

REMEMBERING FANON: SELF, PSYCHE AND THE COLONIAL CONDITION

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O my body, make of me always a man who questions!

—Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 1952

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emories of Frantz Fanon tend to the mythical. He is either revered as the prophetic spirit of Third World liberation or reviled as an exterminating angel, the inspiration to violence in the Black Power movement. Despite his historic participation in the Algerian revolution and the influence of

his ideas on the race politics of the 1960s

and '70s, Fanon's work will not be possessed by one political moment or movement, nor can it be easily placed in a seamless narrative of liberationist history. Fanon refuses to be so completely claimed by events or eventualities. It is the sustaining irony of his work that his severe commitment to the political task in hand never restricted the restless, inquiring movement of his thought.

It is not for the finitude of philosophical thinking nor for the finality of a political direction that we turn to Fanon. Heir to the ingenuity and artistry of Toussaint L'Ouverture and Léopold Sédar Senghor, as well as to the iconoclasm of Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, and Jean-Paul Sartre, Fanon is the purveyor of the transgressive and transitional truth. He may yearn for the total transformation of Man and Society, but he speaks most effectively from the uncertain interstices of historical change: from the area of ambivalence between race and sexuality; out of an unresolved contradiction between culture and class; from deep within the struggle of psychic representation and social reality.

To read Fanon is to experience the sense of division that prefigures—and fissures—the emergence of a truly radical thought that never dawns without casting an uncertain dark. His voice is most clearly heard in the subversive turn of a familiar term, in the silence of a sudden rupture: "*The Negro is not. Any more than the white man.*" The awkward division that breaks his line of thought keeps alive the dramatic and enigmatic sense of the process of change. That familiar alignment of colonial subjects—Black/White, Self/Other—is disturbed with one brief pause and the traditional grounds of racial identity are dispersed, whenever they are found to rest in the narcissistic myths of *Négritude* or white cultural supremacy. It is this palpable pressure of division and displacement that pushes Fanon's writing to the edge of things, the cutting edge that reveals no ultimate radiance but, in his words, "exposes an utterly naked declivity where an authentic upheaval can be born."

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As Fanon attempts such audacious, often impossible transformations of truth and value, the jagged testimony of colonial dislocation, its displacement of time and person, its defilement of culture and territory, refuses the ambition of any "total" theory of colonial oppression. The Antillean *evolué* cut to the quick by the glancing look of a frightened,

confused white child; the stereotype of the native fixed at the shifting boundaries between barbarism and civility; the insatiable fear and desire for the Negro: "Our women are at the mercy of Negroes. ... God knows how they make love"; the deep cultural fear of the black figured in the psychic trembling of Western sexuality—it is these signs and symptoms of the colonial condition that drive Fanon from one conceptual scheme to another, while the colonial relation takes shape in the gaps between them, articulated in the intrepid engagements of his style. As Fanon's text unfolds, the "scientific" fact comes to be aggressed by the experience of the street; sociological observations are intercut with literary artifacts, and the poetry of liberation is brought up short against the leaden, deadening prose of the colonized world ...

What is this distinctive *force* of Fanon's vision that has been forming even as I write about the division, the displacement, the cutting edge of his thought? It comes, I believe, from the tradition of the oppressed, as Walter Benjamin suggests; it is the language of a revolutionary awareness that "the state of emergency in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a concept of history that is in keeping with this insight." And the state of emergency is also always a state of *emergence*. The struggle against colonial oppression not only changes the direction of Western history but challenges its historicist "idea" of time as a progressive, ordered whole. The analysis of colonial depersonalization not only alienates the Enlightenment idea of "Man" but challenges the transparency of social reality as a pregiven image of human knowledge. If the order of Western historicism is disturbed in the colonial state of emergency, even more deeply disturbed is the social and psychic representation of the human subject. For the very nature of humanity becomes estranged in the colonial condition, and from that "naked declivity" it emerges, not as an assertion of will nor as an evocation of freedom, but as an enigmatic questioning. With a question that echoes Freud's *What does woman want?*, Fanon turns to confront the colonized world. "What does a man want?" he asks, in the introduction to *Black Skin, White Masks*, "What does the black man want?"

