

Fanon via Lacan, or: Decolonization by psychoanalytic means...?

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ABSTRACT

It has often been assumed that Lacanian psychoanalysis is necessarily antithetical to Frantz Fanon's decolonizing political project. This paper argues, by contrast, that by exploring hitherto underexplored aspects of the Fanon-Lacan relation we are able to re-articulate and extend many of Fanon's most crucial political insights. The paper adopts three routes of enquiry. Firstly, it investigates Fanon's (recently published) earliest citations of Lacan. Secondly, it highlights a series of conceptual parallels and affinities that exist between the work of the two theorists. Thirdly, it provides an instructive example of how Fanon's theorizations of colonial oppression might be supplemented and extended by means of Lacanian theory. Returning to Fanon's earliest work shows how Fanon was inspired by Lacan's ideas of historically situated forms of madness, (mis)recognition (*meconnaissance*), paranoia and psychical causality. An investigation of parallels between the two psychiatrists foregrounds a series of conceptual affinities, including sociogeny, the importance of symbolic (or social) structure, the notions of fantasy (Fanon's 'Negro myth') and of a social (or trans-individual) unconscious (Fanon's 'European collective unconscious'). Contemporary Lacanian social theory, as in the work of Peter Hudson, enables us to think of how colonial subjects are positioned as 'non-subjects', that is, as the real or 'part of no part' of the colonial order. This, in turn suggests that to centralize whiteness as target of decolonial critique may extend rather than dissipate the master-signifier of whiteness.

1. Introduction: Against Lacan

One way of exploring the question of how Lacanian psychoanalysis might inform postcolonial studies - and thereby a decolonizing agenda more broadly - would be to examine a more specific intellectual relationship. I have in mind the relationship between the work of Frantz Fanon - perhaps still the single most inspiring figure in the domain of postcolonial theory and decolonizing scholarship - and that of Jacques Lacan. There are, of course, a great many avenues we could explore in thinking about how Frantz Fanon's conceptual and political agendas may have drawn upon - or been inspired by - the work of Jacques Lacan. That being said, we are routinely warned about overly psychoanalytic readings of Fanon just as we are told that postcolonial readers "overstate the importance of the psychoanalytic strand in [Fanon's] work".¹ What however if there is *more* of Lacan's influence in Fanon than had previously been thought? This is one

¹ Macey, 'The Recall of the Real', p. 98.

conclusion that might be reached by a reading of Fanon's recently translated psychiatric writings.
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Provocations aside, the above concerns are legitimate. Superimposing a variety of Lacanian concepts onto Fanon's work does run the risk of reducing Fanon to a footnote in the broader project of Lacanian High Theory. And yet, we should hasten to add, there are also important contemporary Lacanian contributions to the Fanonian project.³ This idea, that there may be an important role for Lacanian theory in the broader Fanonian project, pushes up against a prevailing attitude in much of the literature on Fanon, namely the presumption that Lacan is not a resource worth investigating as a way of furthering Fanon.

The assumption has, I think, been that Lacanian psychoanalytic theory is necessarily antithetical to Fanon's over-arching political project. Nigel Gibson emphasizes, for example, the need to highlight psychoanalysis's "Eurocentric and bourgeois assumptions which are passed off as universals".⁴ In much the same vein, Macey argues that classical psychoanalysis "thinks with a paradigm that makes it difficult to discuss precolonial and colonial societies without falling back on the evolutionary-anthropological trope [of the savage]", adding, for good measure, that "Psychoanalysis itself can provide...the underpinnings of the racial stereotyping Fanon denounces".⁵ In a more pointed critique of Lacanian theory, Kelly Oliver insists that Lacan's conceptualization of subjectivity "presupposes a privileged subject and cannot account for the subject of oppression".⁶ Lacan, moreover, is guilty "of theoretical moves...[that] cover over the alienation inherent in oppression by postulating a universal alienation that renders invisible concrete forms of alienation".⁷ These critiques beg the question, of course, of why Fanon – who was clearly aware of such issues – did nonetheless go ahead and draw on Lacanian and other psychoanalytic resources in his work, even if in crucially strategic, adapted and 'customized' ways.

I should be clear. Lacanian theory, like all variants of psychoanalysis, should most certainly be subject to the critiques that Fanon famously mounts in *Black Skin White Masks* against the depoliticizing and universalizing tendencies of psychoanalysis.⁸ What, however, is often forgotten, is that Lacanian theory – particularly contemporary Lacanian social theory (especially that of Slavoj Žižek⁹) – has distanced itself from many presumptions of Freudianism, and, indeed, has itself offered critiques of how psychoanalysis has previously been used in reductive and reactionary ends. Moreover, Lacan himself maintained a more iconoclastic relation to Freudianism than is often assumed. Many of the key tenets of Freud's psychoanalysis – the notion of an intra-psychic (or 'depth') unconscious, the conviction of the trans-historical applicability of psychoanalysis, the universalization of the Oedipus complex – are all challenged, if not indeed

² See Khalifa and Young, *Alienation and Freedom*.

³ See Burman, *Fanon, Education, Action*; George, *Trauma & Race*; Marriott, *Whither Fanon?*

⁴ Gibson, 'Losing Sight of the Real', p. 130.

⁵ Macey, 'The Recall of the Real', pp. 101-102.

