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Philosophy in Black:

African Philosophy as a Negritude

African philosophy, as a negritude, is a moment in the postcolonial critique of European/Western colonialism and the bodies of knowledge which sustained it. Yet a critical analysis of its' original articulations reveals the limits of this critique and more broadly of postcolonial studies, while also pointing towards more radical theoretical possibilities within African Philosophy. Jean-Paul Sartre's essay "Black Orpheus", a philosophical appropriation of negritude poetry, serves as a guide for this reflection, for the text reveals the inspiration and wealth of expressions of negritude, as well as their ambiguity. Sartre's essay however also renders possible a further act of re-appropriation that takes us beyond culture-centred readings of African philosophy and postcolonialism, readings whose conceptual and critical potential is far greater than what has hitherto been explored.

African Philosophy, Negritude, Postcolonislism.

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…chez moi, l'imagination est tout.
Raymond Rousssel, Comment j'ai écrit certains de mes livres

Alioune Diop, founder and director of the journal *Présence Africaine*, in the preface to the 1949 French edition of Placide Tempels' *La Philosophie Bantoue* would write that the work was essential to the black person, to her/his self-awareness, to sate the desire to position oneself in relation to Europe. It was of equal significance to all of those who were concerned to understand the African and to engage in a dialogue with him.[1] This little book ("ce petit livre") was, in his own mind, the most important of all of those that he had read about Africa.[2] If judged exclusively from the perspective of the subsequent history of what would come to be known as *African Philosophy*, Diop's evaluation is not without warrant, for Tempels' work would become the original creative act in the constitution of this philosophy. *Bantu Philosophy* was, in the words of Lucius Outlaw, "an axial work", in that it laid out the parameters, the discursive space, within which the subsequent debate about the existence and nature of African philosophy would largely be played out.[3] And yet it was and remains a highly polemical work. If, as Diop believed, it contributed to the "presence" of Africa, with peers soon to follow, it was also objected to on the grounds that it distorted the nature of philosophy and of Africans, and this against the background of the colonial goals evident in the work, thus failing to offer an adequate picture of African philosophy.[4]

The purpose of this reflection is not to review the many interventions that now comprise the textual history of contemporary African philosophy, nor to critically evaluate Tempels' *Bantu Philosophy*. Others have already done this work, and admirably.[5] What is proposed in its place is a return to Diop's original contention that

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[1] Alioune Diop, "Niam M'Paya ou de la fin que dévorent les moyens" (Preface), R.P. Placide Tempels, *La Philosophie Bantoue*, 2ième Edition, Présence Africaine, Paris, 1949, p. 5. Unless otherwise indicated, translations are my own.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Lucius T. Outlaw (Jr.), "African "Philosophy"? Deconstructive and Reconstructive Challenges", in *On Race and Philosophy*, Routledge, New York, 1996, p. 60.

[4] If we use the word "African" here in referring to Tempels' work, and not "Bantu", it is because Tempels himself, in speaking of the Bantu moves between "Bantu", "pagan", "primitive", "black", and "African" throughout his essay, thereby inaugurating a very common practice among African philosophers of slipping between ethnic, religious, geographical, developmental and racial signifiers when describing the philosophy of the region, as contrasted with "Christian", "civilised", "white", "European", and so on.. This is indicative of both the panoply of concepts that have framed discussions about Africa since the onset of European modernity ("Africa" as a *floating signifier*), to which Tempels was indebted and which I believe he did not challenge, as well as to the perhaps more dubious tendency of African philosophers to share the very same framework. See: R.P. Placide Tempels, *La Philosophie Bantoue*, 2ième Edition, Présence Africaine, Paris, 1949.

[5] V.Y. Mudimbe's study of the European/Western knowledge of Africa and of the significance of Tempels' central role in the emergence of African philosophy remains a critical source for understanding this history. See: V.Y. Mudimbe, The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Indiana, 1988. For further critical evaluations of Tempels and its consequences, see also: Paulin J. Hountondji, African Philosophy: Myth or Reality, 2nd Ed., Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Indiana, 1996; D.A. Masolo, *African Philosophy in Search of Identity*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Indiana, 1994.

Tempels' essay was essential to black people, essential to filling in the great hole in the world map that was Africa, as Jean-Paul Sartre said in his own contribution to the first issue of the journal *Présence Africaine*.[6] Diop's text, in other words, reads Tempels' work as a record of a *black* philosophy, thus explicitly identifying what would often go unmentioned or unanalyzed throughout African philosophy, namely, that it was the philosophy of *black* Africans. That the racial marker of this philosophy should have so often gone without notice or comment is important. More often than not, this philosophy is referred to by the simple designation of "African", or by a more specific ethnic African identity, such as Bantu, Akan, Igbo, Acholi, and so on. The racial identity is passed over. And yet it is my belief that it is always silently at work beneath the surface of its elaborations, and that indeed without it, African philosophy as it has been conceived would be impossible. The thesis defended here then will be that African philosophy is a *negritude*, and to read the philosophy in this manner is both to reveal limits in its conceptual and theoretical possibilities, but also perhaps to open up alternative philosophical *becomings*.[7]

