

## Black Skin, White Masks By Frantz Fanon (1952)

Nicola Bidwell



"A feeling of inferiority?" asks Frantz Fanon, in his essay "The Fact of Blackness." "No," he says, "a feeling of nonexistence." Recently, South African students protesting for #Rhodes Must Fall joined a succession of liberation movements referencing Fanon over the past 50 years. Among many creative acts, students wore placards that read "recognize me." Mainstream media reported protests at formerly exclusively white universities most extensively; they also tended to portray protesting students at majority black universities as prone to violence—woeful evidence of Fanon's contemporary significance to race identity politics in education. His relevance to HCI, specifically, is simply illustrated by image searches using Google.com.na. Only two of the first 50 people in photos returned for "person using computer" are black unless the special filter category "black" is used. There is no filter for "white," but there are categories for "work," "office," "icon," and so on. Indeed, the black man is an "object in the midst of other objects," "black in relation to the white man," Fanon writes, and "has no ontological resistance." (Searches for "person with computer" using one of the languages in the country where I live, "nakulongifa okomputa," do not yet yield any image results.)

Fanon's pursuit of the meaning of being fully human in his first book, *Black Skin, White Masks*, has much to offer HCI for creating the human, whether by designing interactions with computers or teaching or mentoring researchers and practitioners. The book focuses on a human's work to create him/herself, despite the dehumanizing psychopathology of colonization and the psycho-existential complex that arises from dualizing and juxtaposing races. It is an account informed by Fanon's profession as a psychiatrist, interest in phenomenology, and experiences as a black man from the French colonies. An account that flouts the form of the classic essay collection, expresses many different thoughts, claims no absolute truths, and often dramatizes assorted voices to reenact extracts from books, poems, and conversations in which Fanon's voice appears as an aside. Fanon opposes the colonizing voices that act to own and gaze upon black identity by affirmation. However, he insists that a black person must make his/her own self-identity to free him/herself, because humans become themselves through action; becoming decolonized is therefore more active than self-



reflective. Some feminists critique *Black Skin, White Masks* for ignoring black women's agency, so it's worth noting that African women are visible activists in the Fallist Movement, deftly combining Fanon's work with current theories about intersectionality.

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HCI has shown increased interest in post-colonialism in the past five years but, with some exceptions (e.g., [1]), has not much referred to African theorists. Thus, it is interesting that Fanon, who latterly identified as Algerian, has influenced discussions about the inaugural AfriCHI conference to be held in Nairobi this November ([www.africhi.net](http://www.africhi.net)). Discussions have considered, for instance, what languages and written and oral literacies AfriCHI should support; whether "Afrika" should be used to refer to the continent; what the trade-offs are in imitating Euro-American-centric models; how AfriCHI can contribute to resisting "citation apartheid" and balance local and international reviewers' perspectives; and how these

complexities should be navigated amid economic constraints and endless requests that Africans explain their views to others. AfriCHI's African committee members have different opinions about such issues—as they should, since being decolonized is "a psychic state more than a political project," as Achille Mbembe writes [2]. My work with committee members is both an absolute honor and a constant learning experience, but it is not without personal unease. As a white person I cannot escape being part of the oppressor camp, as Steve Biko, a follower of Fanon, asserts [3]. Yet AfriCHI also inspires me to think that journeys in creating self-identities in the complex space of colonialism and race offer much toward re-imagining the kind of human that users can become and the types of actions HCI must support to enable this becoming.

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