

Visual Skin, Virtual Masks: Frantz Fanon's Legacy and the Caribbean

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This essay explores the question of Frantz Fanon's relevance to the contemporary Caribbean in the context of his views, articulated in *Peau noire, masques blancs* and *Les Damnés de la terre*, on the psychological legacy of the violence of colonialism and his proposed solution for psychological and political decolonization. In the 21st century context, technological advances in the area of communication extend the promise of a brave new world, which minimizes or even erases the importance of an individual's visual (visible) persona. Drawing on illustrations from his native land of Barbados, as a territory with a history of colonization similar to that of Fanon's native Martinique, this author offers insights into Fanon's importance to contemporary generations of Caribbean people emerging in the context of a globalized, virtual environment that, while diminishing the significance of the visual in relation to the skin color of individuals, tends to mask the persistence of new permutations of neo-colonial, racialized ideologies.

Frantz Fanon is for many a disturbing figure and a dissonant voice for several reasons: he dares to articulate thoughts, ideas, and feelings about topics that more than 50 years after his death are still sensitive: about race, identity, colonialism, women of color, "lactification," wanting to be white, inferiority complex, the epidermization of inferiority (*Peau noire, masques blancs* 28), and the justification of violence. In his published works, Fanon expresses the psychological complexity and damage experienced by himself as a black colonized individual, and reveals the subconscious resentment of a black male confronted with the choice made by a woman of color to prefer a white man to a black man as a mate. He also exposes the profound psychological illness that colonizers inevitably manifest. Fanon in fact leaves no unproblematic place for anyone involved in the experience of colonization. As a result, he

does not fit comfortably into the space of popular public discourse. And yet social scientists and other academic intellectuals find it difficult to ignore him. This essay explores the question of Fanon's relevance to the contemporary Caribbean in the context of his views, articulated in *Peau noire, masques blancs* and *Les Damnés de la terre*, on the psychological legacy of the violence of colonialism and his proposed solution for psychological and political decolonization.

A blog by Francis Carole (now Président of the Parti pour la Libération de la Martinique [PALIMA]) on Wednesday 13 July 2011, headlined "Fanon effacé de la liste des grandes personnalités de la Martinique," refers to a "circuit" produced by the Conseil Régional which includes among these eminent figures the names of Aimé Césaire and Édouard Glissant, and even the Empress Joséphine, but not that of Fanon. Carole offers the following insightful and relevant comment: "Cet effacement délibéré de Fanon de la liste des grandes personnalités de notre Martinique montre à quel point l'auteur des 'Damnés de la terre' dérange certains."

It is a perhaps uncomfortable truth that Frantz Fanon is not very much known or talked about outside academic circles. In the groves of academe, he has been adopted, co-opted, and criticized by Euro-American and "post-colonial," cultural studies, and even feminist scholars, but is yet to be imbedded in the core humanities general education curriculum. And yet, as each year passes, my conviction grows that exposure to Fanon's insights is an increasingly urgent need particularly for the younger, so-called "post-racial" generation in the U.S.A. and throughout the Americas and the Caribbean, as well as in the postcolonial societies in Britain, Europe, and Africa. My conviction is to a large extent the result of personal experience, since Fanon has taught me a lot: about my own situation as a colonized individual and about what is involved in the process of personal decolonization—a therapeutic project necessary for all human products of the colonial experience. Fanon is, I would contend, essential reading for any colonized individual, as well as for colonizers, the descendants of colonizers, and potential colonizers or potential colonized—i.e., for everyone. Fanon's accounts of his ideas and experience, both his lived experience and his experience as the subject or ob-

ject of literary discourse, as expressed in *Peau noire, masques blancs*, and his reflections on decolonization in *Les Damnés de la terre*, exemplify some of the complex linkages and tensions that exist between the colonized subject and the (ex) colonial power.

