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New Orleans Unveiled

Fanon and A Reconceptualization of the Performative

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Abstract: This article examines Frantz Fanon's "Algeria Unveiled" as a reconceptualization of J. L. Austin's theory of the performative. Austin, whose examples of the performative all assume an equal, if not harmonious, relationship, overlooks instances of incompatibility and inequality. Fanon's post-colonial framework, in contrast, illustrates the markedly different types of intentions, uptake, and conventions which inform the speech act in cases of extreme inequality. In these cases, the powerless and seemingly voiceless use tacitly agreed upon conventions inappropriately to attain what they would not be able to have otherwise. Fanon's notion of the performative is used to explore the performative resistance within New Orleans' tourism narrative.

Recent arguments about the construction of race as performance are indebted (sometimes unknowingly) to J. L. Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* (1962), in which he defines, then continually refines and revises, the term "performative." Subsequent scholars and theorists in fields as diverse as sociology, philosophy, gender, race, and performance studies have expanded the concept of performativity and identified some of its potential strengths as well as limitations in elucidating and complicating notions of racial identity. Generally overlooked from these revisions of performativity is the important work by Frantz Fanon who was working through these questions of identity much earlier and, I argue, much more effectively than Austin.

Austin excludes literary, dramatic, and comedic uses of language from the performative category and focuses instead on normal, serious, or ordinary uses of language. Initially, he isolates performative utterances as those utterances which are not nonsense, yet are "intended as something quite different" from straightforward statements of fact which Austin terms constatives.¹ Austin argues that contrary to philosophical assumptions about the verifiability of statements, performatives are neither true nor false, and their very utterance "is, or is part of, the doing of an action" (5).

¹ J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 2nd ed., ed. J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), 3. Hereafter, cited parenthetically.

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Austin's concern with the total speech act places him firmly in the rhetorical tradition. Rejecting philosophy's view of a statement as an outward sign of an "inward and spiritual act" (9), Austin focuses almost entirely on language use—language in action and as act. Language then does not become a purveyor of interiority, meaning, truth or falsity. Instead, Austin takes into consideration the social and contextual elements of language. Austin is ever mindful of the dynamic between speaker, listener/audience, and context as he presents cases "in which to say something may be to do something, or in saying something we do something (and...in which *by* saying something we do something)" (91). Austin's myriad of conditions and classifications of the performative illustrates the degree to which the performative is dependent on the varied potential connections between speaker, audience, and context. The complexity and variety of speech acts that Austin considers show that the sole or primary function of language is not to make statements. The extralinguistic aspects of language exemplify the numerous other ways in which we use speech.

Performatives provide one such example. They do not merely say something; they perform the action which is the object of the utterance. For example, by saying, "I baptize you" or "I forfeit the game," the baptism or forfeiture is not described but is actually carried out. Of course, the words must be spoken in the appropriate circumstances within the guidelines of the agreed upon conventions. For example, in the case of a Catholic baptism, the priest must perform the ceremony in a church using water previously blessed; and in the case of a baseball game, only one of the coaches or umpires can call the game if a team does not have the proper number of players or for some other violation of the rules of the game. Austin would consider these examples explicit performatives because the statements, "I baptize you" and "I forfeit" clearly reveal what actions are being performed with the statements. By contrast, primary performatives

do not clearly reveal how the utterance is to be understood and what resultant action should be taken. For example, the utterance, "I shall be there" may or may not be intended as a promise. The action that is solicited with the utterance cannot be clearly determined without additional information (69-82).

Not even all explicit performative utterances result in the desired or anticipated action. Yet, even in their failures, performatives cannot be regarded as true or false because they do not describe or report anything. For this reason, Austin proposes to evaluate the success or failure of the performative as happy or unhappy, felicitous or infelicitous instead of true or false (5-14). A happy performative—one that is appropriately uttered by the speaker, received by the listener, and executed within the accepted guidelines—must adhere to several requisite conditions: the existence of an accepted conventional procedure and effect which includes the uttering of specific words by certain people in established or agreed upon circumstances; the people involved must be appropriate for the procedure in question; the procedure must be performed correctly and completely; these people must have the thoughts, feelings, and intentions mandated by the procedure; and they must subsequently conduct themselves according to those thoughts, feelings, and intentions (14-15). When any of these criteria are not met or are not met well, the performative is said to be infelicitous. Infelicities vary in type and degree, ranging from a variety of misfires, such as misapplications and misexecutions, to different kinds of abuses, such as insincerities (18-38).

