

From Black Skin, White Masks

Introduction

I am talking about millions of men whom they have knowingly instilled with fear and a complex of inferiority, whom they have infused with despair and trained to tremble, to kneel and behave like flunkies.

—A. Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*¹

Don't expect to see any explosion today. It's too early . . . or too late.

I'm not the bearer of absolute truths.

No fundamental inspiration has flashed across my mind.

I honestly think, however, it's time some things were said.

Things I'm going to say, not shout. I've long given up shouting.

A long time ago . . .

Why am I writing this book? Nobody asked me to.

Especially not those for whom it is intended.

So? So in all serenity my answer is that there are too many idiots on this earth. And now that I've said it, I have to prove it.

Striving for a New Humanism.

Understanding Mankind.

Our Black Brothers.

I believe in you, Man.

Racial Prejudice.

Understanding and Loving.

I'm bombarded from all sides with hundreds of lines that try to foist themselves on me. A single line, however, would be enough. All it needs is one simple answer and the black question would lose all relevance.

What does man want?

What does the black man want?

1. An essay first published in 1950 (*Discours sur le colonialisme*) by Aimé Césaire (1913–2008), poet and politician of Martinique, Fanon's native island in the French Caribbean. He was a critic of colonialism, one of the founders of the Négritude move-

descend to a level where the categories of sense and nonsense are not yet in use.

The black man wants to be white. The white man is desperately trying to achieve the rank of man.

This essay will attempt to understand the Black-White relationship.

The white man is locked in his whiteness.

The black man in his blackness.

We shall endeavor to determine the tendencies of this double narcissism and the motivations behind it.

At the beginning of our reflections it seemed inappropriate to clarify our conclusions.

Our sole concern was to put an end to a vicious cycle.

Fact: some Whites consider themselves superior to Blacks.

Another fact: some Blacks want to prove at all costs to the Whites the wealth of the black man's intellect and equal intelligence.

How can we break the cycle?

We have just used the word "narcissism." We believe, in fact, that only a psychoanalytic interpretation of the black problem can reveal the affective disorders responsible for this network of complexes. We are aiming for a complete lysis of this morbid universe. We believe that an individual must endeavor to assume the universalism inherent in the human condition. And in this regard, we are thinking equally of men like Gobineau or women like Mayotte Capécia.⁵ But in order to apprehend this we urgently need to rid ourselves of a series of defects inherited from childhood.

Man's misfortune, Nietzsche said, was that he was once a child.⁶ Nevertheless, we can never forget, as Charles Odier⁷ implies, that the fate of the neurotic lies in his own hands.

As painful as it is for us to have to say this: there is but one destiny for the black man. And it is white.

Before opening the proceedings, we would like to say a few things. The analysis we are undertaking is psychological. It remains, nevertheless, evident that for us the true disalienation of the black man⁸ implies a brutal awareness of the social and economic realities. The inferiority complex can be ascribed to a double process:

First, economic.

Then, internalization or rather epidermalization of this inferiority.

Reacting against the constitutionalizing trend at the end of the nineteenth century, Freud⁹ demanded that the individual factor be taken into account in psychoanalysis. He replaced the phylogenetic theory by an ontogenetic approach. We shall see that the alienation of the black man is not an indi-

5. Francophone novelist from Martinique (1916–1955), author of *I Am a Martinican Woman* (1948) and *The White Negress* (1950). Joseph-Arthur, comte de Gobineau (1816–1862), French diplomat and writer, best known for the racist theory of racial determinism set forth in *Essay on the Inequality of Human Races* (4 vols., 1853–55).

6. For FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE, see above.

7. Swiss psychoanalyst (1886–1954).

8. A phrase that describes the project of this book, which in its initial version was titled "Essay on the Disalienation of the Black."

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And this future is not that of the cosmos, but very much the future of my century, my country, and my existence. In no way is it up to me to prepare for the world coming after me. I am resolutely a man of my time.

And that is my reason for living. The future must be a construction supported by man in the present. This future edifice is linked to the present inssofar as I consider the present something to be overtaken.

The first three chapters deal with the black man in modern times. I take the contemporary black man and endeavor to determine his attitudes in a white world. The last two chapters focus on an attempt to explain psychopathologically and philosophically the *being* of the black man.

The analysis is above all regressive.

The fourth and fifth chapters are situated at a fundamentally different level.

In the fourth chapter, I make a critical study of a book⁶ that I consider dangerous. Moreover, the author, O. Mannoni, is aware of the ambiguity of his position. There lies perhaps one of the merits of his testimony. He has attempted to give an account of a situation. We are entitled to be dissatisfied with it. It is our duty to convey to the author the instances in which we disagree with him.

The fifth chapter, which I have called "The Lived Experience of the Black Man," is important for more than one reason. It shows the black man confronted with his race. Note that there is nothing in common between the black man in this chapter and the black man who wants to sleep with the white woman. The latter wants to be white. Or has a thirst for revenge, in any case. In this chapter, on the contrary, we are witness to the desperate efforts of a black man striving desperately to discover the meaning of black identity. White civilization and European culture have imposed an existential deviation on the black man. We shall demonstrate furthermore that what is called the black soul is a construction by white folk.

The educated black man, slave of the myth of the spontaneous and cosmic Negro, feels at some point in time that his race no longer understands him.

Or that he no longer understands his race.

He is only too pleased about this, and by developing further this difference, this incomprehension and discord, he discovers the meaning of his true humanity. Less commonly he wants to feel a part of his people. And with feverish lips and frenzied heart he plunges into the great black hole. We shall see that this wonderfully generous attitude rejects the present and future in the name of a mystical past.

