



The Lived Experience of Social Construction

Anthony Alessandrini

Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy - Revue de la philosophie française et de langue française, Vol XXX, No 2 (2022) pp 78-86.

Vol XXX, No 2 (2022)
ISSN 1936-6280 (print)
ISSN 2155-1162 (online)
DOI 10.5195/jffp.2022.1025
www.jffp.org



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.



This journal is operated by the University Library System of the University of Pittsburgh as part of its D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program, and is co-sponsored by the University of Pittsburgh Press

The Lived Experience of Social Construction

Anthony Alessandrini

Kingsborough College

“So wait, basically Fanon is saying that race is a social construct. Right?”

I’ve gotten this statement, or a version of it, a lot. Often it has been spoken by students during class discussions, but just as often by colleagues and, once, in pretty much the exact form above, by an earnest audience member after a screening of Isaac Julien’s *Frantz Fanon: Black Skin, White Mask* at a venue in Brooklyn.

I get it. And it’s not wrong: after all, Fanon isn’t *not* saying that race is socially constructed. If you just stop there, then what’s most amazing about Fanon is that he said this so long ago—in the case of *Peau noire, masques blancs*, seventy years ago and counting—long before the culture wars and the science wars, back in the days of the non-metaphorical decolonization wars. But *basically*, he’s not telling us anything that we don’t already know about race and racism today. Right?

The first problem, of course, is that “basically.” The difficulty of *Peau noire, masques blancs*—and I mean “difficult” in every sense—is not just a constitutive part of the text but, I would insist, is ultimately determined by Fanon’s larger intellectual and political project. Prior to the publication of the book, Francis Jeanson, Fanon’s editor, asked him to clarify a particular passage in the manuscript; Fanon wrote back: “I cannot explain this sentence. When I write things like that, I am trying to touch my reader affectively, or in other words irrationally, almost sensually. For me, words have a charge.”¹ One reason why *Peau noire, masques blancs* continues to astonish seventy years later has to do precisely with this affective charge, which has not diminished with time.

But returning to the question—*Isn’t Fanon basically saying that race is a social construct?*—I’ve come to develop a ready response. What Fanon reveals in *Peau noire, masques blancs* is not simply the social construction of race but, to quote the title of the book’s most famous chapter, *l’expérience vécue du Noir*.

Fanon speaks to us of racial identification as, at the same time, utterly fictional, not to say psychopathic, and *simultaneously* as completely determining of the subject's experience from the moment of racial recognition—which is to say, in the U.S. context at least, from the moment of birth.² The most horrific racial epithet or the blindest, most “polite” descriptor (“*Sale nègre!*” ou simplement: “*Tiens, un nègre!*”): equally socially constructed and equally all-determining.³ What we find in *Peau noire, masques blancs*, then, is something that remains useful for anti-racist thought and action today: an extended analysis of *the lived experience of social construction*.

Such an analysis moves us beyond the mere declaration that race is a social construct, a fact sometimes trotted out as though its simple assertion will itself dissolve racism. In the opening pages of the book, Fanon remarks, almost off-handedly, “what is called the black soul is a construction by white folk” [*une construction du Blanc*].⁴ But that’s just the starting point for the analysis to come. In his vivid portrayal of the experience of racialization (“*Tiens, un nègre!*”), he narrates how the Black subject’s efforts “to construct a physiological self”—a bodily existence that would not be “imposed on me” but rather “a definitive structuring of my self and the world”—are instead determined from without, constructed in advance “by the Other, the white man, who had woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, and stories.” This forced engagement with the construction of one’s self by the hostile and threatening Other is experienced as a literal attack upon his body, and a total collapse into what Fanon calls “an epidermal racial schema.” “*Tiens, un nègre!*” *C’était vrai*.⁵