Hegel, in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, grounded his enquiryon the premise that geography and climate determine if and how people engage in world history.[8] And for Hegel, "…neither the *torrid* nor the *cold region* can provide a basis for human freedom or for world-historical nations".[9] Such climes render human freedom difficult, if not impossible. The conclusion that followed was that "it is therefore the *temperate zone* which must furnish the theatre of world history."[10] Africa was to be found in the torrid region, the consequence of which was that it was historically without significance. The "fiery heat" of the continent was a natural force far too powerful "for the spirit to achieve free movement and to reach that degree of richness which is the precondition and source of a fully developed mastery of reality."[11] However, for Hegel, not all of the peoples of the continent were to be considered African, as the region could be divided into three distinct parts: a northern, coastal region that could be called "European Africa", the Nile valley connected with Asia, and lastly, Africa proper, that which lay south of the Sahara.[12] The geographical limits are then paralleled by a racial and spiritual distinctiveness. Africans are Negroes, blacks, lacking in any true cultural expression. They know neither religion, nor politics, nor

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[6] Sartre, "Présence Noire", *Présence Africaine*, 1, 1947 Jean-Paul, p. 28.
[7] My use of the term "becomings" follows that of Deleuze and Guattari. See: Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1994, pp. 59, 96.
[8] Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1975, pp. 152-3.
[9] Ibid., p. 154.
[10] Ibid., 155.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid., P. 173.

morality. Theirs is a world isolated from all other peoples, "wrapped in the dark mantle of night",[13] incapable of any "development", and thus without history.[14] Hegel's Africa, exemplified humanly by the Negro, is *black* Africa. And if it is argued that Hegel's thinking here is not racial because race is understood as a result of geography and climate, and therefore as not *intrinsically* consequential for the determination of human characteristics, this is meagre consolation as there seems to be little or nothing that would permit human beings from escaping the influence of geography, or at least not in the context of Africa. And therefore Hegel, in his own mind, was justified in ranking hierarchically racially identified human groups, with black Africans placed below the threshold of true historical existence. This was a *racism* that viewed Africa as nothing more than a "blank darkness",[15] that "great hole in the world map" that Diop and others thought Tempels' *Bantu Philosophy* helped to fill.

The paradox in Diop's reception of this work and of the greater part of subsequent African philosophy was that it accepted Hegel's racial cartography, while rejecting its racist evaluation. The question would remain however as to how much the former was dependent on the latter, and thus still more disturbingly, to what degree African philosophy has and continues to be seduced by what may very well be racist logic. Tempels moves easily between ethnic, continental and racial criteria for identifying the subjects who are the bearers of "Bantu philosophy", a practice then repeated in subsequent work in African philosophy.[16] And even when the racial criterion is not expressly referred to, it remains operative, framing and conditioning research.

The repeated affirmation of Hegel's racial interpretation of Africa by African philosophers, even if only as an implicit presupposition, is what then sustains the initial thesis that African philosophy is a negritude. This of course is not to contend that each contribution to this domain of philosophy is a commentary on Hegel, or that Hegel is the only philosopher or writer who enriched the "colonial library".[17] Hegel's work however is particularly emblematic in this regard and it offers a uniquely clear and useful prism through which to understand African philosophy.

Of course to construe African philosophy as a negritude is to bring upon oneself all kinds of objections regarding the latter term, objections having to do with the

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[13] Ibid., p. 174.
[14] Ibid., p. 190.
[15] The expression is Christopher Miller's. See: Christopher Miller, *Blank Darkness: Africanist Discourse in French*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1985.
[16] See footnote 4.
[17] The expression is Mudimbe's. See: V.Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge*; V.Y Mudimbe, *Parables and Fables: Exegesis, Textuality, and Politics in Central Africa*, The University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, Wisconsin, 1991; V.Y. Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Indiana, 1994.

concept's ambiguity and/or falsity. Clarity is thus demanded first and foremost. Negritude, as a doctrine, was above all a critique of European-Western racist colonialism and its many permutations and ramifications for African and peoples of African descent. It emerged between the two world wars of the twentieth century, in France, among a group of black students from Africa and the Caribbean. Yet if it is understood as a movement, it was never a cohesive one. It lacked organizational form, agreement among its most representative figures (most notably, Léopold Sédar Senghor, Aimé Césaire, Léon Damas) over the proper interpretation of its nature and significance, and was crippled by the very contradictions that marred the politics of French republican colonialism.[18] And yet what binds all of its many strands together is that it derives from the black "experience of the encounter with Europe". Negritude then may be described as the emergence of a "distinctive consciousness", of a *black* collective identity, positioned in relationship with the rest of the world.[19] In the effort to secure this latter location, negritude writers would elaborate a "*machine de guerre*"[20] of diverse strategies to condemn colonialism, to picture and convey a certain idea of Africa, of its culture, of its' place in black consciousness, and of its significance for the future.[21] Negritude was then a search for a collective identity, a racial identity (something it would share with other pan-negro movements) that was felt to be necessary in the modern world for the self-affirmation of a group of people that until then had been made to experience and had been taught that "they had thought nothing, built nothing, painted nothing, sang nothing"; in sum, that they were nothing.[22]