As those of an Antillean, our observations and conclusions are valid only for the French Antilles⁷—at least regarding the black man *on his home territory*. A study needs to be made to explain the differences between Antilleans and Africans. One day perhaps we shall conduct such a study. Perhaps it will no longer be necessary, in which case we can but have reason for applause.

6. O. Mannoni, *Psychologie de la colonisation (Prospero and Caliban: The Psychology of Colonization)*, Éditions du Seuil, 1950 [Fanon's note]. Dominique-Octave Mannoni (1899–1989), French psychoanalyst. Fanon's chapter 4, "The So-Called

Dependency Complex of the Colonized," is not included here.

7. The islands in the Caribbean (including Martinique) that are overseas departments of France.

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19 Running the risk of angering my black brothers, I shall say that a Black is not a man.

20 There is a zone of nonbeing, an extraordinarily sterile and arid region, an incline stripped bare of every essential from which a genuine new departure can emerge. In most cases, the black man cannot take advantage of this descent into a veritable hell.

21 Man is not only the potential for self-consciousness or negation.² If it be true that consciousness is transcendental, we must also realize that this transcendence is obsessed with the issue of love and understanding. Man is a "yes" resonating from cosmic harmonies. Uprooted, dispersed, dazed, and doomed to watch as the truths he has elaborated vanish one by one, he must stop projecting his antinomy into the world.

22 Blacks are men who are black; in other words, owing to a series of affective disorders they have settled into a universe from which we have to extricate them.

The issue is paramount. We are aiming at nothing less than to liberate the black man from himself.³ We shall tread very carefully, for there are two camps: white and black.

We shall inquire persistently into both metaphysics and we shall see that they are often highly destructive.

We shall show no pity for the former colonial governors or missionaries. In our view, an individual who loves Blacks is as "sick" as someone who abhors them.

Conversely, the black man who strives to whiten his race is as wretched as the one who preaches hatred of the white man.

23 The black man is no more inherently amiable than the Czech; the truth is that we must unleash the man.

24 This book should have been written three years ago. But at the time the truths made our blood boil. Today the fever has dropped and truths can be said without having them hurled into people's faces. They are not intended to endorse zealousness. We are wary of being zealous.

25 Every time we have seen it hatched somewhere it has been an omen of fire, famine, and poverty, as well as contempt for man.

Zealousness is the arm par excellence of the powerless. Those who heat the iron to hammer it immediately into a tool. We would like to heat the carcass of man and leave. Perhaps this would result in Man's keeping the fire burning by self-combustion.

26 Man freed from the springboard embodying the resistance of others and digging into his flesh in order to find self-meaning.

27 Only some of you will guess how difficult it was to write this book.

28 In an age of skepticism when, according to a group of *salauds*,⁴ sense can no longer be distinguished from nonsense, it becomes arduous to

2. Fanon is using the language of SARTRE'S account of human reality in *Being and Nothingness* (1943; see above).

3. That is, from a demeaning interpretation of himself imposed by whites.

4. "Salaud" is what Sartre abusively calls someone

who refuses to take responsibility for his acts and demonstrates his bad faith, a form of self-deception, a denial of human freedom, and an abdication of responsibility toward oneself and others [translator's note]. The term *salaud* is best translated as something like "bastard" (as a derogative).

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vidual question. Alongside phylogeny and ontogeny, there is also sociogeny.¹ In a way, in answer to the wishes of Leconte and Damey,² let us say that here it is a question of sociodiagnostics.

What is the prognosis? Society, unlike biochemical processes, does not escape human influence. Man is what brings society into being. The prognosis is in the hands of those who are prepared to shake the worm-eaten foundations of the edifice.

The black man must wage the struggle on two levels: whereas historically these levels are mutually dependent, any unilateral liberation is flawed, and the worst mistake would be to believe their mutual dependence automatic. Moreover, such a systematic trend goes against the facts. We will demonstrate this.

For once, reality requires total comprehension. An answer must be found on the objective as well as the subjective level.

And there's no point sidling up crabwise with a *mea culpa* look, insisting it's a matter of salvation of the soul.

Genuine disalienation will have been achieved only when things, in the most materialist sense, have resumed their rightful place.

It is considered appropriate to preface a work on psychology with a methodology. We shall break with tradition. We leave methods to the botanists and mathematicians. There is a point where methods are resorbed.³

That is where we would like to position ourselves. We shall attempt to discover the various mental attitudes the black man adopts in the face of white civilization.

The "savage" will not be included here. Certain elements have not yet had enough impact on him.

We believe the juxtaposition of the black and white races has resulted in a massive psycho-existential complex. By analyzing it we aim to destroy it.⁴

Many Blacks will not recognize themselves in the following pages.

Likewise many Whites.

But the fact that I feel alien to the world of the schizophrenic or of the sexually impotent in no way diminishes their reality.

The attitudes I propose describing are true. I have found them any number of times.

I identified the same aggressiveness and passivity in students, workers, and the pimps of Pigalle or Marseille.⁵

This book is a clinical study. Those who recognize themselves in it will, I believe, have made a step in the right direction. My true wish is to get my brother, black or white, to shake off the dust from that lamentable livery built up over centuries of incomprehension.

The structure of the present work is grounded in temporality. Every human problem cries out to be considered on the basis of time, the ideal being that the present always serves to build the future.

1. The origin and development of society.

2. M. Leconte and A. Damey, "Essai critique des nosographies psychiatriques actuelles" [Fanon's note], *Critical Essay on Current Practices of Naming Psychiatric Phenomena* (1949), by Maurice Leconte and Alfred Damey.

3. That is, dissolved and assimilated (biology).

4. This paragraph expresses both Fanon's conception of the nature of the problem and his practical and intellectual project.

5. Port city in southern France. Pigalle: a neighborhood in Paris.

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