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Introductions by
Homi Bhabha and Ziauddin Sardar

GET  POLITICAL

Black Skin, White Masks

black skin white masks

FRANTZ FANON

Translated by Charles Lam Markmann

Forewords by
Ziauddin Sardar and Homi K. Bhabha

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 2008

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 2849 2 Hardback

ISBN 978 0 7453 2848 5 Paperback

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. The paper may contain up to 70% post consumer waste.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Designed and produced for Pluto Press by

Chase Publishing Services Ltd, Sidmouth, EX10 9QG, England

Typeset by Stanford DTP Services, Northampton

Printed and bound in the European Union by

CPI Antony Rowe, Chippenham and Eastbourne

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FOREWORD TO THE 1986 EDITION

Homi K. Bhabha

Remembering Fanon: Self, Psyche and the Colonial Condition

O my body, make of me always a man who questions!
Black Skin, White Masks

In the popular memory of English socialism the mention of Frantz Fanon stirs a dim, deceiving echo. *Black Skin, White Masks*, *The Wretched of the Earth*, *Toward the African Revolution*—these memorable titles reverberate in the self-righteous rhetoric of “resistance” whenever the English left gathers, in its narrow church or its Trotskyist camps, to deplore the immiseration of the colonized world. Repeatedly used as the idioms of simple moral outrage, Fanon’s titles emptily echo a political spirit that is far from his own; they sound the troubled conscience of a socialist vision that extends, in the main, from an ethnocentric little Englandism to a large trade union internationalism. When that laborist line of vision is challenged by the “autonomous” struggles of the politics of race and gender, or threatened by problems of human psychology or cultural representation, it can only make an empty gesture of solidarity. Whenever questions of race and sexuality make their own organizational and theoretical demands on the primacy of “class,” “state” and “party” the language of traditional socialism is quick to describe those urgent, “other” questions as symptoms of petty-bourgeois deviation, signs of the bad faith of socialist intellectuals. The ritual respect accorded to the name of Fanon, the currency of his titles in the common language of liberation, are part of the ceremony of a polite, English refusal.

There has been no substantial work on Fanon in the history of the *New Left Review*; one piece in the *New Statesman*; one essay in *Marxism Today*; one article in *Socialist Register*; one short book by an English author. Of late, the memory of Fanon has been kept alive in the activist traditions of *Race and Class*, by A. Sivanandan's stirring indictments of state racism. Edward Said, himself a scholar engage, has richly recalled the work of Fanon in his important T.S. Eliot memorial lectures, *Culture and Imperialism*. And finally, Stephan Feuchtwang's fine, far-reaching essay, "Fanon's Politics of Culture" (*Economy and Society*) examines Fanon's concept of culture with its innovatory insights for a non-deterministic political organization of the psyche. Apart from these exceptions, in Britain today Fanon's ideas are effectively "out of print."

Memories of Fanon tend to the mythical. He is either revered as the prophetic spirit of Third World Liberation or reviled as an exterminating angel, the inspiration to violence in the Black Power movement. Despite his historic participation in the Algerian revolution and the influence of his ideas on the race politics of the 1960s and 1970s, Fanon's work will not be possessed by one political moment or movement, nor can it be easily placed in a seamless narrative of liberationist history. Fanon refuses to be so completely claimed by events or eventualities. It is the sustaining irony of his work that his severe commitment to the political task in hand, never restricted the restless, inquiring movement of his thought.

It is not for the finitude of philosophical thinking nor for the finality of a political direction that we turn to Fanon. Heir to the ingenuity and artistry of Toussaint and Senghor, as well as the iconoclasm of Nietzsche, Freud and Sartre, Fanon is the purveyor of the transgressive and transitional truth. He may yearn for the total transformation of Man and Society, but he speaks most effectively from the uncertain interstices of historical change: from the area of ambivalence between race and sexuality; out of an unresolved contradiction between culture and class; from deep within the struggle of psychic representation and social reality.