In an effort to further explore the thesis guiding this enquiry, Senghor's analyses of negritude will serve as our initial lead. His work offers the single most elaborate and sophisticated account of the doctrine, and thus a critical engagement with it should permit a more consequential understanding of African philosophy as a negritude. This endeavour can in turn be deepened by a re-reading of Jean-Paul Sartre's *Orphée noir*, the preface to Senghor's anthology of negritude poetry of 1948.[23]

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[18] Gary Wilder's study of the complex relationship between French colonial politics and the development of Negritude as a movement and doctrine is of great value. See: Gary Wilder, *The French Imperial Nation State: Negritude and Colonial Humanism between the Two World Wars*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2005.

[19] Abiola Irele, *The African Experience in Literature and Ideology*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Indiana, 1990, p. 89.

[20] Aimé Césaire, "Discours pronounce à Dakar le 6 avril 1966", in *Gradhiva au musée du quai Branly : Présence Africaine : Les conditions noirs : une généologie des discours*, N° 10, numero spécial, 2009.

[21] Abiola Irele, *The African Experience in Literature and Ideology*, pp. 67-9; 89.

[22] Léopold Sédar Senghor, *Liberté I: Négritude et Humanisme*, Editions du Seuil, Paris, 1964, p. 133.

[23] Though my attention will be directed towards Black Orpheus, the text reveals its promise only when read in light of his broader philosophy. I will however limit myself in this reflection to those of Sartre's essays written before or roughly during the time of the publication of *Black Orpheus*. Mudimbe has described *Black Orpheus* as "a major ideological moment, perhaps one of the most important" and this in challenging racist colonialism (V.Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge*,

Senghor, writing in 1964, describes negritude as the collective personality of the black African.[24] More precisely, negritude is the "ensemble of the cultural values of the black world, *as these express themselves in the life, the institutions and the works of black people*".[25] *Race* circumscribes the area within which are to be found common beliefs and values.[26] The emphasis on it though should not be taken to suggest that it is a thing or substance, that is, a fixed, independent reality. Race is rather the child of geography and history. But it is no less real for that.[27] Indeed, it is so real that it is constitutive of a way of being in the world, and thus of a particular kind of cultural expression. Senghor, in an earlier reflection, writes of culture as born from the reciprocal action of race, tradition and milieu,[28] and therefore it is appropriate to speak of a "black style", a "black soul", rooted in and reflective of black experience. Furthermore, from the nature of the black soul, Senghor will derive, in numerous writings, a philosophy of negritude, a conceptual analysis of black humanity. The black person's relation to the world is of an essentially sensuous, emotional nature.[29] It is not thereby blind, but the mode of cognition here is not objectifying.[30] It is instead intuitive, participatory, "magical" and holistic.[31] This cognitive-affective relation also defines the black person's relation to others, family, society, politics and the divine[32] and equally serves as the justification for the choice of poetry by negritude intellectuals as the most appropriate form for the expression of black experience.

Sartre's critical intervention in the construction of negritude can then be understood against Senghor's own work. *Black Orpheus* begins with a dramatic description of an inversion of the racial hierarchies of perspective. If the white man enjoyed for three thousand years the privilege of seeing without being seen, and thus could play the role of the embodiment of truth, goodness and beauty, the poetry of negritude testified to the "savage and free" gaze of black men now able to look upon whites.[33] The *white* is finished, his power is unmasked, and his true freedom is only to be found beyond "whiteness", in the assumption of his condition as a human being.[34] What Sartre touches upon here is the radical nature of poetry of and about black experience which decentres and de-essentialises European and Eurocentric racist

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p. 85). It is this evaluation of the work that I have sought to explore and justify, in relationship to African philosophy.

[24] Léopold Sédar Senghor, *Liberté I: Négritude et Humanisme*, p. 8.
[25] Ibid., p. 9.
[26] Ibid., p. 70.
[27] Ibid., pp. 8-9.
[28] Ibid ., pp. 12, 23.
[29] Ibid., pp. 23-4, 260.
[30] Ibid., p. 81.
[31] Ibid., pp. 24-5, 70-1, 260, 262-4, 267-8.
[32] Ibid., pp. 71-7.
[33] Jean-Paul Sartre, "Orphée noir", in Léopold Sédar Senghor ed., *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malagache de langue française*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1948, p. x.
[34] Ibid., p. xi.

discourses and practices. White European domination is thus *shown* to be but a *contingent* arrangement of power, an effect which some African/a philosophers and more broadly postcolonial theorists have also attributed to their own theoretical work. In other words, the very effort to elaborate an *African* philosophy, for example, is already to challenge Eurocentric conceptions of the same.[35] To follow Sartre however in his reading of negritude and its poetry is to learn of the complexity and ambiguity of such a gesture.