At the center of *Peau noire, masques blancs* is the narrative of this internalization—or, to use Fanon’s coinage, the *epidermalization*—of a particular form of social construction: the systematic inferiority complex, imposed from the outside, that is the inevitable result of racialization. This insight into the nature of epidermalization, the manner by which white supremacy works to impose upon the Black subject a lived experience determined and framed by “the power of inner compulsion and subjective con-formation to the norm,” is, as Stuart Hall puts it, “the lesson—the somber majesty” of *Peau noire, masques blancs*.⁶ Simone Browne’s expansion of Fanon’s insight sixty years later, via her analysis of “digital epidermalization” to describe the racializing power of biometrics, attests to the continuing relevance of this lesson. Epidermalization, in Browne’s words, names the “contact moment of fracture of the body from its humanness, refracted into a new subject position.” “*Tiens, un nègre!*” Now as then, via eye or lens or pixel, epidermalization is “the making of the body as out of place, an attempt to deny its capacity for humanness.”⁷

The point here is not simply that all experience is socially constructed; after all, as feminist thinkers such as Joan W. Scott have taught us, “It is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience.”⁸ Rather, the specific nature of social construction under the

regime of racialization guarantees that the experience through which subjects are constituted is pathological by its very nature. What Fanon calls, with supreme concision, “the juxtaposition of the black and white races” inevitably creates “a massive psycho-existential complex”; the analysis of this complex, he insists, is only the first step towards its abolition.⁹ Fanon’s humanism is ultimately encompassing enough to suggest that the pathology extends to all – as he famously notes, “any ontology is made impossible in a colonized and acculturated society.” But to stop there, in an “all lives matter” sort of gesture, ignores what he calls “the basic problem”: put bluntly, “the black man suffers in his body quite differently from the white man.” Ontology ultimately “ignores the lived experience” – in this case, the fact that “the Black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man.”¹⁰

This situation of “denied subjectivity” determines the lived experience of social construction under a regime of anti-Black racism. In Lewis R. Gordon’s words, “where there is no being, where there is no one there, and where there is no link to another subjectivity...then all is permitted.” The situation of a subject constructed through anti-Black racism is the experience of “a subjectivity that is experiencing a world in which all is permitted against him or her.” And what follows from this? “The conclusion, marked in red over half a millennium, is ineluctable: structured violence.”¹¹ Simply revealing this situation of structured violence to be a “social construct” is very, very preliminary to destroying it.

* * *

“Race is a social construct” is also a statement attributed to what’s currently circulating in the public square as “Critical Race Theory.”¹² Now that “CRT” has become a favorite target of fascist trolls and bottom feeders – that is to say, the Republican Party – it too has become an object against which “all is permitted.” I mean that in the most literal sense. Christopher Rufo, a thinktank con artist and prime mover of the campaign to villainize “CRT,” has said as much. “We have successfully frozen their brand,” he wrote on Twitter in March 2021, in a weird echo of Fanon’s description of the reifying power of racialized identification (“the Other fixes me with his gaze, his gestures and attitude, in the same way you fix a preparation with a dye”¹³); Rufo continues: “We will eventually turn it toxic, as we put all of the various cultural insanities under that brand category....The goal is to have the public read something crazy in the newspaper and immediately think ‘critical race theory.’ We have decodified the term and will recodify it to annex the entire range of cultural constructions that are unpopular with Americans.”¹⁴ The fascists too have learned to play the “social construct” game, in their sick way.

Now that one insane accusation after another has been heaped into the bucket labeled “CRT” – CRT wants to teach your child that human sacrifice should be culturally revered! CRT will scream at your preschooler for being

white! CRT wants to replace math and science with Social Justice Studies! – all is permitted against it. The resultant image seared into the public mind is vividly evoked by Patricia J. Williams: “a million Willie Hortons dressed up as teachers hired to feast on the brains of kindergartners, killing their innocence.”¹⁵ The violence still to come as a result of the assault against CRT is chillingly portended in a 2021 campaign ad from Michele Fiore, a Republican candidate for governor in Nevada, produced the same month Williams wrote these words: in the ad, Fiore pulls out a pistol and shoots a bottle labeled “Critical Race Theory” (along with two others: “Voter Fraud” and “Vaccinate Mandates”), smiling as the bottle shatters into a million pieces.¹⁶ *Je m'emportai, exigeai une explication...Rien n'y fit. J'explosai. Voici les menus morceaux par un autre moi réunis.*¹⁷

