

Frantz Fanon: Existentialist, Dialectician, and Revolutionary

by

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Abstract

Most theorists consider Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* the preeminent work on Third World liberation. Nevertheless, Fanon's earlier text, *Black Skin, White Masks*, presents a unique application of psychoanalysis, dialectics, and existentialism to the colonial situation. This unprecedented theoretical pastiche established the foundation for Fanon's seminal liberationist ideology

If one is nearly everywhere told that one is not fully a human being, but one finds oneself struggling constantly with human responsibilities – over life and death, freedom and lack thereof...the moment of theoretical reflection demands engagement with such idiosyncrasy...including engagements with ontological questions of being – for example, essence, necessity, contingency, and possibility – and teleological questions of where humanity should be going – for example, liberation, humanization, and freedom.

-- Lewis Gordon

Blacks alone are reduced to being a color...And though they are not the only victims of racism, blacks alone have been set apart, degraded and ostracized exclusively on the basis of race and color. Thus the striving to create and affirm our identity and humanity in defiance of racial essentialization and domination forms the common ground of the black liberation struggle. The struggle for identity entails a struggle for a liberated 'black consciousness.

-- Robert Birt

As a psychiatrist and political philosopher, Fanon's concerns are the psychology, materiality, and ontology of the colonized subject; thus he reinterprets psychoanalysis, materialism and existentialism in *Black Skin, White Masks* to thoroughly scrutinize the colonial subject's lived experience of racism. While it is generally held that existentialism and materialism represent opposing philosophical modes, this perception should not occlude existentialism's more practical and implicitly materialist preoccupation with the human condition. Indeed, existentialism's ideological influence:

...derives from the fact that it has concerned itself with human existence in its cultural and historical context...existential philosophers have deliberately and self-consciously addressed themselves to the human situation as they themselves have been involved in it. (Schrader 3)

Since existential thought is firmly grounded in historical and cultural contexts, and its theorists' experiences of said social fields, this proves that two of its principal themes – Being and freedom – may be more radically interrogated and applied to the social and material field of history itself. Historians and theorists from the African Diaspora have explored the existential themes of Being and Freedom since the late nineteenth century:

The...ontological question was examined by many philosophers and social critics of African descent in the nineteenth century, including such well-known and diverse figures as Martin Delany, Maria Stewart, Anna Julia Cooper, and (early) Du Bois. It was not until the late 1940's, however, that a self-avowed existential examination of these issues emerged, ironically through the work of a European philosopher – namely, Jean-Paul Sartre. (Gordon 8-9)

It is ironic that Jean-Paul Sartre would categorize these philosophical issues under the rubric of existentialism more than a century after these same questions were raised by African thinkers who were directly affected by the material conditions of chattel slavery, racial oppression, and their attendant phenomenological effects.

In the 1950's Frantz Fanon and Jean-Paul Sartre applied the ontological and phenomenological aspects of existential philosophy to dialectical materialism, forging a multi-disciplinary discourse against the capitalist and hegemonic exigencies of Western empire. Fanon and Sartre reinvigorated existentialism's philosophical base to consider the complicating elements of anti-Arab and anti-African racism on colonial identity formation during the French-Algerian War. The subsequent decolonization of Algeria, which served as the revolutionary template for the remainder of the colonized Third World, provided Fanon and Sartre with a contemporary example of dialectical materialism within the context of empire, one that readily accommodated the socio-political aspects of existentialist thought vis-à-vis global decolonization.¹

Though it is generally held that Fanon's radicalism was born of his commitment to the Algerian decolonization struggle, the seeds of his radicalism lay in the 1952 publication of his first book, *Black Skin, White Masks*.² In it, a distinctly Fanonian theoretical method is established. Fanon not only breaks with the Negritude philosophy of his mentor, Aimé Césaire, but he combines elements of psychoanalysis, dialectics, materialism, and existentialism to establish a theoretical foundation that would become the basis of his later political writings.³ Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952, 1967) expands existential philosophy's focus on Being and Freedom to emphasize the ideological and material effects of anti-African racism under European colonial rule, thereby revealing existentialism's potential use as a discursive critique against empire.