That negritude, as the coming to self-consciousness of black men and women to the black's "situation" in the world, expresses itself through poetry was not for Sartre coincidental. In contrast to the working class, the "white proletariat", whose oppression is characterised by technical domination and exploitation of their labour, and whose self-consciousness and action as a class requires an understanding of the objective characteristics of the *situation* of the working class in capitalist society, the black is doubly oppressed, both as a worker, colonised worker and as black. In the latter, it is the black person's humanity, because it is black, which is denied. Against this racism, black people are obliged to oppose a more just view of their own subjectivity, an invariably black subjectivity, because white supremacy has defined them as *essentially* black. It is accordingly first as a *black man* or *woman* that black people must affirm themselves.[36] The return to self, a racial self in this instance, can be effected through two complementary movements, according to Sartre: either through an objectification of subjective qualities, or through the interiorisation of objective characteristics of the racial group and its culture.[37] In either case, the process is a reflexive one and has as its goal to call all blacks to an awareness of their "black soul", of their negritude. Due to the nature of the oppression of blacks and the need for a necessary passage through subjectivity, the negritude movement found in poetry the most appropriate vehicle to make manifest the black condition.[38]

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[35] Lucius T. Outlaw (Jr.), "African "Philosophy"? Deconstructive and Reconstructive Challenges", pp. 51-4; Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, "Introduction: Philosophy and the (Post)colonial", in Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, ed., *Postcolonial African Philosohy: A Critical Reader*, Blackwell, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1997. The often difficult debates surrounding the meaning and significance of "postcolonialism" in postcolonial studies does not impede us from offering a working definition of the notion. It can be said to comprise at least two moments, a *descriptive* one in which is studied "all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day", (Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures*, Routledge, London, 1989, p. 2; see also: Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, Routldedge, London, 1998, pp. 18-9) as well as a critical moment that challenges the "spurious universality" of European-Western dominant knowledges and their political effects (Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1998, pp. 44-5).

[36] Jean-Paul Sartre, "Orphée noir", pp. xiii-xv.

[37] Sartre will also call these two moments and *objective* and *subjective* negritude, respectively. See: Ibid., pp. xxiii-xxiv.

[38] Ibid., p. xv.

If negritude and the motivations for its poetry seem at least clear in Sartre's text, and if echoes of Senghor's conceptualisation of the doctrine are discernible in it, a complexity quickly emerges from here on. Sartre states that "negritude…does not simply unveil itself to the regard of the soul", and this because for Sartre, nothing in the soul is given.[39] The reflection that gives birth to a black poetry is mediated by white culture, by its education and language, which signifies that the black poet has ceased to live his negritude, his blackness; he no longer coincides with himself, which then in turn motivates the felt need to show himself. The poetry of negritude begins in exile, exile from black self-consciousness, as well as from black corporeality, displaced through slavery and immigration.[40] Negritude poetry is described by Sartre as "orphic" because it involves a search for, a return to, the depths of the black African soul. The situation of the black, subject to colonialism and racism, imposes upon her/him the necessity of conquering anew her/his existential unity as a black person.[41] In a movement from immediate experience to reflexive and thematised discourse, the black person must both discover and become what he is. Indeed, the discovery and the self-making are one and the same, as Sartre reads in Aimé Césaire's poetry.[42] "Césaire's words do not describe negritude, do not designate it, and do not copy from outside as a painter does from a model: they *make* it; they compose it beneath our eyes."[43]

Sartre's conception of consciousness is crucial at this moment to clarify the emerging complexity of the nature of negritude, as Sartre imagines it. Sartre, following Edmund Husserl, conceives of consciousness as intentionality, that is, "all consciousness is consciousness of something".[44] Consciousness is accordingly always directed towards what it is not, that of which it is consciousness. It is always in movement, reaching beyond itself, and this regardless of whether it knows, perceives, feels, imagines, and so on. Conceived as movement, consciousness cannot ever fully apprehend itself or coincide with itself. There is no self, true self, sustaining consciousness behind or beneath this movement. The self lies outside consciousness, among all the other many things that fill the world. What we are then is what we have already been in the mode of not being it, and this always in the midst of a world of roads, cities, crowds, things, men and women.[45]

Sartre, in a further elucidation of the idea of *self* as something which is outside of the activity of consciousness, introduces within consciousness a distinction between

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[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid., pp. xv-xvi.
[41] Ibid., xxiii.
[42] Ibid., pp. xxiv-xxix.
[43] Ibid., p. xxviii.
[44] Jean-Paul Sartre, "Une idée fondamentale de la phenomenology de Husserl: *L'Intentionalité*", in *Situations I*, Gallimard, Paris, (1939)1947, p. 33.
[45] Ibid., p. 35.