Scholars like Williams who actually work in the large, capacious, and complicatedly interlocking fields of critical race theory – particularly those who, in Derrick Bell’s words, “are both existentially people of color and ideologically committed to the struggle against racism, particularly as institutionalized in and by law” – have been forced to respond to such egregious attacks by going back to the basics.¹⁸ As they have patiently explained, the notion of race as a social construct is indeed an important part of the point. But again, that’s a beginning, not a conclusion. The legal theorist Angela Onwuachi-Willig, writing as part of a *New York Times* forum a few weeks before the fateful 2016 Presidential election, begins her article by stating: “Race is not biological. It is a social construct.” But, she continues, “That all said, unlike race and racial identity, the social, political, and economic meanings of race, or rather belonging to particular racial groups, have not been fluid. Racial meanings for non-European groups have remained stagnant. For no group has this reality been truer than African-Americans.”¹⁹

The first part of the formulation is simple enough to articulate in the public sphere; in Fanon’s terms, the admission that race is not biological but rather a social construct is akin to saying “the Negro is a human being – i.e., his heart’s on his left side, added those who were not too convinced.”²⁰ More demanding is the fundamental insight of theorists working in actually-existing critical race theory: racism is not just “persistent” but rather foundational to the legal and political system of the United States. This idea too has been simplified into a buzzword – “structural racism” – whose liberal articulation implies that it can be addressed and rectified via a few small adjustments, mostly limited to diversity initiatives. Right-wing trolls like Rufo have feasted upon the liberal rhetoric of some of the most convoluted of these DEI initiatives.

For the right-wingers who have declared war against CRT, what may be most incendiary about the theorists and activists who take the foundational status of white supremacy and anti-Black racism as a starting point is the refusal of these thinkers to articulate this insight in an incendiary way. Fanon

might have called this the “affective ankylosis of the white man.”²¹ The petrified racial schema signified by Fanon’s quasi-clinical term functions to “make gestures and attitudes of phobic discharge possible for privileged subjects, and position racialized subjects as the phobic objects of those gestures.”²² So in the white imagination, Cheryl I. Harris’ eighty-five page, closely-argued, extensively-sourced *Harvard Law Review* article “Whiteness as Property” becomes, thanks to an online “briefing book” produced by Rufo, a screed that calls for stripping whites of their property and redistributing it along racial lines. Describing the hate mail that she has received as a result, Harris rightly spells out the consequences of this affective ankylosis: “Maybe I’m reading this in a particular way, but I know that when people believe that something like their property is threatened, or their children are threatened, they feel justified in doing whatever they need to do to protect them.”²³

The psychodrama played out by Senator Ted Cruz during the confirmation hearings for Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson in March 2022 was a particularly spectacular example of such “phobic discharge” available to privileged subjects. Justice Jackson’s work as a jurist has had nothing to do with critical race theory, but that hardly mattered; Cruz and a parade of white colleagues proceeded to heap abuse upon her for merely uttering the phrase during a lecture delivered seven years before. As a Black woman forced to seek “confirmation,” all was permitted against her, and all was brought to bear.

In this context, arguably the most scandalous aspect of Derrick Bell’s life-long work is embedded in the seemingly bland phrase he used to describe the alignment of forces that led to the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision: “interest-convergence.” The brief moment of legal desegregation ushered in by such decisions was of course attributable to the tireless struggles of those who participated in the Civil Rights Movement, Bell among them; but the enshrinement of these principles in law, as he argued, had to do with a fleeting moment when the interests of white elites converged with those of the movement. By the time Bell wrote about this in 1980, this brief moment of interest-convergence was already long past.²⁴ His argument robs both liberals and conservatives of their beloved claim that achievements like *Brown v. Board of Education* represent irreversible “progress” made within a perfectible system, thanks to struggles that need to be continued in more limited forms (the liberal position) or that can be comfortably relegated to the history books since we have now achieved peak racial equality (the conservative position, as expressed repeatedly by the Supreme Court over the past two decades).