Fanon's Radical Methodology

A trained psychiatrist when he wrote *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon ostensibly employs psychoanalytic methods to probe the colonized subject's "abnormal" psyche. Fanon's methodology combines what he terms ontogeny, phylogeny, and sociogeny. This integrative process calls for a holistic analysis of the individual colonial subject, the collective colonized subject class, and the larger colonial society as dysfunctional outgrowths of European empire.⁴ Fanon uses this method of examining the colonized subject and the colonizer to theorize on Being and Freedom within what he terms the Manichean colonial world, a world where the colonizer represents the embodiment of universal good and the colonized that of pure evil. Fanon's white-Black binary is further complicated by three centuries of attendant philosophical and political developments, for his Manichean colonial world is delineated through an anti-imperialist and pro-liberationist discourse that revises elements of Hegelian dialectics, Marxist materialism, Heideggerian phenomenology, and Sartrean Existentialism by positing the colonial subject's quest for freedom.⁵

Fanon utilizes this theoretical pastiche to elucidate the totalizing oppression of Western hegemony and empire, and its impact on several related fields of the colonial subject's lived experience: the psychological, the material, the dialectical, and the existential. Therefore, as someone committed to "analyzing and destroying" the "psychoexistential complex" resulting from the "juxtaposition of the black and white races" (12), Fanon must reveal breadth and depth of said complex(es). To that end, he applies, and thereby revises, key principles from these divergent schools of Western thought in his analysis of the colonial subject, in particular, and the ideological structures of European colonialism, in general. In doing so, he not only reveals the psychological (individual) and institutional (social) effects of imperial hegemony, he also illuminates their firm hold on the colonized subject's psyche in the manifestation of an insidious inferiority complex.

The ideological structures of colonialism, indeed, colonialism's very survival, demands the complete eradication of native culture, history, citizenship, and language; and the replacement of these with European systems of culture, history, citizenship, and language. Fanon holds that:

Insofar as he conceives of European culture as a means of stripping himself of his race, he becomes alienated...it is a question of a victim of a system based on the exploitation of a given race by another, on the contempt in which a given branch of humanity is held by a form of civilization that pretends to superiority. (224)

The native must be convinced of her essential inferiority in order for her to submit to foreign rule, thereby ensuring the colonial project's very survival. The colonial world creates and perpetuates a collective inferiority complex among its colonized subjects; thus, European cultural imperialism and internalized inferiority become the dualistically defining characteristic of the colonized subject's lived experience. Fanon further expostulates that: "The feeling of inferiority of the colonized is correlative to the European's feeling of superiority" (93).

Fanon depicts the colonial world as a nearly impenetrable systemic fortress of Western hegemony, but his diagnosis is not fatal. He posits the potential for native freedom and, in doing so, reveals the colonial subject's necessary quest for ontological fulfillment, human potential realized by risking death in a violent confrontation for recognition and freedom. Fanon reveals the liberated consciousness of the colonial subject, and the resultant liberated society, as the pinnacle of existential actualization. Thus, through *Black Skin, White Mask's* theoretical mélange of psychoanalysis, dialectics, materialism, and existentialism Fanon accomplishes two unprecedented discursive feats: Being and Freedom seemingly reach their apotheosis within the historical and political context of African diasporic liberation. And somewhat paradoxically, European-centered schools of Western thought are used to posit the colonial subject's liberated consciousness as the quintessential site of existential actualization and the foundation for collective revolutionary action.

Black Skin, White Masks' imagistic title seemingly announces the multi-disciplinary approach Fanon uses to probe the colonial subject's crisis of self-identification, as the binary formulation of Black skins and white masks describes several theoretical dichotomies: psychoanalytical, in the employment of a mask to obscure true identity; dialectical, in the play of opposing racial identities and symbolically Manichean forces; and ontological, in the subsuming of Black identity by the mask of white identity. The Negro is Black but, according to Fanon, the stultifying effects of colonialism's white mask prevent her from existing by and for herself. She must exist by and for white civilization, for as Fanon states in *Black Skin, White Masks'* introduction: "White civilization and European culture have forced an existential deviation on the Negro" (12).

This existential deviation is manifest in the colonized subject's forced denial of her own native identity. Wearing a white mask negates native/Black identity and all that it represents: racial and ethnic particularity, racial self-identification, and native history and culture. A colonial subject, himself, Fanon understood colonialism as the historical, ideological and material deviation that breeds what he terms psychological "disalienation" (or alienation) in colonized subjects. So while Fanon begins by declaring *Black Skin, White Masks* a psychological study, he simultaneously insists that the colonial subject's inferiority complex is the direct result of extenuating socio-economic forces created by the material realities of colonialism. In his introduction Fanon announces that:

The analysis that I am undertaking is psychological. In spite of this it is apparent to me that the effective disalienation of 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 internalization – or better the epidermalization – of this inferiority.* (10) (emphasis added)

The social and economic realities of colonialism that necessitate native poverty and degradation while ensuring imperial wealth and privilege, according to Fanon, also contribute to the colonized subject class' inferiority complex, for a causal link is established between the impoverished material conditions of colonial oppression and the native's identity as a Black-skinned colonized subject. Fanon's colonial disalienation, or self-alienation, is the internalization of native inferiority. This condition makes the colonial subject's plight ineluctable, for as long as she is Black she will remain inferior in the eyes of the European colonizer and justifiably oppressed. The colonized is seemingly locked into a cycle of oppression, a material condition that catalyzes the psychological complex of self-alienation. To prove that the material reality of colonial oppression creates and maintains psychological complexes, Fanon illuminates the ways in which a detailed study of colonialism imbricates two critical approaches that are generally perceived as theoretically opposed: dialectical materialism and psychoanalysis. On *Black Skin, White Masks*' critical juxtaposition of these contrasting theoretical methods, it has been observed that:

The audacity of [Fanon's] insight is that it allows one to ask whether the psychodynamics of colonial power and anti-colonial subversion can be interpreted by deploying...the same concept and techniques used to interpret the psychodynamics of the unconscious...in *Black Skin, White Masks*...he insists that...racial alienation is not only an 'individual question' but also involves a 'socio-diagnostic'. Reducing Fanon to a purely formal psychoanalysis, or a purely structural Marxism, risks foreclosing precisely those suggestive tensions that animate...the most subversive elements in his work. (McClintock 94)

It is these suggestive tensions between Marxism and psychoanalysis that establish critical commonalities, which, in turn, forge unexpected linkages between these divergent approaches. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon demonstrates how the (individual) colonial subject's abnormal psychological state is the result of an aberrant (social) material state: that of a dominated, subjugated, and degraded colonized existence. The colonial subject's awareness of being is, therefore, distilled from the oppressive material conditions of Western domination that compromise her individual psyche and ontology. For this reason, Fanon's quote bears repeating: "If there is an inferiority complex, it is the outcome of a double process: -- 1 primarily economic; subsequently 2, the internalization – or, better the epidermalization of this inferiority" (10).

Contextualizing Fanon

Before examining Fanon's explorations of Being and Freedom in *Black Skin, White Masks*, it is first necessary to situate Fanon as a psychiatrist and intellectual whose motivations were professional, stemming from his chosen field of psychiatry; social, originating in his identification as a colonial subject; and intellectual, arising from his intense study of Western philosophy.⁶ During his psychiatric residency in France at Saint Alban hospital in 1952, Fanon studied under a professor who exposed him to socio-therapy, a psychiatric method that stresses the indivisibility of the patient from her specific social environment and societal orientation. This form of socio-therapy offers a diagnostic method that places equal weight on the individual and her social orientation. With the colonial subject as his patient, Fanon seemingly applied this method of socio-therapy to the individual, to the social setting of the French colonial Antilles, and to the wider colonial world.⁷ In addition to Fanon's professional forays into socio-therapy, he was exposed to a significant amount of existentialist literature in 1950's France. Fanon studied the works of Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre, among the works of other philosophers whose exegeses on phenomenology and ontology complimented Fanon's earlier undergraduate education in the principal authors of Western radical theory: Karl Marx, Vladimir Lenin, and Leon Trotsky.⁸ Based on Fanon's exposure to psychiatric socio-therapy's materialist concern with the individual as a product of her social milieu, it seems that his methodology in *Black Skin, White Masks* resulted from his application of socio-therapeutic analysis to his examination of the colonial situation. Fanon uses the colonized subject as the psychiatric patient, just as he analyzes her larger socio-political context as a subject of Western empire, affected by its attendant ideological and political discourses of racism. This distinctly Fanonian method combines key principles from the schools of thought to which he was exposed as a colonial subject studying in the European metropole: psychoanalysis, dialectics, materialism, and existentialism.

While some consider Fanon's theoretical approach idiosyncratic, there does exist a potentially seamless conceptual progression from Freudian psychoanalysis to Heideggerian phenomenology.⁹ Freud's study of the unconscious motives behind human behavior offers a theoretical bridge to Heidegger's examination of ontology, for:

It is quite easy to make the transition from Freud's psychoanalytic theory of human behavior to Heidegger's fundamental ontology. We need only to expand our analysis in order to grasp the basic principles of ontology...Heidegger's thesis is that ontological concerns are operative in all...human activity. If Heidegger is correct...ontology is relevant to the most commonplace features of our experience. (Schrader 37)

One such prosaic feature of human experience would be desire; and according to Freud human behavior is the cumulative manifestation of unconscious desires that shape one's apprehension of Being. Just as Freudian psychoanalysis implies that the unconscious dictates our experience of Being through the (un)conscious manifestation of our desires, choices and actions, Heideggerian phenomenology posits Being as the center of our lived experience since Being cannot be divorced from the world in which we live:

Heidegger builds on Husserl's central argument that subject and object, human awareness and the enviroing world, are indissolubly linked. One cannot even in principle treat the ego as something detached from its surrounding...the phenomenologist must open himself up to the rich totality of experience...(Hinchman and Hinchman 189)