To this loaded question where cultural alienation bears down on the ambivalence of psychic identification, Fanon responds with an agonizing performance of self-images:

I had to meet the white man's eyes. An unfamiliar weight burdened me. In the white world the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema. ... I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects. ... I took myself far off from my own presence. ... What else could it be for me but an amputation, an excision, a hemorrhage that spattered my whole body with black blood?

From within the metaphor of vision complicit with a Western metaphysic of man emerges the displacement of the colonial relation. The black presence ruins the representative narrative of Western personhood: its past tethered to treacherous stereotypes of primitivism and

degeneracy will not produce a history of civil progress, a space for the Socius; its present, dismembered and dislocated, will not contain the image of identity that is questioned in the dialectic of mind/body and resolved in the epistemology of “appearance and reality.” The white man’s eyes break up the black man’s body and in that act of epistemic violence its own frame of reference is transgressed, its field of vision disturbed.

“What does the black man want?” Fanon insists, and in privileging the psychic dimension he changes not only what we understand by a political demand but transforms the very means by which we recognize and identify its *human agency*. Fanon is not principally posing the question of political oppression as the violation of a human essence, although he lapses into such a lament in his more existential moment. He is not raising the question of colonial man in the universalist terms of the liberal-humanist (“How does colonialism deny the Rights of Man?”); nor is he posing an ontological question about man’s being (“Who is the alienated colonial man?”). Fanon’s question is not addressed to such a unified notion of history nor such a unitary concept of man. It is one of the original and disturbing qualities of *Black Skin, White Masks* that it rarely historicizes the colonial experience. There is no master narrative or realist perspective that provide a background of social and historical facts against which emerge the problems of the individual or collective psyche. Such a traditional sociological alignment of self and society or history and psyche is rendered questionable in Fanon’s identification of the colonial subject, who is historicized as it comes to be heterogeneously inscribed in the texts of history, literature, science, myth. The colonial subject is always “overdetermined from without,” Fanon writes. It is through image and fantasy—those orders that figure transgressively on the borders of history and the unconscious—that Fanon most profoundly evokes the colonial condition.

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For Fanon such a myth of man and society is fundamentally undermined in the colonial situation where everyday life exhibits a “constellation of delirium” that mediates the normal social relations of its subjects: “The Negro enslaved by his inferiority, the white man enslaved by his superiority alike behave in accordance with a neurotic orientation.” Fanon’s demand for a psychoanalytic explanation emerges from the perverse reflections of “civil virtue” in the alienating acts of colonial governance: the visibility of cultural “mummification” in the colonizer’s avowed ambition to civilize or modernize the native, which results in “archaic inert institutions [that function] under the oppressor’s supervision like a caricature of formerly fertile institutions”; or the validity of violence in the very definition of the colonial social space; or the viability of the febrile, fantasmatic images of racial hatred that come to be absorbed and acted out in the wisdom of the West. These interpositions, indeed collaborations of political and psychic violence *within* civic virtue, alienation within identity, drive Fanon

to describe the splitting of the colonial space of consciousness and society as marked by a “Manichean delirium.”

The representative figure of such a perversion, I want to suggest, is the image of post-Enlightenment man tethered to, *not* confronted by, his dark reflection, the shadow of colonized man, which splits his presence, distorts his outline, breaches his boundaries, repeats his action at a distance, disturbs and divides the very time of his being. This ambivalent identification of the racist world—moving on two planes without being in the least embarrassed by it, as Sartre says of the anti-Semitic consciousness—turns on the idea of man as his alienated image, not self and other but the “otherness” of the self inscribed in the perverse palimpsest of colonial identity. And it is that bizarre figure of desire, which splits along the axis on which it turns, that compels Fanon to put the psychoanalytic question of the desire of the subject to the historic condition of colonial man.

