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***Black Skin, White Masks* and the Paradoxical Politics of Black Historiography**

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Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* has the paradoxical status of being a text that rejects historiography and History as a primary means of facilitating radical political transformation while also being a key point of departure for histories concerning modern colonial and decolonial thought.¹ This reflection is an examination of the tensions in *Black Skin, White Masks* as a political work and as an intervention into philosophical, psychoanalytic, literary, and existential debates. Prompted by the 70th anniversary of the publication of *Black Skin, White Masks*, I examine the richness of the past two decades of historiographical scholarship on slavery, abolition, and freedom struggles in the Caribbean and North America alongside arguments that Fanon made about the limited role of history in sustaining and guiding anti-colonial thought and praxis. *Black Skin, White Masks* remains relevant, albeit troubling, for querying the presumed connections between historical knowledge, political action, and scholarly production facilitated by academic and political trends. I am interested in how the provocations of *Black Skin, White Masks*, in particular its last chapter "By Way of Conclusion," provides fertile grounds for questioning, positioning, and refining contemporary historiographical production.

At the center of Fanon's discussion of history, is the relationship of history to decolonial, anti-colonial, and other forms of radical political action. For Fanon, the type of historical scholarly and popular historiographies that sought to ground contemporary Black anti-colonial struggles in the twentieth century— including recovering lost Black civilizations or histories of Black resistance— were neither the pre-requisite nor the cause of anti-colonial political action. His arguments destabilized the emphasis on Black history in various traditions of Black scholarly and activists production in the years between the 1920s-1950s in the Black Atlantic which included Arturo

Schomburg's "The Negro Digs Up His Past," W.E.B. Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction in America*, C.L.R. James's *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Overture and the San Domingo Revolution*, and Aimé Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism*.² The relationships between history and political action in each of these texts are distinct; however, there is an assumption that recovering and narrating Black diasporic and resistant colonial history can provide a guide, impetus, and ground for anti-racist and anti-colonial political action.

Black Skin, White Masks problematizes easy connections between historical knowledge of Black politics (and Black civilizations) and Black revolutionary action in order to maintain a materialist and existential understanding of anti-colonial thought and action. Fanon argues that those who need history the most are a small minority of Black people who are alienated primarily through language, culture, and education, while the majority of colonized Black people are alienated through the material conditions of their lives which includes mechanical, domestic, manual, and agricultural labor.³ This division in how Black colonized subjects are positioned means that scholarly historiographies and literature are not likely to dis-alienate the masses of Black people.

Furthermore, *Black Skin, White Masks* argues that Black people should avoid focusing their energy, intellectual efforts, and political orientations on the past, and thus on the ontological level avoid being trapped by "History."⁴ History for Fanon, refers to the philosophies of history in Western thought and the historiographies of political and social events. His argument against "History" and an orientation to the past, reinforces earlier analyses about how responding to colonial norms places the Black colonial subject in an existential and philosophical game rigged to deny his humanity.⁵ Thus, history as a way to legitimate the humanity and equality of Black people (even for themselves) through the resources and logics provided by colonialism is another form of psychic, political, and philosophical dead-end.⁶ In addition, history as a prerequisite for political action would mean that Black people (especially men) are not spontaneous actors, but rather trapped by the past.⁷

Black Skin, White Masks facilitates novel approaches to conceptualizing history (especially of historicizing and grappling with colonial thought) which are not guided by the desire for recognition. This has proved meaningful in how scholars of colonialism and decolonization have continually revealed the changing logics of colonial historiography, History, academic disciplines, colonial methodologies, and colonial epistemologies in knowledge production.⁸ However, *Black Skin, White Masks* poses vexed challenges for those who desire to write histories of spaces, peoples, and lands that take seriously the identities created and concealed by colonialism and that are grounded (at least partially) in national and racial conflicts.⁹ This is because Fanon's understanding of universalism and humanism place into doubt projects that can be considered particularist, provincial, and bound by the logics of colonialism.¹⁰

The arguments that Fanon deploys to avoid particularism pose challenges to recent historical production. In *Black Skin, White Masks* national histories and histories of particular spaces and territories do not belong exclusively (or possibly primarily) to specific nations or races. Rather, Fanon argues against racializing and nationalizing political and social histories due to how such moves can reify and naturalize race instead of revealing it as a product of human artifice birthed by European colonialism. Thus, Fanon provocatively maintains that not only are the histories of Africa his inheritance, but also those of Europe, the Mediterranean, and Asia. His view of history crosses racial and national lines, thus he states, “Every time a man has brought victory to the dignity of the spirit, every time a man has said no to an attempt to enslave his fellow man, I have felt a sense of solidarity with his act.”¹¹ This solidarity functions as a recognition of those who have served human dignity as well as those who have opposed the domination of others. It also allows for individuals to knit together disparate events, peoples, and ideas found in the past. Fanon’s idiosyncratic view of history filtered through his political and philosophical lenses is meant as a model for how others might want to approach past human actions and thought i.e., history. Such an approach can serve to connect people to events that are not considered part of their cultural, racial, and national inheritance.