Somewhat paradoxically, Heidegger's "rich totality of experience" includes a deliberate consideration of the individual's lived reality; thus Heidegger himself revises phenomenology by positing a somewhat materialist premise: the individual, and her sense of Being, is inextricably bound to the subjective experience of her social world. Indeed, Heidegger's *Being and Time*: "...deals with the phenomenological study of everyday life...Heidegger...transformed phenomenology...into a method through which to carry on a more radical inquiry into ontology, the study of what it is *to be*" (Hinchman & Hinchman 189). Given that Heidegger's work offers a radical intervention into the study of Being, it is no surprise that Fanon would agree with Heidegger's thesis that individual ontology is the dichotomous reflection of the individual *and* her societal milieu. For Fanon himself was a colonial subject, the very embodiment of historical, ideological, and geo-political forces.

Fanon's professional vocation as a psychiatrist and his social orientation as an intellectual seemingly allowed him to build upon this connection between the psychoanalytic and the phenomenological; yet Fanon accomplished something that neither Freud nor Heidegger could because of their exclusive focus on the European subject.

Fanon applied Freudian psychoanalytic theories on consciousness and Heidegger's phenomenological theories of Being to a dialectical *and* materialist analysis of the colonial world.¹⁰ As Fanon states on his incorporation of differing methods in his examination of colonialism in *Black Skin, White Masks*: "Although I had more or less concentrated on the psychic alienation of the black man, I could not remain silent about certain things which, however psychological they may be, produce consequences that extend into the domains of other sciences" (48). Clearly, the extreme forces of hegemonic domination intrinsic to and necessary for the survival of empire compelled Fanon to probe the afore-mentioned sciences and philosophies of psychoanalysis and phenomenology.

Fanon's exposition on the profoundly stultifying effects of racism as ideology and praxis on the colonized psyche in *Black Skin, White Masks* was formulated as the direct result of his methodical engagement with the political and philosophical tomes of Western discourse. This dialogic engagement is made clear in several of *Black Skin, White Masks*' chapter titles and subtitles: "The Negro and Psychopathology," "The Negro and Hegel," "The Negro and Recognition." Fanon biographer Irene Gendzier notes that:

...out of the amalgam of men and ideas that affected Fanon, there were other historic figures, notably Marx, Freud, and Hegel, whose presence is to be discerned in his works. *It was through the inner debate he engaged with these men, a debate molded by events in which he found himself, that Fanon eventually evolved an intellectual and political position of his own.* (21) (emphasis added)

Fanon's inner debate with these theorists raises several questions about the epistemic, ideological, and institutional aspects of anti-African racism that are highlighted in his theorization of the Manichaean colonial world, a world whose dualistic white-Black, good-evil binary quite conveniently lends itself to another interpretive juxtaposition of Freudian psychoanalysis and Marxist materialism. Through a psychoanalytic reading, the "evil", Black native may symbolize the wildly undisciplined id and the "good", white colonizer that of the tempered, controlling super-ego. A materialist critique of Fanon's Manicheism reveals the dialectics of empire: the white, European ruling colonial class oppresses the Black native/colonized class until resistance, which is imminent, occurs.

Nevertheless, Fanon ostensibly announces psychoanalysis as his primary method in *Black Skin, White Masks*, declaring: "Before beginning the case, I have to say certain things. The analysis that I am undertaking is psychological" (10). Fanon's brand of psychoanalytic engagement, however, also utilizes a critical framework that examines the irrational dimensions of the colonial world:

Psychoanalysis' interest in the problem of identification provides Fanon with a vocabulary and an intellectual framework in which to diagnose and to treat not only the psychological disorders produced in individuals by the violence of colonial domination but also the neurotic structure of colonialism itself. At the same time, its investigation of alterity within the historical and political frame of colonialism suggests that identification is neither a historically universal concept nor a politically innocent one. *A by-product of modernity, the psychoanalytic theory of identification takes shape within the larger cultural context of colonial expansion and imperial crisis.* (Fuss 20) (emphasis added)

Indeed, Fanon's application of psychoanalytic principles to the colonial problem allows him to establish the colonial subject's individual identity formation as indiscrete from the ideological, political, and material history of European imperialism and colonial domination. Fanon declares emphatically that the colonial subject's self-identification is informed by her awareness of the specific power relationship of Western domination and Black oppression.