⁶ Oliver, *Colonization of Psychic Space*, p. 4.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Mask*, pp. 141-209

⁹ See Žižek, *Sublime Object and Plague of Fantasies*.

explicitly rejected by the later Lacan.¹⁰ One is thus led to suspect that many readers of Fanon's work that reject Lacan out of hand do so on a largely unsubstantiated or uninformed basis.

The commonplace rejection of psychoanalysis risks dismissing the prospective value of Lacanian theory precisely as a resource for political conceptualization, indeed, for furthering Fanon by Lacanian means. Indeed, was this not, at least in part, one of Fanon's insights, that certain psychoanalytic conceptualizations can help enlarge our ethico-political sensibilities? I am thus in agreement with Erica Burman who hopes to prompt further interrogations of Fanon's relationship with Lacan: "reading Fanon alongside his citations of Lacan and some aspects of Lacanian theory opens up further interpretative possibilities".¹¹

There are at least three routes of enquiry that we could pursue here. Firstly, we could briefly consider the hitherto under-explored references Fanon makes to Lacan in his (Fanon's) doctoral thesis. Secondly, we could highlight a series of subtle conceptual parallels and affinities that exist between the work of the two theorists. Thirdly, we could provide an example of how Fanon's theorizations have been revisited, opened up and expanded upon by Lacanian theory. I will take up each of these routes of enquiry, with the proviso that, given the amount of literature investigating the Fanon-Lacan relation, I will selectively sample rather than exhaustively explore the most recent literature in these areas.¹²

One last introductory qualification. In trying to approach Fanon's use of Lacan afresh, it helps to differentiate between the earlier figure of Lacan the student of psychiatry (whose work from the 1930s and 1940s Fanon, of course, referred to), and the subsequent *enfant terrible* of Parisian intellectual life whose seminars from the later 1950's, the 1960's and 1970's formed an intricate conceptual system and the doctrinal basis of a school of psychoanalysis (whose work, Fanon, who died in 1961, clearly did not engage with). These are two very different realms of influence - two different figures of Lacan, we might say - and my concern is that those who decry the exploration of Lacan's influence on Fanon often run the risk of conflating these two realms of influence, just as they risk conflating psychiatry and psychoanalysis. It is for this reason that Christopher Lee, in his introductory book on Fanon insists on a rudimentary distinction:

It is important to stress the difference between psychiatry - a medical field that treats mental health as part of the biological functioning of the brain - and psychoanalysis...this distinction is often overlooked by readers of Fanon, who tend to view his pioneering perspectives strictly on psychoanalytic grounds... it is fair to argue that psychoanalysis had a significant bearing on his thinking given its...particular validation for treating patients on an individual basis rather than institutionally.¹³

¹⁰ Svolos, *Twenty-First Century Psychoanalysis*.

¹¹ Burman, 'Fanon's Lacan', p. 77.

¹² Accordingly, I do not offer yet another exploration of how Fanon makes use of Lacan's mirror stage (see Frosh, 'Psychoanalysis, Colonialism, Racism' for a good summary of the literature, but also Khanna, *Dark Continents* Stephens, 'Skin, Stain and Lamella', and Oliver, *Colonization of Psychic Space*. Similarly, I do not add to the already considerable literature discussing Bhabha's Lacanian readings of Fanon in *The Location of Culture*.

¹³ Lee, *Fanon*, pp. 62-63.

We can thus anticipate two prospective errors in Fanon scholarship. Firstly, the tendency to sideline Fanon's psychiatric work and conceptualizations on the basis that it is fundamentally psychoanalytic and thus subject to all the critiques – and dismissals – of psychoanalysis. Secondly the possibility of overlooking the fact that psychoanalysis at the time held a radical promise beyond the remit of biologically reductive forms of psychiatry.

2. Fanon's 'doctrinal' Lacan: Early psychiatric writings

Jean Khalifa's comments on Fanon's doctoral thesis – only recently translated into English – draw attention to a section of Fanon's dissertation headed "the Lacanian theory of the pure psychogenesis of madness".¹⁴ Fanon seems to have been particularly taken with Lacan's "insistence on the social constitution of personality"¹⁵ taking up and endorsing Lacan's view that biological factors cannot, in and of themselves, cause madness. So, while Fanon cannot by any stretch of the imagination be called a 'Lacanian' – his enthusiasm for Lacanian ideas is tempered, and he certainly draws inspiration from a variety of other thinkers from the domains of psychiatry, anthropology and philosophy – it is clear that he shared with Lacan a commitment to grasping the "social category of human reality".¹⁶

Fanon's reading of Lacanian theory (as it was developed up until that point, that is, 1951), proved astute. He pinpointed the importance of desire in Lacan's work, and in commenting on Lacan's own doctoral work (on paranoid psychosis) stresses that psychosis is seen by Lacan as a cycle of behavior, one which is guided by "the organizing mechanism of desire and its satisfaction".¹⁷ Desire, furthermore, as Fanon observes, is essentially for Lacan social in its origin, its meaning and its exercise – a characterization that the younger student of psychiatry clearly felt great affinity toward. Within the closing pages of his thesis, Fanon offers several more affirmatory characterizations of Lacan's conceptualization of the psyche, crediting him with developing a "phenomenology of personality"¹⁸ with the notion of psychogenetic determinism, and with highlighting "an intersubjectivist perspective on madness".¹⁹

Lacan thus offered the young Fanon a series of perspectives that uprooted organic/biological models of psychopathology in favor of a more considered engagement with environmental, symbolic and cultural considerations. This point is affirmed in *Black Skin White Masks*, where, as Burman highlights, Fanon explicitly draws on Lacan's doctoral thesis so as to "critique the notion of biologically determined 'psychic constitutions' of the kind subscribed to in the then contemporary colonial psychiatry"²⁰ (in Fanon's words: "Lacan...violently attacked the idea of the constitutional...for the idea of the constitutional as it is understood by the French School I am substituting that of structure"²¹).

