Leaving the South: Frantz Fanon, Modern Jazz and the Rejection of Négritude

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In his biography of Frantz Fanon, David Macey is somewhat dismissive of the scattered allusions to jazz Fanon makes throughout his work. Thus, according to Macey, the ‘parody of the négritude vision of Louis Armstrong’s music’ in *Peau noire, masques blancs* (1952) proves that Fanon knew little about the music itself and was interested primarily, if not exclusively, in its sociological significance (Macey, 2000: 124). The promotion of modern jazz, in *Les Damnés de la terre* (1961), as a model for the ‘national culture’ of a newly independent Algeria, meanwhile, was simply ‘not at all pertinent’ to Algeria (ibid.: 378).

This chapter will argue that Macey has misunderstood and underestimated the significance of Fanon’s various allusions to jazz. Further, his attempts to adjudicate on the question of precisely which cultural forms were or were not ‘pertinent’ to any discussion of the Algerian situation appear to rely upon a set of unquestioned assumptions about ethnic or national identity, the particular cultural forms appropriate to that identity and the specified geographical locations to which those cultural forms might hence be considered ‘pertinent’. In this sense, his rather dismissive comments regarding Fanon’s interest in jazz might be seen as broadly analogous to Françoise Vergès’s critique of what she sees as Fanon’s ‘disavowal’ of the ‘reality’ of his Creole identity in favour of a reinvention of his ‘filiation’ and ‘symbolic ancestry in Algeria’ (Vergès, 1997: 579). Where Macey criticizes the impertinence of Fanon’s attempts to relate modern jazz to the Algerian situation, Vergès criticizes the impropriety of his pretence to an Algerian ‘filiation’ that can only, in her view, be based on a ‘disavowal’ of his true
identity. Both critics seem to possess a strong and rather sententious sense that agents and cultural forms alike have their rightful place or true identity and should stick to that place or identity. Implicit in Macey’s and Vergès’s remarks, then, is the call for Fanon to be brought back into line, to acknowledge his true identity, and discuss cultural forms which express that identity only in relation to the specified geographical location from which they are taken to originate and to whose political or cultural dilemmas they remain, exclusively, pertinent.

What lies behind all of this appears to be certain fundamentally Romantic assumptions about the organic relationships between ethnic identity, bounded geographical location and their associated forms of cultural and linguistic expression. Ironically, as this article will seek to demonstrate, Fanon’s scattered allusions to jazz show him attempting precisely to question and reformulate each of those Romantic assumptions. In Fanon’s case, the most obvious manifestation of the pitfalls attendant upon such organic and essentialized notions of black identity was to be found in Senghor’s conception of *négritude*. In his early essays and poems, Senghor had attributed a very particular role to jazz, claiming it to be an important expression of *négritude*: that is to say, of an essentialized *nègre* identity,¹ rooted in the unchanging rhythms of an organic rural community, of which West Africa was the archetype and the American South its faithful reproduction in the New World. Fanon’s allusions to jazz form an integral part of his critique of Senghor’s *négritude* and, as such, involve him seeking to uncouple jazz’s potential cultural and political significance from any organic links the music might be assumed to possess either to essential racial identity or to its putative geographical place of origin in the American South.

Whilst it is true, then, that Fanon’s allusions to jazz throughout his work are both brief and sporadic, it is important not to underestimate their significance. Through these scattered allusions Fanon does not simply disavow all questions of ethnic identity, however that identity might be understood to relate to the interlinked locations of Africa, the American South and the Francophone Caribbean. Rather he seeks to challenge and reformulate certain enduring, essentially Romantic assumptions about the organic links between geographical location, ethnic identity, cultural expression and political agency. In order to understand quite what is at stake here, it will

¹ Since it covers a range of connotations, which are not adequately conveyed by the English ‘black’ or ‘negro’, the French term *nègre* will be retained throughout this chapter. For a detailed analysis of *nègre*’s many meanings, and a justification for retaining the original French term, see Edwards, 2003.
be necessary to return to the apparently well-worn topic of Fanon’s critique of Senghor’s *négritude*, focusing on the dispute over the significance of jazz that is one of its central, but henceforth largely overlooked, elements.

**Jazz, Négritude and the American South**

Fanon’s best-known and most commented upon criticisms of Senghor’s *négritude* are contained in his 1952 study *Peau noire, masques blancs*. As Robert Bernasconi points out (Bernasconi 2002), Fanon’s critique comprises two interrelated elements. First, he takes issue with Senghor’s account, in the 1939 essay ‘Ce que l’homme noir apporte’, of black identity as comprising an inherent rhythmic sensibility, an essential spirituality and an organic relationship with the natural and social worlds. This account, according to Fanon, represents an essentialist and primitivist conception of black identity, which risks denying black people any capacity for rational thought or historical agency (Fanon, 1952: 98–104). Secondly, Fanon questions Senghor’s emphasis on delving into the past, on seeking in the glories of pre-colonial West Africa the key to black identity in the twentieth century. This, too, he argues, represents a kind of essentialism, locking black people into a mythologized past to the detriment of any acknowledgement of their role as active agents in the modern world. As Fanon puts it,

