

FRANTZ FANON BLACK SKIN WHITE MASKS (1952)

Fanon, Frantz. Black Skin, White Masks. Trans. Charles Lan Markmann. New York: Grove, 1967.

"Introduction"

In a manner parallel to Freud's famous assertion "What does woman want?" which underpins much of Freud's later research especially on the distinction between the sexes, Fanon's question is "What does the black man want?" (8). Fanon suggests that the "black is not a man . . . There is a zone of non-being, an extraordinarily sterile and arid region, an utterly naked declivity where an authentic upheaval can be born" (8). It is herein lies the liberatory possibilities for the black man: Fanon's goal is to "interrogate both metaphysics" (8), that is, of both blackness and whiteness, in order to show how "they are often quite fluid" (8). Fanon proposes the "liberation of the black man from himself" (8): "Uprooted, pursued, baffled, doomed to watch the dissolution of the truths that he has worked out for himself one after another, he has to give up projecting onto the world an antimony that coexists with him" (8). As much as the white man thinks himself superior to the black, the black man desires to be white. Indeed, black "men want to prove to white men, at all costs, the richness of their thought, the equal value of their intellect" (10). "For the black man, there is only one destiny. And it is white" (10).

Fanon's tool of choice is Psychoanalysis: "only a psychoanalytic interpretation can lay bare the anomalies of affect that are responsible for the structure of the complex" (10) in black men. In this regard, it is "imperative to eliminate a whole set of defects left over from childhood" (10) because, as Nietzsche put it, "Man's tragedy . . . is that he was once a child" (10).

To disalienate the black man "entails an immediate recognition of social and economic realities. If there is an inferiority complex, it is the outcome of a double process: . . . – primarily, economic; . . . subsequently, the internalisation--or, better, the epidermalisation – of this inferiority" (11). In contrast to the individualism inherent in Freud's project, Fanon stresses that the "black man's alienation is not an individual question. Besides phylogeny and ontogeny stands sociogeny . . . this is a question of a sociodiagnostic" (11). The "fact of the juxtaposition of the white and black races has created a massive psychoexistential complex. I hope by analysing it to destroy it" (12). "White civilisation and European culture have forced an existential deviation on the Negro" (14) to the point where "what is often called the black soul is a white man's artifact" (14).

Ch. 6: "The Negro and Psychopathology"

Here, Fanon draws on a mixture of Freudian psychoanalysis and Jungian analytical psychology in order to analyse the psyche of the Antillean negro (Fanon's comments would seem to be mostly about the Antillean male, as some feminists have pointed out). He questions, firstly, the wholesale applicability of the Freudian schema to the black *man*. He argues, firstly, that it is important not to view the effects of racism on the negro as analogous to the effects of sexual repression on the part of the white man. From the Freudian point of view, the white European cannot be aware of his repressed sexual desires precisely because they have been repressed. However, the negro's unconscious does not consist of *repressed* feelings of inferiority: since the "racial drama is played out in

the open, the black man has no time to 'make it unconscious.' The Negro's inferiority . . . is *conscious*. In him there is none of the affective amnesia characteristic of the typical neurotic" (150). Secondly, given the largely matriarchal structure of West Indian post-slavery society in which the father is often absent, in effect disrupting the nuclear familial triad of which Freud speaks, he doubts whether Freud's theory of the Oedipal complex is applicable to "97% of the families" (152) in the French Antilles.¹

Fanon also questions, or at least, qualifies some aspects of Jungian thought and distances himself from a wholesale application of it to the Caribbean context. He believes, for example, that Jung is wrong to think of the collective unconscious as innate rather than acquired:

Jung has confused instinct with habit. In his view . . . the collective unconscious is bound up with the cerebral structure, the myths and archetypes are permanent engrams of the race. I hope that I have shown that nothing of the sort is the case and that in fact the collective unconscious is cultural, which means acquired. (188)

From this perspective, the archetypes in the collective unconscious are not universal but culturally-specific.