¹⁴ Khalifa, 'Fanon Revolutionary Psychiatrist', p. 171.

¹⁵ Fanon cited in Khalifa, 'Fanon Revolutionary Psychiatrist', p. 171.

¹⁶ Fanon, 'Mental Alterations', p. 266.

¹⁷ Fanon, 'Mental Alterations', p. 264.

¹⁸ Fanon, 'Mental Alterations', p. 265.

¹⁹ Fanon, 'Mental Alterations', p. 267.

²⁰ Burman, 'Fanon's Lacan', p. 85.

²¹ Fanon, cited in Burman, 'Fanon's Lacan', pp. 85-86.

Fanon also considered in some detail the role of the image in Lacan's early work, Lacan's earliest thoughts on the mirror stage, and the idea that "the primordial Ego...remains ontologically unstable" engaged in a struggle with "the existential complex" such that "there is an essential discordance within human reality".²² The latter idea is particularly significant inasmuch as it suggests that even the elusive concept of the real - which would of course go on to assume such an important position for the later Lacan - was, at least in this nascent form, an idea that Fanon had already grasped. Fanon also discussed Lacan's notion of *meconnaissance* (imaginary misrecognition), describing it as "the phenomenon of misjudging".²³ Perhaps more crucially yet, Fanon grasped the centrality that Lacan accorded language for both human experience and psychopathology. For Lacan, Fanon reported "the phenomenon of madness is not separable from...language".²⁴

With the above set of ideas - many of which will reappear when we consider current Lacanian re-articulations of Fanonian theory - we have evidence that Fanon understood, even if in preliminary form, the rudiments of Lacan's three registers, namely: the imaginary (as evinced in the concepts of the mirror stage, imaginary identification, *meconnaissance*), the symbolic (the pivotal role of language, desire, the intersubjective) and the real (death drive, the notion of essential discordance). None of this necessarily suggests that Fanon fundamentally agreed with these concepts - his attitude to Lacan in his thesis is enthusiastic yet in some respects guarded, clearly not uncritical - although it shows that Fanon had a good deal more than a passing familiarity with such ideas.

Let us now move to Gibson & Beneduce's *Frantz Fanon, Psychiatry and Politics*, a text which offers further insights into Fanon's early psychiatric writings. Gibson & Beneduce foreground three thematic areas within Lacan's work that proved to be of particular importance to Fanon. The first of these - predictably perhaps - was Fanon's early work circa 1938 on the mirror stage. The second was Lacan's theorization of the family complex, which as Gibson & Beneduce speculate, "Fanon might have considered useful in deconstructing the universality of the Oedipus myth".²⁵ The third was Lacan's understanding of psychic causality which struck a significant distance from the then influential notions of psychical deficit or lack of control in explaining for madness. All three of these areas within Lacan's work "contain[ed] decisive insights that Fanon drew from to build his own critical approach to alienation in [*Black Skin White Masks*]".²⁶

In addition to this overview of those topics in Lacan that were most obviously influential on Fanon, Gibson and Beneduce also identify three additional themes that played a crucial - if less obvious - role in Fanon's subsequent theorizations (some of which have already been noted): Lacan's ideas of misrecognition, Lacan's preference for a historically located notion of psychic life, and the priority afforded by Lacan to the role of paranoia in human intersubjectivity. "It is easy" say Gibson & Beneduce, "to see why the dialectic between recognition and misrecognition placed at the heart of delusion by Lacan, was of interest to Fanon and that this played a part in

²² Fanon, 'Mental Alterations', p. 269.

²³ Fanon, 'Mental Alterations', p. 267.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Gibson & Beneduce, *Fanon, Psychiatry and Politics*, p. 43.

²⁶ Ibid.

his subversive analysis of alienation and persecutory ideas among the dominated”.²⁷ “Without doubt”, continue Gibson & Beneduce

Lacan’s efforts to understand the architecture of delusion and the sense of madness pushed Fanon to discuss Lacan’s theory in his dissertation... The search for a historically founded logic of madness, and the singular definition of history as the “systematic valorization of collective complexes” was decisive in Fanon’s reading of Lacan.²⁸

The phrase “historically founded logic of madness” points to a crucial common denominator between the two psychiatric thinkers. It pertains as much to Fanon’s own subsequent theorizations of the pathogenic nature of the *colonial condition* as it does to Lacan’s own preference for viewing disruptions of psychic life via a detailed consideration of the symbolic order through, and by means of which, they emerge.

It is interesting to note exactly *how* Fanon praises Lacan in his earliest work. Lacan is referred to as “the logician of madness” and is credited with bearing the hope of locating “the organizing principle within madness...the logic of madness”.²⁹ This is worth pausing over. Lacan is not Fanon’s ally only because he is less of a psychical reductionist than many other psychoanalysts of the time (like Fanon’s subsequent target, Octave Mannoni, who in his (1950) *Prospero & Caliban* reduces the political factors of colonial oppression to the internal domain of psychological conflicts). Fanon is saying something more here. To speak of the *logic* of madness, of an *organizing principle* within madness, to make mention of collective *complexes* or, as Gibson & Beneduce do in paraphrasing Fanon, the *architecture* of delusion, is to highlight a mode of psychological functioning. It is to emphasize the role of *processes* or *mechanisms* – indeed, of *structures* - in psychic life in addition to merely adopting the paradigm of sociogenesis.