> Le problème envisagé ici se situe dans la temporalité. Seront désaliénés Nègres et Blancs qui auront refusé de se laisser enfermer dans la Tour substantialisée du Passé. Pour beaucoup d’autres nègres la désaliénation naîtra, par ailleurs, du refus de tenir l’actualité pour définitive. [...] En aucune façon je ne dois m’attacher à faire revivre une civilisation nègre injustement méconnue. Je ne me fais pas l’homme d’aucun passé. Je ne veux pas chanter le passé aux dépens de mon présent et de mon avenir.2

(Fanon, 1952: 183)

As Bernasconi puts it, what this means ‗is that Fanon is unwilling to look to the past of peoples of colour for a solution or for his “original

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2 The problem envisaged here relates to temporality. The Nègres and the Whites who have refused to allow themselves to be enclosed in the substantialised Tower of the Past are the ones who will be disalienated. Moreover, for many other Nègres, disalienation will arise from their refusal to accept the present as definitive. [...] In no way should I dedicate myself to reviving an unjustly unrecognised nègre civilisation. I will not make of myself a man of any past. I do not want to exalt the past at the expense of my present and my future’ (Fanon, 1966: 226; translation modified).
American Creoles

calling’’ (Bernasconi, 2002: 73). However, Bernasconi neglects to consider the significance of the fact that this passage is immediately preceded by one in which Fanon recounts an anecdote relating directly to jazz. Indeed, the ‘problem envisaged’ in the quotation above is exemplified, for Fanon, by a particular interpretation of jazz.

Fanon tells of being invited by the Association lyonnaise des Étudiants de la France d’outre-mer to deliver a speech refuting the claims of a white commentator who had claimed that ‘la musique de jazz’ represented ‘une irruption du cannibalisme dans le monde moderne’ [jazz music represented an irruption of cannibalism in the modern world]. Fanon explains that he rejected ‘les prémices de l’interlocuteur’ [the premises of my interlocutor], choosing not ‘à prendre position pour la musique noire contre la musique blanche, mais à aider mon frère à abandonner une attitude qui n’avait rien de bénéfique’ [to take position in favour of black music against white music, but to help my brother to abandon an attitude that was in no way helpful] (Fanon, 1952: 183 [1986: 226]). He concludes that the ‘problem envisaged here relates to temporality’, before going on, as we have seen, to argue that this same problem of temporality is manifest in the négritude project of ‘reviving an unjustly unrecognised nègre civilisation’. Fanon’s point is that the white racist’s denunciation of jazz as a form of modern cannibalism and négritude’s mythologization of a lost nègre civilization are two sides of the same primitivist coin. He suggests that the proper response to this is not to celebrate the authenticity of black musical forms in opposition to their white equivalents but to abandon that binary opposition altogether as being ‘in no way helpful’.

The analogy Fanon draws in Peau noire, masques blancs between négritude, on the one hand, and primitivist interpretations of jazz, on the other, becomes more understandable when we recall the important role Senghor accords to jazz in his early essay ‘Ce que l’homme noir apporte’. Rightly considered a seminal statement of Senghor’s négritude, the work has elicited much commentary as a result. However, the specific role Senghor attributes to jazz in this essay has, again, been largely overlooked, as has the extent to which Fanon’s later critique of Senghor’s négritude turns on a disagreement over the precise cultural significance of jazz.

Senghor opens ‘Ce que l’homme noir apporte’ by citing the German anthropologist Leo Frobenius in support of his contention that there exists a unified ‘culture nègre’, which was born in Africa and which, ‘émigrée en Amérique, est restée intacte dans son style’ [having emigrated to America, has remained intact in its style] (Senghor, 1939: 22–23).³ He argues that

³ This and all subsequent quotations from this source are my translations.
this ‘nègre culture’ embodies a series of fundamental values which have been lost in an excessively rationalistic and materialistic West – a spiritual transcendence, a sensitivity to the rhythms of the natural world, organic collectivist social and familial structures, unalienated forms of agricultural and artisanal labour. In short, Senghor suggests that everything that is missing in contemporary Western societies can be found in the traditional structures and practices of West Africa or, in their transplanted form, on the plantations of the American South.

Thus Senghor maintains that the ‘âme nègre reste obstinément paysanne’ [the nègre soul remains obstinately peasant] and this explains why, ‘aux États-Unis, les ouvriers du Nord […] ont la nostalgie des plantations du Sud, où leurs frères vivent en serfs’ [in the United States, the workers of the North […] are nostalgic for the plantations of the South, where their brothers live like serfs] (Senghor, 1939: 31). Such nostalgia reflects the fact that agricultural labour, particularly as practised in rural West Africa, epitomizes honest, ‘noble’ toil, securing the joys contingent upon an organic relationship with the soil and with the rhythms of nature itself, joys severely lacking from mechanized labour in the West.