Austin's designation of *force* is integral in determining the numerous ways speech acts and causes reactions. The force determines which use is intended or interpreted in a particular circumstance and which consequences result from the interpretation. Illocutionary force refers to the objective or goal of the utterance and relies on uptake or recognition by the audience/listeners,

whereas perlocutionary force involves a direct causal link between the speaker and audience—the difference between ordering a person to be obedient and waving a gun at that person (100-120). As opposed to inherent meaning, force is determined “by the ‘context’ in which [words] are designed to be or have actually been spoken in a linguistic interchange” (100). In this way, Austin substitutes happiness for truth and force for meaning in analyzing the total speech act.

The speech act is composed of the locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts. Locutionary refers to the combination of phonetic, phatic, and rhetic acts which results in the uttering of a statement. The illocutionary indicates or reports on the conventional force of the utterance, such as proclaiming, swearing, or promising. Its happiness rests on the force of the utterance and the speaker’s and audience’s uptake or reception of the act (117). In other words, for the illocutionary act to successfully proclaim, swear, or promise, it must be perceived as such by the speaker and audience based on the appropriate conventions. The perlocutionary act refers to the consequences of an utterance, such as angering or persuading (98-108). Within this framework, the performative is a locutionary and illocutionary act whose perlocutionary effect is the realization of the illocutionary act.

These numerous usages elucidate Austin’s contention that performative and constative utterances are parallel and not dichotomous (52). As (speech) acts, both constatives and performatives are susceptible to infelicities of all types, each dependent on certain conventions and each having the potential to fail or be misapplied. Moreover, performatives often imply or presuppose a true-false dimension, while constative utterances entail the performance of an act, namely the uttering of certain noises or words in a particular construction with a certain sense and reference or meaning (94). It is only by examining the total speech act that Austin is able to define the performative more clearly. No longer bound to the con-

stative-performative opposition, Austin regards the performative as “*families* of related and overlapping speech acts” (150).

This family includes verdictives, exercitives, commissives, behabitives, and expositives, which refer to giving a verdict/judicial acts; exercising power; committing one to actions; attitudes/social behavior; and expository uses of language, respectively (151-164). Clearly, these groupings overlap and intrude upon one another. Most importantly, they illustrate the various forms that illocutionary force takes. The variety and complexity of these forms provide Austin’s best argument that illocutionary acts are only one of many types of speech acts and that the dichotomies between truth and falsity, performatives and constatives are far less productive and illuminating than the study of how to do things with words.

Fanon’s chapter “Algeria Unveiled” in *Studies in a Dying Colonialism* offers an alternative conception of performativity—one that reconceptualizes bodily performance, expands the parameters of speech acts, and challenges Austin’s notion of convention. In contrast to Austin’s rhetorical stance in rejecting language’s interior meanings and motivations, Fanon is very much concerned with the interiority of language. In fact, it is this notion of interiority and intentionality that imbues Fanon’s characterization of the Algerian woman’s veil.

Fanon argues that in the course of the Algerian revolution, the meaning and significance—the agreed upon conventions—of the Algerian woman’s veil, have been transformed. Precisely because of the veil’s distinctiveness and apparent transparency to outsiders, particularly the French colonialists, Algerian revolutionaries have altered the intentions behind the veil so that it no longer represents what the colonialists perceive.

According to Fanon, during the Algerian war, the veil had come to represent the Arab world. Within the framework of Western conventions, the veil is itself a performance, a speech act that purportedly

conveys Algeria's uniformity, mystery, and subjugation of its women.² Yet, at the same time, the veil had also become a threatening performative gesture of self-assertion and resistance.

As early as the 1930s, this quintessential symbol of Algerian nationalism was under direct attack by French colonialist forces. The attack took the form of a systematic program to unveil Algerian women in the guise of uplift. Through the intercessions of Algerian women, the French colonialists hoped to convert Algerian men to acquiescence and obedience (38-42). However, the performative nature of the veil became paramount in this struggle. It was the presence or absence of the veil that determined the contexts and conventions by which the Algerian war would be waged.

Fanon's focus on the veil parallels Austin's interest in extralinguistic aspects of language use. Yet, unlike the performative that Austin articulates, with its mandate for appropriate circumstances and agreed upon conventions, Fanon suggests that the unequal power relations between the colonizer and colonized preclude the type of felicity and sincerity that characterize Austin's performative. The inequality inherent in a relationship in which even the maintenance "'of co-existence' takes the form of conflict and latent warfare" (47) makes agreement and understanding impossible. In the case of the veil, Fanon finds that the French are not able to comprehend the veil as anything but irrational and oppressive. They cannot understand or appreciate the veil's traditional resonance. Their failure to comprehend these conventions lead to the mistaken belief that the unveiled Algerian woman was a colonial success. Yet, despite the colonialists' ability to make Algerian women appear more European by removing their veils, Algerian women were able to create new

bodily performances of resistance.