However, contending that adult neuroses mainly "owe their origin" (141) to what takes place in early childhood, Fanon then proceeds to utilise Freud's notion of the Id in particular in order to explain both the anti-black racism of white Europeans and the detrimental effect which this has in turn on the psyche of black people. Racism in whites, he argues, is due to what he describes as a "Negro-phobogenesis" (151), the development of a fear of black people. The reason for this, he argues, is that the white person projects onto the negro all the repressed sexuality which he harbours in his unconscious and which is, for Freud, the price of civilisation:

Every intellectual gain requires a loss in sexual potential. The civilised white man retains an irrational longing for unusual eras of sexual license, of orgiastic scenes, of unpunished rapes, of unrepressed incest. . . . Projecting his own desires onto the Negro, the white man behaves 'as if' the Negro really had them. . . . [T]he Negro is fixated at the genital; or at any rate he has been fixated there. (165)

In other words, following the tendency of many so-called 'vulgar' (i.e. crude or simplistic, not obscene) Freudians to seek out sexual aetiologies for all ailments, Fanon contends that the negro is, in a nutshell, "viewed as a penis symbol" (159): "when a white man hates a black man, is he not yielding to a feeling of impotence or of sexual inferiority?" (159), he asks rhetorically. For the majority of white men, he continues, the negro "represents the sexual instinct (in its raw state). The Negro is the incarnation of a genital potency beyond all moralities and prohibitions" (177). The sexual reductiveness of Fanon's explication of white racism has been controversial even among many Post-colonial thinkers. Many have argued that Fanon's thinking here, even if true, does little to account for racist attitudes towards black *women*.

Fanon then supplements this Freudian interpretation of white racism with an essentially

¹For Freud, the psyche of the masculine subject is split after confronting the horror of castration. The father's explicit or implicit threat of castration has two consequences: the male infant simultaneously ingests socially derived moral values and represses all drives which are incompatible therewith.

Jungian argument that, given the unfortunate historical conflation in European civilisation of evil with the colour black, the negro has been tragically equated in the collective unconscious of Europe with the absence of Good and Beauty. Both the Jew and the negro stand for Evil. The black man more so, for the good reason that he is black. Is not whiteness in symbols always ascribed to . . . Justice, Truth, Virginity? . . . 'His body is black, his language is black, his soul must be black too. . . .' The black man is the symbol of Evil and Ugliness. (180)

"In Europe, the black man is the symbol of Evil" (188), he writes. There are many examples of this: the "torturer is the black man, Satan is black, one talks of shadows, when one is dirty one is black – whether one is thinking of physical dirtiness or of moral dirtiness" (189). All kinds of expressions "make the black man the equivalent of sin" (189), he contends: in Europe, "whether concretely or symbolically, the black man stands for the bad side of the character. . . . [T]he Negro is the symbol of sin. The archetype of the lowest values is represented by the Negro" (189). In short, the negro "has one function: that of symbolising the lower emotions, the baser inclinations, the dark side of the soul. In the collective unconscious of *homo occidentalis*, the Negro – or, if one prefers, the colour black – symbolises evil, sin, wretchedness, death, war, famine. All birds of prey are black" (190-1).

Continuing to intermingle Freudian with Jungian elements in this way, Fanon contends that the source of this colour symbolism and the negative stereotyping of the negro lies within the psyche of the white person. He contends that in the

remotest depth of the European unconscious an inordinately black hollow has been made in which the most immoral impulses, the most shameful desires lie dormant. And as every man climbs upwards towards whiteness and light, the European has tried to repudiate this uncivilised self. . . . When European civilization came into contact with the black world, with those savage peoples, everyone agreed: Those Negroes were the principle of Evil. (190)