To read Fanon is to experience the sense of division that prefigures—and fissures—the emergence of a truly radical thought

that never dawns without casting an uncertain dark. His voice is most clearly heard in the subversive turn of a familiar term, in the silence of a sudden rupture: "*The Negro is not. Any more than the white man.*" The awkward division that breaks his line of thought keeps alive the dramatic and enigmatic sense of the process of change. That familiar alignment of colonial subjects—Black/White, Self/Other—is disturbed with one brief pause and the traditional grounds of racial identity are dispersed, whenever they are found to rest in the narcissistic myths of Negritude or White cultural supremacy. It is this palpable pressure of division and displacement that pushes Fanon's writing to the edge of things; the cutting edge that reveals no ultimate radiance but, in his words, "exposes an utterly naked declivity where an authentic upheaval can be born."

The psychiatric hospital at Blida-Joinville is one such place where, in the divided world of French Algeria, Fanon discovered the impossibility of his mission as a colonial psychiatrist:

If psychiatry is the medical technique that aims to enable man no longer to be a stranger to his environment, I owe it to myself to affirm that the Arab, permanently an alien in his own country, lives in a state of absolute depersonalization ... The social structure existing in Algeria was hostile to any attempt to put the individual back where he belonged.

The extremity of this colonial alienation of the person—this end of the "idea" of the individual—produces a restless urgency in Fanon's search for a conceptual form appropriate to the social antagonism of the colonial relation. The body of his work splits between a Hegelian–Marxist dialectic, a phenomenological affirmation of Self and Other and the psychoanalytic ambivalence of the Unconscious, its turning from love to hate, mastery to servitude. In his desperate, doomed search for a dialectic of deliverance Fanon explores the edge of these modes for thought: his Hegelianism restores hope to history; his existentialist evocation of the "I" restores the presence of the marginalized; and his psychoanalytic framework illuminates the "madness" of racism, the pleasure of pain, the agonistic fantasy of political power.

As Fanon attempts such audacious, often impossible, transformations of truth and value, the jagged testimony of colonial dislocation, its displacement of time and person, its defilement of culture and territory, refuses the ambition of any “total” theory of colonial oppression. The Antillean *evolué* cut to the quick by the glancing look of a frightened, confused, White child; the stereotype of the native fixed at the shifting boundaries between barbarism and civility; the insatiable fear and desire for the Negro: “Our women are at the mercy of Negroes ... God knows how they make love”; the deep cultural fear of the Black figured in the psychic trembling of Western sexuality—it is these signs and symptoms of the colonial condition that drive Fanon from one conceptual scheme to another, while the colonial relation takes shape in the gaps between them, articulated in the intrepid engagements of his style. As Fanon’s text unfolds, the “scientific” fact comes to be aggressed by the experience of the street; sociological observations are intercut with literary artefacts, and the poetry of liberation is brought up short against the leaden, deadening prose of the colonized world ...

What is this distinctive *force* of Fanon’s vision that has been forming even as I write about the division, the displacement, the cutting edge of his thought? It comes, I believe, from the tradition of the oppressed, as Walter Benjamin suggests; it is the language of a revolutionary awareness that “the state of emergency in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a concept of history that is in keeping with this insight.” And the state of emergency is also always a state of *emergence*. The struggle against colonial oppression changes not only the direction of Western history, but challenges its historicist “idea” of time as a progressive, ordered whole. The analysis of colonial de-personalization alienates not only the Enlightenment idea of “Man,” but challenges the transparency of social reality, as a pre-given image of human knowledge. If the order of Western historicism is disturbed in the colonial state of emergency, even more deeply disturbed is the social and psychic representation of the human subject. For the very nature of humanity becomes estranged in the colonial condition and from that “naked declivity”

it emerges, not as an assertion of will nor as an evocation of freedom, but as an enigmatic questioning. With a question that echoes Freud's *what does woman want?*, Fanon turns to confront the colonized world. "What does a man want?" he asks, in the introduction to *Black Skin, White Masks*, "What does the black man want?"

To this loaded question where cultural alienation bears down on the ambivalence of psychic identification, Fanon responds with an agonizing performance of self-images:

I had to meet the white man's eyes. An unfamiliar weight burdened me. In the white world the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema ... I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects ... I took myself far off from my own presence ... What else could it be for me but an amputation, an excision, a haemorrhage that splattered my whole body with black blood?

From within the metaphor of vision complicit with a Western metaphysic of Man emerges the displacement of the colonial relation. The Black presence ruins the representative narrative of Western personhood: its past tethered to treacherous stereotypes of primitivism and degeneracy will not produce a history of civil progress, a space for the *Socius*; its present, dismembered and dislocated, will not contain the image of identity that is questioned in the dialectic of mind/body and resolved in the epistemology of "appearance and reality." The White man's eyes break up the Black man's body and in that act of epistemic violence its own frame of reference is transgressed, its field of vision disturbed.