C’est que le travail de la terre permet l’accord de l’Homme et de la ‘création’, qui est au cœur du problème humaniste; qu’il se fait au rythme du monde: rythme point mécanique, qui est libre et vivant; celui du jour et de la nuit, des saisons qui sont deux en Afrique, de la plante qui pousse et qui meurt. Et le Nègre, se sentant à l’unisson de l’univers, rythme son travail par le chant et le tam-tam. Travail nègre, rythme, joie nègre qui se libère par le travail et se libère du travail.4 (Senghor, 1939: 31)

Implicit in Senghor’s depiction of the rhythms of nègre labour being modelled on and accompanied by the rhythms of song and percussion is the notion that, in West African society, culture has remained integrated into the praxis of everyday life, rather than splitting off to occupy an autonomous cultural sphere, where it might atrophy or degenerate, as in the West. Nègre culture has retained this integrated role ‘chez les Nègres occidentalisés,

4 ‘Working the land allows for the unity between Man and “creation” that is at the heart of the humanist problem. It allows him to adapt to the rhythm of the world, a rhythm which is in no way mechanical, which is free and alive; the rhythm of the day and the night, the rhythm of the seasons, of which there are two in Africa, the rhythm of the plant which grows and dies. And the Nègre, feeling himself at one with the universe, paces his work by the song and the tom-tom. Nègre work, nègre rhythm, nègre joy which liberates itself by work and liberates itself from work.’
américanisés’ [amongst Westernized, Americanized Nègres]. Like sculpture and dance, ‘nègre music’ is ‘enracinée dans le sol nourricier, […] chargée des rythmes, des sons et des bruits de la Terre’ [rooted in the nourishing earth, […] laden with the rhythms, sounds and noises of the Earth] and, as such, could bring ‘la sève nécessaire à la musique occidentale appauvrie, car basée et perpétuée sur des règles arbitraires, surtout trop étroites’ [the sap necessary to Western music, which has become impoverished through being based on and perpetuated through arbitrary and, above all, too narrow rules] (Senghor, 1939: 36). Such music owes its regenerative role, first, to its organic rhythms, rhythms expressed in Africa in ‘le tam-tam, voire le battement des mains’ [toms-toms, or even the clapping of hands] and in America in ‘ce que les Américains appellent swing’ [what the Americans call swing] (ibid.: 37). The second contribution nègre music could make to the regeneration of the West is most clearly expressed in the characteristic style of ‘hot jazz’ performance. It is here, Senghor claims, that ‘les Afro-Américains sont restés le plus près des sources. C’est affaire de style avant tout: d’âme’ [the Afro-Americans have remained closest to the source. It is a matter of style above all: of soul] (ibid.). Here Senghor turns to the work of the contemporary French jazz critic, Hugues Panassié, whose 1934 study, Le Jazz hot, he credits with having ‘mis en pleine lumière les apports nègres dans le jazz hot, dont le caractère fondamental est dans l’interprétation’ [cast full light on the nègre contributions in hot jazz, whose fundamental characteristic is in performance]. Panassié had explained the ability of the ‘hot’ musician to endow notes with an expressive quality which communicated his whole personality. As Senghor puts it, glossing Panassié’s analysis: ‘C’est cette façon particulière d’entourer la note, le son, d’un halo de chair et de sang, qui le fait paraître si trouble et si troublant; cette façon “ naïve” de traduire, par la voix la plus charnelle, la spiritualité la plus secrète’ [It is this particular manner of surrounding the note, the sound, with a halo of flesh and blood, which makes it appear so troubled and so troubling; this ‘naive’ manner of communicating, by means of the most carnal of voices, the most secret form of spirituality] (ibid.: 38).

Jazz, Panassié and the French Extreme Right

Senghor’s account of the relationship between jazz and nègritude in ‘Ce que l’homme noir apporte’ would thus seem to epitomize that organic conception of the links between ethnic identity, geographical location and cultural expression we discussed in the introduction to this chapter. If that organic conception, in itself, risks reproducing a certain essentialism and primitivism, Senghor’s reliance on the jazz criticism of Hugues Panassié is
fraught with dangers of a more directly political nature yet. In the 1930s, Panassié was the best-known jazz critic in France and one of the most influential jazz critics anywhere in the world. A founding member of the French jazz appreciation society, the *Hot Club de France*, his study *Le Jazz hot* had been rapidly translated into English for an American readership and has subsequently been acknowledged as a founding text in the emergence of jazz criticism as a serious discipline. However, Panassié remains a highly controversial figure in jazz history and this for two principal reasons. First, he was affiliated with the French extreme right, being a close personal friend and collaborator of a number of *jeunes maurrassiens*, or young supporters of Charles Maurras, the leader of the extreme right-wing, anti-democratic and rabidly anti-Semitic *Action française* movement. Indeed, in the course of 1937, Panassié contributed two articles on jazz to the *jeune maurrassien* newspaper *L’Insurgé* in which he presented jazz’s authenticity, vitality and spontaneity as an antidote to the decadence of the modern industrial and democratic age, seeking thus to champion jazz’s possible role in the extreme right’s programme of national regeneration (Panassié 1937a; 1937b).