Fanon is not only interested the psychological reductionism of psychoanalysis and in reiterating the historically-specific and fundamentally political origins of trauma; he remains also concerned with the psychical mechanisms of their individualized reproduction. Differently put: Fanon’s concern is not only with the *contents* of psychic experience and how they arise within the brutal conditions of colonial oppression, he is also, as a psychiatrist, interested in the *processes* of their traumatic influence, with the ways in which they become internalized, *subjectivized* in an actively psychopathologizing way.

Here then follows my critique of how Gibson and Beneduce frame the influence of Lacan upon Fanon. While they certainly – and rightly – highlight Lacan’s role in Fanon’s thinking of the how the psychic is “anchored to culture and history”, of “the social dimensions of the unconscious,” indeed, of how mental disorders “have to be understood within a “social tension” and their meaning to be found in intersubjective relations”³⁰, they tend to shy away from foregrounding - or exploring - the psychical mechanisms involved. Perhaps this is unfair; one might counter that neither Gibson nor Beneduce are clinical psychologists (or psychoanalysts) and that as such it is not their task – or indeed their disciplinary inclination – to focus upon such

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Gibson & Beneduce, *Fanon, Psychiatry and Politics*, pp. 42-43.

²⁹ Gibson & Beneduce, *Fanon, Psychiatry and Politics*, p. 43.

³⁰ Gibson & Beneduce, *Fanon, Psychiatry and Politics*, p. 44.

psychical operations and processes. Then again, Fanon himself was a psychiatrist and *Black Skin White Masks* contains multiple novel theorizations of just such psychical operations, from ideas concerning the racist productions of the Collective European Unconscious, to notions of epidermalization and lactification, from the conceptualization of the ‘corporeal malediction’ entailed in the psychical/bodily trauma of colonial racism, to the phobogenic nature of white racism. In short then, Lacan’s influence on Fanon cannot, I think, be limited to stressing the multiple historical factors underlying colonialism, although the latter remains of course crucial although this is of course remains crucial in countering the psychological reductionism of much psychoanalysis.

Elsewhere, Gibson himself seems to come close to this idea – namely that the emergence of colonial psychopathologies, while very much about socio-historical or contextual factors, is also the result of the psychical *processes* through which such factors are redoubled in their impact. In a lengthy unpublished overview of Fanon’s psychiatric writings, Gibson observes:

Fanon was dismissive of the liberal colonial culturalist insight that neurosis and alienation were simply a result of prejudice or the effect of European “modernization” and “civilization” on a colonized people. Fanon’s specific quest for disalienation in *Black Skin* addresses trauma created by colonialism. To understand alienation, one has to consider the production of mystifications which fasted the Black to images of Blackness, [here citing Fanon] “snaring...imprisoning him [or her] as the eternal victim of an essence, of a visible appearance for which [s/]he is not responsible.”³¹

This is valuable commentary, particular in the attention it pays to the “production of mystifications”. Just as Fanon rightly and powerfully critiques those forms of psychoanalysis that ostensibly reduce the effects of colonialism to psychical dispositions, so it is also important – the more Lacanian psychoanalytic point – not to consider the brutal epistemic and material effects of colonialism as *exclusively* cultural, historical or sociological. Why so? Because such epistemic and material conditions are traumatic and psychopathology-inducing in multiple varied and complex ways. One might frame this, at least in part, as a methodological issue. An adequate engagement with how Fanon utilizes Lacan needs to go a step further than tracing the historical antecedents or conceptual correlates of Fanon’s thought – it needs to enter into psychological discourse itself, to explore and further elaborate *how Fanon operationalizes the psychical to decolonial ends*.

I am here much inspired by Chloë Taylor who offers an instructive comparison of the critical agendas of Fanon and Michel Foucault:

Crucially, the cause and cure of mental illness is socio-political, and the function of psychiatry and psychoanalysis is, likewise, political, whether it is used to preserve colonization, as in the cases Fanon critiques, or, as in his own use of psychiatry, to aid the process of decolonization. In short, Fanon, like Foucault, sees specific psychological discourses as contributing to the production rather than to the cure of the

³¹ Gibson, *Decolonizing Madness*, p. 14.

psychopathologies they describe, but he differs from Foucault in so far as he envisions and enacts his own psychological discourses as counter-attacks against this process.³²

Not only then does Fanon “acknowledge the nonscientific and political function of psychiatry and psychoanalysis”, says Taylor he takes these discourses up, “using them as tools for anticolonial engagement”.³³ This is why it seems crucial to move beyond the scholarly historian’s task of identifying the elements of Lacanian thought that show up in Fanon’s work and to consider also how Fanon actively reformulates such ideas and how he – and we – might put them to decolonial ends.

3. Conceptual parallels

Having provided a general overview of Lacanian themes in the early Fanon, let us now turn to a series of shared themes that have tended to remain under-developed in the literature. As part of this task, we will need to address the topic of sociogeny, a topic which is often assumed to represent a crucial and intractable difference between Fanon’s work and that of psychoanalytic theorization.

