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# Kissing Ass and Other Performative Acts of Resistance: Austin, Fanon, and New Orleans Tourism

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# Kissing Ass and other Performative Acts of Resistance

## Austin, Fanon and New Orleans tourism

LYNNELL THOMAS

Cleo, Market lady: Traditionally this lady held an honored position in the Southern household. Her duties were to keep the house running smoothly by overseeing the house servants and attending to errands, especially marketing. Because of her high station she was respected by the other servants and loved by the family she served.

Emma, Circa 1850: Harvest time, from the earliest days of settlement to the mid-1900's, brought family and friends together and the whole community would work side by side to bring in their crops. Cotton was ready for the mills in the summer, and the children would help, too. Many festivals and country fairs evolved from this type of community effort. In the cotton fields, everyone would grab a sack and sing and carry on lively conversations as they walked through the rows of cotton filling their sacks. Emma represents a woman of this era and wears a typical country dress and carries a sack of cotton by her side.

(Inscriptions on slave dolls sold in New Orleans French Quarter)<sup>1</sup>

As a black girl in New Orleans, I grew up haunted by the spectre of slavery. Collectible slave dolls, such as 'Cleo' and 'Emma', contributed to a tourist landscape of slavery kitsch and high culture catering to white tourists willing to pay for and participate in a glorified Southern past. Like other black New Orleanians, I was faced with the daily challenge of reconciling the omnipresence of slavery and black docility presented in the city's tourism narrative with the history of black agency and autonomy that informed my lived experience in

a predominantly African American city. From an early age, I was confronted with difficult questions about history and hegemony. How does one navigate reality and representation? What tools are available to those marginalized or ignored by historical representation to insert themselves and their knowledge into the dominant narrative? At the time, I responded in predictably juvenile ways - by finding imaginative ways to act up and act out as a strategy of resistance.

This early 'acting' later led me to scholarship in ethnic and gender studies on the performance of race and gender and eventually led me to J. L. Austin's *How to Do Things with Words*, in which he defines, then continually refines and revises, the term 'performative'. I recognized in these theories the potential strengths in elucidating and complicating notions of identity. I also identified some limitations, particularly in cases of profound inequality. Frantz Fanon, in his attention to unequal power relations, expands Austin's theory of the performative and opens new avenues for exploring race and performative acts of resistance. His conceptualization of performance in 'Algeria Unveiled' is especially useful in thinking about race and representation in touristic New Orleans.

### AUSTIN AND THE PERFORMATIVE

In *How to Do Things with Words*, Austin focuses on normal, serious or ordinary uses of language. Initially, he isolates performative utterances as

<sup>1</sup> Both dolls were produced by C. V. Gambina, Inc., a small family business based in New Orleans. I purchased the dolls from a New Orleans department store in 1996.

those utterances that are not nonsense, yet are 'intended as something quite different' from straightforward statements of fact, which Austin terms constatives (Austin 1975: 3). 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).

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 is not a purveyor of interiority, meaning, truth or falsity. Instead, Austin takes into consideration the social and contextual elements of language. He 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 paralinguistic 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 that is the object of the utterance. Of course, the words must be spoken in the appropriate circumstances within the guidelines of the agreed-upon conventions. Explicit performatives clearly reveal which actions are being performed with the statements, although they do not always 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. 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 that 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. When any of these criteria are not met or are not met well, the performative is said to be infelicitous (5-38).

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). Force is not dictated by inherent meaning but '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.

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 constative-performative opposition, Austin regards the performative as 'families of related and overlapping speech acts' (150).

These families includes verdictives, exercitives, commissives, behabitives and expositives, which refer to verdicts or judicial acts; the exercise of power; committing one to actions; attitudes or social behaviour; and expository uses of language, respectively (151-64). 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 concern with 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 AND A RECONCEPTUALIZATION OF THE PERFORMATIVE

Notwithstanding the important feminist critiques of his representation of women, 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.<sup>2</sup> 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 signification - the agreed-upon conventions - of the Algerian woman's veil were transformed. Precisely because of the veil's distinctiveness and apparent transparency to outsiders, particularly the French colonialists, Algerian revolutionaries altered the intentions behind the veil so that it no longer represented what the colonialists perceived. According to Fanon, during the Algerian war, the veil had come to represent the Arab world. Within the framework of Western conventions, the veil was itself a performance, a speech act that purportedly conveyed Algeria's uniformity, mystery and subjugation of its women (Fanon 1965: 36). 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 programme 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. The presence or absence of the veil determined the contexts and conventions by which the Algerian war would be waged.

Fanon's focus on the veil parallels Austin's interest in paralinguistic 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

<sup>2</sup> Many scholars have argued that Fanon's representation of women, particularly in 'Algeria Unveiled', essentializes gender and fetishizes women's bodies. For examples, see Decker (1990-91), Fuss (1994), hooks (1996), Madison (1999), McClintock (1995) and Mowitt (1992).

that the French were not capable of comprehending the veil as anything but irrational and oppressive. They could not understand or appreciate the veil's traditional resonance, and as a result, mistakenly believed 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, unveiled 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 subversive. After 1955, the National Liberation Front began deliberately 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 demeanour 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, marked 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).

In discussing the use of the veil to infiltrate public spaces, Madhu Dubey elaborates on this idea of manipulation. She argues that in

manipulating the veil, Algerian women also manipulated colonizers' perceptions of the veil's significance: 'Tracing these shifting and strategic functions of the veil, Fanon, like the politicized Algerian women he describes, uses a preeminent signifier of the third-world women's oppression to scramble the codes of native tradition as understood by the European colonizers' (Dubey 1998: 17). Algerian women's strategic uses of the veil anticipate and rely on the colonizers' misapprehension of its signification.