"What does the black man *want?*" Fanon insists and in privileging the psychic dimension he changes not only what we understand by a *political* demand but transforms the very means by which we recognize and identify its *human agency*. Fanon is not principally posing the question of political oppression as the violation of a human essence, although he lapses into such a lament in his more existential moment. He is not raising the question of colonial man in the universalist terms of the liberal-humanist ("How does colonialism deny the Rights of Man?");

nor is he posing an ontological question about Man's being ("Who is the alienated colonial man?"). Fanon's question is not addressed to such a unified notion of history nor such a unitary concept of Man. It is one of the original and disturbing qualities of *Black Skin, White Masks* that it rarely historicizes the colonial experience. There is no master narrative or realist perspective that provide a background of social and historical facts against which emerge the problems of the individual or collective psyche. Such a traditional sociological alignment of Self and Society or History and Psyche is rendered questionable in Fanon's identification of the colonial subject who is historicized as it comes to be heterogeneously inscribed in the texts of history, literature, science, myth. The colonial subject is always "overdetermined from without," Fanon writes. It is through image and fantasy—those orders that figure transgressively on the borders of history and the unconscious—that Fanon most profoundly evokes the colonial condition.

In articulating the problem of colonial cultural alienation in the psychoanalytic language of demand and desire, Fanon radically questions the formation of both individual and social authority as they come to be developed in the discourse of Social Sovereignty. The social virtues of historical rationality, cultural cohesion, the autonomy of individual consciousness assume an immediate, Utopian identity with the subjects upon whom they confer a civil status. The civil state is the ultimate expression of the innate ethical and rational bent of the human mind; the social instinct is the progressive destiny of human nature, the necessary transition from Nature to Culture. The direct access from individual interests to social authority is objectified in the representative structure of a General Will—Law or Culture—where Psyche and Society mirror each other, transparently translating their difference, without loss, into a historical totality. Forms of social and psychic alienation and aggression—madness, self-hate, treason, violence—can never be acknowledged as determinate and constitutive conditions of civil authority, or as the ambivalent effects of the social instinct itself. They are always explained away as alien presences, occlusions of historical progress, the ultimate misrecognition of Man.

For Fanon such a myth of Man and Society is fundamentally undermined in the colonial situation where everyday life exhibits a “constellation of delirium” that mediates the normal social relations of its subjects: “The Negro enslaved by his inferiority, the white man enslaved by his superiority alike behave in accordance with a neurotic orientation.” Fanon’s demand for a psychoanalytic explanation emerges from the perverse reflections of “civil virtue” in the alienating acts of colonial governance: the visibility of cultural “mummification” in the colonizer’s avowed ambition to civilize or modernize the native which results in “archaic inert institutions [that function] under the oppressor’s supervision like a caricature of formerly fertile institutions”; or the validity of violence in the very definition of the colonial social space; or the viability of the febrile, fantasmatic images of racial hatred that come to be absorbed and acted out in the wisdom of the West. These interpositions, indeed collaborations of political and psychic violence *within* civic virtue, alienation within identity, drive Fanon to describe the splitting of the colonial space of consciousness and society as marked by a “Manichean delirium.”

The representative figure of such a perversion, I want to suggest, is the image of post-Enlightenment man tethered to, *not* confronted by, his dark reflection, the shadow of colonized man, that splits his presence, distorts his outline, breaches his boundaries, repeats his action at a distance, disturbs and divides the very time of his being. This ambivalent identification of the racist world—moving on two planes without being in the least embarrassed by it, as Sartre says of the anti-Semitic consciousness—turns on the idea of Man *as* his alienated image, not Self and Other but the “Other-ness” of the Self inscribed in the perverse palimpsest of colonial identity. And it is that bizarre figure of desire, which splits along the axis on which it turns, that compels Fanon to put the psychoanalytic question of the desire of the subject to the historic condition of colonial man.

“What is often called the black soul is a white man’s artefact,” Fanon writes. This transference, I’ve argued, speaks otherwise. It reveals the deep psychic uncertainty of the colonial relation itself; its split representations stage that division of “body” and

“soul” which enacts the artifice of “identity”; a division which cuts across the fragile skin – black and white—of individual and social authority. What emerges from the figurative language I have used to make such an argument are three conditions that underlie an understanding of the *process of identification* in the analytic of desire.