what he variously calls consciousness in the first degree, unreflective, non-positional or non-thetic consciousness and reflective consciousness.[46] At the former, more primordial level, consciousness is a revelation of being, of things in the world, devoid of any *self* or *I* which would presumably gather conscious acts together into a formal or substantive unity. To cite *Being and Nothingness*, consciousness is a "revealing intuition"[47] of a being which is not it,[48] that is the being of the world to which consciousness directs itself and into which it is thrown. The consciousness of the world precedes conceptually, as its possibility, consciousness of the self and therefore unreflective consciousness may be described as impersonal, or pre-personal, for it lacks an immediate sense of self and it is on the basis of it that a self can be constructed.[49] The source of the I/me/self is thereby to be found exclusively at the second level of consciousness identified by Sartre, that is, at the level of reflective consciousness.[50] In other words, *self*-consciousness "is performed by a consciousness *directed upon consciousness*, a consciousness which takes consciousness as an object."[51]

The conclusions that Sartre draws from his analysis of consciousness and the self are quite striking. The "self" reveals itself to be a profoundly unstable reality, something that is "*by nature* fugitive."[52] In relation to its constituent parts, it exists as a performance,[53] as a "poetic production",[54] But as a product or consequence of unreflected consciousnesses, and as something external to them, the ego is only a *virtual* locus of unity of subjective life, an *ideal* unity never fully realisable because it never, and can never, coincide with consciousness as such.[55] Consciousness as spontaneous creative movement is always more or beyond what reflected consciousness can grasp, and thus the ego is both true and false of consciousness, reflecting as it does an external, and thus partial, perspective on consciousness itself. "Thus, "really to know oneself" is inevitably to take towards oneself the point of view of others, that is to say, a point of view which is necessarily false."[56]

All of these ideas receive a more complete and incisive elaboration in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*. In this work, Sartre defines the being of consciousness, being-

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[46] Jean-Paul Sartre, The Transcendence of the Ego : An Existentialist Theory of Consciousness, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, (1937)1991.
[47] Jean-Paul Sartre, Being and Nothingness, Philosophical Library, New York, (1943)1958, p. lxi.
[48] Ibid., p. lxii.
[49] Jean-Paul Sartre, The Transcendence of the Ego : An Existentialist Theory of Consciousness, p. 36; Jean-Paul Sartre, Being and Nothingness, p. 74.
[50] Jean-Paul Sartre, The Transcendence of the Ego : An Existentialist Theory of Consciousness., p. 45.
[51] Ibid., pp. 44.
[52] Ibid., p. 89.
[53] Ibid., p. 94.
[54] Ibid., pp. 77, 79.
[55] Ibid., p. 87.
[56] Ibid.

for-itself, as "being what it is not and not being what it is",[57] as a being such that in its being, its being is in question,[58] for it depends on a being other than itself, of which it is consciousness. The language has changed from the earlier essays, but the fundamental concept remains of consciousness as pure activity in the world. This activity is now described by Sartre as freedom, or as he also puts it, consciousness activity of transcending that which is given to it as other than itself, a freedom expressive of the ontological reality of being-for-itself, namely, that it is as such *nothing*, except a revelation of being, of being-in-itself, which in contrast to consciousness, is what it is.[59] Consciousness accordingly lacks any fixed or stable identity. Consciousness, the for-itself, is an internally fractured reality; it is what it is and yet because it is "in the manner of an event",[60] it is always something more, and this because freedom, the nothingness that is its essence, does not permit it ever to coincide with itself. At the heart of consciousness we find a "game of musical chairs".[61] And therefore any effort to be oneself as one truly is, to be *sincerely* what one is, is fated to failure.[62] And the desire for such identity that leads to behaviour which suggests its reality is the quintessential example of what Sartre calls "bad-faith", that is, the effort to be exclusively either what one is, on the analogy of a thing, or to refuse to be anything, in the form of pure freedom. Human existence encompasses both realities, given the nature of consciousness, and therefore if we are to be as we truly are, then we must assume that essential, "tragic" ambiguity that lies at the heart of the human condition.

What then is to be made of Sartre's claims in *Black Orpheus* that the black's self alienation calls for a re-appropriation of hers/his black existential unity, or as Sartre also expresses it, that there is a need for her/him to discover and "become what he is"?[63] That Sartre does not, and could not, understand such affirmations as suggesting a re-discovery or return to an essential or native "black soul" should be obvious from Sartre's conception of the "self". Or to put it rather bluntly, Sartre does not believe in *souls*, whether black or white. The self is created according to Sartre and consequently negritude poetry, as an expression of *blackness*, is a reflected, constructed collective identity that seeks to move black people from an experience of collective alienation to collective affirmation. But Sartre's "black soul", to the extent that he speaks of such a thing, is a situated or contextual reality. That is, in a white supremacist world, there are *black souls*, but as all human or self identity is contingent, so too is that of blackness.

[57] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. lxv.
[58] Ibid., p. 74.
[59] Ibid., p. lxv.
[60] Ibid., p. 79.
[61] Ibid., p. 142.
[62] Ibid., p. 62.
[63] Jean-Paul Sartre, "Orphée noir", p. xxiii.