Literary scholars and academic humanities theorists in general find it difficult to accept the implications of Fanon as someone who moves, however tentatively and contradictorily, toward recognizing the violence of colonialism and the necessity for similar “violence” to counteract colonialism’s traumatic and devastating effects. Fanon recognized early the limitations of discourse – the theoretical and practical approach favored by so many career academicians. Even in *Peau noire...*, his first published work, Fanon articulated his awareness that reason and intelligence do not solve the urgent problems faced by those who endure or have endured the violence of colonization:

...je dis que la philosophie n’a jamais sauvé personne. Quand un autre s’acharne à me prouver que les Noirs sont aussi intelligents que les Blancs, je dis : l’intelligence non plus n’a jamais sauvé personne, et cela est vrai, car si c’est au nom de l’intelligence et de la philosophie que l’on proclame l’égalité des hommes, c’est en leur nom aussi qu’on décide leur extermination. (*PNMB* 42)

Part of the problem posed by colonization has always been the imbalance of power (real or imagined, military, economic, cultural, psychological, though not demographic) between colonizer and colonized. In the context of the Caribbean, the peoples of small island states have always been aware of this vulnerability and comparative lack of power on many levels. This power imbalance between ex-colonized states and former (and new) colonial powers remains, even after some form of political decolonization, under the rubric of “independence,” takes place.

Central to a discussion of Fanon’s relevance to the contemporary Caribbean is the fact that, as one of Fanon’s biographers, David Macey, insists in *Frantz Fanon: A Biography*, Fanon’s Caribbean cultural formation as a colonized Martinican constitutes the bedrock of his later explorations and activities: “For the Martinican Fanon, the experience of coming under the white gaze reproduces the primal experience of his island’s history: slavery

and a colonization so brutal as to be a form of trauma or even annihilation” (168). As Macey points out, the basis of Fanon's thesis in *Peau noire* was his realization that “in Martinique, mental illness is the result of a cultural situation determined by the existence of colonialism” (194).

Raphaël Confiant, one of Martinique's foremost writers and intellectuals, speaking at an end-of-year ceremony in 2011, on the Schoelcher (Martinique) campus of the Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines, in honor of the recent passing of Edouard Glissant and of Frantz Fanon 50 years earlier, quoted the final message that Fanon delivered in *Les Damnés de la terre*: “Le colonialisme n'est pas une machine à penser, n'est pas un corps doué de raison. Il est la violence à l'état de nature et ne peut s'incliner que devant une plus grande violence”(25).

Confiant's allusion to the association made by Fanon between colonialism and violence and Francis Carole's blog provide a backdrop against which the question of the relevance of Fanon's ideas and views to the contemporary Caribbean may be assessed. In order to address this question, two of the fundamental ideas expressed by Fanon need to be considered: 1) the traumatic psychic damage produced by colonization which results in a distorted, even negated, ontology, in alienation, self-devaluation, and manifestations of preference for visual whiteness; and 2) the salutary effect of violence as a counter to the violence that is implicit in, and inevitably accompanies, colonization. These ideas in turn invite consideration of other questions that shed light on the significance and relevance of Fanon's legacy to the Caribbean: Do the leaders and people of these former Caribbean colonies manifest signs of psychic damage, of psychological illness? Or can we assert with confidence that the former Caribbean colonies have been healed from this psychic damage? What role does Fanonian “violence” play in the process of decolonization in these ex-colonial territories? Has decolonization, in the sense proposed by Fanon, really taken place? To what extent do choices and behaviors at the individual or national level reflect concerns raised by Fanon? These questions, all related to the implications and consequences of colonization and decolonization, inform the discussion that follows.

Some of the assertions made by Fanon in *Les Damnés de la terre*, based on his lived and observed experience of the decolonization struggle in Algeria, provide a template for any assessment of decolonization in the Caribbean: “La décolonisation est toujours un phénomène violent ... la décolonisation e[s]t très simplement le remplacement d’une ‘espèce’ d’hommes par une autre ‘espèce’ d’hommes” (5). Fanon’s articulation of the process of decolonization is an ironic echo of a Darwinian (Anglo-European) theory of “natural selection” as part of the struggle of every species (and human groupings) for survival. If we accept the validity of this theory, the logical inference is that there can be no “replacement” without force, without some form of violence. Colonizers and their psychological and ideological structures have to be forcibly removed for true decolonization to be effected.