First: to exist is to be called into being in relation to an Otherness, its look or locus. It is a demand that reaches outward to an external object and as J. Rose writes, “it is the relation of this demand to the place of the object it claims that becomes the basis for identification.” This process is visible in that exchange of looks between native and settler that structures their psychic relation in the paranoid fantasy of boundless possession and its familiar language of reversal: “when their glances meet he [the settler] ascertains bitterly, always on the defensive, “They want to take our place.” It is true for there is no native who does not dream at least once a day of setting himself up in the settler’s place.” It is always in relation to the place of the Other that colonial desire is articulated: that is, in part, the fantasmatic space of possession” that no one subject can singly occupy which permits the dream of the inversion of roles.

Second: the very place of identification, caught in the tension of demand and desire, is a space of splitting. The fantasy of the native is precisely to occupy the master’s place while keeping his place in the slave’s *avenging* anger. “Black skins, white masks” is not, for example, a neat division; it is a doubling, dissembling image of being in at least two places at once which makes it impossible for the devalued, insatiable *evolué* (an abandonment neurotic, Fanon claims) to accept the colonizer’s invitation to identity: “You’re a doctor, a writer, a student, you’re *different* you’re one of *us*.” It is precisely in that ambivalent use of “different”—to be different from those that are different makes you the same—that the Unconscious speaks of the form of Otherness, the tethered shadow of deferral and displacement. It is not the Colonialist Self or the Colonized Other, but the disturbing distance in-between that constitutes the figure of colonial otherness—the White man’s artifice inscribed on the black man’s body. It is in relation to this

impossible object that emerges the liminal problem of colonial identity and its vicissitudes.

Finally, as has already been disclosed by the rhetorical figures of my account of desire and Otherness, the question of identification is never the affirmation of a pre-given identity, never a self-fulfilling prophecy—it is always the production of an “image” of identity and the transformation of the subject in assuming that image. The demand of identification—that is, to be *for* an Other—entails the representation of the subject in the differentiating order of Otherness. Identification, as we inferred from the illustrations above, is always the return of an image of identity which bears the mark of splitting in that “Other” place from which it comes. For Fanon, like Lacan, the primary moments of such a repetition of the self lie in the desire of the look and the limits of language. The “atmosphere of certain uncertainty” that surrounds the body certifies its existence and threatens its dismemberment.

Look a Negro ... Mama, see the Negro! I'm frightened ... I could no longer laugh, because I already know there were legends, stories, history and above all *historicity* ... Then assailed at various points, the corporal schema crumbled its place taken by a racial epidermal schema ... It was no longer a question of being aware of my body in the third person but in a triple person ... I was responsible for my body, for my race, for my ancestors.

In reading *Black Skin, White Masks* it is crucial to respect the difference between “personal identity” as an intimation of reality, or an intuition of being, and the psychoanalytic problem of identification that, in a sense, always begs the question of the subject—“What does a man want?” The emergence of the human subject as socially and psychically authenticated depends upon the *negation* of an originary narrative of fulfilment or an imaginary coincidence between individual interest or instinct and the General Will. Such binary, two-part, identities function in a kind of narcissistic reflection of the One in the Other which is confronted in the language of desire by the psychoanalytic process of identification. For identification, identity is never an *a priori*, nor a finished product; it is only ever the problematic process of access

to an “image” of totality. The discursive conditions of this psychic image of identification will be clarified if we think of the perilous perspective of the concept of the image itself. For the image—as point of identification—marks the site of an ambivalence. Its representation is always spatially split—it makes *present* something that is *absent*—and temporally deferred—it is the representation of a time that is always elsewhere, a repetition. The image is only ever an *appurtenance* to authority and identity; it must never be read mimetically as the “appearance” of a “reality.” The access to the image of identity is only ever possible in the *negation* of any sense of originality or plenitude, through the principle of displacement and differentiation (absence/presence; representation/repetition) that always renders it a liminal reality. The image is at once a metaphoric substitution, an illusion of presence and by that same token a metonym, a sign of its absence and loss. It is precisely from this edge of meaning and being, from this shifting boundary of otherness within identity, that Fanon asks: “What does a *black* man want?”