To put the issue more precisely, the experience of blackness exists at two levels: unreflectedly and reflectedly. At the unreflected level (in parallel to unreflected consciousness), negritude is "a certain affective attitude in relation to the world", a "black way of being-in-the-world".[64] Whereas the white appropriates nature technically, rendering nature in this way passive, a purely quantitative reality, the black acts first and foremost upon her/himself, and then with or upon nature emotionally or sympathetically.[65] Senghor would understand such a way of being as part of a black's or African's "essential nature".[66] Sartre, by contrast, again sees it as the consequence of contingent circumstances, circumstances of racist, capitalist-colonial oppression within which black people are accordingly incapable of being *recognised* as humans by whites because of their racially fixed identities.[67] This however does not make race or blackness the substantive reality and identity of black people, because for Sartre, there are no such identities.

Sartre's *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions* clarifies further the nature of unreflected black consciousness. If the primordial black way of being-in-the-world is emotional, according to Sartre and Senghor, for Sartre emotion is a possibility of intentional consciousness, that is, "emotion is a certain way of apprehending the world".[68] The origin of such a mode of consciousness, we then learn, results from obstacles that arise in the path of our desires, needs and actions. Emotions, or emotional consciousnesses, are thus ways of changing the world "magically", and all of this originally at a non-reflected level. But such changes are without effect, revealing as they do consciousness' impotence to overcome the impediment in fact. It is therefore then that consciousness changes itself, *bodily*, becoming thereby "emotional" (e.g., "fear", "sadness", "joy", etc.), so as to establish a new way of being in the world and accordingly change the qualities of the world.[69] "In effect, there is a world of emotion",[70] a world that corresponds to one of the principal ways of being of consciousness, *all* consciousness.[71] There follows an inescapable conclusion, that if black consciousness is black, it is not *only* because it is black, but because the obstacles thrown up against its freedom by white racism, are or can be felt to be overwhelming. It is then a mistake to affirm that Sartre confused a historical reality for a racial or ethnic ontological

[64] Ibid., p. xxix.
[65] Ibid., pp. xxx-xxxi.
[66] Robert W. July, *An African Voice*, Duke University Press, Durham, 1987, p. 201.
[67] Ibid., pp. xiv-xv . Fanon's reflections on the failure of the dialectic of recognition in contexts of racism have not in this regard aged. See: Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, Pluto Press, London, (1952)1986.
[68] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Esquisse d'une théorie des émotions*, Hermann, Paris, 1938, p. 71.
[69] Ibid., pp. 81-2.
[70] Ibid., p. 103.
[71] Ibid., p. 116.

structure and that he succumbed intellectually to the reactionary myth of an eternal "black soul".[72] Sartre's description of "black" lived experience was historical, conditioned as it was by the black's situation in a white dominated world.[73] To read his use of "black soul" in a more essentialised or reified manner is to ignore the whole tenor of his philosophy. And to the extent that Senghor defends an ahistorical conception of black experience, then Sartre's *Black Orpheus* may be seen as implicitly critical of Senghor's elaboration of negritude.

Shifting then to reflection, negritude at this level reveals itself as the self-conscious expression of black experience. And if this experience is essentially emotional, for the reasons that we have seen, then the choice of poetry as its mode of expression has not only to do with the obligatory passage through subjectivity on the path to black self-consciousness, but also with the deeper reality that poetry is emotion metamorphosed in language; a language which does not refer to or signify a world beyond itself, but is itself a world.[74] But regardless of how reflected black consciousness expresses itself, the expression, if we follow Sartre, as a form of self-consciousness, profoundly alters the reality reflected on.[75] In other words, there is a hiatus, a distance, that is *freedom*, between black experience and black self-consciousness (again, paralleling the gap between non-positional consciousness and positional consciousness), with the latter giving rise to a performed, created self that is transcendent to the experience and which can never fully coincide with or exhaust it.

Black self-consciousness, as was noted, is an exiled consciousness, separated from its body, its history and culture, its place of origin. But if the possibility of a perfect correspondence between black experience and black self-consciousness is excluded by Sartre's philosophy, as it is denied of all self-consciousness, then the return from exile can only mean an ambiguous playing out of the black being-in-the-world. We "can be nothing without *playing* at being";[76] we cannot simply be. The *play* can be serious, terribly so, but the fact that we "play" at who we are tells us that we cannot be who we are and nothing more, that consciousness, freedom, always pushes against and overcomes the limits of whatever self I have made. And thus we are always running after ourselves, playing the role of an ever aged authority trying to catch a youthful consciousness that is always just beyond our grasp.

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[72] For criticisms of this nature, see : Stanislas Spero K. Adotevi, *Négritude et négrologues*, Union Générale D'Editions, Paris, 1972, pp. 64; 68; Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1976, pp. 126-39; Gary Wilder, *The French Imperial Nation State: Negritude and Colonial Humanism between the Two World Wars*, pp. 259-61.
[73] Jean-Paul Sartre, "Orphée noir", p. xxxi.
[74] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Qu'est-ce que la literature?*, Gallimard, Paris, 1948, pp. 20; 22; 24.
[75] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 152.
[76] Ibid., p. 83. (Emphasis mine).

