

Black Skin, White Masks

Black Skin, White Masks

Frantz Fanon

Translated by Charles Lam Markmann

Introduction by Paul Gilroy



Pluto Press
www.plutobooks.com

Originally published by Editions de Seuil, France, 1952 as *Peau Noire*,
Masques Blanc

First published in the United Kingdom in 1986 by Pluto Press
345 Archway Road, London N6 5AA
This new edition published 2017

www.plutobooks.com

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 7453 9956 0 Hardback

ISBN 978 0 7453 9954 6 Paperback

ISBN 978 1 7868 0065 7 PDF eBook

ISBN 978 1 7868 0067 1 Kindle eBook

ISBN 978 1 7868 0066 4 EPUB eBook

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed
and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are
expected to conform to the environmental standards of the country of origin.

Typeset by Stanford DTP Services, Northampton, England

Simultaneously printed in the United Kingdom and United States of America

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Introduction

I am talking of millions of men who have been skillfully injected with fear, inferiority complexes, trepidation, servility, despair, abasement.

—*Aimé Césaire*, Discours sur le Colonialisme

The explosion will not happen today. It is too soon . . . or too late.

I do not come with timeless truths.

My consciousness is not illuminated with ultimate radiances.

Nevertheless, in complete composure, I think it would be good if certain things were said.

These things I am going to say, not shout. For it is a long time since shouting has gone out of my life.

So very long. . . .

Why write this book? No one has asked me for it.

Especially those to whom it is directed.

Well? Well, I reply quite calmly that there are too many idiots in this world. And having said it, I have the burden of proving it.

Toward a new humanism. . . .

Understanding among men. . . .

Our colored brothers. . . .

Mankind, I believe in you. . . .

Race prejudice. . . .

To understand and to love. . . .

From all sides dozens and hundreds of pages assail me and try to impose their wills on me. But a single line would be enough. Supply a single answer and the color problem would be stripped of all its importance.

What does a man want?

What does the black man want?

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At the risk of arousing the resentment of my colored brothers, I will say that the black is not a man.

There is a zone of nonbeing, an extraordinarily sterile and arid region, an utterly naked declivity where an authentic upheaval can be born. In most cases, the black man lacks the advantage of being able to accomplish this descent into a real hell

Man is not merely a possibility of recapture or of negation. If it is true that consciousness is a process of transcendence, we have to see too that this transcendence is haunted by the problems of love and understanding. Man is a *yes* that vibrates to cosmic harmonies. 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 antinomy that coexists with him.

The black is a black man; that is, as the result of a series of aberrations of affect, he is rooted at the core of a universe from which he must be extricated.

The problem is important. I propose nothing short of the liberation of the man of color from himself. We shall go very slowly, for there are two camps: the white and the black.

Stubbornly we shall investigate both metaphysics and we shall find that they are often quite fluid.

We shall have no mercy for the former governors, the former missionaries. To us, the man who adores the Negro is as "sick" as the man who abominates him.

Conversely, the black man who wants to turn his race white is as miserable as he who preaches hatred for the whites.

In the absolute, the black is no more to be loved than the Czech, and truly what is to be done is to set man free.

This book should have been written three years ago. . . . But these truths were a fire in me then. Now I can tell them without being burned. These truths do not have to be hurled in men's faces. They are not intended to ignite fervor. I do not trust fervor.

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Every time it has burst out somewhere, it has brought fire, famine, misery. . . . And contempt for man.

Fervor is the weapon of choice of the impotent.

Of those who heat the iron in order to shape it at once. I should prefer to warm man's body and leave him. We might reach this result: mankind retaining this fire through self-combustion.

Mankind set free of the trampoline that is the resistance of others, and digging into its own flesh to find a meaning.

Only a few of those who read this book will understand the problems that were encountered in its composition.

In an age when skeptical doubt has taken root in the world, when in the words of a gang of *salauds* it is no longer possible to find the sense of non-sense, it becomes harder to penetrate to a level where the categories of sense and non-sense are not yet invoked.

The black man wants to be white. The white man slaves to reach a human level.

In the course of this essay we shall observe the development of an effort to understand the black-white relation.

The white man is sealed in his whiteness.

The black man in his blackness.

We shall seek to ascertain the directions of this dual narcissism and the motivations that inspire it.

At the beginning of my speculations it seems inappropriate to elaborate the conclusions that the reader will find.

Concern with the elimination of a vicious circle has been the only guide-line for my efforts.

There is a fact: White men consider themselves superior to black men.

There is another fact: Black men want to prove to white men, at all costs, the richness of their thought, the equal value of their intellect.

How do we extricate ourselves?