If Panassié’s extreme right-wing political affiliations seem problematic, the second reason he remains a controversial figure in jazz criticism reflects his complete refusal to accord modern jazz any musical or aesthetic value whatsoever, rejecting the music as a degraded European by-product of the true essence of traditional jazz, played by black musicians. Already by the late 1930s, Panassié had begun to embrace a racially purist conception of jazz, tinged with his own peculiar version of Catholic spirituality. By the end of the 1930s, Panassié was arguing that blacks and only blacks were capable of playing proper or ‘hot’ jazz and, as Ludovic Tournès puts it, ‘les Noirs deviennent pour lui une sorte de peuple élu et le jazz un moyen de communication avec le divin’ [Blacks became for him a sort of chosen people and jazz a means of communicating with the divine] (Tournès, 1999: 56). When the first recordings by bebop artists such as Dizzy Gillespie, Thelonius Monk and Charlie Parker arrived in France after the Liberation, Panassié’s aesthetic and racial purism became more extreme still. He published a series of fierce polemics denouncing these practitioners of modern jazz, arguing they performed an excessively intellectual form of the music that had tainted the original freedom and spontaneity of traditional, New Orleans jazz by an over-reliance on harmonic complexities deriving from European music. Jazz, according to Panassié, was originally and essentially a simple, spontaneous, inherently black musical form and, as such, needed to be preserved from the polluting force of a degraded European intellectualism (Panassié, 1959; 1965). Panassié’s polemics against modern jazz provoked a schism in the *Hot Club de France* and the broader field of French jazz criticism, the so-called guerre
du jazz, which set Panassié against a generation of mostly younger critics, who sought to defend the value and significance of modern jazz.5

It has become conventional amongst commentators on the reception of jazz in France to distinguish between the traditionalist and racially purist conception of jazz Panassié embraced from the late 1930s onwards and the apparently more enlightened, hybrid conception of the music he elaborated in his earlier book of 1934, Le Jazz hot (see, e.g., Tournès, 1999: 53–58, 77–81 or Gennari, 2006: 57–58). Certainly, it is true that Le Jazz hot describes jazz as the product of a process of hybridization between African and European musical styles and traditions. Nonetheless, even that earlier study is marked by a profound ethnocentrism, as all of the African or ‘black’ elements of that hybrid are ascribed typically primitivist characteristic of natural, simple or untutored spontaneity and carnality, while all of the European or ‘white’ elements are ascribed ‘superior’ characteristics of order, intellect and reason (Panassié, 1934). Moreover, in elaborating his jazz aesthetic, Panassié draws heavily on the work of the Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain, most notably the latter’s Art et scolastique (1920). At the time of writing Art et scolastique, Maritain had himself been a member of Action française and the book contains a scathing critique of rationalist, post-Cartesian philosophy, of the ‘ferveur nivelleuse’ [levelling fervour] of the democratic French Third Republic, and of what Maritain terms ‘la spirituelle acéphalie du siècle des lumières’ [the spiritual brainlessness of the Enlightenment] (Maritain, 1920: 65–66). Against this degenerate rationalist tradition, Maritain promotes a spiritual conception of the aesthetic which rejects French republican egalitarianism in favour of a recognition of a God-given hierarchy of grace, talents and artistic abilities. In the course of Le Jazz hot, Panassié appropriates this Catholic, spiritual and decidedly anti-egalitarian aesthetic to promote jazz as the privileged expression of natural God-given talents and hence traditional order.

Senghor’s interest in Panassié’s jazz criticism surely reflected both his own Catholic spirituality and his own fondness for the philosophy of Maritain, a philosophy whose political implications had, by the 1930s, become rather ambiguous. As we have seen, at the time of writing Art et scolastique Maritain was a firm supporter of Charles Maurras and a member of Action française. In 1926, however, Maritain had left Action française, following the Pope’s decision to excommunicate Maurras and denounce Action française for its political extremism. By the 1930s, Maritain had allied himself with the broad

