



What Color Was the Blood?

Frantz Fanon and Colonization from Within

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Abstract: I set about to write a paper about Fanon and the South Korean women and their struggle to change their appearance, but my concept of their experience was overdetermined and I knew it. Eventually, and luckily before the conference came, I realized that the paper I was going to write was about me, and not them. And that is exactly what the vicious circle Fanon writes about is made from. That is exactly what racism is...it is about self, and not other. It is always about self. Society is the sum total of individual psyches. Our social constructions are manifestations of basic human needs within us all. I wish I had more of a solution. The idealist sociology student in me wishes he had some solution to offer. The best I can propose is that each of us looks within ourselves to find what governs our desire, *whatever it is we want*, and fuels our hatred, *whoever it is we hate*, and keeps the vicious circle moving within us all.

*I do not trust fervor...fervor is the
weapon of choice for the impotent.*

—Fanon

Frantz Fanon won my respect and made clear his intentions with one line when he said “Concern with the elimination of a vicious circle has been the only guidelines of my efforts” ... and so it should be ours as well. It is only through deconstruction of our fervor, understanding our own intentions, as best as we can, that we can even hope to make our actions anything other than guided steps in a vicious circle.

Fanon ends his introduction to *Black Skin, White Masks* by speaking of a future book he might write concerning the Negro identity. He then adds of this unwritten book “Perhaps it will be no longer necessary—a fact for which we could only congratulate ourselves.” We are here today to celebrate, and proliferate his work. In light of these words, however, the fact that we are here, and *must* be here, discussing his work, is no cause for celebration. It is a reminder that we are still walking in a vicious circle.

I truly believe that “concern with the elimination of the vicious circle” exists

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within the heart and mind of everyone here today. When I first began to study sociology at this school some years ago, my rose-colored glasses led me to believe that increasing numbers of people worldwide wanted to end the vicious circle. I had, at first, altruistic hopes, then came the dangerous fervor Fanon speaks of, as I became angry and frustrated at the futility of my hopes. Then I became jaded, and began to hate, and feel that there was nothing I could do. Fervor was indeed the weapon of the impotent, and when it did me no good, all I had left was that impotence. Left to my own ill feelings I withdrew into myself, and it is there that I found new hope when a professor of mine helped me get out of an alcoholic and drug addicted spiral, and I began to study psychoanalysis alongside sociology.

I realized I had very little power over myself at all, but that in the end, my self may be the only thing I have any hope of changing at all. I refocused my efforts on dissecting my *hope, altruism, anger, frustration* and *hate*...and that is where I am now. I periodically, or perhaps daily, regress to each stage of the progression I just shared. It is always within my potential to be the bright-eyed idealist, the angry zealot, or the jaded misanthrope. But my hope is that I will always be able to return to the self-reflective calm that is the sum total of all three.

The jaded part of me wants to tell you that any and all things I do are circular steps in the vicious circle, and that none of us will ever dissect our unconscious minds sufficiently to understand how to escape the destructiveness of our own natures. The bright-eyed idealist wants to tell you "love will conquer all." In the end, I need all those parts of myself to tell you the only truth I can recognize so far...and that is: whether or not we can break the circle I will probably never know, but the fact that we are all here today attempting to locate ourselves and our social and personal structures within the construction of that circle

means that we can at least try...and for my money, that is cause enough to celebrate.

Having said that one should examine oneself...and that the only hope for breaking the vicious circle is to understand one's part in it, I shall have to admit to you that the original conception of this essay—the original paper I had planned to present—was written in fervor. When Fanon tells us fervor is dangerous I think I understand why, because my own fervor was as angry and hateful as that which it was directed against. I have retained the original title of the paper, "What color was the blood?" But I'll admit to you that I did not ask the question casually. If you could have been inside my head when I came up with it, you'd have been able to hear the real tone of my inner voice at that time.

It was my last semester at UMass Boston. I read an article about women in South Korea undergoing plastic surgery on their eyes, and heard of other such measures by non-western, non-white people to change their appearance in what seems from my point of view to be in accordance with white-western ideals of beauty. I could see how this might happen in the west, where minorities live within a culture that values white beauty so highly in all its media. But it made me very frightened. It aroused in me lots of feelings to think that women in a country where their own appearance was the norm would be seeking such surgery. It aroused perhaps some guilt that my culture was impinged upon their very bodies.