Just as the veiled Algerian woman thwarted the European's desire for a happy performative by refusing to make herself visible, and thereby knowable and accessible, so too the unveiled Algerian woman became equally as deceptive. After 1955, the National Liberation Front began to include women in the war. Unveiled, they walked through the colonized city discreetly carrying messages and verbal orders, stood watch for leaders of the revolution, transported money for guerrillas, and led groups of men carrying artillery in the face of abuse and degradation by French soldiers and administrators. By the following year, Algerian women were actively participating in acts of terrorism (43-57). (Un)clothed as if she had been converted to the ways of the colonialists, the Algerian woman appeared as "the one radically transformed into a European woman, poised and unconstrained, whom no one would suspect, completely at home in the environment" (57), but her clothing and demeanor belied the "woman-arsenal" (58) that she had become. When the colonialists detected the strategy and began to search these unveiled women, the Algerian women veiled themselves again.

The reappearance of the veil, however, marks an entirely different speech act. Fanon aptly observes, "Removed and reassumed again and again, the veil has been manipulated, transformed into a technique of camouflage, into a means of struggle" (61). This deception was enacted on many levels. Not limited to the Algerian woman's new mobility or outward appearance, it manifested itself, perhaps most forcefully, within her very psyche. The Algerian woman's external revolutionary act must be preceded by an internal one in which the Algerian woman entering the European city

must overcome a multiplicity of inner resistances, of subjectively organized fears, of emotions. She must at the same time confront the essentially hostile world of the occupier

² Frantz Fanon, *Studies in a Dying Colonialism*, trans. Haakon Chevalier (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1965), 36. Hereafter, cited parenthetically.

and the mobilized, vigilant, and efficient police forces. Each time she ventures into the European city, the Algerian woman must achieve a victory over herself, over her childish fears. She must consider the image of the occupier lodged somewhere in her mind and in her body, remodel it, initiate the essential work of eroding it, make it inessential, remove something of the shame that is attached to it, devalue it. (52)

The Algerian woman must re-invent herself. Her relearned body must navigate through a city among dangers and degradation. As a result of these revolutionary and performative acts, the Algerian woman's body is transformed, both internally and externally, reflecting and performing a changed society (53-58).

Austin's scant attention to this type of bodily performance does not accommodate Fanon's idea of bodily reconceptualization. Within the context of revolution, the illocutionary force of this performative was never intended to be taken up by the colonialists. Instead, the objective of the speech act was to deceive and disarm the French occupiers. The occupied Algerian female body resisted subjugation not only by its adoption and manipulation of certain conventions, but by acts of bodily resistance incompatible with the West's scientific evidence of Algerian women's status and psychology.

This aspect of incompatibility and inequality is overlooked by Austin whose examples of the performative all assume an equal, if not harmonious, relationship. Fanon's post-colonial framework, on the other hand, illustrates the markedly different types of intentions, uptake, and conventions which inform the speech act in cases of extreme inequality. In these cases, as "Algeria Unveiled" reveals, the powerless and seemingly voiceless use tacitly agreed upon conventions inappropriately to attain what they would not be able to have otherwise.

For them, at least, the felicity of this type of speech act cannot be underestimated.

I think Fanon's reconceptualization might prove useful for exploring the performative possibilities of resistance among groups that are marginalized, disfranchised, or rendered invisible in popular narratives. I am just beginning to recognize some of these possibilities in my own research on representations of race in New Orleans tourism. I am reminded of an African American woman I met several years ago who had been a New Orleans tour guide for over 20 years. "Jay" owned her own black heritage tour company, yet she was forced to operate within a tourism market that was in many ways inhospitable to black heritage. Ironically, in New Orleans—a predominantly African American city with a rich and enduring African history and culture, punctuated by jazz, Creole cuisine, voodoo, different forms of architecture and artisanship, the largest antebellum population of free people of color in the United States, significant Civil Rights activism, and countless resources dedicated to historic preservation and tourism marketing—Jay and other African Americans contended with a glaring omission of the black presence and participation in the development and sustenance of the city.