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5 For a summary of the positions taken by Panassié, see Panassié 1959; 1965. For a detailed refutation of Panassié’s position, as well as a statement of the opposing camp’s interpretation of modern jazz, see Hodeir, 1954.
current of French social Catholicism, situated on the centre, or centre-left of the political spectrum, and had begun to elaborate his philosophy of ‘integral humanism’ as a foil to Maurras’s ‘integral nationalism’ (Maritain, 1936). This current, which embraced the ‘personalism’ of Emmanuel Mounier alongside Maritain’s own ‘integral humanism’, sought a ‘third way’ between fascism and communism, while retaining many of the Catholic, anti-rationalist, anti-modern, anti-statist, pro-corporatist ideas that Maritain had shared with Action française in the early 1920s. Its anti-materialism and anti-statism led to an interest in the cultures of France’s provinces and colonies, and hence its journals, such as Charpentes and Mounier’s Esprit, were happy to publish the first writings by French intellectuals of colour, including Léon Gontran Damas, Aimé Césaire and Senghor himself. A practising Catholic, Senghor possessed a strong religious, philosophical and political affinity to the philosophies of Maritain and Mounier (Wilder, 2005: 244–45). Nonetheless, this current was politically highly ambiguous, its critique of the degeneracy of the modern world remaining amenable to extreme right-wing interpretations and affiliations. This would be strikingly demonstrated in the months immediately following the fall of France in 1940 when Mounier welcomed the end of the Third Republic, declaring in Esprit in November 1940, for example, that ‘democracy was a parasite on France’, and presenting the Vichy regime as an opportunity to put some of his ideas into practice (Shennan, 1989: 29).

If the dividing line between extreme right-wing and centre-left interpretations of this current of interwar Catholic thought was not always clear-cut, all the evidence suggests that Panassié stood unambiguously at the extreme right wing of that political and philosophical spectrum. Senghor’s interest in both Maritain and in Panassié’s jazz criticism, by contrast, might seem to be expressions of the centre-left interpretation of that current of interwar French Catholic thought. However, as Mounier’s flirtation with the Vichy regime demonstrates, even the centre-left version of such thought could lapse into dangerously conservative, nostalgic and anti-rationalist forms of political thought and practice. This, essentially, was the burden of the critiques which Fanon addressed to Senghor’s conception of négritude. As we have already seen, the famous passage of Peau noire, masques blancs in which Fanon rejected négritude’s project of ‘reviving an unjustly unrecognised nègre civilisation’ was prefaced by an anecdote about his response to primitivist interpretations of jazz. This strongly suggested Fanon had a keen awareness of the links between Senghor’s négritude and Panassié’s jazz criticism. Further confirmation of this would seem to be offered by an earlier passage in Peau noire, masques blancs in which Fanon parodies the primitivist interpretation of jazz in the following terms: ‘Je suis Noir, je réalise une fusion totale avec le monde, une compréhension sympathique de la terre; une perte de mon
moi au cœur du cosmos, et le Blanc, quelque intelligent qu’il soit, ne saurait comprendre [Louis] Armstrong et les chants du Congo’ [I am Black, I achieve a total fusion with the world, a sympathetic understanding of the earth, a loss of my self in the heart of the cosmos, and the white, however intelligent he may be, will never be able to understand [Louis] Armstrong or the songs of the Congo] (Fanon, 1952: 36 [1986: 45]).

As we saw in the introduction to this chapter, David Macey has written rather dismissively of Fanon’s allusion to jazz here, claiming it proves the latter ‘was less interested in the music itself than in the sociological phenomenon of black music in the racist white society of the United States’ (Macey, 2000: 124). This is surely both to underestimate and to misunderstand what Fanon is driving at here. For although his remarks are clearly parodic, they present a by no means wholly unfair caricature of the interpretation of jazz Senghor had offered in his essay ‘Ce que l’homme noir apporte’. As we have seen, Panassié’s jazz criticism does indeed present jazz appreciation as some kind of mystical communion with an ineffable spiritual force. In articulating Panassié’s work to négritude, Senghor had, in turn, endowed jazz with an almost mystical spiritual force, seeing it as the expression of the nègre’s organic communion with the earth and the natural rhythms of nature. Fanon’s point is that this conception of négritude, in general, and of jazz, in particular, rehearses and reinforces the primitivist stereotypes on which colonial discourse depends. In his subsequent remarks on jazz in both the 1956 essay ‘Racisme et culture’ and Les Damnés de la terre (1961), he would suggest that modern jazz might, at the aesthetic level, be capable of figuring a way out of this trap, of uncoupling jazz from any organic link its promoters might claim it possessed to either specified geographical location or fixed ethnic identity. On the basis of that uncoupling, modern jazz might indeed become pertinent to discussions of a national culture in a newly independent Algeria.