Fanon also insisted, from the psychological perspective, that the “violence” was not simply physical, it was also psychic, because of the psychological and psychic damage already perpetrated during the process of colonization. Consequently, for him, “La décolonisation est véritablement création d’hommes nouveaux” (6). Implicit in the creation of new people, of a new human species, is a process that like birth necessarily involves a form of violence and pain.

It is incumbent, therefore, to pose the following question: To what extent have the hierarchized structures (social, political, and psychological,) of colonial societies remained in place, in the early decades of the twenty-first century, even in those territories in the Caribbean and elsewhere whose political independent status officially signals the end of the colonial era? It would be impolitic to speak in too general terms about the whole of the Caribbean because of the twin dangers of being inaccurate and offensive. In his analysis of the Antilles in *Peau noire masques blancs*, Fanon was careful to insert a caveat: “Etant Antillais d’origine, nos observations et nos conclusions ne valent que pour les Antilles” (31). Following Fanon’s lead, in my own analysis I use my own native land of Barbados as a specific point of reference. It will be left to the reader to determine the extent to which the illustration provided by Barbados is applicable to other Caribbean and ex-colonized countries as well.

Barbados may be considered an exemplary ex-colonized country, with a special history of an unbroken past of colonial domination by one colonial power, England, dating back to the early 17th century. Ever since Barbados obtained its political independence from Britain in 1966, without physical violence and in a long tradition of the Westminster-model parliamentary democracy, political power has been firmly entrenched in the hands of the African-heritage majority. Consequently, on the surface at least, Barbados seems to present a picture of successful decolonization. On a local television program in Barbados in 2006, on the occasion of the official opening of the annual Crop Over Festival (the local carnival) in 2006, the keynote speaker, minister of state in the office of the Prime Minister and also an ordained minister, proposed a model for Barbados which is relevant in the context of a discussion of the colonial legacy. This minister outlined what he perceived as the different stages through which the Barbadian people had passed, first as "slaves" and "serfs," to evolve eventually with Independence into stewards of the colonial overlords. The principal thrust of the speech was an exhortation to the Barbadian people, in the context of the minister's conviction that business ownership is a manifestation of economic or "real" power, that they needed to move from servitude and stewardship toward the ideal of ownership. This exhortation in 2006 by a minister of government, 40 years after Independence, provides insight into the status of decolonization in Barbados: from the minister's perspective, the process of decolonization was far from complete, since the acquisition of nominal political power had not brought a shift in the ownership of economic power to the African-heritage majority of Barbadians. Barbadians in 2006 were, in the assessment of one of its most influential political and spiritual leaders, still serving and acting as stewards of colonial overlords.

This insight into the process and status of decolonization in Barbados is reinforced by an article published in Barbados's *Nation* newspaper in December 20, 2006. Citing the BBC as a source, the article reported that, according to statistics from the "Brits Abroad" project of the Institute for Public Policy Research, a "think-tank" based in London, some 27,000 Brits were resident in Barbados. The article adds:

When this is combined with the British nationals and/or people born in Britain who are normally resident there but spend more than three months here, that number swells to 34,000, — over one-tenth of Barbados' resident population. These figures are based on those who own or rent properties on the island and do not include people who travel here frequently." (6A)

Previously published figures of the demographics of the Barbadian population, from sources such as the U.S. C.I.A. Fact Book, indicate a population distribution of only 5% white, and more than 90% of African heritage, in a total population of a little under 280,000. If, however, the information from "Brits Abroad" is accurate, that would mean that a full 10% of Barbadian residents are British. This significant increase in the percentage of British residents must be taken in the context of the frequent newspaper reports and radio call-in programs in Barbados which reveal persistent rumblings by the Barbadian populace of African heritage about the unavailability of land for those at the bottom of the economic ladder and persistent complaints about the new resident whites, who, according to anecdotal reports, increasingly seek to restrict access to beaches, all of which are supposed to be, according to the Barbados Constitution, public. The reality of an increasing British (expatriate white) segment of the population, with the power, historical and current, to affect public policy and social practice in the island, reveals one of the hidden faces of postcoloniality: the potential for a recurrence of colonization in a mutated form. Barbados was, 40 years after Independence, as it was in 1667, (and is in 2014) a desirable location, with a pacified population, a stable postcolonial government and economy, and as a consequence eminently suitable for recolonization.