I was actually sipping some ginseng tea from S. Korea during the writing of this essay, and I realized it was called "Prince of Peace" and had a quote from Jesus on the box. Studying it, I determined that the world became global when we began fighting world wars, and that WWII in particular brought the west to places like Korea. Our movies and magazines were brought for our soldiers and it appears they never left. For some reason the idea of wanting to

change one's appearance, and feeling that her own was inadequate for whatever the conscious reasons given, aroused in me quite a bit of negative feelings. The tone of my thoughts during the original writing of this essay would have revealed that the question in its title was directed at the colonizers, and the doctors who profit (though they may not know it themselves) from the medicalization of racialized features. Were I to have completed the sentence with fervor as I then felt it, the title would have gone on to read more fully, "What color was the blood?...Now lets open up your veins and compare."

Fervor is dangerous because anger and hatred can only push the circle in the same direction—no matter who or what they are directed against. But why should I be angry in the first place? How is it that I could hate? Was it merely guilt that I was born in the United States, the capital of the western empire that seizes the globe with its language, both spoken and felt? Was I empathizing with the pain and alienation, the devaluation of self that comes with being colonized? The answer of course is yes to both. You may be thinking by now, "This guy hasn't stopped talking about himself yet and this is a conference about Frantz Fanon...what a narcissist!" If you are thinking that, you are correct, and perhaps that's the very point I am trying to make.

Why *should* I care about a Korean woman I will never meet. Why should I ever have been altruistic in the first place? Why should I empathize with, or hate, anyone at all? The only answer that I have ever found that makes any sense to me is that all of these processes, altruistic love, or searing hatred, go on within myself, and *about* myself in the most narcissistic way possible. They are the fuel for which I am able to project them onto the world. No one can love or hate anyone else any more or less than they do their own self. Self is the most salient object to any creature...thus its perception of the world, and all other objects in

it, are inextricably linked to its own perception of the object of itself.

How is it that we come to perceive our self at all? Fanon tells us that "to speak is to exist absolutely for the other" (Fanon 17). I think this is true, and I bring to all my perceptions the language that is being brought to south Korea and the world, English and western ideology...but I also bring my mother tongue, that which was spoken to me as I grew. Feelings are given meaning through words—words which were given meaning to me by hearing others speak them. Fanon is absolutely correct about language. There is no self without other, no ego without alter...we learn to speak of ourselves as we are spoken to and spoken of...we learn to treat ourselves as we have been treated. Self is born in Cooley's looking glass and after it has been given to us, we give it back to the world for the rest of our lives. In the words of W.B. Yeats, "Mirror turns Lamp."

I can speak with authority only of myself, and even then I am merely a very close observer. Should I have written the paper I began, I would have been patronizing its subject in the very way Fanon tells us a white man speaks "pidgin nigger" to a black in the Antilles (Fanon 23). I can endeavor to be as scholarly and knowledgeable about a subject as I want, but I have not the power to give voice to the colonized, from the position of colonizer...to do so is colonization itself. Should I try, I may succeed in assuaging some white-western colonial guilt in myself and no more. If I had endeavored to speak for these South Korean women as I intended, or even to speak about them as I had, without an examination of the real roots of my fervor, I would only have succeeded in making my struggle theirs...and that I believe is what colonization is at its heart.

Race is an uncomfortable topic because it stirs our deepest feelings of superiority vs. inferiority, inadequacy vs. a desire to be whole. In my research I found that the psy-

choanalytic literature is only just beginning to recognize the absence of race within its discourse. One analyst Kris Yi (1998) gives a very good account of how the classical Freudian and also Kleinian approaches can fail their patients when the analyst fails to recognize the subjectivity in her countertransference to the patient. Countertransference is the emotional response the patient's transference, or repetition of past relationships with his experience of the analyst, and it is one of the most valuable tools for empathically receiving the communications of the patient. She writes of several of her patients who have different racial backgrounds than her own. Yi discovers how despite the years of her own training, analyses which were designed to bring her own unconscious transferences to consciousness, so that she may best be able to be objective in her analytic listening, had perhaps made her overconfident in her objectivity. She realized that the culture of her own upbringing was still an unconscious factor in her motivations. Yi proposes an intersubjective approach to analysis, wherein the analyst must always be aware of her own subjectivity at all times, lest she colonizes the patient accidentally. I am currently training to become an analyst myself, and it is in this spirit that I share with you the family culture of my childhood which I discovered was the fuel for my fervor in the original idea for this paper.