It is, unfortunately, often the case in the secondary literature that Fanon’s critique of “Freud’s ontogenetic reductionism”³⁴ is read as a dismissal of all ontogenetic and phylogenetic issues, and indeed, as a rejection of psychoanalysis *tout court*. At some level, this attack is something that we should appreciate: there are certainly many moments within the history of psychoanalysis where the facts of political oppression have been read as the result of psychical conflicts and intra- and inter-psychical psychodynamics (Mannoni’s *Prospero & Caliban* again serves as a case in point). And yet to foreclose all analytical attention to the *psychical*, the *unconscious*, and indeed, the *individual*, would likewise represent a critical and crucial omission in developing an adequate strategy of decolonization.

This then is a prospective error to be aware of, that in attempting to grasp the full extent of the structural role of oppression on the psyche we might run the risk of not adequately exploring how the individual patient has understood and internalized such structures. So, whereas a critic like Bulhan in *Frantz Fanon and the Psychology of Oppression* is certainly right to follow Fanon in insisting upon the socio-political, historical and material conditions that underlie instances of psychopathology, he arguably fails to follow Fanon in thinking how such a ‘psycho-political’ relation works both ways. We need to bear in mind, in other words, how racist structure is psychically mediated.

My concerns are shared by Marilyn Nissim-Sabat who clarifies that sociogeny “is Fanon’s term for the process whereby social structures and meanings, including the ideology of racial inferiority, are formed and internalized, resulting in self-negation”.³⁵ Sociogeny, she insists, needs to be differentiated both from phylogeny (which concerns the evolution of the species) and ontogeny (the progressive development of the individual). It is thus vital that Fanon

³² Taylor, ‘Fanon, Foucault’, p. 66.

³³ Taylor, ‘Fanon, Foucault’, p. 62.

³⁴ Bulhan, *Fanon and the Psychology of Oppression*, p. 72.

³⁵ Nissim-Sabat, ‘Fanonian Musings’, p. 42.

describes and explains sociogeny in terms of the effect of *individual* psychology of socio-economic processes. Why? Precisely because “social process leading to black alienation effect...human beings as individual in both their intrapsychic and intersubjective or social existence”.³⁶

David Marriott provides us with a sense of what would be lost to Fanonian forms of analysis if we were to excise all psychoanalytic conceptualization from his work:

Fanon constantly wants to discover a reading of culture that is psychopolitical, but a psychopolitics that, in its analysis of unconscious fantasy and colonial reality,...show[s] how racist fantasy can not only be fully integrated and institutionalized, but remains a kind of traumatic – albeit disavowed – memory in the unconscious life of the colonized.³⁷

If we jettison completely the notion of the unconscious, as David Macey so often seems to read Fanon as urging us to do,³⁸ then we lose an awareness of the psychic life of power. This is arguably why a Fanonian project of decolonization can – or should – never completely jettison psychoanalysis, at least insofar as the latter provides a means of uprooting the subjective and unconscious dimensions of oppression. What this means, in more overtly Lacanian terms, is that we need to take into account the patient’s relationship to the cultural situation (to the symbolic order, the ‘big Other’), a relationship necessarily mediated both by structural (social, historical, political) factors and by the particularities of fantasy and the unconscious.

The move to consider more prominently the subject’s relation to the role of the symbolic order helps bring into view a further crucial parallel between Fanonian and Lacanian conceptualizations. Seshadri-Crookes’s *Desiring Whiteness* (2000) provides an effective example of how Lacanian ideas can be used to support and augment Fanon’s thinking. Seshadri-Crookes utilizes Lacanian theory precisely so as to make explicit a crucial (yet often implicit) conceptual distinction in Fanon’s *Black Skin White Masks*. We make an error, she says (for both Fanon and for Lacan) by

locating our reading of race on the ostensibly dual plane of the mirror relation alone, which leads to the simpler opposition now entrenched in cultural studies between the “self” and the “other”... [In so doing] we risk confining race to a notion of the ego as false consciousness. Race we will then be led to assert, is an illusory, narcissistic construct, and racism is an ego defense. If the order of race.... pertained only to the subject’s assimilation of his her ego ideal, then race as such would seem to have nothing to do with the symbolic...that is, with the psychical structure of the subject. It would seem to be free of the effects of the signifier.³⁹

³⁶ Nissim-Sabat, ‘Fanonian Musings’, p. 43.

³⁷ Marriott, *Whither Fanon?*, p. 70.

³⁸ Macey, ‘Recall of the Real’.

³⁹ Seshadri-Crookes, *Desiring Whiteness*, p. 32.

Or, more simply put: to view the dynamics of racism in a purely psychological register (as a dual or narcissistic relation between the self and other) is to lose sight of the structuring role the symbolic (indeed, of the big Other) in the psyche of the subject. This is a nice example of Lacanian theory playing a supporting role in extending a Fanonian insight. Indeed, to insist that “race cannot be mapped onto the simpler theory of misrecognition and ego identification” and “that one can only do so through an inadequate understanding of the [Lacanian] imaginary, and the raced subject”⁴⁰ is to agree with Fanon’s assertion in *Toward the African Revolution*, that we should emphatically refrain from reducing racism merely to psychology:

Racism...is only one element of a vaster whole: that of... systematized oppression... Psychologists, who tend to explain everything by movements of the psyche, claim to discover this behavior on the level of contacts between individuals... The habit of considering racism as a mental quirk, as a psychological flaw, must be abandoned.⁴¹

Having stressed that racism is not reducible to the psychological for Fanon, we should nevertheless recall that one of the challenges he faced in *Black Skin White Masks* was accounting for the omnipresence and inescapability of racial (and of course racist) consciousness in the colony. The pervasiveness as racism as a cultural schema that over-rides, indeed, over-determines individual experience is part of what made Fanon’s work so important to critical theorists of race, discourse theorists and cultural studies scholars in the 1980’s and 1990’s. Fanon, however, is interested in more than the content of discourse or a critique of dominant representational forms; he is concerned also with what underlies and fundamentally arranges such understandings and depictions, in what guarantees their repetition.