It is striking that the observations made by Fanon of his native Caribbean which led to the 1952 publication of *Peau noire, masques blancs* parallel my own observations of the situation that exists in my native land of Barbados 48 years after nominal "independence." My observations reveal a country that is largely unconscious of the degree to which many of the social structures, attitudes, and values of the former colonial overlord are still firmly entrenched and embraced with uncritical acceptance. Indeed, Barbados may be considered as a living example of what could be termed "successful" col-

onization, and therefore an exemplar of the violent psychological trauma identified by Fanon.

Another example may be pertinent. Despite the recent global recession, which has had a disturbing effect on Barbados's economy and international economic ranking, Barbados still enjoys and is proud of a standard of living which may be regarded as close to the status of "developed," in large measure because of an economy based on tourism which continues to thrive. This aspect of Barbados's situation is an alarming reminder of a prophetic prediction made by Fanon in *Les Damnés de la terre*: "La bourgeoisie nationale organise des centres de repos et de délassement, des cures de plaisir à l'intention de la bourgeoisie occidentale. Cette activité prendra le nom de tourisme et sera assimilée pour la circonstance à une industrie nationale" (99).

It would be difficult to deny that the circumstance envisaged by Fanon is precisely what has taken place in Barbados, which prides itself on being a luxury tourist destination, where the super-wealthy from Britain, Europe, Canada, and the United States have bought up most of the highly desirable real estate along the West ("Platinum") Coast of Barbados, some accorded permission to construct what amounts to private beaches (even though constitutionally all Barbadian beaches are supposed to be public), to the extent that for the most part the sea is rarely visible to anyone driving along that coast. The growing population of expatriate whites live in their own social world deliberately separate from the mass of the black Barbadian populace, whose role they consider is to cater to their (the expatriates') comfort. Needless to say, the recolonization of the scarce land of Barbados (a mere 166 square miles) cannot be effected without the complicity of the local political leadership – i.e., in Fanonian terms, the national bourgeoisie.

Fanon had identified in *Peau noire, masques blancs*, as a consequence of the experience of colonization, the manifestation of an inferiority complex in the form of conscious or subconscious "lactification" within African-heritage, ex-colonial communities in the Caribbean and elsewhere. Fanon had commented on the tendency of some middle-class Martinicans to "whiten" themselves socially: "Il est habituel en effet, en Martinique, de rêver à une forme de salut qui consiste à se blanchir magiquement. Une villa à Didier,

son insertion dans la société de là-haut...” (55). In his theoretically and practically flawed denouncement of Mayotte Capécia (Fanon was not aware that Mayotte was not a real person but a character and pen-name created for novelistic purposes), Fanon accused her of having a propensity for “lactification”: “... c’est vers la lactification que tend Mayotte . Car enfin il faut blanchir la race...” (58). The association between a symbolic acquisition of whiteness and physical (epidermal) transformation became an important manifestation of the psychological and spiritual illness identified by Fanon in black people:

Depuis quelques années, des laboratoires ont projeté de découvrir un sérum de dénégification; des laboratoires, le plus sérieusement du monde, ont rincé leurs éprouvettes, réglé leurs balances et entamé des recherches qui permettront aux malheureux nègres de se blanchir, et ainsi de ne plus supporter le poids de cette malédiction corporelle. (109-110)