Against such claims, we might counter with the two searing questions asked by Joao Costa Vargas and Joy A. James, in response to the state-sanctioned murder of Trayvon Martin in 2012: “What happens when, instead of becoming enraged and shocked every time a black person is killed in the United States, we recognize black death as a predictable and constitutive aspect of this democracy? What will happen then if instead of demanding

justice we recognize (or at least consider) that the very notion of justice...produces or requires black exclusion and death as normative?"²⁵

It is precisely the achievement of those who have struggled, on the page and in the streets, to force such questions to the surface that those socially constructed as "white" have been forced into an unavoidable confrontation with the murderousness inherent in whiteness itself. This is best evidenced on the psychic level, precisely where Fanon pursued it all his life. Williams points out the most surreal and terrifying provision of laws that ban CRT from schools: they explicitly "prohibit teaching in which 'any individual should feel discomfort, guilt, anguish or any other form of psychological distress on account of his or her race or sex.'" Such laws thus "outlaw feelings, which transfers agency beyond negotiation or norm or law."²⁶

What such laws attempt to outlaw, in short, is the process by which *white subjects are at last being forced to consciously experience their social construction via racialization.*

* * *

Let's be clear: whiteness as a category of identity supposedly based on skin color is literally insane. Throughout *Peau noire, masques blancs*, whiteness is at the heart of the psycho-existential complex that Fanon sets out to explore and explode: "The black man wants to be white. The white man is desperately trying to achieve the rank of man."²⁷ When I teach *Peau noire, masques blancs* to undergraduates, I ask them to point out something in the room that's white. Their eyes inevitably fall upon the whiteboard behind me, and we agree that no human being who is still breathing is *that* color. Whiteness only makes sense as metaphor, as *the absence of color*. When whiteness comes to the surface and becomes visible, as it has thanks to the struggle of those "both existentially people of color and ideologically committed to the struggle against racism," it becomes bloodily present. Had he lived to see the passing of laws that aim to outlaw critical race theory—laws that are themselves violent manifestations of white supremacy and that will no doubt do untold damage—Fanon might nevertheless remark: "You have come too late."²⁸

That fact in and of itself is not to be celebrated. As chroniclers of whiteness from Ida B. Wells to W. E. B. Du Bois to James Baldwin to Nell Irvin Painter to Ta-Nehisi Coates (not forgetting John Brown, David Roediger, and Noel Ignatiev) testify, there's nothing in the world more dangerous than whiteness that considers itself wounded. For those like me who enjoy, unasked, the socially constructed state of whiteness, the lines have been drawn and the battle stands ready to be joined. Here again Fanon can help us, if we follow him from *Peau noire, masques blancs* to Algeria. Against flattened caricatures of Fanon as an undifferentiated "third world" figure for whom Martinique and Algeria were interchangeable, we must remember the act of

solidarity necessitated in his border crossing, in every sense, into the Algerian Revolution.

There are many (including Kwame Anthony Appiah, in a recent and weirdly aggressive “tribute” to Fanon) who are happy to see this embracing of the Algerian Revolution as stemming from Fanon’s own pathology, his vain attempt to superimpose his own psychic battles onto a struggle that belonged to others.²⁹ But one doesn’t have to defend all aspects of Fanon’s involvement with Algeria to find in it an exemplary instance of solidarity as a literal crossing over that transforms what came before. In the midst of the struggle, Fanon writes in *Les Damnés de la terre*, lines are crossed: segments of the colonized bourgeoisie pledge themselves to neocolonialism, while some members of the colonizing population commit themselves to the decolonization struggle. “The species is splitting up before their very eyes,” Fanon writes of those engaged in the struggle; and “the scandal really erupts when pioneers of the species change sides, go ‘native,’ and volunteer to undergo suffering, torture, and death.”³⁰

The structural violence that is racialization will not be abolished simply by being revealed as a social construct. It can only be contested in struggle. In this struggle, ongoing and still to come, the abolition of whiteness—the treason to whiteness that is loyalty to humanity, in Ignatiev’s resounding phrase—has a small but necessary part to play. This, too, is the lesson of *Peau noire, masques blancs*, if we are ready to learn it.