It is this ambiguity that allows Sartre to interpret the relationship of black experience and self-consciousness to that of whites. Black experience is born of an interrupted dialectic of recognition that makes impossible reciprocity of perception and understanding between black and white people. That this is so in unreflected consciousness should be clear from the discussion of black consciousness as an emotional being-in-the-world. Reflectively, the mediation of the being-for-white-others is equally evident in the constitution of the black *self*. In negritude poetry, the white appears, among other ways, through the French language employed by its poets, the language of the oppressors. "Between the colonised, the coloniser has arranged matters such that he is the eternal mediator; he is there, always there, even absent, even in the most secret of gatherings". With what words then can the black poet speak the "immediate givens of black consciousness"?[77] Nonetheless, the French language is not *entirely* foreign to black experience, as the colonised learns it from a very early age. Both strange and common, in relation to the use of French, it would be better to speak of a "slight and constant hiatus that separates what [the black poet] says and what he would like to say, as soon as he speaks of himself".[78] The French language is resistant, recalcitrant to black consciousness, but this same consciousness appropriates the master's idiom, bending it to speak her/himself against those who would silence her/him. We find ourselves before the origin of poetry once again, for according to Sartre, it is "the sentiment of failure before language understood as a means of direct expression that is at the origin of all poetic experience".[79] And we could add that this failure before language is but a more specific experience of the failure before the world that lies at the genesis of emotion, which may then be expressed through poetry. The joust is thus engaged. To the ruse of the coloniser, blacks respond by a similar, inverted ruse: "since the oppressor is present even in the language that they speak, they will speak that language so as to destroy it".[80] The language is freed of its "Frenchness"; words are broken, their common meanings overturned, the language is short circuited, in sum an "auto da fé" of language is aimed for because black truth can only emerge from the ruins of the white's truth.[81] The language of negritude poetry is French, but it is French unmoored, freed from those who would claim it as their exclusive property. And that language can be so appropriated reveals that it exists as a medium between the particular and the universal, between self-consciousness and consciousness for others and that it is foolish to speak of a "mother tongue" and a

[77] Jean-Paul Sartre, "Orphée noir", p. xviii.
[78] Ibid., p. xix.
[79] Ibid.
[80] Ibid., p. xx.
[81] Ibid.

secondary language or of a language and a dialect, as if language were not the *in between* such institutionalised hierarchies. If then the poetry of negritude renders a black self *real*,[82] then the self, the black self to which this poetry contributes, is as much the consequence of black consciousness, as of the white consciousness that mediates black self-consciousness. In the words of Frantz Fanon, "the black soul is a white man's artefact".[83]

To challenge the *racist artefact* however is not to reject or flee from it, which is impossible, nor to accept it as an inalterable reality, which is false, but rather to take up its essential ambiguity. Sartre, in a study of anti-Semitism, speaks of what a *Jewish authenticity* amounts to.

> Jewish authenticity consists of choosing oneself as Jewish, which is realising one's Jewish condition. The authentic Jew abandons the myth of universal humanity: he knows himself and desires himself in history as a historical and damned creature;…he knows that he is apart, untouchable, scorned, proscribed and it is as such that he asserts himself.[84]

The Jew nevertheless thereby removes all power and virulence from anti-Semitism the moment that s/he ceases to suffer it passively.[85] The Jewish self of anti-Semitism is thus appropriated by the Jew; s/he makes it hers/his, and can accordingly struggle to remake it. More significantly, in freely assuming and creating the Jewish self, the Jew, like all *authentic* women and men, escapes the description that follows on the name.[86] We find again Sartre's account of the *self* as something which is complex and which is created and perpetuated by the freedom of consciousness, that is, the nihilating or transcending capacity of consciousness that Sartre calls the *imagination*. Our *self* and *its world* are imaginary, unreal, beyond time; an ideal or value of perfect self-identity, impossible to reach, but always present, haunting consciousness.[87]

Against the Manichean world of the racist, Sartre's notion of consciousness, of the human self, renders problematic any simple and fixed opposition between identities. Sartre's interpretation of racism and colonialism will be governed by the understanding that all such forms of marginalisation and oppression are grounded in a binary logic of right and wrong, inclusion and exclusion, legitimacy and exception.[88]

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[82] Ibid., p. xxviii.
[83] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 16.
[84] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Réflexions sur la question juive*, Gallimard, 1954, p. 146.
[85] Ibid.
[86] Ibid., p. 147.
[87] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, pp. 84-95. See also: Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'imaginaire*, Gaillimard, Paris, (1940) 1986.
[88] Along with the works already discussed, Sartre's preface to Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* is particularly illustrative in this regard. See: Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Grove Press, New York, (1961)1968.

That such systems are not without flaws or fissures goes without saying. But the institutionalisation of Manichean logic animates efforts to divide opposing populations.[89] Sartre's challenge to such dualisms is driven by a philosophy of consciousness which demonstrates that there are no such clear separations of identity, that indeed, self-identity is a fiction, imaginatively made and remade in self-consciousness and in the consciousness for others.