Fanon rejects the norms of modern European historiography, (including the long tradition of developmental historiography of which Kant, Hegel, and J.S. Mill are exemplars), that universalize European history (History).¹² He also opposed the norms and expectations of Black historiography that demand a focus on political and social transformations produced by Black people. Instead, he propounds a decolonial humanist historiography that opposes the partial humanism of *negritude* and European philosophies of history. He writes against both in his statement, “I am a man, and I have to rework the world’s past from the very beginning. I am not just responsible for the slave revolt in Saint Domingue.”¹³ This perspective is further contextualized by claims that the Peloponnesian War, fought in the fifth century BCE, and the invention of the compass also are his. Finally, Fanon demands that Black men not become slaves to the past, which renders specific forms of racial and national consciousness (including *negritude*) problematic.¹⁴

Moreover, *Black Skins, White Masks* represents a direct challenge to those who would place historical consciousness as a prerequisite to decolonial political action. When Fanon claimed that the Black man was the slave to the past, he sought to reveal that the relationship to the past that Black writers and scholars had imagined as a space of freedom was in fact a space of confinement.¹⁵ Fanon challenged core beliefs that had influenced scholarly, popular, and political understandings of the necessity of excavating, interrogating, and affirming Black civilizations and Black history in Africa and its diaspora. In this way, *Black Skin, White Masks* arguments are explicitly

political, by denying a host of historical understandings and ways of relating to the past, Fanon attempts to guide consciousness of history and its relation to anti-colonial praxis.

The challenge of *Black Skin, White Masks* to earlier historical scholarship including the work of Aimé Césaire, C.L.R. James, and others is noteworthy. However, *Black Skin, White Masks* poses similar challenges to recent historiographies on slavery, marronage, and anti-colonial resistance. In the past two decades, historians, literary theorists, and scholars of Black Studies have repeatedly challenged academic disciplinary boundaries in order to excavate Black political and social history over and against the limits of the colonial archive and the archive of slavery. Just as previous generations—including Fanon’s predecessors and contemporaries analyzed above—recent scholars have created illuminating histories by subverting the epistemologies that constituted modern colonialism and chattel slavery. They have continued to critically examine the construction and content of archival knowledge and the dominant methods used to interpret the archive.¹⁶ In such a flourishing of intellectual production, which continues to coincide with Black political and social resistance throughout the Americas, it once again appears that historiography and History have a profound connection to anti-racist, anti-colonial, and decolonial action aimed at addressing the structures of colonialism and racial slavery birthed and maintaining the modern/colonial world. Recent historiographies have widened understandings of who counts as Black political and social agents as well as have provided alternative epistemologies and knowledges that challenge Eurocentric worldviews. Placing class, gender, sexuality, and the sacred at the center of historical analyses and approaches have led to profound changes in understandings of the practice of historical analysis and the historiography of particular events and locales.

One example of this has been recent historiography on the Haitian Revolution. The Haitian Revolution has had an outsized impact on Black thought especially during the twentieth century when Black anti-colonial thought borrowed extensively from the history of the first Black republic, the second independent nation in the Americas, and the only successful modern slave revolt. Through Caribbean intellectuals, the Haitian Revolution and the subsequent nation of Haiti became archived as the exemplar of Black revolutionary anti-colonial thought and praxis. The history of Haiti became a key point of departure for theorizing Black history, Black culture, Caribbean history, and anti-colonial thought. Recent historiographies of Haitian history have sought to extend critical perspectives examining that history without narrating it from the perspective of those most powerful. The historiography of the past three decades has been instrumental in separating Haitian history, social development, and politics from the discourses and actions of the property owning, urban, elite, and anti-Black positions of the leaders who would lead post-independence Haiti. These “histories from below” have

documented how the mid-twentieth century vision of the Haitian Revolution as the embodiment of anti-colonial praxis was partially grounded in the ideology and historiographies of the property-owning elite of Haiti in the nineteenth century.¹⁷ In light of histories that have focused on bossales, women, non-literate peoples, and the vodou masses, this has meant that the mid-twentieth century understanding of anti-colonial and revolutionary Black thought and praxis was partial, and that the Haitian Revolution can no longer be conceptualized through elitist, male, literate, and secular lenses of the nineteenth or twentieth century. The recent historiographies have highlighted narratives, conflicts, and solutions that were always there, but not brought to the forefront due to the perspectives of scholars, the limited political/epistemological commitments of thinkers, and the structures of “post-colonial” politics and society.