Fanon, is, I think, trying to conceptualize an obdurate yet mobile set of intersecting stereotypes and racist presumptions that come to function as effectively automatic, as prior to rational thoughts. This is a latent, pre-propositional type of social comprehension that situates the colonial subject in reference to questions of difference and identity. In this way, Fanon’s theoretical concerns might be described as focused on a political mode of *fantasy*. This is what Fanon offers in his attention to what he calls ‘the Negro myth’: an outlining of the fantasy frame, the configuring parameters of racist ideation which are not themselves explicitly stated but nonetheless condition racial comprehension.

The ‘Negro myth’ is a racist system of representations and attitudes that is in a sense more substantial – more socially rooted – than individual psychological experience. Fanon goes on to use the term ‘European collective unconscious’ to describe how pervasive and systematic is this image of blackness: “the archetype of the lowest values is represented by the negro”.⁴² Fanon’s critique of Jung comes to the fore here:

Jung locates the collective unconscious in the inherited cerebral matter. But there is no need to resort to genes; the collective unconscious is quite simply the repository or prejudices, myths, and collective attitudes of a particular group... Jung confuses

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Fanon, *Toward the African Revolution*, pp. 33-34.

⁴² Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 198.

instinct and habit. According to him the collective unconscious is part of the psyche; the myths and archetypes are permanent engrams of the species....this [European] collective unconscious is nothing of the sort...it is cultural, i.e., it is acquired. ⁴³

This critique of Jung offers us an excellent, if yet somewhat provisional, anticipation of an external unconscious of symbolic elements, just as it foreshadows the Lacanian conceptualization of the big Other (“the repository or prejudices, myths, and collective attitudes” ⁴⁴). There is a sense here in which Fanon and Lacan are unexpected allies, even in Fanon’s critique of psychoanalysis. How so?

Well, the notion of an ‘individual’ unconscious somehow insulated from the societal domain (from the symbolic Other) cannot be adequate, especially so within the realm of such brutal disparities of power as the colony. This is why it is so crucial that Fanon takes up and radicalizes the Jungian concept of the collective unconscious. Rather than view this as a misadventure in psychoanalytic theory – as it would be for many Lacanians wary of Jung’s notions of shared archetypes and a collective unconscious - we should see it as a necessary push towards a more societal-symbolic conceptualization of the unconscious which anticipates or parallels Lacan’s own conceptual developments in this regard.

One of the reasons that Lacanian theory represents an advance on the types of psychoanalysis so frequently criticized by Fanon in *Black Skin White Masks* is that it stresses that the unconscious is never merely individual but is instead, crucially, *trans-individual*. To make this argument, it helps to stress a few crucial concepts within Lacanian theory. Lacanian psychoanalysis, firstly, is most emphatically not a *depth* psychology (it is never exclusively focused on the *intra*-subjective). Secondly, the fact that the symbolic order (or: the big Other) is given such a constitutive role in the making of the subject (who is always, ‘the subject of the signifier’) means that the Lacanian unconscious is effectively *external* rather than internal. Differently put, to understand Lacan’s notion of the unconscious is to appreciate that the unconscious always represents a social relation, a relation of the subject to the big Other (hence any number of Lacanian well-known maxims: ‘desire is always the desire of the Other’, ‘the unconscious is the discourse of the Other’). It is for these reasons that Lacanian theory is – arguably - the form of psychoanalysis best able to understand the determining role of the political, which precisely is what Fanon demands in *Black Skin White Masks*.

4. Contemporary Lacanian re-articulations

We have examined Fanon’s earliest citations of Lacan in addition to identifying a series of (often subtle) conceptual parallels existing between the work of the two theorists. We move now to consider what I take to be one of the most important recent Lacanian efforts to re-articulate salient aspects of Fanon’s ideas, namely the work of Peter Hudson. ⁴⁵

⁴³ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 188.

⁴⁴ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 165.

⁴⁵ Were it not for limits of space, I would include here also engagements with Burman, *Fanon, Education, Action, George, Trauma and Race* and Stephens (2018) ‘Skin, Stain and Lamella’, all of whom have in some way furthered a type of Lacanian-Fanonism. This task will have to wait to a future publication.

Hudson credits Fanon for devising the concept of the colonial unconscious, which is prevalent in multiple postcolonial contexts today. This colonial unconscious is likewise apparent in the return of the colonial repressed, that is, in the reappearance of often extreme, unreconstructed forms of racism in ostensibly democratic or liberal societies. In introducing and expanding upon the notion of the colonial unconscious, Hudson utilizes Lacanian terminology, stressing the differential and yet asymmetrical relation between “blackness” and the master signifier of “whiteness” which colonizing subjects identify with and which “invests them with...the illusion of self-sufficiency and full autonomy”.⁴⁶