A moment ago I spoke of narcissism. Indeed, I believe that only a psychoanalytical interpretation of the black problem can lay bare

the anomalies of affect that are responsible for the structure of the complex. I shall attempt a complete lysis of this morbid body. I believe that the individual should tend to take on the universality inherent in the human condition. And when I say this, I am thinking impartially of men like Gobineau or women like Mayotte Capécia. But, in order to arrive at this judgment, it is imperative to eliminate a whole set of defects left over from childhood.

Man's tragedy, Nietzsche said, is that he was once a child. None the less, we cannot afford to forget that, as Charles Odier has shown us, the neurotic's fate remains in his own hands.

However painful it may be for me to accept this conclusion, I am obliged to state it: For the black man there is only one destiny. And it is white.

Before beginning the case, I have to say certain things. 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 epi-dermalization—of this inferiority.

Reacting against the constitutionalist tendency of the late nineteenth century, Freud insisted that the individual factor be taken into account through psychoanalysis. He substituted for a phylogenetic theory the ontogenetic perspective. It will be seen that the black man's alienation is not an individual question. Beside phylogeny and ontogeny stands sociogeny. In one sense, conforming to the view of Leconte and Damey,¹ let us say that this is a question of a sociodiagnostic.

What is the prognosis?

But society, unlike biochemical processes, cannot escape human influences. Man is what brings society into being. The prognosis is

1. M. Leconte and A. Damey, *Essai critique des nosographies psychiatriques actuelles*.

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in the hands of those who are willing to get rid of the worm-eaten roots of the structure.

The black man must wage his war on both levels: Since historically they influence each other, any unilateral liberation is incomplete, and the gravest mistake would be to believe in their automatic interdependence. Besides, such a systematic tendency is contrary to the facts. This will be proved.

Reality, for once, requires a total understanding. On the objective level as on the subjective level, a solution has to be supplied.

And to declare in the tone of "it's-all-my-fault" that what matters is the salvation of the soul is not worth the effort.

There will be an authentic disalienation only to the degree to which things, in the most materialistic meaning of the word, will have been restored to their proper places.

It is good form to introduce a work in psychology with a statement of its methodological point of view. I shall be derelict. I leave methods to the botanists and the mathematicians. There is a point at which methods devour themselves.

I should like to start from there. I shall try to discover the various attitudes that the Negro adopts in contact with white civilization.

The "jungle savage" is not what I have in mind. That is because for him certain factors have not yet acquired importance.

I believe that the fact of the juxtaposition of the white and black races has created a massive psychoexistential complex. I hope by analyzing it to destroy it.

Many Negroes will not find themselves in what follows.

This is equally true of many whites.

But the fact that I feel a foreigner in the worlds of the schizophrenic or the sexual cripple in no way diminishes their reality.

The attitudes that I propose to describe are real. I have encountered them innumerable times.

Among students, among workers, among the pimps of Pigalle or Marseille, I have been able to isolate the same components of aggressiveness and passivity.

This book is a clinical study. Those who recognize themselves in it, I think, will have made a step forward. I seriously hope to persuade my brother, whether black or white, to tear off with all his strength the shameful livery put together by centuries of incomprehension.

The architecture of this work is rooted in the temporal. Every human problem must be considered from the standpoint of time. Ideally, the present will always contribute to the building of the future.

And this future is not the future of the cosmos but rather the future of my century, my country, my existence. In no fashion should I undertake to prepare the world that will come later. I belong irreducibly to my time.

And it is for my own time that I should live. The future should be an edifice supported by living men. This structure is connected to the present to the extent that I consider the present in terms of something to be exceeded.

The first three chapters deal with the modern Negro. I take the black man of today and I try to establish his attitudes in the white world. The last two chapters are devoted to an attempt at a psychopathological and philosophical explanation of the *state of being* a Negro.

The analysis is, above all, regressive.

The fourth and fifth chapters rest on a fundamentally different basis.

In the fourth chapter I examine a work² that in my opinion is dangerous. The author, O. Mannoni, is, moreover, aware of the ambiguity of his position. That perhaps is one of the merits of his evidence. He has tried to account for a situation. It is our right to say that we are not satisfied. It is our duty to show the author how we differ from him.

2. [Dominique] O. Mannoni, *Prospero and Caliban: The Psychology of Colonization* (New York, Praeger, 1964). Originally *Psychologie de la Colonisation* (Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1950).

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The fifth chapter, which I have called *The Fact of Blackness*, is important for more than one reason. It portrays the Negro face to face with his race. It will be observed that there is no common link between the Negro of this chapter and the Negro who wants to go to bed with a white woman. In the latter there is clearly a wish to be white. A lust for revenge, in any case. Here, in contrast, we observe the desperate struggles of a Negro who is driven to discover the meaning of black identity. White civilization and European culture have forced an existential deviation on the Negro. I shall demonstrate elsewhere that what is often called the black soul is a white man's artifact.

The educated Negro, slave of the spontaneous and cosmic Negro myth, feels at a given stage that his race no longer understands him.

Or that he no longer understands it.