Black Skin, White Masks has not been an explicit point of departure for this scholarship due to its contentious views on gender and sexuality, and its complex blending of philosophical thought, cultural analysis, and psychoanalysis.¹⁸ This has meant that Black historiographical scholarship about nations, peoples, social structures, and political history has flourished alongside scholarship on the history of the philosophical underpinnings of colonialism. In many ways, the result of the former poses challenges to Fanon’s conceptions of history, decolonization, and political action in *Black Skin, White Masks*. For example, through expanding the meaning of revolution, the conflicts at the heart of the slave revolts, independence, and post-independence politics and social transformation, scholars of Haitian history have helped redefine understandings of the human, politics, and philosophy and thus the meanings of anti-colonial and decolonial thought and action that Fanon presupposed. In particular, the focus on gender and sexuality provides challenges to the male dominated materialist assumptions of political action and political agency, while the focus on the sacred—especially vodou—transforms the meaning of history through its embodiment of gods (lwa) working in the present, thereby collapsing neat distinctions between the past/present (i.e. historical periodization and consciousness) as well as the pivotal role of the sacred (and history) and the consciousness of the *damné*.¹⁹ Scholarship on the Haitian Revolution has reinterpreted the meaning of revolution, marronage, anti-colonial thought/practice, decolonization, and abolition. Through reshaping the understanding of one of the most famous Black revolutions and the only successful modern slave revolt, this scholarship has redefined earlier understandings of the sources of Black revolutionary potentiality. The transformation of concepts, distinctions, and the grounds of Fanon’s thought may require a rethinking of history as a space of confinement and as an impediment to revolutionary political action. However, Fanon’s seventy-year-old arguments pose challenges to present day historiography. His analysis of how colonialism alienates Black subjects differently, his warning of the dangers of attempting to gain recognition through History, his claim

that the Black subject can be a slave to the past, as well as his critiques of racial, national, and cultural ownership of past events pose challenges to historiography today.

Thus, we find ourselves at a crossroads, down one path are new understandings of decolonization, abolition, marronage, and anti-colonial politics that have been shaped by recent historiography, down the other are Fanon's provocations to attend to the structure of colonial intellectual production and avoiding particularity that might reify the racial logics of colonialism. One way out is to specify some of the challenges that *Black Skin, White Masks* poses for Black historiography in the twenty-first century. This includes questioning whether colonial capitalism still functions through creating divisions between those who can access education and upward mobility and those who are more materially vulnerable. We are left asking: who are histories of slavery and histories of resistance, against slavery and colonialism for? Who asked for this – not only in the Fanonian way of providing unwelcomed but critical insight, but also which communities and people specifically asked for these histories in print?²⁰ Are these historiographies subtle attempts to display the humanity and rationality of Black people to colonizing national and international audiences –i.e. attempts to place Black people within a History that will never accept them?²¹ Can there be a history of the decolonial masses – which sees the masses as engaged in the process of acting against economic inferiority, and “its internalization or rather epidermalization,” which also explicitly grapples with the colonial logics of knowledge production?²² This type of history may be able to combine the two strands of historiography examined above.²³ If such histories are possible, how? Will these histories have a value outside of the dis-alienation of the most privileged? Fanon offers one way to query and assess contemporary historiography as well as the structural apparatus in which the writing of history is produced. However, these questions inevitably place us back at Fanon's seemingly denial of the role of histories in their ability to spur or facilitate anti-colonial, anti-racist, and decolonial social and political action.

In the end, the arguments of *Black Skin, White Masks* leave only a sliver of room for the possibility of Black history playing some role in spurring anti-colonial and decolonial action. As I have reconstructed the line of argumentation, this sliver could be found in Fanon's insistence that human creativity and human capacity to will can transform our human made societies.²⁴ Similarly, although Fanon makes it abundantly clear that histories cannot be the ground for decolonial action, it does not follow that this forecloses the possibility that such historiographies once in the world cannot have subtle, subterranean, and unexpected influence on human subjects and populations.²⁵ In this way, it behooves us to maintain that historiography should have a revolutionary function, even if a classic text argues that it is unlikely to have that intended effect.