In the collective unconscious of white Europeans, he suggests, the negro plays the role of the shadow, that part of our personality which, because it embodies all that is reprehensible in human beings, must at all costs be repudiated. Involved in all this, on the part of the white European is the phenomenon of "projection" (190):

In the degree to which I find in myself something unheard-of, something reprehensible, only one solution remains for me: to get rid of it, to ascribe its origin to someone else. In so doing, I eliminate a short circuit that threatens to destroy my equilibrium. (190)

As a result, Fanon continues (but in a more Freudian vein), "European culture has an *imago* of the Negro which is responsible for all the conflicts that may arise" (169). The negro is, by virtue of his colour, the antithetical *physical* incarnation of everything for which whiteness stands. Hence, Fanon's observation, alluding to Jacques Lacan, that the "real Other for the white man is and will continue to be the black man. And conversely. Only for the white man The Other is perceived on the level of the body image, absolutely as the not-self--that is, the unidentifiable, the unassimilable. For the black man . . . historical and economic realities come into the picture" (161).

Having conceptualised white racism and its history in this way, Fanon then turns his attention to how this racism is internalised by the negro to his own detriment. He draws on the Jungian model of the psyche once more to explicate the process of internalisation which results in the psychic division which marks the negro's personality. He argues that the psyche of the Antillean negro in particular and the negro in general is necessarily

shaped by the Eurocentric world in which he grows up and is educated and where he subsequently lives, moves and has his being. The

collective unconscious is not dependent on cerebral heredity; it is the result of what I shall call the unreflected imposition of culture. Hence there is no reason to be surprised when an Antillean . . . relives the same fantasies as a European. It is because the Antillean partakes of the same collective unconscious as the European. . . . It is normal for the Antillean to be anti-Negro. Through the collective unconscious the Antillean has taken over all the archetypes belonging to the European. . . . I am a white man. For unconsciously I distrust what is black in me, that is, the whole of my being. (191)

The negative archetypes of blackness in the collective unconscious are slowly but surely assimilated via cultural indoctrination: "I read white books and little by little I take into myself the prejudices, the myths, the folklore that have come to me from Europe" (192-3). The result is that the negro "selects himself as a object capable of carrying the burden of original sin. . . . The black Antillean is the slave of this cultural imposition. After having been the slave of the white man, he enslaves himself" (192).

The result of all this is, Fanon stresses, that the negro "lives an ambiguity that is extraordinarily neurotic" (192): this is because the

Antillean has recognised himself as a Negro, but, by virtue of an ethical transit, he also feels (the collective unconscious) that one is a Negro to the degree that one is wicked, sloppy, malicious, instinctual. Everything that is the opposite of these Negro modes of behaviour is white. This must be recognised as the source of Negrophobia in the Antillean. In the collective unconscious, black = ugliness, sin, darkness, immorality. In other words, he is Negro who is immoral. (192)

In sum, the black man is "made white by the collective unconscious, by a large part of his individual unconscious, and by the virtual totality of his mechanism of individuation" (193).

Slipping back into a somewhat more Freudian vein, Fanon contends that the internalisation of these negative stereotypes eventuates in the fragmentation of the negro's psyche. The consequence of all this for the negro is that irreconcilable self-division which Fanon's title so neatly encapsulates: the rejection of most / all that is black and the embrace of most / all things white:

Moral consciousness implies a kind of scission, a fracture of consciousness into a bright part and an opposing black part. In order to achieve morality, it is essential that the black, the dark, the Negro vanish from consciousness. Hence a Negro is forever in combat with his own image. (194)

From this point of view, according to Fanon, what is repressed in the negro is not racism per se but blackness itself and all with which he is taught to associate it. The negro is at war with his very own self, uneasy within his own skin, taught to hate and reject self by virtue of the equation of the colour black with everything evil. The negro learns to repress his blackness in order to identify with everything white, at a huge cost to himself. The negro's unconscious consists of everything which he is taught to despise about himself, in short, of his very own biological being and his heritage.