

**BLACK SKIN
WHITE MASKS
THE EXPERIENCES
OF A BLACK MAN
IN A WHITE WORLD
BY FRANTZ FANON**

AUTHOR OF THE WRETCHED OF THE EARTH



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Frantz Fanon

BLACK SKIN
WHITE MASKS

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ited. It is because the Negress feels inferior that she aspires to win admittance into the white world. In this endeavor she will seek the help of a phenomenon that we shall call *affective erethism*.

This work represents the sum of the experiences and observations of seven years; regardless of the area I have studied, one thing has struck me: The Negro enslaved by his inferiority, the white man enslaved by his superiority alike behave in accordance with a neurotic orientation. Therefore I have been led to consider their alienation in terms of psychoanalytical classifications. The Negro's behavior makes him akin to an obsessive neurotic type, or, if one prefers, he puts himself into a complete situational neurosis. In the man of color there is a constant effort to run away from his own individuality, to annihilate his own presence. Whenever a man of color protests, there is alienation. Whenever a man of color rebukes, there is alienation. We shall see later, in Chapter Six, that the Negro, having been made inferior, proceeds from humiliating insecurity through strongly voiced self-accusation to despair. The attitude of the black man toward the white, or toward his own race, often duplicates almost completely a constellation of delirium, frequently bordering on the region of the pathological.

It will be objected that there is nothing psychotic in the Negroes who are discussed here. Nevertheless I should like to cite two highly significant instances. A few years ago I knew a Negro medical student. He had an *agonizing* conviction that he was not taken at his true worth—not on the university level, he explained, but as a human being. He had an *agonizing* conviction that he would never succeed in gaining recognition as a colleague from the whites in his profession and as a physician from his

European patients. In such moments of fantasy intuition,²⁵ the times most favorable²⁶ to psychosis, he would get drunk. Finally, he enlisted one day in the army as a medical officer; and, he added, not for anything in the world would he agree to go to the colonies or to serve in a colonial unit. He wanted to have white men under his command. He was a boss; as such he was to be feared or respected. That was just what he wanted, what he strove for: to make white men adopt a Negro attitude toward him. In this way he was obtaining revenge for the *imago* that had always obsessed him: the frightened, trembling Negro, abased before the white overlord.

I had another acquaintance, a customs inspector in a port on the French mainland, who was extremely severe with tourists or travelers in transit. "Because," he explained to me, "if you aren't a bastard they take you for a poor shit. Since I'm a Negro, you can imagine how I'm going to get it either way. . . ."

In *Understanding Human Nature*, Adler says:

When we demonstrate cases . . . it is frequently convenient to show relationships between the childhood impressions and the actual complaint . . . this is best done by a graph. . . . We will succeed in many cases in being able to plot this graph of life, the spiritual curve along which the entire movement of an individual has taken place. The equation of the curve is the behavior pattern which this individual has followed since earliest childhood. . . . Actually we see this behavior pattern, whose final configuration is subject to some few changes, but whose essential content, whose energy and meaning remain unchanged from earliest childhood, is the determining factor, even though the relations

25. Dublineau, *L'intuition délirante*.

26. Jacques Lacan.

ness of self. In opposition to rationalism, he summoned up the negative side, but he forgot that this negativity draws its worth from an almost substantive absoluteness. A consciousness committed to experience is ignorant, has to be ignorant, of the essences and the determinations of its being.

Orphée Noir is a date in the intellectualization of the experience of being black. And Sartre's mistake was not only to seek the source of the source but in a certain sense to block that source:

Will the source of Poetry be dried up? Or will the great black flood, in spite of everything, color the sea into which it pours itself? It does not matter: Every age has its own poetry; in every age the circumstances of history choose a nation, a race, a class to take up the torch by creating situations that can be expressed or transcended only through Poetry; sometimes the poetic impulse coincides with the revolutionary impulse, and sometimes they take different courses. Today let us hail the turn of history that will make it possible for the black men to utter "the great Negro cry with a force that will shake the pillars of the world" (Césaire).²⁰

And so it is not I who make a meaning for myself, but it is the meaning that was already there, pre-existing, waiting for me. It is not out of my bad nigger's misery, my bad nigger's teeth, my bad nigger's hunger that I will shape a torch with which to burn down the world, but it is the torch that was already there, waiting for that turn of history.

In terms of consciousness, the black consciousness is held out as an absolute density, as filled with itself, a stage preceding any invasion, any abolition of the ego by

20. *Ibid.*, p. xlv.

excellent
mentioning
of S's
flaws &
of his
inventions
Marxism

desire. Jean-Paul Sartre, in this work, has destroyed black zeal. In opposition to historical becoming, there had always been the unforeseeable. I needed to lose myself completely in negritude. One day, perhaps, in the depths of that unhappy romanticism. . . .