- ¹ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trs. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008).
- ² Schomburg writes, “The Negro must remake his past in order to make his future...History must restore what slavery took away, for it is the social damage of slavery that the present generation must repair and offset;” W.E.B. Du Bois states, “Particularly interesting for students of human culture is the sudden freeing of these black folk [enslaved peoples in the U.S.] in the Nineteenth Century and the attempt, through them, to reconstruct the basis of American democracy from 1860-1880.” C.L.R. James writes of his history of revolution that “the concluding pages which envisage and were intended to stimulate the coming emancipation of Africa.” Aimé Césaire laments the destruction and colonization of non-European societies when he states, “I make a systematic defense of the non-European civilizations. Every day that passes... brings home the value of our old societies.” Arthur Schomburg, “The Negro Digs Up His Past” in *The New Negro*, ed. Alain Locke (New York: Atheneum, 1925), 231; W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 3; Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 44. C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Overture and the San Domingo Revolution* (New York: Random House, 1963), vii.
- ³ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 199.
- ⁴ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 204.
- ⁵ Thus, it reinforces key passages in “On the Lived Experience of the Black Man,” in which Fanon goes through the possible dialectical moves in proving Black humanity which ends in tears. See Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 119.
- ⁶ Nelson Maldonado-Torres, *Against War: Views from the Underside of Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 131.
- ⁷ Christopher J. Lee, *Frantz Fanon: Toward A Revolutionary Humanism* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2015), 93-94.
- ⁸ Readers will of course be familiar with the diversity of texts that avoid centering Eurocentric concepts and frameworks and instead center decolonization, humanism, and decoloniality. Such works includes Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Sylvia Wynter, Maria Lugones, and a host of scholars and thinkers who are in extended dialogue with these writers. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2005); Sylvia Wynter, “1492: A New World View” in *Race, discourse, and the origin of the Americas : a new world*, eds. Vera Lawrence Hyatt and Rex Nettleford (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995), 5- 57; Maria Lugones, “The Coloniality of Gender” *Worlds & Knowledges Otherwise* (Spring 2008), 2; Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books Ltd, 2006); Glen Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).
- ⁹ *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man: An Essay on Philosophy and the Human Sciences* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 28.
- ¹⁰ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 202.
- ¹¹ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 201.
- ¹² Immanuel Kant, “An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment,” in *Practical Philosophy: The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 54-60; G.W.F. Hegel, *Introduction to the Philosophy of History* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1988); J.S. Mill, *On Liberty* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1978).

- ¹³ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 201.
- ¹⁴ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 116.
- ¹⁵ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 200.
- ¹⁶ Stephanie M. H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts" *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 1-14; Stephanie E. Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008); Marisa J. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); Jennifer L. Morgan, "Accounting for 'The Most Excruciating Torment': Gender, Slavery, and Trans-Atlantic Passages" *History of the Present* 6, no. 2 (2016): 184-207.
- ¹⁷ Joan Dayan, *Haiti, History, and the Gods* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Mimi Sheller, "'You signed my name but not my Feet': Paradoxes of Peasant Resistance and State Control in Post-Revolutionary Haiti" *Journal of Haitian Studies*, 10: 1 (2004): 72-86; Lauren Dubois, *Avengers of the New World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005); Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (New York: Beacon Press, 2015); Johnhenry Gonzalez, *Maroon Nation: A History of Revolutionary Haiti* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019).
- ¹⁸ Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel, *Coloniality of Diasporas: Rethinking Intra-Colonial Migrations in a Pan-Caribbean Context* (New York: Palgrave, 2014), 110-113; T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, "Anti-black Femininity and Mixed-race Identity: Engaging Fanon to Reread Capécia" *Fanon: A Critical Reader*, eds. Lewis R. Gordon, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, Renée T. White (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 155-162.
- ¹⁹ Joan Dayan, *Haiti, History, and the Gods* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Gina Athena Ulysse, "Vodou as Idea: On Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley's 'Ezili's Mirrors,'" *Los Angeles Review of Books*, September 28, 2018; Natasha Tinsley, *Ezili's Mirror: Imagining Black Queer Genders* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 9-12.
- ²⁰ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, xi.
- ²¹ See Lewis Gordon, *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man: An Essay on Philosophy and the Human Sciences* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 29.
- ²² Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, xv.
- ²³ Jean Casimir, *The Haitians: A Decolonial History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020).
- ²⁴ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, xv.
- ²⁵ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 201.