Following the arguments advanced by Fanon in *Black Skin White Masks*, Hudson notes that black subjects likewise identify with, and perceive themselves through, this master signifier. Doing so results in a structurally harmonious body image – in Fanon’s terms, a viable ‘corporeal schema’ – for those who are recognized as white. The result, by contrast, for those *not* recognized as white, is something far less stable and far more dissonant and anxiety-provoking dissonant – a type of bodily and psychic dismemberment. (Oliver helpfully describes this, the effect of the white mirror on the black subject “as undermining any sense of unification and control...returning the black body and psyche to a state of fragmentation and lack of control”⁴⁷). Turning to “the white order of being with which he seeks to identify” the black “sees himself as non-existent” stresses Hudson.⁴⁸ The black subject is hence torn between two impossible positions - to be white and to be black, the first of which is barred in the colonial context while the second is “an impossibility in its own terms as there is no black “being””.⁴⁹ This, for Hudson sums up “the ontological void of the black colonized subject”.⁵⁰

While this may seem to reiterate key elements of the literature discussing the application of Lacan’s mirror stage by Fanon, it adds something also: the role of the signifier, the idea of the colonial symbolic and the notion of the Colonial Big Other. As Hudson puts it, in an insightful reading of Fanon that combines the Lacanian concepts of the imaginary (image-based notions of body and identity) and the symbolic (language, social structure and laws):

The colonial symbolic is so constructed as to give the black subject nothing to hold onto – no orthopaedic support for an identity... Within the colonial matrix, this is the ontological vortex that is the elementary colonial identity and lived experience... [T]he meaning of whiteness and that of “blackness” is carried via [here citing Fanon] “a constellation of postulates, a series of propositions...anecdotes, stories...prejudices, myths”... We can call this constellation the Colonial Big Other (symbolic) in and through which the colonial relation is constituted and reproduced. This Big Other is white, in that whiteness is the master signifier and therefore all identities are “white” under colonialism.⁵¹

⁴⁶ Hudson, ‘State and the Colonial Unconscious’, p. 264.

⁴⁷ Oliver, *Colonization of Psychic Space*, p. 21.

⁴⁸ Hudson, ‘State and the Colonial Unconscious’, p. 264.

⁴⁹ Hudson, ‘State and the Colonial Unconscious’, p. 265.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

It is on this basis that Hudson's most original and compelling insights are reached, and the influence of Lacan (and, admittedly that of Ernesto Laclau and Žižek) are most assuredly on display:

A crucial feature of the colonial symbolic is that the real is not [effectively] screened off...At the place of the colonized, the symbolic and imaginary give way because non-identity (the real of the social) is *immediately* inscribed in the "lived experience" of the colonized subject... [For the colonized] the void of the verb "to be" is the very content of his interpellation... "Fixed" into "non-fixity," ... he is where the colonial symbolic falters in the production of meaning and is thus the point of entry of the real into the texture itself of colonialism. ⁵²

The Lacanian concept of the real (that which eludes both symbolization and the domestication of the imaginary) is thus put to the work of a distinctively Fanonian critique. It helps to recall here that within Lacanian theory all symbolization produces an excess - a residue, a type of 'extra-discursive' stain - that cannot be integrated within the symbolic order itself. This recalcitrance to symbolization is materialized in the form of what Lacan dubs 'object a', that is a type of extrusive element which is simultaneously definitively *not* part of the symbolic order and yet nonetheless still produced by it. Hence the idea, within continental political philosophy of the "part of no part", an object without a designated place, a non-totalizable excess that is produced by a system that cannot recognize its categories. ⁵³

We have then, via a mode of political Lacanian social theory, a novel conceptualization of the state of the racist social and psychic alienation suffered by the colonized subject:

The colonized...has a designated place, but in that place the colonized experiences a void of no identity – its specificity is to be a non-identity recognized in the categories that produce it. It is an excess of non-meaning...[yet] it is part of the system. In this way colonialism integrates its "part of no part" ... The real doesn't erode the system (from within), but is included as its ballast – the destitution of the colonized is the condition of possibility of the plenitude of the colonizer. ⁵⁴

Cynics may complain that this is simply a different level of conceptual formalization which ultimately adds nothing new to Fanon's theorization of colonial alienation. There may be some truth to this – I don't think Hudson's use of Lacanian theory is aimed at going beyond Fanon, quite the contrary, it aims at being faithful to Fanon's thinking in *Black Skin White Masks*. And yet is it not the case that such a re-formalization, that is, the translation of Fanon's existential-phenomenological conceptualizations into a different theoretical register, itself opens up new perspectives and modes of critique? Doing so – to reiterate – need not take us *beyond* Fanon, but might simply articulate his political insights in novel and differently accented ways, drawing our attention thus to potentially unexplored facets of Fanon's original account.

⁵² Hudson, 'State and the Colonial Unconscious', p. 266.

⁵³ See Douzinas & Žižek, *The Idea of Communism*.

⁵⁴ Hudson, 'State and the Colonial Unconscious', p. 267.

Hudson, for example, understands that in Lacanian theory the subject is thoroughly alienated in the signifier/big Other, and yet he also appreciates, via Fanon, that there are powerful and asymmetrical differences in how this alienation occurs in the colonial domain. (Frosh, incidentally, proves very helpful here, sketching how Lacanian and Fanonian theory might be brought together: Lacan typically offers a *culturally undifferentiated account* (of the mirror stage, of alienation, the gaze, etc.) whereas Fanon offers a *historically grounded and racialized version* of certain of these ideas⁵⁵).