The tendency identified by Fanon as an illness or even a curse manifests itself in the “colorism” that obtains among some African-heritage communities (in which lighter skin tones are accorded preference and privilege), and in the maintenance of a system of white privilege and white preference. Significant departure (recovery?) from this disease, however, is evident in public images in Barbados: dark-skinned faces are common on television, in the print media, and in beauty pageants. Yet, according to a report in the local *Nation* newspaper, the skin-bleaching industry still thrives even in an island that claims to consist of an African-heritage population of more than 90%. (A search of “skin bleaching” in the *Nation* conducted on 11/28/11 yielded 1,447 results). Olutoye Walrond reported on Thursday, May 26, 2011, in an article entitled “By the colour of your skin”:

... among the latest news to reach us from Jamdown (Jamaica) is the skin bleaching craze: the use of creams to remove melanin from the skin and lighten the appearance.

And according to a CBC TV report, Barbadian women and some men are picking up this craze in such numbers that some retailers have run out of stock. The preference for lightness of skin tone is nothing new to us in the Caribbean.

This, after all, is the place where darkness of skin is viewed more as an affliction than an asset in a sunny environment, and where female television presenters and characters in pictorial advertisements are nearly always of a fair complexion.

As preposterous as it may sound to those imbued with basic intellect, in this part of the world the lightness of a person's skin tone and the straightness of his hair can be strong determinants of his fortunes of life.

Moreover, anecdotal reports as well as personal observation and experience suggest that whites are often accorded preferential treatment in airports, stores, and at entertainment and sporting events, and the viewpoints of "white" commentators on sport or politics often seem to be valued more highly than those of blacks. A national newspaper has refused to publish letters to the editor or sections within a letter which contain criticism, however subtle or innocuous, of local whites or of a system of white privilege.

In a broader context, it may be argued that the deleterious, traumatic, violent nature of colonization has never adequately been addressed in territories which claim to have acceded to a form of "independence" or even "internal self-government" by so-called non-violent means. As Fanon predicted, "... le leader est objectivement le défenseur acharné des intérêts aujourd'hui conjugués de la bourgeoisie nationale et des ex-compagnies coloniales" (109). The lack of direct physical confrontation in the achievement of independence or decolonization has masked the more devastating violence of psychological conditioning which has resulted in the perpetuation of the same value system erected by the colonizers and by a similar dependency model, in respect to both economics and psychology, by which the ex-colonized participate in their own alienation as they gradually assimilate (psychologically, aesthetically) into Fanonian clones in black face of their former colonial overlords, seldom conscious of their own self-abnegation.

Fanon warned particularly against using Europe, the (former) colonial overlord, as a model to be imitated by ex-colonial societies, and suggested that the experience of the United States of America should provide a cautionary lesson:

Décidons de ne pas imiter l'Europe et bandons nos muscles et nos cerveaux dans une direction nouvelle ... Il y a deux siècles, une ancienne colonie européenne s'est mise en tête de rattraper l'Europe. Elle y a tellement réussi que des Etats-Unis d'Amérique sont devenus un monstre où les tares, les maladies et l'inhumanité de l'Europe ont atteint des dimensions épouvantables.

“Camarades, n'avons-nous pas autre chose à faire que de créer une troisième Europe?” (230-1).

Fanon recognized that one of the most unfortunate consequences of colonization was an imaginative dependency that stifled true creativity – the kind of originality and inventiveness that would contribute toward the advance of humanity:

Mais si nous voulons que l'humanité avance d'un cran, si nous voulons la porter à un niveau différent de celui où l'Europe l'a manifestée, alors, il faut inventer, il faut découvrir.

Si nous voulons répondre à l'attente de nos peuples, il faut chercher ailleurs qu'en Europe” (232-3)

Fanon's advice to look elsewhere than Europe for any progress in the humanization of humanity is as unpopular and unwelcome in ex-European, ex-colonial circles in the Caribbean as it is in continental European and Euro-American circles. It is similarly unpopular to suggest that the old European and more recent Euro-American colonization has expanded and mutated into what is now being touted as globalization.