When it encounters resistance from the other, self-consciousness undergoes the experience of desire ... As soon as I desire I ask to be considered. I am not merely here and now, sealed into thingness. I am for somewhere else and for something else. I demand that notice be taken of my negating activity—in so far as I pursue something other than life ...

I occupied space. I moved towards the other ... and the evanescent other, hostile but not opaque, transparent, not there, disappeared. Nausea.

From that overwhelming emptiness of nausea Fanon makes his answer: the black man wants the objectifying confrontation with otherness; in the colonial psyche there is an unconscious disavowal of the negating, splitting moment of desire. The place of the Other must not be imaged as Fanon sometimes suggests as a fixed phenomenological point, opposed to the self, that represents a culturally alien consciousness. The Other must be seen as the necessary negation of a primordial identity—cultural or psychic—that introduces the system of differentiation which enables the “cultural” to be signified as a linguistic, symbolic, historic reality. If, as I have suggested, the subject of desire is

never simply a *Myself*, then the Other is never simply an *It-self*, a font of identity, truth, or misrecognition.

As a principle of identification, the Other bestows a degree of objectivity but its representation—be it the social process of the Law or the psychic process of the Oedipus—is always ambivalent, disclosing a lack. For instance, the common, conversational distinction between “the letter and spirit” of the Law displays the otherness of Law itself; the ambiguous gray area between “Justice” and judicial procedure is, quite literally, a conflict of judgment. In the language of psychoanalysis, the Law of the Father or the paternal metaphor, again, cannot be taken at its word. It is a process of substitution and exchange that inscribes a normative, normalizing place for the subject; but that metaphoric access to identity is exactly the place of prohibition and repression, precisely a conflict of authority. Identification, as it is spoken in the *desire of the Other*, is always a question of interpretation for it is the elusive assignation of myself with a one-self, the elision of person and place.

If the differentiating force of the Other is the process of the subject’s signification in language and society’s objectification in Law, then how can the Other disappear? Can desire, the moving spirit of the subject, ever evanesce?

In his more analytic mode Fanon can impede the exploration of these ambivalent, uncertain questions of colonial desire. The state of emergency from which he writes demands more insurgent answers, more immediate identifications. At times Fanon attempts too close a correspondence between the *mise-en-scène* of unconscious fantasy and the phantoms of racist fear and hate that stalk the colonial scene, he turns too hastily from the ambivalences of identification to the antagonistic identities of political alienation and cultural discrimination; he is too quick to name the Other, to personalize its presence in the language of colonial racism—“the real Other for the white man is and will continue to be the black man. And conversely.” These attempts, in Fanon’s words, to restore the dream to its proper political time and cultural space, can, at times, blunt the edge of Fanon’s brilliant illustrations of the complexity of psychic projections in

the pathological colonial relation. Jean Veneuse, the Antillean évolué, desires not merely to be in the place of the White man but compulsively seeks to look back and down on himself from that position. The White man does not merely deny what he fears and desires by projecting it on “them”; Fanon sometimes forgets that paranoia never preserves its position of power for the compulsive identification with a persecutory “They” is always an evacuation and emptying of the “I”.

Fanon’s sociodiagnostic psychiatry tends to explain away the ambivalent turns and returns of the subject of colonial desire, its masquerade of Western Man and the “long” historical perspective. It is as if Fanon is fearful of his most radical insights: that the space of the body and its identification is a representational reality; that the politics of race will not be entirely contained within the humanist myth of man or economic necessity or historical progress, for its psychic affects questions such forms of determinism; that social sovereignty and human subjectivity are only realizable in the order of Otherness. It is as if the question of desire that emerged from the traumatic tradition of the oppressed has to be denied, at the end of *Black Skin, White Masks*, to make way for an existentialist humanism that is as banal as it is beatific:

Why not the quite simple attempt to touch the other to feel the other, to explain the other to myself? ... At the conclusion of this study, I want the world to recognize, with me, the open door of every consciousness.

