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PEER-REVIEWED ARTICLE

Intersections of racist identification, love, and guilt: On the vicissitudes of colonial masochism

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ABSTRACT

In a short yet dense section of *Black Skin White Masks*, Frantz Fanon tackles an unexpected topic, namely that of how, within colonial contexts, white subjects might enjoy or fantasize scenes involving their own humiliation or debasement by those they have colonized. These pages make an important contribution to psychoanalytic engagements with the project of decolonization, revealing, as they do, facets of the masochistic unconscious dynamics of colonial racism in which guilt, identification, and sadism/masochism intersect. In this article, I provide a commentary—both expository and in some respects critical—on Fanon's all too brief analysis of such unconscious and/or sublimated scenes. I close with a few remarks on questions and further research questions posed by Fanon's analysis.

KEYWORDS: masochism; identification; racism; guilt; decolonial; Fanon; psychoanalysis

'[A] CERTAIN IDENTIFICATION OF THE WHITE MAN WITH THE BLACK'

In the sixth chapter of *Black Skin White Masks* (Fanon, 1967), in a section focusing on the fantasmatically overdetermined *imago* of the Black man, Fanon takes up a somewhat unexpected topic: the masochistic dimension of white racism. The Black man, argues Fanon, is a target of the white man's racial jealousy and rivalry (the Black man 'is a beast…it is [his] sexual potency which impresses [the white man]' [p. 170]). It quickly becomes that the figure of the white woman succumbing to enjoyment is as much a point of fixation as is the Black man as faceless agent of a type of *jouissance* without measure. The white man becomes, in this sense, the masochistic object of his own racist fantasy. He is repeatedly shown up as

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sexually inferior, as incapable of the fantasmatically exaggerated sexual powers of the Black man.

It is at this point that Fanon, in an ingenious move, turns to the topic of children's literature noting that a similar theme, albeit in a far more disguised form, is apparent there. Addressing American author Bernard Wolfe's idea of the 'ambivalence in the white man' as 'the dominant factor in the white American psychology' (1967, p. 173), and, alongside it, the examples of popular stories which give some form of expression to this ambivalence (such as Joel Chandler Harris's *Uncle Remus* stories), Fanon notes the prospect that a repressed 'admiration corresponds to a certain identification of the white man with the Black' (pp. 173–174). It is clear, says Fanon, that the rabbit—who invariably emerges as the victor in the many scrapes that he finds himself in—is the Black man 'in his remarkably ironic and wary disguise' (p. 174). What is in question, of course, is not merely a form of unadmitted identification or envy, but a reaction of 'unconscious masochism' itself the result of the 'rapturous admiration of… Black… prowess' (p. 174). A double move is afoot here. What is tacitly registered, namely the fact of the white man being outstripped, humiliated, shown up as inferior in matters of phallic ingenuity or, by extension, sexual potency, is immediately offset by the relegation of this heroic character, and by extension, the Black man he is thought to represent, to the ranks of the animal.

Improvising on Wolfe's analysis, Fanon identifies several intersecting dynamics at work within the masochistic dimension of white racism. We have the idea, firstly, that in consigning the Black man to inferiority, to 'the Limbo of mankind' (1967, p. 174), that is, to being in every respect the very opposite of his own anxious self ('unworried, gregarious, voluble, muscularly relaxed… exuberant' [p. 175]), the white man has inadvertently created an object of considerable envy. The work of racist counter-identification has, in other words, re-located a series of at once denigrated and yet also wished for, *desired*, attributes in the place of Blackness, and Blackness itself is made responsible for the aggressive envy that results. Yet this suggestion doesn't go quite far enough, for it does not adequately register the factor of guilt nor, arguably, the degree of identification required for this guilt, or need for punishment, to arise.

Fanon goes on to cite Wolfe's (1949) analysis of the motivations of Joel Chandler Harris at some length. It is here that the crucial factor of ambivalent identification as it occurs within white racism can be identified. Harris, according to Wolfe (as cited by Fanon) was 'filled… [with] racial obsessions over above those that tormented the South and, to a lesser extent, all of white America' (1967, p. 175). 'Here again' says Fanon, 'the white man is the victim of his unconscious' (p. 175). Furthermore:

> Harris, the archetype of the southerner, went in search of the… [Black man's] love and claimed that he had won it… [Yet] he was striving for the… [Black man's] hatred, and he reveled in it, in an unconscious orgy of masochism… punishing himself for not being the Black man… Is it not

> possible that… the majority of white America, often behave in the same way…? (Wolfe, cited in Fanon, 1967, p. 176)

At first glance, this strikes one as an example of Lacan's imaginary (ego-other/mirror) relation. The ego desperately seeks affirmation—and more than this, a type of narcissistic self-substantiation—in its insistence that the other convey to them an idealizing (ideal-ego affirming) image of themselves as lovable. Such a relationship is always in danger of tipping over into a lethal form of rivalry. While this love-hating aggressivity of the ego's relation to its other/mirror image is evident here, we need to be wary of accepting such a general Lacanian formulation as an adequate explanation. So, while the imaginary dimension remains foundational here, we need also to note the factor of 'an unconscious orgy of masochism', the apparent—and markedly counter-intuitive—result of the white man 'punishing himself for not being the Black man' (Wolfe, cited in Fanon, 1967, p. 175). In short: an additional analytical step is required here, one that foregrounds the white Southerner's 'search [for] the [Black man's] love' (Fanon, 1967, p. 176).