While Diana Fuss is quite right in asserting that psychoanalysis provides Fanon with the lexical and critical frame for his examination of the colonized individual and the larger colonial society, I would argue further that Fanon uses psychoanalysis in the colonial setting as a contextual springboard to leap into a more nuanced exploration of linkages among psychoanalysis, dialectics, materialism, and existentialism. Fanon teases these connections out through an analysis of the colonial subject's lived experience. On *Black Skin, White Masks'* employment of psychoanalysis and his acute awareness of the need for dialectical engagement in the colonial setting, Fanon himself explains that:

When I began this book, having completed my medical studies, I thought of presenting it as my thesis. But dialectic required the constant adoption of positions. Although I had more or less concentrated on the psychic alienation of the black man, I could not remain silent about certain things which, however psychological they may be, produce consequences that extend into the domain of other sciences. (48)

Despite *Black Skin, White Masks'* psychoanalytic subject matter, and Fanon's need to meet his professional training requirement, he reveals his deep engagement with Hegelian and Marxist discourse by holding fast to the requirements of dialectic. He explicitly states that he could not write *Black Skin, White Masks* as a purely psychological study because he saw the colonial subject's psychological alienation as the result of the historical and material alienation of European hegemony and colonial rule. For Fanon, the crisis of empire provides the ideal socio-political and ideological field within which to apprehend the colonial subject's internalization of hegemonic ideals and practices.

This internalization of Western domination is also reflected in many of *Black Skin, White Masks*' chapter titles: "The Woman of Color and the White Man," "The Man of Color and the White Woman," "The So-Called Dependency Complex of Colonized People," and "The Fact of Blackness." Thus, Fanon's engagement with the historical forces of colonization and decolonization seemingly compels him to identify their material, psychological, and existential effects upon the colonized subject's psyche. Fanon forges ahead to explore more material and ontological manifestations of racism and their impact on the colonial subject's psyche through her lived experience, and he begins this inquiry by citing Jean-Paul Sartre's *Anti-Semite and Jew* to denote the complex meaning of over-determination.

The Black native, the colonized subject, ever remains Black. This overdetermination, defined first by Sartre and then revised by Fanon, is best explained through *Black Skin, White Mask's* excerpt of Sartre's text: "They [the Jews] have allowed themselves to be poisoned by the stereotypes that others have of them, and they live in fear that their acts will correspond to this stereotype...We may say that their conduct is perpetually overdetermined from the inside" (qtd. in Fanon 115). Fanon goes on to differentiate between the Jew's overdetermination and the Black's by stressing that the Jew, in most cases, has white skin that may obfuscate her Jewish identity. For the Black, there is no chance of being perceived as anything other than Black.

Using himself as an example, Fanon highlights that: "...in my case everything takes on a *new* guise. I am overdetermined from without. I am a slave...of my own appearance" (116). Invoking the specter of chattel slavery to highlight his own self-alienation, Fanon insists that the colonized subject's overdetermination is as permanent as her Black skin. The reality of this overdetermination and epidermalization is best captured in, "The Fact of Blackness" – in the English edition (1967), and "The Lived Experience of the Black" – the direct translation from the French edition (1952). Despite the different denotative and connotative meanings in these respective chapter titles, both titles reveal the manner in which *Black Skin, White Masks* combines phenomenology and ontology. As a branch of philosophy centered on the "investigation of appearances" (Hinchman & Hinchman 187) the physical manifestation of blackness is connoted in both titles. Where the English edition situates blackness, itself, as the subject of a phenomenological inquiry, the French edition's title positions the Black native as the ontological subject under consideration, and the subject's blackness becomes the de facto phenomenon of her lived experience. In both cases blackness and the lived experience of being Black, therefore, represent the ineluctable aspect of existential facticity in the colonial world.¹¹

Hailing and Hegel: Racist Interpellation and Hegelian Dialectics

In a chapter that critic Ian Baucom has called the most influential chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks*,¹² Fanon proceeds to define “The Fact of Blackness” – “The Lived Experience of the Black,” through lengthy autobiographical encounters of his own racial objectification instantiated by the interpellation of whites in a probing and revelatory manner. He challenges the reader’s senses by exclaiming: “Dirty nigger,” or simply “Look a Negro!” (109). Here, Fanon recounts his experiences of racist interpellation, seemingly positioning himself as the colonial neurotic by delving in to his own damaged psyche:

Fanon goes to a deeper level of interiority: his own experience as lived. He finds in his autobiographical moment, a set of theses converging. The chapter ‘The Lived Experience of the Black’ begins with a little white boy’s use of language – of publicity – to enmesh Fanon in the realm of pure exteriority, the realm of epidermal schema. There, Fanon’s existence is a two-dimensional objectification. (Gordon 33)

This two-dimensional objectification indicates an ontological shattering where Fanon’s very humanity is seemingly called into question. Fanon proceeds to describe a cleaving of racially stereotyped selves that the white boy’s hailing has elicited:

In the train it was no longer a question of being aware of my body in the third person but in a triple person...I was responsible at the same time for my body, for my race, for my ancestors. I subjected myself to an objective examination, I discovered my blackness, my ethnic characteristics; and I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, slave-ships, and above all else, above all: ‘Sho good eatin.’ (112) (emphasis added)