By his inter-meshing of Lacanian and Fanonian theory, Hudson foregrounds a strategy of potential political dis-alienation with different points of emphasis to what might be expected from more existential-phenomenological perspectives. Stressing once again that the black occupies a position of a pseudo-subject in the colonial order, Hudson argues – as might be expected – that the colonized has to separate itself from the Big Other, to “withdraw...from the colonial nothing that he is”.⁵⁶ However, if the black subject’s existential anxiety along with their inability to assume a viable human subject-position is, as we have seen, regulated by the big Other, then there is a problem. In short: the colonized as element of the real, as the object a of the colonial system, is not so easily separated from this system. “Colonialism colonizes the real...this point of excess (object small a) is inscribed into the functioning of colonialism itself”.⁵⁷

In short, the rejection, even the denigration, of whiteness will not suffice. If it is the case – as Fanon had already insisted – that the colonized unconsciously identifies with whiteness and believes that whiteness (even as denigrated) is the way out of colonial destitution then such attempts will only re-inscribe colonial alienation. It is not simply that whiteness must be attacked or destroyed:

the colonized subject has to destroy his attachment to whiteness by withdrawing to the point where he sustains himself, wiping the slate clean of his colonial identity clean before any anti-colonial transformation is possible...To antagonize colonialism, an empty subject is required, but the emptiness of the colonized isn’t empty enough – it still occupies a subject position [within the colonial big Other] no matter that its identity is not to have one – emancipation, on the other hand, requires separation from the signifier.⁵⁸

Exactly what this separation from the signifier might mean is a topic I have taken up elsewhere.⁵⁹ Suffice it to say that we have an example in which Lacanian social theory is able to offer, via a series of unique theoretical tools (the real, the big Other, object a, alienation-in-the-signifier) its own distinctive variation on Fanon’s account of dis-alienation in the colonial realm.

⁵⁵ Frosh, ‘Psychoanalysis, Colonialism, Racism’.

⁵⁶ Hudson, ‘State and the Colonial Unconscious’, p. 268.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Hudson, ‘State and the Colonial Unconscious’, pp. 268-69.

⁵⁹ Hook, ‘Death drive in Žižek and Fanon’.

5. Conclusion: Lacanian-Fanonism?

In the first section of this paper I noted many of the Lacanian ideas – on historically situated forms of madness, (mis)recognition (*meconnaissance*), paranoid identification and psychical causality, etc. – that Fanon drew inspiration from in his earliest psychiatric work. In the second section I traced a series of conceptual parallels that could be said to characterize the relationship between the work of these two psychiatrists. Key themes here included the role of sociology, the importance of symbolic (or social) structure, the notions of fantasy (Fanon's 'Negro myth') and the idea of a social (or trans-individual) unconscious (Fanon's 'European collective unconscious').⁶⁰ In the third section I drew extensively on Hudson's Lacanian re-articulation of several crucial Fanonian ideas to highlight how contemporary forms of Lacanian-Fanonism might not only be possible but may well prove a crucial aspect of a decolonizing agenda.

Exactly how though might a Lacanian perspective assist the project of decolonization? Well, we have, via Hudson, isolated one seemingly doomed and potentially counter-productive approach. Decolonial strategy that focusses its energies in attacking whiteness is likely to be unsuccessful if it is the case – as Hudson, following Fanon, suggests it is – that whiteness operates as a master signifier. This is particular the case if – again following – Fanon – this master signifier is one which the colonized remains unconsciously identified with. Differently put: focalizing whiteness as the object of critique makes whiteness no less central in our (post)colonial present. If whiteness, furthermore, is retained as a master signifier then blackness will presumably remain locked into “the place of a pseudo-subject”, for, as Hudson reminds us, “the colonized....still occupies a subject position [in the colonial order] no matter that its identity is not to have one”.⁶¹ Attacking, reviling whiteness is an inadequate political program inasmuch as it risks simply *re-inscribing* – the colonial Big Other, rather than advancing a fully-fledged and definitive separation from this Other. The current condition of colonial emptiness needs to be, further, more radically, emptied out, fully separated from the signifier.

⁶²

On the basis of the literature overviewed above, we can now arrive at a conclusion. Providing that one is not attempting to reduce Fanon's work to a Lacanian set of ideas (to make Fanon merely a footnote to Lacan), and insofar as we do not denude or elide the crucial political dimension of Fanon's work by means of depoliticizing applications of psychoanalysis, then Lacanian theory can be – and already has been – an ally to the decolonizing project of Fanonian theorization. There are, I think, greater possibilities for theoretical innovation and

⁶⁰ In *Critical Psychology of the Postcolonial* I have also remarked on the underlying compatibility of several other Fanonian and Lacanian concepts (Fanon's idea of epidermalization and the Lacanian imaginary; the sexualized dimension of colonial racism for Fanon and the Lacanian idea of racism as mode of *jouissance*; the prospect that just as there is a Lacanian 'real' there is also a Fanonian 'real', etc.).

⁶¹ Hudson, 'State and the Colonial Unconscious', p. 269.

⁶² One suggestion of how this might effectively be achieved requires a careful reading of Fanon's somewhat cryptic thoughts, in the opening pages of *Black Skin White Masks*, on the zone of nonbeing, which he characterizes as “an extraordinarily sterile and arid region, an utterly naked declivity where an authentic upheaval can be born”, noting furthermore that “In most cases, the black man lacks the advantage of being able to accomplish this descent into a real hell”, p. 8.

expansion by moving between Fanon and Lacan than has been generally acknowledged by Fanon scholars. The attempt to find critical articulations between Fanonian and Lacanian thought, and to utilize Lacanian psychoanalysis to the ends of a decolonizing agenda, remains an unfinished project.

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