-
- ¹ David Macey, *Frantz Fanon* (New York: Picador, 2002), p. 157-58.
- ² In fact, this structuring of lived experience according to racial determinism actually *precedes* birth, given the structural disparities in pre-natal care imposed upon non-white women. See, for example, Latoya Hill, Samantha Artiga, and Usha Ranji, “Racial Disparities in Maternal and Infant Health: Current Status and Efforts to Address Them,” Kaiser Family Foundation Report (November 1, 2022).
- ³ Frantz Fanon, *Oeuvres* (Paris: La Découverte, 2011), p. 153.
- ⁴ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove, 2008), p. xviii; *Oeuvres*, p. 68.
- ⁵ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 91-92; *Oeuvres*, p. 155.
- ⁶ Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence Wishart, 1990), p. 226.
- ⁷ Simone Browne, “Digital Epidermalization: Race, Identity, and Biometrics,” *Critical Sociology* 36.1 (2009), p. 134.
- ⁸ Joan W. Scott, “The Evidence of Experience,” *Critical Inquiry* 17.4 (1991), p. 779.
- ⁹ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. xvi.
- ¹⁰ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 89-90, 119.
- ¹¹ Lewis R. Gordon, “Is the Human a Teleological Suspension of Man? Phenomenological Exploration of Sylvia Wynter’s Fanonian and Biodecean Reflections,” in *Caribbean Reasonings: After Man Towards the Human—Critical Essays on Sylvia Wynter*, ed. Anthony Bogues (Kingston: Ian Randle, 2006), p. 240.
- ¹² A few minutes spent googling “Critical Race Theory” will bring up a multitude of “explainer” pieces, most of them well intentioned (if often lacking accuracy), but a few, like the Heritage Society’s “How to Identify Critical Race Theory,” that are open attempts at intellectual assassination (the piece ends by encouraging readers to “become whistleblowers” under the heading “How to Stop CRT”). All of them seem to agree, however, that “race is a social construct” is a central tenet of “CRT.”
- ¹³ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 89.
- ¹⁴ Quoted in Sarah Jones, “How to Manufacture a Moral Panic,” *New York Magazine* (July 11, 2021).
- ¹⁵ Patricia J. Williams, “How Not to Talk About Race,” *The Nation* (October 18, 2021).
- ¹⁶ Fiore’s gubernatorial bid was unsuccessful, as was her 2022 campaign for Nevada State Treasurer; however, she continues to serve as one of Nevada’s Republican National Committee members.
- ¹⁷ Fanon, *Oeuvres*, p. 153, ellipses in original.
- ¹⁸ Derrick A. Bell, “Who’s Afraid of Critical Race Theory?” *University of Illinois Law Review* 4 (1995): 898.
- ¹⁹ Angela Onwuachi-Willig, “Race and Racial Identity Are Social Constructs,” *New York Times* (September 6, 2016).
- ²⁰ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 99.

- ²¹ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 101.
- ²² Shiloh Whitney, "The Affective Forces of Racialization: Affects and Body Schemas in Fanon and Lorde," *Knowledge Cultures* 3.1 (2015).
- ²³ Cheryl I. Harris, "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review* 106.8 (June 1993); Jones, "How to Manufacture a Moral Panic."
- ²⁴ Derrick A. Bell, "*Brown v. Board of Education* and the Interest-Convergence Dilemma," *Harvard Law Review* 93.3 (1980): 518-533.
- ²⁵ Joao Costa Vargas and Joy A. James, "Refusing Blackness-as-Victimization: Trayvon Martin and the Black Cyborgs," in *Pursuing Trayvon Martin: Historical Contexts and Contemporary Manifestations of Racial Dynamics*, ed. George Yancy and Janine Jones (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014).
- ²⁶ Williams, "How *Not* to Talk About Race." As she points out, the language of such laws is more or less identical from state to state because they are "drafted not at the local level but by a team coordinated and funded by an array of conservative think tanks, including the Manhattan Institute [where Rufo is employed], the American Enterprise Institute, and the Heritage Foundation."
- ²⁷ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. xiii.
- ²⁸ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 101.
- ²⁹ Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Liberation Psychology," *New York Review of Books* (February 24, 2022).
- ³⁰ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, translated by Richard Philcox (New York: Grove, 2004), p. 94.