It seems obvious that any investigation of the relationship between postcolonial theory and psychoanalysis must begin with the work of Frantz Fanon. For some commentators, this is largely because of his psychoanalytically influenced book, *Black Skins White Masks*. For others, it is because of his sometimes experimental and often-politicized psychiatric practice in the Blida-Joinville hospital in colonial Algeria. However, though we readily acknowledge Fanon’s engagement with psychoanalysis and psychiatry, we have given relatively little attention to how his engagement functioned as a strategy rather than an endorsement of psychological and psychoanalytical theories and methods.

It may seem counter-intuitive to make this assertion at a time when those of us who read postcolonial studies are most familiar with Homi Bhabha’s reading of Fanon’s work. Bhabha presents us with a Fanon who ‘speaks most effectively ... from deep within the struggle of psychic representation and social reality’ (*Location of Culture* 183). There is no doubt that, for Bhabha, Fanon writes in the language of psychoanalysis. As commentators such as Henry Louis Gates, Robert Young and Neil Lazarus have noted, where Fanon does not conform to Bhabha’s creation of him, Bhabha excuses him and carries on. So it is that Bhabha’s Fanon ‘lapses’ into existentialist moments (‘Black Man’ 118), and reading Fanon’s re-reading of Lacan he finds Fanon, ‘turns too hastily from the ambivalences of identification to the antagonistic identities of political alienation and cultural discrimination’ (‘Black Man’ 121).
Depending on one’s approach to Fanon, Bhabha’s wilful attempt to turn Fanon into a Lacanian psychoanalyst of colonial and racist culture is either, as Gates suggests, ‘an oddly touching performance of a coaxing devotion’ (460), or as Cedric Robinson writes, less kindly, ‘an ungracious conceit’ (79). However, Bhabha is not the only postcolonial theorist to read Fanon as the best exponent of his or her own methodological preferences. Gates demonstrates in his review of postcolonial writing on Fanon that a range of scholars each produces very different readings of Fanon:

If Said made of Fanon an advocate of post-postmodern counternarratives of liberations; if JanMohamed made of Fanon a Manichean theorist of colonialism absolute negation; and if Bhabha cloned, from Fanon’s theoria, another Third-World post-structuralist, Parry’s Fanon (which I generally find persuasive) turns out to confirm her own rather optimistic vision of literature and social action.

Gates seems enchanted by what he calls the ‘porous’ quality of Fanon’s texts which allows, perhaps even encourages, such varied interpretations. Simon Gikandi offers an alternative reflection. He suggests that even if the postmodern Fanon evinced by Bhabha and others is persuasive ‘there is no doubt in my mind that Gordon’s existential Fanon is closer to the “real” subject. Indeed, despite my own affinity for Marxist and Lacanian readings, such approaches to these texts have always seemed to me misplaced. The point is, we can put Fanon to whatever uses we want, but we should at least respect the intellectual positions he took’ (149).¹

What I want to focus on here is one of those moments where Fanon’s intellectual position does indeed become obscured. Although Bhabha recognizes, and even celebrates, the importance of psychological discourses to Fanon’s project, he also fails to recognize the meaning of Fanon’s eclectic use of psychoanalytic theory. Though Fanon begins *Black Skins White Masks* with the premise that a psychoanalytic investigation of the black man is urgently required, the book illustrates clearly how a solely psychoanalytic explanation of the black man’s situation is ultimately impossible. His remark that ‘only a psychoanalytical interpretation of the black problem can lay bare the anomalies of affect that are responsible for the structure of