Such a deep hunger for humanism, despite Fanon’s insight into the dark side of Man, must be an overcompensation for the closed consciousness or “dual narcissism” to which he attributes the depersonalization of colonial man: “There one lies body to body, with one’s blackness or one’s whiteness in full narcissistic cry, each sealed into his own particularity—with, it is true, now and then a flash or so.” It is this flash of “recognition”—in its Hegelian sense with its transcendental, sublimative spirit—that fails to ignite in the colonial relation where there is only narcissistic indifference: “And yet the Negro knows there is a difference. He wants it ... The former slave needs a challenge to his humanity.” In the absence of such a challenge, Fanon argues, the colonized can only imitate,

never identify, a distinction nicely made by the psychoanalyst Annie Reich: "It is imitation ... when the child holds the newspaper *like* his father. It is identification when the child learns to read." In disavowing the culturally differentiated condition of the colonial world—in demanding *Turn White or disappear*—the colonizer is himself caught in the ambivalence of paranoid identification, alternating between fantasies of megalomania and persecution.

However Fanon's Hegelian dream for a human reality *in-itself-for itself* is ironized, even mocked, by his view of the Manichean structure of colonial consciousness and its non-dialectical division. What he says in *The Wretched of the Earth* of the demography of the colonial city reflects his view of the psychic structure of the colonial relation. The native and settler zones, like the juxtaposition of black and white bodies, are opposed, but not in the service of "a higher unity." No conciliation is possible, he concludes, for of the two terms one is superfluous.

No, there can be no reconciliation, no Hegelian "recognition," no simple, sentimental promise of a humanistic "world of the You." Can there be life without transcendence? Politics without the dream of perfectibility? Unlike Fanon, I think the *non-dialectical* moment of Manicheanism suggests an answer. By following the trajectory of colonial desire—in the company of that bizarre colonial figure, the tethered shadow—it becomes possible to cross, even to shift the Manichean boundaries. Where there is no human *nature* hope can hardly spring eternal; but it emerges surely and surreptitiously in the strategic return of that difference that informs and deforms the image of identity, in the margin of Otherness that displays identification. There may be no Hegelian negation but Fanon must sometimes be reminded that the disavowal of the Other always exacerbates the "edge" of identification, reveals that dangerous place where identity and aggressivity are twinned. For denial is always a retroactive process; a *half* acknowledgment of that Otherness which has left its traumatic mark. In that uncertainty lurks the white masked black man; and from such ambivalent identification—black skin, white masks—it is possible, I believe, to redeem the pathos of cultural confusion into a strategy of political subversion. We cannot agree

with Fanon that “since the racial drama is played out in the open the black man has no time to make it unconscious,” but that is a provocative thought. In occupying two places at once—or three in Fanon’s case—the depersonalized, dislocated colonial subject can become an incalculable object, quite literally, difficult to place. The demand of authority cannot unify its message nor simply identify its subjects. For the strategy of colonial desire is to stage the drama of identity at the point at which the black mask *slips* to reveal the white skin. At that edge, in between the black body and the white body, there is a tension of meaning and being, or some would say demand and desire, which is the psychic counterpart to that “muscular tension” that inhabits the native body:

The symbols of social order—the police, the bugle calls in the barracks, military parades and the waving flags—are at one and the same time inhibitory and stimulating: for they do not convey the message “Don’t dare to budge”; rather, they cry out “Get ready to attack”.

It is from that tension—both psychic and political—that a strategy of subversion emerges. It is a mode of negation that seeks not to unveil the fullness of Man but to manipulate his representation. It is a form of power that is exercised at the very limits of identity and authority, in the mocking spirit of mask and image; it is the lesson taught by the veiled Algerian woman in the course of the Revolution as she crossed the Manichean lines to claim her liberty. In Fanon’s essay *Algeria Unveiled* the colonizer’s attempt to unveil the Algerian woman does not simply turn the veil into a symbol of resistance; it becomes a technique of camouflage, a means of struggle—the veil conceals bombs. The veil that once secured the boundary of the home—the limits of woman—now masks the woman in her revolutionary activity, linking the Arab city and the French quarter, transgressing the familial and colonial boundary. As the “veil” is liberated in the public sphere, circulating between and beyond cultural and social norms and spaces, it becomes the object of paranoid surveillance and interrogation. Every veiled woman, writes Fanon, became suspect. And when the veil is shed in order to penetrate deeper into the European quarter, the colonial police see everything and

nothing. An Algerian woman is only, after all, a woman. But the Algerian *fidai* is an arsenal and in her handbag she carries her hand-grenades.