Fanon’s ontological triplication illustrates the manner in which the Black colonial subject becomes a representation, for his physicality, race, and forebears while recalling internalized stereotypes of blackness and African identity – from “cannibalism and fetishism” to African-American southern identity – “Sho good eatin’”. These stereotypes reveal that in their experiences of anti-African racism the Black colonial subject and the African diasporic subject are one and the same for Fanon. Thus, the African diasporic subject cannot exist autonomously; her ontology is ever problematized by the presence of whites. As Fanon further explains in *Black Skin, White Masks*:

In the Weltanschauung of a colonized people there is an impurity, a flaw that outlaws any ontological explanation...Ontology...does not permit us to understand the being of the black man. For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man. (109-110)

Fanon emphasizes the manner in which the Black's apprehension of Being is problematized by the ineluctable presence of the white individual and colonial society. Ontology for the Black subject is not an a priori reality; instead it is a reality that becomes permanently compromised and defined by its inescapable duality with whiteness and all that it represents – white supremacy, anti-African racism, and racist stereotypes.

Fanon explores this lived binary in the afore-cited autobiographical encounters, and his reactions bespeak the anger, shock, and trauma befitting one who is experiencing a form of existential dread. In C.L.R. James' assessment of Heideggerian dread, he contends that:

...Man is not afraid of anything in particular...the mere fact that you are living...and you do not know what exactly is going to happen to you...that makes in your existence the necessity of some kind of dread as to what is going to happen to you in your future. (9)

For Heidegger dread is the feeling of foreboding. It is a foreboding that awakens the fear of the known, death; and the unknown, the exact moment of death one's death. For Fanon, this dread occurs at the moment of racist interpellation: "Dirty nigger!" Fanon captures the recurring nature of this dehumanizing hailing through repetition. He repeats the hailing four separate times throughout the chapter; this repetitive act of exposition reflects the hailing's frequent occurrence in the colonial world as well as its devastating effects on the colonized subject's psyche.

The existential issues of Being and Freedom in Fanon's dialectical (and dreadful) colonial world necessitate that due consideration be given to the originator of the dialectical process, G.W.F. Hegel. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, the colonized subject's quest for freedom is crystallized in Fanon's interpretation of the Hegelian dialectic of recognition and struggle in *Phenomenology of Mind*. The Hegelian dialectic of individual consciousness and social recognition is laid bare through Fanon's somewhat paradoxical sub-section entitled, "The Negro and Hegel," a heading that raises several red flags. First, Hegel's only position on the Negro is one of complete and utter derision. His *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* speciously establishes the Negro as neither contributing to Western civilization nor possessing human consciousness. Secondly, *Black Skin, White Masks* does not address the African's historical and ontological erasure in Hegelian discourse. Failing to refute or even mention Hegel's anti-African bias makes Fanon's engagement with *Phenomenology of the Mind* extremely paradoxical, for Hegel's dialectic of human recognition and violent struggle encapsulates perfectly the lot of Africana peoples' four centuries long fight for freedom under Western domination.¹³ The very race Hegel deemed sub-human is the same race whose long history of oppression and resistance is mirrored in Hegel's own seminal dialectic. The irony is rich.

Given Hegel's virulent anti-African position, Fanon's attraction to Hegelian discourse appears to be grounded in his posthumous mentor's animation of history as the preeminent social field that determines human experience. Hegel holds that history and culture make human beings who and what they are: "For Hegel, man is first and foremost a being who functions within the context of history and culture...he viewed human becoming as dominated by world history" (Schrader 13). Since the colonial encounter is a consequence of Western hegemonic history, Fanon's method in *Black Skin, White Masks* is very Hegelian. His text proposes that the colonial subject's inferiority complex has been created by the history and culture of European empire and colonialism; that the colonial subject is the direct product of her environment; and that she is directly affected by the history and culture of European domination. It is no wonder that this aspect of Hegelian discourse held allure for Fanon, as Hegelian discourse delineates the connection between human alienation and world history even further: "The particular form of alienation experienced by an individual depends upon his situation in world history and cannot be overcome save as historical-cultural processes follow out of the logic of their development" (Schrader 14). Thus, the colonized subject's alienation (or disalienation as Fanon has renamed it) is the direct result of the historical forces of Western imperialism and subjugation.