African or black identity, construed within the context of Sartre's thought, falls equally then to the ambiguity of consciousness. The work of negritude writers and artists is characterised by a search for identity, an identity that would function as an ideal, the ideal of a lost or forgotten past, or of a promised future. The mistake of this work was to take this ideal as a given, as something that was already present, but which required restitution or resurrection. This would be Senghor's "black soul", and if this latter could be rehabilitated, black peoples could in turn take their rightful place in the dialogue of civilizations. For Sartre, by contrast, the "black soul" is the creation of reflection on black experience. The latter is tragically real, for to be *black* in a world of white supremacy is to fail to be recognised as fully human by others. Negritude is then the ideal of a self-coincident, integrated black self that is able to challenge racism. But to the extent that this implies an *essential* black or African nature, then for Sartre the challenge is ill founded. The black self must rather be seen for what it is, a temporary, conditioned awareness of black experience that can never fully exhaust the latter, and that therefore *authentic* black existence both accepts racial and racist categorization, while also turning racism against itself, thereby undermining its apparent self-evidence. *Authenticity* for Sartre is a revolt against an alienating *situation* constructed by and for others. And the revolt is radical, for beyond relativising the presumed superiority of the racist, something accomplished by the typical re-evaluation of racist racial hierarchies, it relativises the relativisation, in that what is born of the challenge to racism is not a celebration of the diversity of identities, but rather the questioning of identity itself. Sartre in this way undermines any interpretation of black experience that would reify or objectify it, whether expressed through negritude poetry or African philosophy. Simple definitions of the latter which define it for example as "a set of written texts, when available, as well as orally transmitted texts that deal with the human condition in Africa on which Africans and non-Africans reflect" hide more than they reveal, for who or what is African in definitions of this kind is precisely what must be addressed, and not

[89] Jean-Paul Sartre, "Colonialism is a System" (1956), in Jean-Paul Sartre, *Colonialism and Neo-Neocolonialism*, Routledge, London, 2001.

assumed.[90] The "African nature of an institution is never self-evident and all claims to Africaness should be carefully examined".[91] To do otherwise is to take an atemporal imaginary Africa, Sartre's imaginary Africa, for reality.[92] Equally problematic are conceptions of African philosophy which treat it as a simple gesture of inversion of European philosophy, accordingly relativizing the latter, what may be called African philosophy's *postcolonial* posture.[93] Such a notion is dubious because it plays with a radical opposition between African and European philosophical reflection, "inverting the relation of oppressor and oppressed, centre and periphery, negative image and positive image";[94] something which belies the complicity of both sides of the divide in the constitution of their respective intellectual identities.[95]

And if we take our reflections one final step further, accepting Sartre's conclusion that it is reflexive imagination that is the source of self-knowledge, we may also infer that not only is the latter the child of the interpretation of lived experience, but that it is also a fiction. Sartre's dialectic of human liberation in which negritude "appears as the weak moment of a dialectical progression"[96] culminating in a working class revolution is thus but an imaginary narrative that is true, as it is false. Through it, the world reveals something of itself, and this because imagination underlies all knowledge. But the narrative is also elaborated beyond or against the world, in the timeless realm of the imaginary; unreal, false, this same imaginary world is what nourishes creativity in the real world. It was Walter Benjamin who wrote of revolutionaries that the "awareness that they are about to make the continuum of history explode is characteristic of the revolutionary classes at the moment of their action".[97] This awareness for Benjamin involved a rupture in time, the surging forth of a present that was no longer a transition, a "Messianic cessation of happening".[98] To read Sartre through Benjamin is to disclose the imagination as a possible source for this conception of a creative present that is the "time of the now";[99] it challenges the dialectical resolution of class or racial conflict in a higher synthesis because the

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[90] Teodros Kiros, "Introduction: African Philosophy: A Critical/Moral Practice", in Teodros Kiros, ed., *Explorations in African Political Thought: Identity, Community, Ethics*, Routledge, New York, 2001, p. 1.
[91] Jean-Loup Amselle, *Branchements: Anthropologie de l'universalité des cultures*, Flammarion, Paris, 2001, p. 100.
[92] Jean-Paul Sartre, "Orphée noir", p. xvi.
[93] See footnote 35.
[94] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, London, 1994, p. 19.
[95] Postcolonial theory has endeavoured to move beyond sometimes simplistic representations of the coloniser-colonised relationship. See, for example: Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge, "What is Post(-)colonialism?", in Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, eds., *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1994. Bhabha's work is another very notable example in this direction.
[96] Jean-Paul Sartre, "Orphée noir", p. xli.
[97] Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History", in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, Schocken, New York, 1968, p. 261.
[98] Ibid., pp. 262-3.
[99] Ibid. p. 263.

creatures of the imagination are by nature transient; above all, it invites us to re-read *Black Orpheus* as a study in the poetic nature of revolution, somehow and perhaps guarded in black or African experience.