**From the Guerre du Jazz to the Guerre d’Algérie**

In Les Damnés de la terre, Fanon returns to the question of négritude’s interpretation of jazz, in a section in which he discusses the nature of the new ‘national culture’ that should be forged in any nation struggling to free itself from Western imperial rule. His primary concern is that such a national culture should not reflect the fetishization of national tradition; it should not be purely backward-looking, nativist or primitivist but should, rather, reflect decolonized peoples’ active engagement in the historical dialectic. To exemplify his point, Fanon turns once more to jazz and, more specifically, to what he terms the ‘réactions des spécialistes blancs du jazz quand, après
la deuxième guerre mondiale se cristallisèrent de façon stable de nouveaux styles comme le be-bop’ [the reactions of white jazz specialists, when, after the Second World War, new styles such as bebop took definitive shape] (Fanon, 1961: 291 [1986: 195]). This is an allusion to the so-called guerre du jazz, that fierce dispute between, on one side, those who claimed traditional or New Orleans jazz was the only true jazz and hence that modern jazz or bebop was an aberration and those, on the other, who defended the new music. As we have seen, Panassié was the best-known, most vocal and most influential member of the traditionalist school of thought. For Fanon, the cultural and political implications of this dispute are clear. Those who adopt Panassié’s position betray their investment in a fixed, nostalgic and primitivist conception of black identity, whilst those who champion bebop acknowledge black peoples to be active agents on the historical stage. As he puts it,

C’est que le jazz ne doit être que la nostalgie cassée et désespérée d’un vieux nègre pris entre cinq whiskies, sa propre malédiction et la haine raciste des Blancs. Dès lors que le nègre s’appréhende et appréhende le monde différemment, fait naître l’espoir et impose un recul à l’univers raciste, il est clair que sa trompette tend à se déboucher et sa voix à se désenrouler. Les nouveaux styles en matière de jazz ne sont pas seulement nés de la concurrence économique. Il faut y voir à n’en pas douter une des conséquences inéluctables de la défaite, inéluctable quoique lente, de l’univers Sudiste aux États-Unis. Et il n’est pas utopique de supposer que dans une cinquantaine d’années la catégorie jazz-cri hoqueté d’un pauvre nègre maudit sera défendue par les seuls Blancs, fidèles à l’image stoppée d’un type de rapports, d’une forme de la négritude.6 (Fanon 1961: 291)

Although again quite brief, Fanon’s remarks here work on a number of interrelated levels. On one level, they demonstrate a keen awareness of the

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6 ‘Jazz must not merely be the broken and despairing nostalgia of an old Nègre, caught between five whiskies, his own accursed state, and the racist hatred of the Whites. Once the Nègre apprehends himself and the world differently, fosters some hope and imposes some distance on the racist universe, it is clear that he tends to give up playing with a muted trumpet and his voice tends to become less husky. The new styles in jazz are not only the products of commercial competition. We must, without doubt, see them as one of the consequences of the defeat, ineluctable if slow, of the system of the American South. And it is not utopian to suppose that in fifty years or so the category of jazz as the stammered cry of a poor accursed Nègre will only be defended by Whites who remain faithful to the arrested image of a kind of relations, of a form of négritude’ (Fanon, 1986: 195–95; translation modified).
possible political implications of the *guerre du jazz*, of the extent to which the positions adopted by a Panassié in favour of New Orleans jazz reflected his investment in a primitivist and essentialist conception of black identity. Fanon also shows his understanding here of the close relationship between Panassié’s jazz criticism and Senghor’s *négritude*. As we have seen, in ‘Ce que l’homme noir apporte’ Senghor had claimed that all African Americans were nostalgic for the plantations of the South, that such nostalgia reflected their essentially organic relationship to the land, an organic relationship expressed in the rhythms of jazz, as in other inherently *nègre* cultural forms. It is these organic relationships between identity, geography and cultural expression that Fanon rejects here. He also shows his interest in the sociological conditions which enabled modern jazz or bebop to develop. Bebop was a fundamentally urban phenomenon; it first emerged in jam sessions in various New York jazz clubs and was thus one product of African Americans’ literal movement away from the plantations of the South, in search of a better life in the cities and factories of the North. Figuratively, bebop also represented a conspicuous attempt by African-American musicians to distance themselves from the world of the Southern plantations. The sharp suits and ostentatiously ‘cool’ demeanour of the beboppers stood in stark contrast to the clowning and ‘mugging’ that characterized the performances of a Louis Armstrong and reflected the formers’ overt refusal to play the role of the black clown or minstrel. The harmonic sophistication, dissonances, dizzyingly fast chord changes and rhythmic complexities that characterized bebop performances similarly represented a refusal of the role of simple, instinctive black musicians in favour of a claim to virtuosity and hence human dignity. As Fanon explains here, the political and sociological aspects of the emergence of modern jazz were thus reflected and expressed in the new music’s properly aesthetic or musical characteristics, in what he describes as the rejection of the traditional blues tonality of muted trumpets or mournful, nostalgic singing voices.