“What is often called the black soul is a white man’s artefact,” Fanon writes. This transference, I’ve argued, speaks otherwise. It reveals the deep psychic uncertainty of the colonial relation itself: its split representations stage the division of “body” and “soul” that enacts the artifice of “identity”; a division that cuts across the fragile skin—black and white—of individual and social authority. What emerges from the figurative language I have used to make such an argument are three conditions that underlie an understanding of the *process of identification* in the analytic of desire.

First: to exist is to be called into being in relation to an otherness, its look or locus. It is a demand that reaches outward to an external object, and, as J. Rose writes, “it is the relation of this demand to the place of the object it claims that becomes the basis for identification.” This process is visible in the exchange of looks between native and settler that structures their psychic relation in the paranoid fantasy of boundless possession and its familiar language of reversal: “when their glances meet [the settler] ascertains bitterly, always on the defensive, ‘They want to take our place.’ It is true for there is no native who does not dream at least once a day of setting himself up in the settler’s place.” It is always in relation to the place of the other that colonial desire is articulated; it is, in part, the fantasmatic space of “possession” that no one subject can singly occupy that permits the dream of the inversion of roles.

Second: the very place of identification, caught in the tension of demand and desire, is a space of splitting. The fantasy of the native is precisely to occupy the master’s place while keeping his place in the slave’s *avenging* anger. “Black skins, white masks” is not, for example, a neat division; it is a doubling, dissembling image of being in at least two places at once, which makes it impossible for the devalued, insatiable *evolué* (an abandonment neurotic, Fanon claims) to accept the colonizer’s invitation to identity: “You’re a doctor, a writer, a student, you’re *different*, you’re one of us.” It is precisely in that ambivalent use of “different”—to be different from those that are different makes you the same—that the unconscious speaks of the form of otherness, the

tethered shadow of deferral and displacement. It is not the colonialist self or the colonized other but the disturbing distance in-between that constitutes the figure of colonial otherness—the white man’s artifice inscribed on the black man’s body. It is in relation to this impossible object that emerges the liminal problem of colonial identity and its vicissitudes.

Finally, as has already been disclosed by the rhetorical figures of my account of desire and otherness, the question of identification is never the affirmation of a pregiven identity, never a self-fulfilling prophecy—it is always the production of an “image” of identity and of the transformation of the subject in assuming that image. The demand of identification—that is, to be for an other—entails the representation of the subject in the differentiating order of otherness. Identification, as we inferred from the illustrations above, is always the return of an image of identity that bears the mark of splitting in that “other” place from which it comes. For Fanon, as for Jacques Lacan, the primary moments of such a repetition of the self lie in the desire of the look and the limits of language. The “atmosphere of certain uncertainty” that surrounds the body certifies its existence and threatens its dismemberment.

Look, a Negro! ... Mama, see the Negro! I’m frightened! ... I could no longer laugh, because I already know there were legends, stories, history and above all historicity ... Then, assailed at various points, the corporal schema crumbled, its place taken by a racial epidermal schema ... It was no longer a question of being aware of my body in the third person but in a triple person ... I was responsible for my body, for my race, for my ancestors.

In reading *Black Skin, White Masks* it is crucial to respect the difference between “personal identity” as an intimation of reality, or an intuition of being, and the psychoanalytic problem of identification that, in a sense, always begs the question of the subject—“What does a man want?” The emergence of the human subject as socially and psychically authenticated depends upon the *negation* of an originary

narrative of fulfilment or an imaginary coincidence between individual interest or instinct and the general will.

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In his more analytic mode Fanon can impede the exploration of these ambivalent, uncertain questions of colonial desire. The state of emergency from which he writes demands more insurgent answers,

more immediate identifications. At times Fanon attempts too close a correspondence between the mise-en-scène of unconscious fantasy and the phantoms of racist fear and hate that stalk the colonial scene; he turns too hastily from the ambivalences of identification to the antagonistic identities of political alienation and cultural discrimination; he is too quick to name the other, to personalize its presence in the language of colonial racism—“the real Other for the white man is and will continue to be the black man. And conversely.” These attempts, in Fanon’s words, to restore the dream to its proper political time and cultural space can, at times, blunt the edge of Fanon’s brilliant illustrations of the complexity of psychic projections in the pathological colonial relation. Jean Veneuse, the Antillean *evolué*, desires not merely to be in the place of the white man but compulsively seeks to look back and down on himself from that position. The white man does not merely deny what he fears and desires by projecting it on “them”; Fanon sometimes forgets that paranoia never preserves its position of power, for the compulsive

identification with a persecutory “They” is always an evacuation and emptying of the “I”.