Globalization is often invoked to suggest ideally not merely a shifting, but also an equalization of perspective – the collapsing of distinctions between center and periphery. Indeed, in 21st-century practice, technological expertise and demographic density become increasingly important factors, permitting greater participation by non-western and ex-colonized societies in global economic and cultural activities. The dominant and most valued perspectives, however, remain those of the culture, the institutions, the financial and economic systems that control the mechanisms (new transnational media technologies – satellite communication, internet, web, cellular communications) by which globalization manifests itself. Technological ad-

vances in the area of communication extend the promise of a brave new world, which minimizes or even erases the importance of an individual's visual (visible) persona. This new world seems to suggest that the survival of "race," constructed around assessments of phenotypical values, could be endangered. This aspect of globalization may, however, turn out to be another of the "masks" (in this case, a virtual mask) against which Fanon warned. Globalization as it manifests itself seems clearly a mutation of the old colonial enterprise, since the globalized world still privileges the expansion and domination of the same economic and cultural forces concentrated in the U.S. and Europe, with the complicity of elites within the competing economies of China and Japan.

From my perspective, colonialism and its correlates post-colonialism and globalization evoke an undertone of violence. Manifested or reflected in subliminal cultural memory are traces of violence in relation to centuries-long displacement from Africa, of the violence of confinement, of suicide, of rape, of murder, of forced labor, of physical abuse and torture, of continuous exploitation in the new geographical location which is so reminiscent of the old. And there is too the violence of the imposition of a new linguistic system that includes the violence of a value signification within that system, persisting to this day, which regulates the relative worth of whiteness and blackness.

Real-life events in the United States, such as the killing of Trayvon Martin in Sanford, FL, Michael Brown, Ferguson, MO, Eric Garner in Staten Island, NY, Tamir Rice, and many others, illustrate not only that it would be ludicrous to assume that, in this brave, new, post-colonial, globalized world, black lives are now valued equally with those of whites. Against the violence perpetrated with impunity against black people, it is ironic that no reference to the purifying, cathartic, and salutary benefit of violence suggested by Fanon, and also present in many cases of non-violent protest, seem politically acceptable in a globalized climate of fears of "terrorism" as a legitimate response to the violence practiced on black bodies by a white power structure in the form of incarceration and "justified" homicide.

These observations lead us back to the relevance of Fanon and his ideas. His legacy and importance can be assessed most effectively by underlining the sociocultural conditions that provided the context for his development. Frantz Fanon was a member of a comparatively privileged colonial elite, educated within the highly centralized system of colonial France – a system geared toward the assimilation of all its subjects into a normalized Frenchness – the same civilization and culture that practiced for its own benefit and gratification an intensive, violent colonization. Fanon's relevance to the Caribbean is inextricably linked to the fact that Caribbean African-heritage people are all products of a similar experience of colonization.

Fanon was like most of us in the Caribbean who have had the opportunity through education to move beyond the relative economic deprivation of our foremothers and forefathers to ascend the socioeconomic ladder and enter the ranks of the privileged middle or even upper-middle class. It is impossible to participate in such a process without, at some level, embracing or internalizing some of the ideology embedded in colonial education which trains the ex-colonized into inordinate respect for the values and perspectives of colonizers, into what Fanon saw as psychic alienation (28).

Just as Fanon has never explicitly or implicitly rejected European intellectual traditions or methodologies, it is often difficult for subjects or victims and progenies of the colonial experience to reject, at a conscious level, the intellectual and cultural traditions that formed them. One of Fanon's major triumphs was that he took the courageous risk to question much of what he was trained to accept without question. In this way, he can serve as a useful model for young students, and formed in and by colonial and ex-colonial educational institutions, to encourage them to resist indoctrination, to look behind the mask, and to subscribe to the commitment that Fanon himself made at the end of *Peau noire...*: "O mon corps, fais de moi toujours un homme qui interroge!" (208). This may be the most promising strategy to adopt to counter and resist the permutations of re-colonizing, neocolonial, racialized ideologies and practices that are masked by the new globalized, virtual environment that diminishes the significance of the visual in relation to the skin color of individuals.

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