Then he congratulates himself on this, and enlarging the difference, the incomprehension, the disharmony, he finds in them the meaning of his real humanity. Or more rarely he wants to belong to his people. And it is with rage in his mouth and abandon in his heart that he buries himself in the vast black abyss. We shall see that this attitude, so heroically absolute, renounces the present and the future in the name of a mystical past.

Since I was born in the Antilles, my observations and my conclusions are valid only for the Antilles—at least concerning the black man *at home*. Another book could be dedicated to explaining the differences that separate the Negro of the Antilles from the Negro of Africa. Perhaps one day I shall write it. Perhaps too it will no longer be necessary—a fact for which we could only congratulate ourselves.

I

The Negro and Language

I ascribe a basic importance to the phenomenon of language. That is why I find it necessary to begin with this subject, which should provide us with one of the elements in the colored man's comprehension of the dimension of *the other*. For it is implicit that to speak is to exist absolutely for the other.

The black man has two dimensions. One with his fellows, the other with the white man. A Negro behaves differently with a white man and with another Negro. That this self-division is a direct result of colonialist subjugation is beyond question. . . . No one would dream of doubting that its major artery is fed from the heart of those various theories that have tried to prove that the Negro is a stage in the slow evolution of monkey into man. Here is objective evidence that expresses reality.

But when one has taken cognizance of this situation, when one has understood it, one considers the job completed. How can one then be deaf to that voice rolling down the stages of history: "What matters is not to know the world but to change it."

This matters appallingly in our lifetime.

To speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization. Since the situation is not one-way only, the statement of it should reflect the fact. Here the reader is asked to concede certain points that, however unacceptable they may seem in the beginning, will find the measure of their validity in the facts.

The problem that we confront in this chapter is this: The Negro of the Antilles will be proportionately whiter—that is, he will come closer to being a real human being—in direct ratio to his mastery of the French language. I am not unaware that this is one of man's attitudes face to face with Being. A man who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language. What we are getting at becomes plain: Mastery of language affords remarkable power. Paul Valéry knew this, for he called language "the god gone astray in the flesh."¹

In a work now in preparation I propose to investigate this phenomenon.² For the moment I want to show why the Negro of the Antilles, whoever he is, has always to face the problem of language. Furthermore, I will broaden the field of this description and through the Negro of the Antilles include every colonized man.

Every colonized people—in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality—finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country. The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards. He becomes whiter as he renounces his blackness, his jungle. In the French colonial army, and particularly in the Senegalese regiments, the black officers serve first of all as interpreters. They are used to convey the master's orders to their fellows, and they too enjoy a certain position of honor.

There is the city, there is the country. There is the capital, there is the province. Apparently the problem in the mother country is the same. Let us take a Lyonnais in Paris: He boasts of the quiet of his city, the intoxicating beauty of the quays of the Rhône, the splendor of the plane trees, and all those other things that fascinate people who have nothing to do. If you meet him again when he has returned from Paris, and especially if you do not know the capital,

1. *Charmes* (Paris, Gallimard, 1952).

2. *Le langage et l'agressivité*.

he will never run out of its praises: Paris-city-of-light, the Seine, the little garden restaurants, know Paris and die. . . .

The process repeats itself with the man of Martinique. First of all on his island: Basse-Pointe, Marigot, Gros-Morne, and, opposite, the imposing Fort-de-France. Then, and this is the important point, beyond his island. The Negro who knows the mother country is a demigod. In this connection I offer a fact that must have struck my compatriots. Many of them, after stays of varying length in metropolitan France, go home to be deified. The most eloquent form of ambivalence is adopted toward them by the native, the-one-who-never-crawled-out-of-his-hole, the *bitaco*. The black man who has lived in France for a length of time returns radically changed. To express it in genetic terms, his phenotype undergoes a definitive, an absolute mutation.³ Even before he had gone away, one could tell from the almost aerial manner of his carriage that new forces had been set in motion. When he met a friend or an acquaintance, his greeting was no longer the wide sweep of the arm: With great reserve our "new man" bowed slightly. The habitually raucous voice hinted at a gentle inner stirring as of rustling breezes. For the Negro knows that over there in France there *is* a stereotype of him that will fasten on to him at the pier in Le Havre or Marseille: "Ah come fom Mahtinique, it's the fuhst time Ah've eveh come to Fance." He knows that what the poets call the *divine gurgling* (listen to Creole) is only a halfway house between pidgin-nigger and French. The middle class in the Antilles never speak Creole except to their servants. In school the children of Martinique are taught to scorn the dialect. One avoids *Creolisms*. Some families completely forbid the use of Creole, and mothers ridicule their children for speaking it.

My mother wanting a son to keep in mind
if you do not know your history lesson

3. By that I mean that Negroes who return to their original environments convey the impression that they have completed a cycle, that they have added to themselves something that was lacking. They return literally full of themselves.