When I was 13 years old my mother came out to us as a lesbian. But certain of my family knew since I was quite younger. My father's brothers and their family hated her. I learned only recently, at a wedding, of the fantasies they held about her and what happened. They thought she had duped my father, a man she still loves, and used him purposefully to have children of her own. I understand them better now, and I can forgive quite a lot. But they were very cruel to me as a child, during the years I was acquiring identity, because they could

not help but see me as the spawn of my, in their eyes, *abhorrent* mother.

As a kid I never understood the reasons, but my cousins, my uncles' children, racialized me. In hindsight I know that they must have obtained the idea that I was different from their fathers. But they, unable to pinpoint exactly how I was different, looked for signs, marks on my body—the only salient information they could draw conclusions from. They racialized my features. Many of them had light or blonde hair and blue eyes. My father was the “black Irish” one of the Conroy brothers, with dark brown eyes and curly black hair. But they could see none of those qualities coming from their stock and they told me I was “half black” or “Puerto Rican.” They told me that my “real father” was black. They pointed to my curly dark hair, and wide-set nose, my lips that were fuller than theirs, and they told me I wasn't white. They used those exact words. “You're not really Irish... You're not white.”

This was so painful for a child growing up in a very proud Irish family who had heard his father, and family, and television, and books and everything else he'd encountered, lay out the historicity of difference, the incompleteness of non-whites—all his life. Jean Wyatt employs in her analysis of race within psychoanalysis, what she calls the “fundamental fantasy” of Lacanian thought; “what according to Lacan, governs desire: the fantasy that the subject could unite with the “object a” and become whole” (Wyatt).

We see examples of this throughout Fanon's work—most blatantly in his account of the fantasies of Negro, and Mulatto men and women in the Antilles in his chapters on interracial sexual and romantic fantasies. Whiteness promises wholeness, mastery, self-completion—or in Lacanian terms, absolute humanness” (Wyatt). My cousins told me I was incomplete, I lacked something that was required of me to be fully accepted—fully human. Then my

cousins said something that hurt even more than not being white. They said “You’re not a real Conroy.” If they took away part of my humanness when they told me I wasn’t white, they took away the rest when they told me I wasn’t even good enough to wear my father’s name. They were telling me that my father, who I thought loved me, had reason to be ashamed of his son. They even made me feel like he wasn’t my real father. If only it had been just my uncles’ children that had made me feel this way, and not in many other ways the adults themselves, people whose authority I knew no better than to trust at that time...

Fanon says “Consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity. It is a third person consciousness” (Fanon 110). When I was at a tender age in the development of my sense of self, I would lie in bed at night squeezing my nostrils together in the hopes that I could train my nose to be thin. I tan very well, and I remember at least one whole summer where I stayed indoors as much as possible so as not to get any darker and give them fuel for their comments about my imagined blackness. Indeed, I had readily internalized their voices, and I had become disgusted with myself. At age 13, I had a new battle to add to the self-loathing when I found out half my blood was lesbian. It wasn’t until years later that I made the connection between my uncles’ attitude toward my mother and my cousins’ toward me. I wanted to change what I looked like to gain acceptance into my own race and family. After a while I realized I could not and began to hate them as much as myself.

It is within this context that I became who I am now. And it wasn’t until I thought about my anger at the plastic surgeons of the western world and empathy for the South Korean women who wanted to change their eyes for some number of weeks that I realized why it caused me so much fervor and emotion. I transferred the hate for a family that made me feel less than

human onto doctors who I saw profiting from something that looked very similar to me holding my nostrils together, or staying out of the sunlight, and I wanted to write a paper about how terrible it is that these women should have this as part of their self-esteem.

I set about to write a paper about these women and their struggle, but my concept of their experience was overdetermined and I knew it. Eventually, and luckily before the conference came, I realized that the paper I was going to write was about me, and not them. And that is exactly what the vicious circle is made from. That is exactly what racism is...it is about self, and not other. It is always about self. Society is the sum total of individual psyches. Our social constructions are manifestations of basic human needs within us all.

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