Human Recognition and Liberation

Setting aside the fact that Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* uses this same argument to justify the excision of African civilization from the narrative of world history, Fanon once again applies Hegelianism to modern colonialism. For Fanon, the colonized subject's alienation is a state of self-hatred created by the history and culture of European empire, and it can only be overcome through the historical and political process of decolonization. This process of radical historical and societal change may only be catalyzed through the antithesis of the colonial inferiority complex: a liberated native consciousness that eventually crystallizes as a collective quest for native freedom. This freedom is only possible through a confrontation, indeed, a demand for human recognition from the colonizer. Fanon distills key ideas on recognition from Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Mind* to reinterpret the problematic of human recognition for the colonized created by the colonizer. In Fanon's estimation Hegel stresses that:

Man is human only to the extent to which he tries to impose his existence on another man in order to be recognized by him. As long as he has not been effectively recognized by the other, that other will remain the theme of his actions. It is on that other being, on recognition by that other being that his own human worth and reality depend. It is that other being in whom the meaning of his life is condensed. (216-217)

In this colonial setting, Fanon asserts that the colonizer will remain the principal catalyst of the colonized subject's actions until the colonizer recognizes the native as a human being. The meaning of the colonized subject's life becomes located in the colonizer's willful denial of her humanity. Unless the colonizer recognizes and acknowledges the native's humanity, according to Fanon, a violent confrontation will ensue: "It is solely by risking life that freedom is obtained; only thus it is tried and proved that the essential nature of self-consciousness is not bare existence..." (qtd. in Fanon 218)

Quite paradoxically, Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Mind* makes a rather strong case *against* the epistemological and ontological erasure of Africans inherent to Western discourse, for risking one's life for the attainment of freedom is and has been the nexus of Africana resistance to chattel slavery and colonialism. Fanon extrapolates upon Hegel's initial proposition, stressing that:

...human reality in-itself-for-itself can be achieved only through conflict and through the risk that conflict implies. This risk means that I go beyond life towards a supreme good that is the transformation of subjective certainty of my own worth into a universally valid objective truth...He who is reluctant to recognize me opposes me. In a savage struggle, I am willing to accept convulsions of death, invincible dissolution, but also the possibility of the impossible. (218)

For Fanon, the risk of death concretizes the essence of human existence: the need for human recognition and the quest for freedom. His insistence that "he who is reluctant to recognize me opposes me" represents the ultimate revolutionary challenge between the colonized subject and the colonizer. That Fanon accepts death as a possible outcome of a struggle for freedom reveals *Black Skin, White Masks* as the originary text of Fanonian radicalism, rather than those works written after his engagement with the French-Algerian War:

Several of Fanon's interpreters suggest that he became aware of the necessity for violence as a result of his Algerian experience. This does not seem to be the case. For as early as his first book...published in 1952, Fanon had unmistakably arrived at this conclusion by way of Hegel. In a section of that book devoted to "The Negro and Hegel," Fanon used the plight of the Negro to elaborate a theory of the conditions under which the Negro could liberate himself. Fanon established that Freedom...can only be established by a dialectical progression in which the subjected individual imposes himself on the other in a violent demand for acceptance. (Martin 392)

In the colonial world, this violent demand for recognition reaches its apex in decolonization struggles. Natives are not recognized as human beings worthy of exercising their right to sovereignty; therefore they are forced, by the nature of this dialectic, to demand recognition from their oppressors and court death to obtain it. For Fanon, violence and the risk of death mean that the native's life is transformed into the corporeal manifestation of the "universal objective truth" of freedom:

In relating themselves to freedom through the readiness to die, the colonized clearly indicate what is at stake...What comes first is not the recognition of particularity but the humanity of the colonized, the struggle for recognition as human being...Violence expresses this disincarnate, ethereal freedom. It is how freedom exists less as an attribute than as the very subject exacting recognition through the risking of life. The rehabilitative value of violence lies in the equation that the colonized are ready to risk the only and most precious thing they have, namely, their life, for their dignity and equality. (Kebede 549-550)

Kebede substantiates Fanon's position that resistance to colonial oppression takes freedom out of the realm of abstraction and into the concrete, ineluctable world of human relations; thus the inequities of racism and colonial oppression can only be eradicated through a struggle for equality and freedom. This struggle begins with the individual's ontological and political awakening, the understanding that the colonized subject must break the chains of mental enslavement. Consequently, there is an absolute necessity for a liberated consciousness in the creation of a liberated society because:

There can be no radical transformation of identity without an entire struggle to radically transform the social order. And no radical transformation of the social structure is possible (nor would it have a purpose) without the transformation of identity – the self-creation of a new kind of human being. It is this self-creation and renewal that is the aim of all effort. (Birt 211)

This new human is one who has initiated her self-recreation by decolonizing her mind, by disposing of internalized racism through the recognition of her own intrinsic value, and by daring to restructure a formerly oppressive society into one that is not only more egalitarian, but one that reflects her native culture, history, and identity. Clearly, Fanon's call for native freedom in *Black Skin, White Masks* reflects his ongoing dialogue with Marxist theory and its preoccupation with social revolution and societal transformation. While Fanon engages with Marxism, it may also be said that Fanon's radicalism surpasses that of Marx because:

...Fanon goes beyond the Marxist characterization of violence as the ‘midwife of history.’ He reads into the forceful resistance against colonialism the gestation, the birth of a historical subject. Through violence directed at their oppressors, the colonized peoples reconstitute their human self in an autonomous and unrestricted way. (Kebede 554)

The creation of a liberated humanity through the revolutionary overthrow of European imperialism in *Black Skin, White Masks* reaches another crescendo in *The Wretched of the Earth*. In it, Fanon warns that: “Decolonization...is a historical process...Decolonization is the veritable creation of new men” (36). And later:

Independence is not a word which can be used as an exorcism, but an indispensable condition for the existence of men and women who are truly liberated, in other words who are truly masters of all the material means which make possible the radical transformation of society. (310)

For the newly liberated masses, existential self-actualization is born of violent confrontation and risking death for human recognition. The natives’ hard won freedom leads to a radical transformation of society specifically because the formerly colonized have become instruments of true societal change by regaining dominion over their own land, culture, and resources. Indeed, as they have regained control over their collective identity and existence the problem of alienation ceases to exist.

With *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon achieves a critical tour de force. His professional training in psychoanalysis and his dialogue with Western philosophers allowed him to elucidate areas of theoretical convergence among varied schools of Western thought. Fanon uses the African diasporic subject as a point of inquiry in this critical experiment and this makes his achievement in *Black Skin, White Masks* unprecedented, for the Black subject was never considered in the initial application of psychoanalysis, materialism, dialectics, or existentialism. Fanon analyzes the Black colonial subject’s psychology and ontology; her lived experience is probed, illuminating a convergence of psychology, dialectics, materiality, and existence that affect her day-to-day reality. It is a reality that reveals the Black colonized subject as a living embodiment of Western discourse’s paradoxes. For once again the African subject, categorized as sub-human by Hegelian discourse, wages battles for Being and Freedom that are outlined in Hegelian, Marxist, and existentialist thought. In revising these critical approaches, Fanon creates a distinctly Fanonian hermeneutics against empire that surpasses the radicalism of both Karl Marx and Jean-Paul Sartre, for Fanon defines the attainment of freedom in the colonial world as the apotheosis of existential actualization. This totality of being, according to Fanon, creates a new race of humans capable of creating a world that is free of oppression, exploitation, and hegemonic domination. Idealistic, yes, but Fanon locates this idealism in the complete eradication of empire, a seemingly impossible feat that, if achieved, would necessitate that freedom be realized by all.

Notes

¹ For a detailed discussion of Fanon and Satre's theoretical engagement with the Algerian decolonization struggle see Le Sueur, 227-249.

² For a comprehensive analysis of Fanon's earlier radicalization, see Martin.

³ For Fanon's disenchantment with the Negritude movement, see Caute, 21-23; Gendzier, 21; Kebede, and Martin.

⁴ See *Black Skin, White Masks*, 11.

⁵ See Le Sueur, 227-249 and Gendzier, 4-21.

⁶ Regarding this call to contextualize Fanon, I do not support Henry Louis Gates' call in "Critical Fanonisms" to historicize Fanon as a means of neutralizing the conflicting contemporary critical interpretations of Fanon's work in postcolonial theory; rather I am attempting to show how Fanon's engagement with the philosophical and socio-political tomes of the Western canon enabled him to radically expand their previously European-centered parameters. See Gates.

⁷ Although Fanon is rather firm in *Black Skins, White Masks*' introduction that his study is specifically pertinent to the colonial world of the French Antilles, the remainder of the text makes numerous references to the colonial subject in general.

⁸ See Gendzier, 19-20.

⁹ On the back cover of the Grove Press 1967 edition of *Black Skin, White Masks* a reviewer from Newsweek describes the text as, "...a strange, haunting mélange of existential analysis, revolutionary manifesto, metaphysics, prose poetry, and literary criticism..."

¹⁰ Here, I make the distinction between dialectics and materialism because Fanon himself does. He applies Hegelian dialectics to the colonial setting in a manner that is quite distinct from his application of Marx's dialectical materialism to the same.

¹¹ See Schrader, 23-24, for an explanation of facticity as the empirically determined aspects of human existence. Schrader also stresses that existentialist writers are equally concerned with human freedom and the factuality of the human situation.

¹² See Baucom for an analysis of radio's pivotal role in the dissemination of liberationist ideology in the African Diaspora.

¹³ Although Fanon engages quite vigorously with Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind*, not once does he mention Hegel's excision of Africa from the stage of world history in *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*. In fact, Fanon takes several ideological jabs at mentor Aime Cesaire's Negritude philosophy by insisting that the discovery of ancient African kingdoms would not dispel colonial alienation. See *Black Skin, White Masks*, 225-226.

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