In any case I *needed* not to know. This struggle, this new decline had to take on an aspect of completeness. Nothing is more unwelcome than the commonplace: "You'll change, my boy; I was like that too when I was young . . . you'll see, it will all pass."

The dialectic that brings necessity into the foundation of my freedom drives me out of myself. It shatters my unreflected position. Still in terms of consciousness, black consciousness is immanent in its own eyes. I am not a potentiality of something, I am wholly what I am. I do not have to look for the universal. No probability has any place inside me. My Negro consciousness does not hold itself out as a lack. It is. It is its own follower.

But, I will be told, your statements show a misreading of the processes of history. Listen then:

Africa I have kept your memory Africa
 you are inside me
 Like the splinter in the wound
 like a guardian fetish in the center of the village
 make me the stone in your sling
 make my mouth the lips of your wound
 make my knees the broken pillars of your abasement
 AND YET

I want to be of your race alone
 workers peasants of all lands . . .
 . . . white worker in Detroit black peon in Alabama
 uncountable nation in capitalist slavery
 destiny ranges us shoulder to shoulder
 repudiating the ancient maledictions of blood taboos

Chapter Seven

THE NEGRO AND RECOGNITION

A. *The Negro and Adler*

From whatever direction one approaches the analysis of abnormal psychogenic conditions, one very soon finds oneself in the presence of the following phenomenon: The whole picture of the neurosis, as well as all its symptoms, emerges as under the influence of some final goal, indeed as projections of this goal. Therefore one can ascribe the character of a formative cause to this final goal, the quality of a principle of orientation, of arrangement, of coordination. Try to understand the "meaning" and the direction of unhealthy manifestations, and you will immediately come face to face with a chaotic throng of tendencies, of impulses, of weaknesses and of anomalies, bound to discourage some and to arouse in others the rash resolve to penetrate the shadows at all costs, even at the risk of finding in the end that nothing has been gained, or that what has been gained is illusory. If, on the other hand, one accepts the hypothesis of a final goal or of a causal finality, one sees the shadows dissolve at once and we can read the soul of the patient like the pages of a book.¹

It is on the basis of similar theoretical positions that,

1. Alfred Adler, *Le tempérament nerveux*, p. 12. (Originally, "Der nervöse charakter," in *Festschrift William Stern*, Leipzig, Barth, 1931).

in general, the most stupendous frauds of our period are constructed. Let us apply Adler's individual psychology to the Antilleans.

The Negro is comparison. There is the first truth. He is comparison: that is, he is constantly preoccupied with self-evaluation and with the ego-ideal. Whenever he comes into contact with someone else, the question of value, of merit, arises. The Antilleans have no inherent values of their own, they are always contingent on the presence of The Other. The question is always whether he is less intelligent than I, blacker than I, less respectable than I. Every position of one's own, every effort at security, is based on relations of dependence, with the diminution of the other. It is the wreckage of what surrounds me that provides the foundation for my virility. !

I should like to suggest an experiment to any Martinican who reads this book: Find the most "comparative" street in Fort-de-France. Rue Schoelcher, rue Victor-Hugo—certainly not rue François-Arago. The Martinican who agrees to make this experiment will share my opinion precisely insofar as he can objectively endure seeing himself stripped naked. An Antillean who meets an acquaintance for the first time after five or six years' absence greets him with aggression. This is because in the past each had a fixed position. Now the inferior thinks that he has acquired worth . . . and the superior is determined to conserve the old hierarchy. "You haven't changed a bit . . . still as stupid as ever."

I have known some, physicians and dentists, who have gone on filling their heads with mistakes in judgment made fifteen years before. It is not so much conceptual errors as "Creolisms" with which the dangerous man is belabored. He was put in his place once and for all: nothing to be done about it. The Antillean is character-

"...should be read by every black man with a desire to understand himself and the forces which conspire against him."

—Floyd McKissick

Written out of Fanon's experience and observations as a Negro and a psychiatrist, *Black Skin, White Masks* is concerned with the warping of the Negro psyche by a "superior" white culture. Fanon begins his book with the fact of blackness, and deals with the black man's attitudes in the white world, clarifying and exposing the Negro to himself, and analyzing the work of others who have written of colonialism.

The core of the book — through an exploration of literature, dreams, case histories, interracial sexuality, and the inferiority complex that develops as the black man is overwhelmed by the desire to be white — is an explanation of the psychopathology and philosophy of the state of being black.

"One feels a brilliant, vivid and hurt mind walking the thin line that separates effective outrage from despair."

— Robert Coles, *The New York Times Book Review*

Frantz Fanon was born in Martinique in 1925, and studied medicine in France, specializing in psychiatry. He was sent to a hospital in Algeria, where his sympathies turned toward the rebels, whom he joined, becoming their most astute theorist. He is also the author of *The Wretched of the Earth* and *A Dying Colonialism*. This year Grove will publish his final work, *Toward the African Revolution*.

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