Remembering Fanon is a process of intense discovery and disorientation. Remembering is never a quiet act of introspection or retrospection. It is a painful re-membering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present. It is such a memory of the history of race and racism, colonialism and the question of cultural identity, that Fanon reveals with greater profundity and poetry than any other writer. What he achieves, I believe, is something far greater: for in seeing the phobic image of the Negro, the native, the colonized, deeply woven into the psychic pattern of the West, he offers the master and slave a deeper reflection of their interpositions, as well as the hope of a difficult, even dangerous, freedom: "It is through the effort to recapture the self and to scrutinize the self, it is through the lasting tension of their freedom that men will be able to create the ideal conditions of existence for a human world." Nobody writes with more honesty and insight of this lasting tension of freedom in which the self—the peremptory self of the present—disavows an image of itself as an ordinary past or an ideal future and confronts the paradox of its own making.

For Fanon, in *Black Skin, White Masks*, there is the intricate irony of turning the European existentialist and psychoanalytic traditions to face the history of the Negro which they had never contemplated, to face the reality of Fanon himself. This leads to a meditation on the experience of dispossession and dislocation—psychic and social—which speaks to the condition of the marginalized, the alienated, those who have to live under the surveillance of a sign of identity and fantasy that denies their difference. In shifting the focus of cultural racism from the politics of nationalism to the politics of narcissism, Fanon opens up a margin of interrogation that causes a subversive slippage of identity and authority. Nowhere is this slippage more visible than in his work itself where a range of texts and traditions—from the classical repertoire to the quotidien, conversational culture of racism—vie to utter that last word which remains unspoken.

Nowhere is this slippage more significantly experienced than in the impossibility of inferring from the texts of Fanon a pacific image of “society” or the “state” as a homogeneous philosophical or representational unity. The “social” is always an unresolved ensemble of antagonistic interlocutions between positions of power and poverty, knowledge and oppression, history and fantasy, surveillance and subversion. It is for this reason—above all else—in the twenty-fifth anniversary of his death, that we should turn to Fanon.

In Britain, today, as a range of culturally and racially marginalized groups readily assume the mask of the Black not to deny their diversity but to audaciously announce the important artifice of cultural identity and its difference, the need for Fanon becomes urgent. As political groups from different directions gather under the banner of the Black, not to homogenize their oppression but to make of it a common cause, a public image of the identity of otherness, the need for Fanon becomes urgent. Urgent, in order to remind us of that crucial engagement between mask and identity, image and identification, from which comes the lasting tension of our freedom and the lasting impression of ourselves as others.

In the case of display ... the play of combat in the form of intimidation, the being gives of himself, or receives from the other, something that is like a mask, a double, an envelope, a thrown-off skin, thrown off in order to cover the frame of a shield. It is through this separated form of himself that the being comes into play in his effects of life and death. [Jacques Lacan]

The time has come to return to Fanon; as always, I believe, with a question: How can the human world live its difference? how can a human being live Other-wise?

London 1986

Note

Fanon’s use of the word “man” usually connotes a phenomenological quality of humanness, inclusive of man and woman and, for that very reason, ignores the question of gender difference. The problem stems from Fanon’s desire to site the question of

sexual difference within the problematic of cultural difference—to give them a shared origin—which is suggestive, but often simplifies the question of sexuality. His portrayals of white women often collude with their cultural stereotypes and reduce the “desire” of sexuality to the desire for sex, leaving unexplored the elusive function of the “object” of desire. In chapter 6 he attempts a somewhat more complex reading of masochism but in making the Negro the “*predestined* depository of this aggression” [my emphasis] he again pre-empts a fuller psychoanalytic discussion of the production of psychic aggressivity in identification and its relation to cultural difference, by citing the cultural stereotype as the predestined aim of the sexual drive. Of the woman of color he has very little to say. “I know nothing about her,” he writes in *Black Skin, White Masks*. This crucial issue requires an order of psychoanalytic argument that goes well beyond the scope of my foreword. I have therefore chosen to note the importance of the problem rather than to elide it in a facile charge of “sexism.”

Acknowledgments

Thanks to Stephan Feuchtwang for shepherding these ideas; Stuart Hall for discussing them; A. Sivanandan and Hazel Walters for their archival assistance at the Institute of Race Relations; Pete Ayrton for his patience; and Jackie Bhabha for the engaged combat of comrades.