New Orleans' mainstream tourism industry—consisting of mostly white-owned tour companies and white tour guides—seldom incorporated African American history and culture. Yet, even when representations of African American history were included, they were often distorted or inaccurate. Stereotypical images of loyal slaves, benevolent slave owners, and antebellum splendor invited white visitors to participate in a glorified Old South past, which relegated—even contemporary African Americans—to the peripheral roles of servants and entertainers. Former slave cottages, renovated into bed and breakfasts, hotels, restaurants, and luxury apartments, exploited the performative possibilities of a white antebellum mythology. This mythology denied both

historical and contemporary acts of agency and resistance by African Americans.

Jay used her own tour to counter this predominant popular narrative in which "African Americans [were] left out of the history of the city of New Orleans."³ She explains,

...Sometimes, even when we were doing the Grayline [tour] course, blacks were never mentioned except Louis Armstrong. And if they were mentioned, some of them would call them "servants," not "slaves." And the real story was not being told, as if they had guilt, which they should have. "Or we'll just eliminate part of the history." ...And people too much sacrificed.... We need to be educated on what we're all about, the contributions.⁴

Despite her commitment to educating residents and tourists about these contributions, however, Jay and other African American tour guides faced considerable obstacles. In fact, even before Hurricane Katrina, there were few permanent or regularly operating tourist sites in New Orleans dedicated to portraying the city's black history and culture. Black heritage bus and walking tours were seasonal and peripatetic, materializing in response to family reunions, conventions, or special events attracting large numbers of African Americans to the city. During these times, such as the annual Fourth of July weekend's Essence Music Festival, independent black tour guides either offered their own tours or were employed by larger, mainstream tour companies. As has been the case historically with black institutions, which generally receive less financial and institutional resources, these smaller tours often had difficulty competing with larger tour com-

panies.

Further exacerbating this imbalance was the fact that potential sites and areas of the city that would have served as ideal settings for black heritage sites had either been destroyed, neglected, or undeveloped by the city of New Orleans, even before Hurricane Katrina. Ironically, the city's much-touted jazz history was woefully underrepresented by historical monuments. One reason for this neglect is that the predominant tourism narrative delimited the proper, "safe" New Orleans experience as non-black. Tourists were encouraged to remain within the boundaries of the heavily police-patrolled French Quarter and were steered away from many predominantly black neighborhoods because the city's majority African American population was portrayed as physically and socially threatening. Yet, the French Quarter, the city's central tourism district, had few black-owned restaurants and no black-owned hotels.

In an interview, Jay identified some of the systemic and institutional obstacles facing African American tour guides and owners:

It starts, I think, because of the marketing. From the state to the local government. When they send out materials promoting tourism in Louisiana, they omit blacks. So, there is a well-planned effort to eliminate the African Americans' existence in New Orleans. Tourist commissions, Chamber of Commerce, State Department of Tourism. Remember, this has been a Jim Crow city. We just started celebrating Louis Armstrong, and he didn't want to be buried here because of the discrimination he experienced. You know, we've had the Perezes, the David Dukes ... Catholic Church ... It's been an effort to eliminate....⁵

³ Jay (pseud.), interview by author, tape recording, New Orleans, LA, 9 September 2002.

⁴ Ibid.

In response to this effort to eliminate, Jay based her tour on her own research of the city's black furniture makers, maroon societies, and 1811 slave uprising. Her counter-narrative to the predominant tourism mythology reclaimed New Orleans as the nation's "most African city." Yet, within the context of a city that exalts its European heritage, Jay found it difficult to market her tour company and relied primarily on word of mouth and black tourism venues for most of her patronage. Consequently, she found it necessary to freelance as a tour guide for mainstream tour companies to supplement her income. Much like Fanon's veiled Algerian women, Jay viewed herself and her culture as under attack as she struggled to navigate the hostile environment of New Orleans' tourism industry. Furthermore, though not confronting physical danger, Jay was also placed in an untenable position—forced to conform, because of economic necessity, to the very conventions of a tourism mythology that promoted her own distortion and negation.

In response to this dilemma, Jay employed a performative strategy of resistance by which her performance of the mainstream tourism script generated an entirely different speech act. Her manipulation of the script involved seemingly subtle changes that had significant implications for the way that black characters are portrayed and real-life African Americans combat hegemonic discourses. In her position as a tour guide for a French Quarter walking tour, Jay retold the story of a wealthy, slave-owing white Creole family in which she altered two pivotal stories involving the white slave-owner Emile and his black slave mistress Anna.