Quite what Fanon has in mind in this last instance can be clarified by examining the precise role of blues idioms in bebop or modern jazz, whether in the form of a characteristic blues tonality or the traditional twelve-bar blues structure that had been the foundation stone of so much earlier jazz. These blues forms are generally considered to have their origins in the collision in the New World between West African melodies and field hollers, on the one hand, and Christian hymn harmonies, work songs and their associated call and response patterns on the Southern plantations, on the other. For the musicians who pioneered bebop, then, blues forms were associated with the American South and with enduring stereotypes as to African Americans’ fundamental simplicity and lack of social or intellectual
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sophistication. As Dizzy Gillespie put it, ‘The be-bop musicians didn’t like to play the blues. They were ashamed. The media had made it shameful’ (quoted in DeVeaux, 1997: 343). However, this did not mean that the beboppers simply abandoned the blues, not least because they knew that the African-American jazz audience had come to expect and feel comfortable with blues forms. Hence, rather than simply rejecting what they took to be the demeaning, earthy, crude forms of the blues, they integrated those forms into their music, transforming the blues idiom as they did so by means of the virtuosity of their harmonic, tonal, and rhythmic innovations. In this way, the beboppers sought to transcend the restrictive racial stereotypes they feared the blues otherwise risked reproducing. As Scott DeVeaux explains in his study of bebop, ‘The beboppers’ frustration with the technical limitations of the older blues style was easily overcome. By fusing traditional blues gestures with a speeded-up double time and couching their language in chromatic dissonance, they imposed a new feeling of swing on the old’ (DeVeaux, 1997: 343). DeVeaux continues,

As upwardly mobile professionals, they [the beboppers] distanced themselves from the rural blues milieu even as they trafficked in its gestures and techniques. Their distancing, however, was no retreat. The progressive urge – in social and cultural terms as well as musical – demanded that musicians take responsibility for elevating the taste of the people they entertained. Their very existence as a professional elite gave the lie to the stereotype of the unlettered Negro singing lewd blues to his guitar. Every sharp, impeccably pressed outfit, every intricate phrase executed with faultless intonation and technique, was a challenge to white assumptions of cultural supremacy and to black resignation to social inferiority. (DeVeaux, 1997: 345)

The relationship DeVeaux describes here between the musical innovations of the beboppers and the more traditional blues idiom is essentially a dialectical one in which a musical tradition is integrated and preserved in a new musical form even as its inherent flaws and limitations are transcended. In this sense, be-bop’s transformative integration of older blues forms mirrors almost precisely the relationship between cultural tradition and political engagement Fanon sketches out in his 1956 essay ‘Racisme et culture’, an essay in which jazz is once again accorded a pivotal role. Here Fanon points out that colonialism does not operate by simply extinguishing all trace of the traditional culture of indigenous colonized peoples. Rather, it tends to exoticize, romanticize and hence freeze traditional indigenous cultures in aspic. Hence, such cultures, paradoxically, serve to reproduce rather than undermine colonial racism. In searching for an example of this process,
Fanon turns once more to blues and to the traditional, New Orleans jazz played by Louis Armstrong. As he puts it,

C’est ainsi que le blues ‘plainte des esclaves noirs’ est présenté à l’admiration des oppresseurs. C’est un peu d’oppression stylisée qui revient à l’exploitant et au racist. Sans oppression et sans racisme, pas de blues. La fin du racisme sonnerait le glas de la grande musique noire ... Comme dirait le trop célèbre Toynbee, le blues est une réponse de l’esclave au défi de l’oppression. Actuellement, pour beaucoup d’hommes même de couleur, la musique d’Armstrong n’a de véritable sens que dans cette perspective. Le racisme boursouffle et défigure le visage de la culture qui le pratique. La littérature, les arts plastiques, les chansons pour midinettes, les proverbes, les habitudes, les patterns, soit qu’ils se proposent d’en faire le procès ou de le banaliser, restituent le racisme.7 (Fanon, 1956: 38–39)

In these circumstances, where the protests against slavery and oppression contained in the blues or Louis Armstrong’s jazz paradoxically contribute to the reproduction of racist stereotypes, the tendency for oppressed peoples to turn to their own cultural traditions as a source of solace, dignity and identity will always be highly ambivalent. The turn to native cultural tradition will always risk simply revalorizing a culture that is ‘encapsulée, végétative’ [bottled, vegetative], a culture that has not been ‘repensée, reprise, dynamisée de l’intérieur’ [rethought, grasped anew, dynamized from within] (Fanon, 1956: 43 [1970: 52]). Nonetheless, whilst this ‘redécouverte [et] revalorisation absolue’ [rediscovery [and] complete revalorization] of traditional culture is ‘objectivement indéfendable’ [objectively indefensible], it retains ‘une importance subjective incomparable’ [an incomparable subjective importance]. As Fanon puts it, ‘la plongée dans le gouffre du passé est condition et source

