thing. As for Fanon’s account, there is no doubt that it is predominantly masculine. He is hostile towards the female body — from the encounter with the white woman where he shames her to his criticism of the black woman’s desire for whiteness. Though declaring to be about the black lived experience at the level of the epidermal, it is quite clear that the black woman suffers quite differently in her body from the black man. However, as phenomenological accounts that are rooted in Beauvoir and Fanon’s own lived experiences, the reader cannot charitably expect them to be comprehensive and exhaustive.

In conclusion, both Beauvoir and Fanon embrace a constructivist approach to gender and race. The woman is othered by a mode of life — immanence and repetition — imposed, set against a background of powerless revolt with the only means of action at the level of utility in a domain that is still within the masculine universe. The black is othered by the imposition of a civilizing language and the white gaze that collapses the body schema into an epidermal racial schema that one cannot escape from. For both, the process of othering is one of objectifying reification and seating one in inferiority. Yet, they differ in the possibilities of revolt, of ambiguity, and ultimately, would benefit immensely in interplay and intertext with each other.

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Works Cited

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