Not limited to the Algerian woman's new mobility or outward appearance, this code-scrambling manifests itself, perhaps most forcefully, within her very psyche. The Algerian woman's external revolutionary act must be preceded by an internal one in which, upon entering the European city, she

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 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.

(Fanon 1965: 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 performative acts, the Algerian woman's body is transformed, both internally and externally, reflecting and performing a society in struggle (53-8).

In her eloquent re-reading of 'Algeria Unveiled', Drucilla Cornell describes the implications of this transformation:

[T]he meaning of the veil or, on the contrary, the act of unveiling, can no longer remain confined within the tradition of patriarchal or religious

understanding. Indeed, Fanon argues that once women strategically appropriate the veil or deliberately unveil themselves, the veil can no longer maintain its status as a representation of the 'natural state' of femininity, which is to be shielded from the rough and ready public and masculine world. A woman's conscious, strategic use of how she dresses, veils, or unveils challenges the inherent connection between her self-presentation and who she must be according to custom.

(Cornell 2001: 28)

Fanon's emphasis on the tension between custom and self-presentation, between external appearance and internal intentions provides an alternative way of thinking about performative resistance that Austin does not address adequately. Within the context of revolution, Algerian women never intend to convey to the colonialists the illocutionary force of this performative. Instead, the objective of the speech act is to deceive and disarm the French occupiers. The occupied Algerian woman resists subjugation not only by adopting and manipulating certain conventions but by acts of bodily resistance incompatible with the West's scientific evidence of Algerian women's status and psychology.

Austin - whose examples of the performative all assume an equal, if not harmonious, relationship - overlooks this aspect of incompatibility and inequality. Fanon's post-colonial framework, on the other hand, illustrates the markedly different types of intentions, uptake and conventions that 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.

#### NEW ORLEANS TOURISM: A CASE STUDY

Fanon's reconceptualization is useful for exploring the performative possibilities of resistance among groups that are marginalized,

disfranchised or rendered invisible in popular narratives. In fact, I 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 twenty 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 colour 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 splendour 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' (Jay 2002b). 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 [tour guides] would call them 'servants', not 'slaves'. And the real story was not being told, as if they had guilt, which they should have, or [as if they were saying], '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.

(Jay 2002b)

Despite her commitment to educating residents and tourists about these contributions, 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 few financial and institutional resources, these smaller tours often had difficulty competing with larger tour companies.

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 under-represented 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 neighbourhoods 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 for these tourists to patronize.

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.

(Jay 2002b)<sup>3</sup>

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' (Jay 2002b). 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

<sup>3</sup> Leander Perez (1891-1969), prominent Louisiana politician who led the White Citizens' Council's fight against desegregation in New Orleans.

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 history of a wealthy, slave-owning 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 the part of either 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 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 she 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 why 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 (Jay 2002a).



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 might have even been a 'perfectly acceptable' arrangement in the family to compensate for a loveless marriage (Pat 2002). 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.

Again, only Jay refrained from drawing this conclusion. She referred to the union between Anna and her owner simply as a liaison (Jay 2002a). 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' (Jay 2002b). 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 appear to rely on the conventions of the popular tourism narrative to eke out a living.

Clearly, by employing the strategy of 'kissing ass' Jay did not incite an overthrow of New Orleans' political system or even a revolution within the tourism industry, nor did she intend to. Her performance, however, does demonstrate the existence within local communities of resistance of both internal and outward transformation. By drawing our attention to the total speech act, Austin's framework helps us to recognize Jay's ability 'to do things with words' that allows her to confront and contest hegemonic discourses. Fanon's

reconceptualization shows us that intentional infelicities of the performative are themselves performative acts of resistance. Given that the class and racial disparities unearthed following Hurricane Katrina attest to an even greater marginalization and erasure of New Orleans black communities, these performative struggles may be a vital part of recovering and reclaiming New Orleans history and culture.

It is difficult to imagine the magnitude of recovery and reclamation that remains to be done in a city in which healthcare, employment, education, criminal justice, mental health and housing services are still grossly inadequate and underfunded. While my family and friends continue to languish under the weight of trying to rebuild our homes and our lives - with few financial resources, negligible government support and no assurances - politicians and business leaders have focused on reviving the French Quarter and other tourism zones. The New Orleans Convention and Visitors Bureau website reassures potential tourists that New Orleans has not been devastated by Hurricane Katrina; in fact, it implies that everything worth saving in the city has been preserved:

The most celebrated and historic core of the city - including the Faubourg Marigny, French Quarter, Central Business District, Warehouse and Arts District, Magazine Street, Garden District, Audubon Park and Zoo and St. Charles Avenue - not only remains intact, both physically and spiritually, but is thriving. The cultural riches, sensual indulgences and unparalleled service that define the New Orleans experience continue to flourish, as they have for centuries. We are open, fully prepared and eager to welcome all of our visitors again.

(New Orleans Metropolitan Convention and Visitors Bureau 2006)

Like the inscriptions on the slave dolls with which I began this article, this description belies and belittles New Orleans' significant black history and cultural contributions as well as its contemporary black communities and our ongoing struggle for survival.

The persistence of this dominant tourism narrative that negates and distorts black New Orleans exemplifies in the most poignant way how racial representations can negatively shape reality. No longer haunted by slavery, it is now the spectre of death that torments me and other members of the post-Katrina New Orleans diaspora. Our loss of property, communities and lives – unacknowledged and unrequited by those in power – compels us to resist and revise these representations strategically. As Fanon's Algerian women and New Orleans tour guide Jay demonstrate, performative resistance offers one such viable strategy. Doing things with words and bodies – even kissing ass – transforms speech acts into acts of resistance.

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