In the tour, Emile is portrayed as a sympathetic, though tragic, character. He is the first family member born in New Orleans

following the Louisiana Purchase. He is a United States citizen whom tour guides describe as fluent in both English and French, symbolic of his status as straddling two cultures—American and Creole. Tour guides also emphasize that Emile not only speaks as an American, but thinks as one. He espouses liberal American ideals and, against his mother's wishes, aspires to be a lawyer instead of a sugar planter. In an effort to discourage these ideas of freedom and democracy and better prepare him for slave ownership, his mother sends him to military school in France. However, while there, Emile associates with other liberals, such as Victor Hugo, and further develops his ideals of democracy, separation of church and state, and the rule of law, which tour guides emphasize, were not as important to Louisiana Creole society as family, good living, and social class. Emile's rejection of these Creole values and his continual confrontation with his mother, often regarding her harsh treatment of their bondsmen and women, leads to his financial ruin at his mother's hands.

Because of these financial and family stresses, Emile's health deteriorates, and he finds solace in alcohol and an addictive prescription drug. In his deteriorated state, a boat is summoned to take Emile from the plantation to seek medical help. The scene that ensues is perhaps one of the most troubling and most revealing of the tour. As Emile prepares to leave, all of his former slaves line up to bid him farewell. Tour guides describe in detail a tearful departure—on either the part of the former slaves, Emile, or both. Some tour guides describe a long line of Black workers spontaneously waving their white handkerchiefs and weeping openly, which creates such a stirring sight that Emile is moved to tears. Tour guides interpret this emotional farewell as an indication that Emile was well-loved and respected by his former bondsmen and women. This portrait of Emile, doomed yet beloved, is symbolic of the New Orleans tourism's romanticism of a dying way of life

⁵ Ibid. Leander Perez (1891-1969), prominent Louisiana politician who led the White Citizens' Council's fight against desegregation in New Orleans.

for white Creoles, a portrait that is identical in form and function to the myth of the antebellum South.

Of the six tour guides whom I interviewed or with whom I took the tour, only Jay offered an alternative reading of the tour's script. She carefully avoided a sympathetic portrayal of Emile by refraining from the sentimental elements of his story. The pivotal scene of Emile's departure is not marked by his former slaves' tearful tribute out of respect to their benevolent employer. Instead, she tells visitors that the Black workers were lined up as Emile departs, without any reference to handkerchief waving, and reports that only Emile—not the Black workers—is crying. This distinction is a significant one for Jay who explained during our interview, "[The slaves] just came out. They wasn't sure why [Emile] was crying." She hypothesized several reasons that Emile may have cried—such as his deteriorating health or his departure from his childhood home—that have nothing to do with his affection for his bondsmen and women.⁶

Similarly, Jay revised the tour's representation of the character Anna. By all other accounts, Anna, the trusted and devoted family slave, was romantically involved with Emile, even suggesting that the relationship was one of true love and passion. One tour guide explained that the relationship may have even been a "perfectly acceptable" arrangement in the family to compensate for a loveless marriage.⁷ In the tourism script, Anna's story—from her romance with her owner to her refusal to leave the plantation and her white family even after slavery is abolished—is used to justify an interpretation of slaves as loyal and well-loved, thus mitigating against an unequivocal condemnation of New Orleans slavery.

⁶ Jay (psued.), *Le Monde Creole French Quarter Walking Tour*, New Orleans, LA, 5 September 2002; idem, interview by author, 9 September 2002.

⁷ Pat (pseud.), *Le Monde Creole French Quarter Walking Tour*, New Orleans, LA, 25 March 2002.

Again, only Jay refrained from drawing this conclusion. She referred to the union between Anna and her owner simply as a liaison.⁸ During our interview, Jay went even further to challenge the tour's script. When asked about the conventional portrayal of Anna, she retorted, "Wasn't nothing like that. Anna was raped. She had to deal with it. She knew where her bread was buttered. She didn't want to be sold, so she kissed ass."⁹ Although Jay was never so forthright in her tour, she clearly identifies "kissing ass" as a performative act of resistance not only for enslaved African Americans attempting to protect themselves and their families, but for contemporary African Americans, like herself, who must rely on the very conventions of the popular tourism narrative to eke out a living.

In a similar fashion as that of the veiled Algerian women, black New Orleanians' tourist performances before Hurricane Katrina relied on both internal and external transformation. In the wake of the class and racial disparities unearthed following Hurricane Katrina, these performative struggles suggest that considering the whole speech act may be a vital part of recovering and reclaiming New Orleans history and culture.

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