Fanon’s sociodiagnostic psychiatry tends to explain away the ambivalent turns and returns of the subject of colonial desire, its masquerade of Western man and the “long” historical perspective. It is as if Fanon is fearful of his most radical insights: that the space of the body and its identification is a representational reality; that the politics of race will not be entirely contained within the humanist myth of man or economic necessity or historical progress, for its psychic



Fig. 1. Marc Riboud. *Algiers, July 1st 1962* (Women in Algiers stand in front of a wall painted with the word “oui” [“yes”] on the day of the Algerian independence referendum). 1962. Photography

affects question such forms of determinism; that social sovereignty and human subjectivity are only realizable in the order of otherness. It is as if the question of desire that emerged from the traumatic tradition of the oppressed has to be denied, at the end of *Black Skin, White Masks*, to make way for an existentialist humanism that is as banal as it is beatific:

Why not the quite simple attempt to touch the other, to feel the other, to explain the other to myself? ... At the conclusion of this study, I want the world to recognize, with me, the open door of every consciousness.

Such a deep hunger for humanism, despite Fanon's insight into the dark side of man, must be an overcompensation for the closed consciousness or "dual narcissism" to which he attributes the depersonalization of colonial man: "There one lies body to body, with one's blackness or one's whiteness in full narcissistic cry, each sealed into his own particularity—with, it is true, now and then a flash or so." It is this flash of "recognition"—in its Hegelian sense, with its transcendental, sublimative spirit—that fails to ignite in the colonial relation, where there is only narcissistic indifference: "And yet the Negro knows there is a difference. He wants it ... The former slave needs a challenge to his humanity." In the absence of such a challenge, Fanon argues, the colonized can only imitate, never identify, a distinction nicely made by the psychoanalyst Annie Reich: "It is imitation ... when the child holds the newspaper like his father. It is identification when the child learns to read." In disavowing the culturally differentiated condition of the colonial world—in demanding *Turn White or disappear*—the colonizer is himself caught in the ambivalence of paranoid identification, alternating between fantasies of megalomania and persecution.

However, Fanon's Hegelian dream for a human reality *in itself-for-itself* is ironized, even mocked, by his view of the Manichaean structure of colonial consciousness and its nondialectical division. What he says in *The Wretched of the Earth* of the demography of the colonial city reflects his view of the psychic structure of the colonial relation. The native and settler zones, like the juxtaposition of black and white bodies, are opposed, but not in the service of "a higher unity." No conciliation is possible, he concludes, for of the two terms one is superfluous.

No, there can be no reconciliation, no Hegelian "recognition," no simple, sentimental promise of a humanistic "world of the You." Can there be life without transcendence? Politics without the dream of perfectibility? Unlike Fanon, I think the *nondialectical* moment of Manichaeism suggests an answer. By following the trajectory of colonial desire—in the company of that bizarre colonial figure, the tethered shadow—it becomes possible to cross, even to shift the Manichaean boundaries. Where there is no human *nature*, hope can hardly spring eternal; but it emerges surely and surreptitiously in the strategic return of that difference that informs and deforms the image of identity, in the margin of otherness that displays identification. There may be no Hegelian negation but Fanon must sometimes be reminded that the disavowal

of the other always exacerbates the "edge" of identification, reveals that dangerous place where identity and aggressivity are twinned. For denial is always a retroactive process; a half acknowledgment of that Otherness which has left its traumatic mark. In that uncertainty lurks the white-masked black man; and from such ambivalent identification—black skin, white masks—it is possible, I believe, to redeem the pathos of cultural confusion into a strategy of political subversion. We cannot agree with Fanon that "since the racial drama is played out in the open the black man has no time to make it unconscious," but that is a provocative thought. In occupying two places at once—or three, in Fanon's case—the depersonalized, dislocated colonial subject can become an incalculable object, quite literally, difficult to place. The demand of authority cannot unify its message nor simply identify its subjects. For the strategy of colonial desire is to stage the drama of identity at the point at which the black mask *slips* to reveal the white skin. At that edge, in between the black body and the white body, there is a tension of meaning and being, or some would say of demand and desire, which is the psychic counterpart to the "muscular tension" that inhabits the native body:

The symbols of social order—the police, the bugle calls in the barracks, military parades and the waving flags—are at one and the same time inhibitory and stimulating: for they do not convey the message "Don't dare to budge"; rather, they cry out "Get ready to attack."

It is from that tension—both psychic and political—that a strategy of subversion emerges. It is a mode of negation that seeks not to unveil the fullness of man but to manipulate his representation. It is a form of power that is exercised at the very limits of identity and authority, in the mocking spirit of mask and image; it is the lesson taught by the veiled Algerian woman in the course of the revolution as she crossed the Manichaean lines to claim her liberty. In Fanon's essay "Algeria Unveiled" the colonizer's attempt to unveil the Algerian woman does not simply turn the veil into a symbol of resistance; it becomes a technique of camouflage, a means of struggle—the veil conceals bombs. The veil that once secured the boundary of the home—the limits of woman—now masks the woman in her revolutionary activity, linking the Arab city and the French quarter, transgressing the familial and colonial boundary. As the "veil" is liberated in the public sphere, circulating between and beyond cultural and social norms and spaces, it becomes the object of paranoid surveillance and interrogation. Every veiled woman, writes Fanon, became suspect. And when the veil is shed in order to penetrate deeper into the European quarter, the colonial police see everything and nothing. An Algerian woman is only, after all, a woman. But the Algerian *fidai* is an arsenal and in her handbag she carries her hand grenades.

Remembering Fanon is a process of intense discovery and disorientation. Remembering is never a quiet act of introspection or retrospection. It is a painful remembering, a putting together of the

dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present. It is such a memory of the history of race and racism, colonialism and the question of cultural identity, that Fanon reveals with greater profundity and poetry than any other writer. What he achieves, I believe, is something far greater: for in seeing the phobic image of the Negro, the native, the colonized, deeply woven into the psychic pattern of the West, he offers the master and slave a deeper reflection of their interpositions, as well as the hope of a difficult, even dangerous freedom: "It is through the effort to recapture the self and to scrutinize the self, it is through the lasting tension of their freedom that men will be able to create the ideal conditions of existence for a human world." Nobody writes with more honesty and insight of this lasting tension of freedom in which the self—the peremptory self of the present—disavows an image of itself as an ordinary past or an ideal future and confronts the paradox of its own making.

For Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*, there is the intricate irony of turning the European existentialist and psychoanalytic traditions to face the history of the Negro, which they had never contemplated—to face the reality of Fanon himself. This leads to a meditation on the experience of dispossession and dislocation—psychic and social—that speaks to the condition of the marginalized, the alienated, those who have to live under the surveillance of a sign of identity and fantasy that denies their difference. In shifting the focus of cultural racism from the politics of nationalism to the politics of narcissism, Fanon opens up a margin of interrogation that causes a subversive slippage of identity and authority. Nowhere is this slippage more visible than in his work itself, where a range of texts and traditions—from the classical repertoire to the quotidian, conversational culture of racism—vie to utter that last word which remains unspoken.

In the case of display ... the play of combat in the form of intimidation, the being gives of himself, or receives from the other, something that is like a mask, a double, an envelope, a thrown-off skin, thrown off in order to cover the frame of a shield. It is through this separated form of himself that the being comes into play in his effects of life and death.
—Jacques Lacan

The time has come to return to Fanon; as always, I believe, with a question: how can the human world live its difference? How can a human being live Other-wise?

A longer version of this essay was published initially as a foreword to: Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 1952, Eng. trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 1986), pp. vii-xxvi.