7 ‘Thus the blues, as “the lament of the black slave”, is offered up for the admiration of the oppressors. This modicum of stylised oppression is the exploiter’s and the racist’s rightful due. Without oppression and without racism, there is no blues. The end of racism would sound the death knell of great black music. As the all too famous Toynbee would say, the blues are the slave’s response to the challenge of oppression. Still today, for many people, even those of colour, Armstrong’s music only makes sense in this context. Racism bloats and disfigures the face of the culture which practises it. Literature, the plastic arts, sentimental popular songs, proverbs, habits, cultural patterns, whether they intend to criticise it or make it commonplace, end up reinforcing racism’ (Fanon, 1970: 47; translation modified). The ‘Toynbee’ mentioned here is presumably the British historian Arnold J. Toynbee, whose multi-volume A Study of History (1934–61) is a Spenglerian study of the rise and fall of different world cultures and civilizations.
de liberté’ [plunging into the chasm of the past is the condition for and source of freedom] (Fanon, 1956: 44 [1970: 53]). Plunging into the roots of one’s cultural identity and traditions thus becomes the necessary first step in a dialectical process that will aim to redynamize those traditions, to transcend and hence escape their primitivist or essentialist limitations. The catalyst for that dynamic, dialectical process will be, according to Fanon, the anti-colonial struggle itself (Fanon, 1956: 45 [1970: 53]).

If in ‘Racisme et culture’ the catalyst for this dialectical sublation of a fetishized cultural tradition is the anti-colonial struggle, in his remarks on modern jazz in Les Damnés de la terre that catalyst is identified as the movement North of African Americans in search of a better life, their literal and figurative rejection of the plantation society of the American South. Bebop or modern jazz is important for Fanon not because it is taken to be an organic expression of a specified ethnic identity rooted in West Africa and transplanted to the American South, as Senghor’s reading of jazz and négritude would have it. Rather, modern jazz’s importance reflects its ability to express a historical process of change undergone by one specific ethnic group, namely African Americans, in their struggle against continuing oppression and racial discrimination. Here I am employing Peter Hallward’s useful distinction between the ‘specified’ and the ‘specific’. For Hallward, a ‘specified identity’ corresponds to a fixed and unchangeable essence, an identity ‘defined by positive, intrinsic characteristics as essences (physical, cultural, personal, and so on)’. A ‘specific understanding of individuals and situations’, on the other hand, grasps such individuals and situations as being ‘conditioned’, but not absolutely determined, ‘by the relations that both enable and constrain their existence’ (Hallward, 2003: 274–75). It is because Fanon interprets modern jazz as reflecting the specific situation of racial oppression faced by African Americans, rather than their specified ethnic identity, that this musical form can be wholly pertinent both to Fanon, as a French Antillean, and to Algerians fighting for their independence, inasmuch as all suffer analogous forms of racial oppression, relating to their specific status as colonial subjects and/or ex-slaves. The pertinence of modern

8 The dialectic Fanon theorizes here is clearly indebted to the dialectical vision elaborated by Jean-Paul Sartre in his famous essay ‘Orphée noir’ (Sartre, 1948). This represents a shift from Fanon’s position in Peau noire, masques blancs, where he had argued that Sartre’s characterization of négritude as the ‘moment faible’ [weak moment] in the dialectical movement of black liberation was an ‘erreur’ [a mistake] since it risked dissolving the realities of black experience and culture in an all-encompassing dialectical process (Fanon, 1952: 107–09 [132–35]).
jazz to both Algeria and to Fanon’s own situation does not rest upon its ability to express some spurious, specified ethnic identity, shared by French Antilleans, African Americans and Algerians alike. Rather, its pertinence rests upon its ability to give aesthetic figuration to that dialectical process whereby a specific situation is transcended, namely that situation in which the victims of racial oppression find their cultural traditions simultaneously denigrated and exoticized by those who oppress them. Understood as the aesthetic figuration of a specific dialectical process, rather than as the organic expression of a specified ethnic identity, modern jazz can thus be entirely pertinent to a discussion of the form any national culture might take in a newly independent Algeria. In this sense, and contrary to what David Macey seems to assume, the pertinence of modern jazz to the Algerian situation does not even rely on any inherent affinity between bebop and the musical tastes or aesthetic sensibilities of Algerians, on the Algerians liking or knowing much about modern jazz. Similarly, Fanon’s engagement in the Algerian struggle cannot, pace Vergès, be read as relying on an illegitimate claim to Algerian ‘filiation’ and hence a ‘disavowal’ of his true Creole identity. Indeed, modern jazz provides Fanon with a model, at the aesthetic level, of how that identity might be integrated into a transformative project, in such a way that its components are re-dynamized and its inherent limitations transcended. By analogy, at the political level, Fanon’s solidarity with the Algerian cause rests on an awareness of a shared specific situation, rather than any illegitimate claim to a common specified identity.

As we have seen, whether in his explorations of his own identity as a French Antillean subject, in his writings on the Algerian situation or on anti-colonial and anti-racist struggle more generally, Fanon makes repeated allusions to jazz music. Although these allusions are typically quite brief, they occur at pivotal moments in his argument and, on closer examination, reveal a detailed understanding of the music, of its critical reception and of the potential political implications of both. It is important to play close attention to these allusions if we wish to understand precisely how Fanon conceptualizes the specific relationships between his own French Antillean identity, the struggles of African Americans to escape the oppressive conditions of the American South and the struggles of the Algerian people for their independence.

Works Cited