GUILT OVER ENJOYMENT

Perhaps contrary to expectations, this factor of racist love, or, more precisely, of the *racist demand for love from the denigrated other*, is a common and longstanding feature of anti-Blackness. One recalls in this respect the third chapter of Wilderson's (2020) *Afropessimism*, the title of which—'Hattie McDaniel is Dead'—invokes both the character of Mammy in *Gone with the Wind* that McDaniel became famous for playing, and the ceaseless demand made by whites for a type of love-affirmation from those designated as Black. Why this goes beyond the standard parameters of the imaginary ego-other relation—or, alternatively, what makes it a *special, exaggerated case of such a relation*—is, potentially, at least, the factor of guilt. The particular intensity of this need to secure a loving gaze from the place of an other is, presumably, proportionate to the degree of debasement, dehumanization, and violence that, under conditions of anti-Blackness, is invariably directed towards this same other.

We need to be cautious here however, so as not to slip into an overly psychologizing mode of explanation. While we should not neglect the factor of guilt—and particularly the factor of *unconscious* guilt or, more aptly expressed, the *need for punishment*, a properly Freudian point of emphasis—we need also bear in mind that under conditions of coloniality/anti-Blackness, acts of racist denigration or violence *need not occasion any guilt at all*, at least not in ways we might expect (i.e., guilt for causing harm to another). Yet even if no inter-subjective form of guilt is induced by such acts, we can expect that they may well give rise to instances of *jouissance*. A Lacanian perspective proves helpful here, not only by prioritizing, analytically, the factor of *jouissance* over that of affect, but in terms of differentiating between sources/modes of guilt. That is to say, the guilt that may arise in such situations—as

motivating the white subject's searching for the Black man or woman's love—is typically less about what has been done to the Black other, than about the white subject's *relation to their own obscene enjoyment*. It helps here to stress that in Lacanian theory, the 'substance' of a subject's enjoyment is disgusting even to themselves.

So, while psychoanalytically we should always be cautious about making social generalizations about as phenomena as subjective and psychically complex as guilt, we could suggest that white guilt in response to acts of anti-Blackness is first and foremost guilt about enjoying too much, enjoying in ways which the standpoint of an Other might view as unseemly or indecent. Differently put: this guilt results not primarily because of a lapse in intersubjective ethics occurring at the imaginary level—that is, between an ego and a (little) other who serves as stand-in for this ego (a mirror-image other). Rather—and here we take a further step in our argument—the guilt arises as the result of how the white subject might be apprehended by the (big) symbolic Other—the anonymous witness or standpoint of evaluation standing in for Society as such—as indulging in a gratuitous form of enjoyment.

To be caught in such a reverie of *jouissance* is for one's own enjoyment to be shown up as prurient, excessive. To add a further qualification: even if the act of anti-Black derogation or violence might be condoned by the symbolic order, even if it is endorsed by the big Other of the racist symbolic order, what remains nonetheless compromising and guilt-inducing is the degree to which the perpetrator of the act might be witnessed in the quasi-orgasmic enjoyment at what they have done. There are many condoned (legal/acceptable) forms of enjoyment that we are invited, even incited, to indulge in—transgressive/hedonistic rituals, for example, sexual experimentation, various modes of excess, etc.—yet most of us would rather not be witnessed 'getting off' in such ways.

Interestingly however, even if the guilt stems from the white subject's relation to their own enjoyment (as opposed to from a sense of harm done), the white subject will often nonetheless still seek a redemptive moment, an affirmation of love from the Black other. This occurs not primarily because they wish to repair any wrongdoing that they have done to this other (although such feelings and motivations may follow in a secondary capacity), but so that they might restore their own image of themselves as a good, honorable, loveable person. This is something which is best done by having such an image confirmed before the Other in a social situation.

THE SOOTHING SCREEN-IMAGE

Let us return to Fanon's commentary on Wolfe's analysis. Fanon highlights Wolfe's remarks on the popularity of reoccurring—and fantasmatically disturbing/alluring—themes within popular culture of the day, such as stories of Black men having sex with white women; white men discovering that they are in fact Black; whites being massacred by Blacks, etc. The

cultural instantiations of white racist masochism evinced here are counterbalanced by the stereotypical emblem of the smiling face of the old, servile, enslaved Black man, as epitomized by the character of Uncle Remus in Harris's novels. The libidinal function of such a figure—of which there are many historical variations, including the figures of Aunt Jemima and Uncle Ben that were used in the advertising of US food products—is to effectively assuage and reverse white anxieties caused by the multiple threats posed by Blackness. As Wolfe argues: so long as we can 'package the [Black man's]… grin and market it on a grand scale in our popular culture', so long as whites are 'being titillated by the subtle content of the stereotyped grin', then there is a 'a cloak for this masochism' (Wolfe, cited in Fanon, 1967, p. 176). The white audience is soothed, in other words, by a screen-image. As such, these images clearly had a fetishistic role to play—at least in the sense that they held a type of castration at bay.

If we are in any doubt as the white (racist) cultural need for such a pacifying screen-image, Fanon reiterates the sexual threat posed by colonial stereotypes. The Black man, he says, 'is the incarnation of a genital potency beyond all moralities and prohibitions', 'the keeper of the… gate that opens into the realm of orgies, of bacchanals, of delirious sexual sensations' (Fanon, 1967, p. 177). The juxtaposition between these two caricatured stereotypes of Black masculinity should thus be jarring, marked by a manifest and irresolvable contradiction. What we find instead however is that the transition between the two types of imagery is, somehow, narratively appealing; a libidinal dynamic of sorts plays its part, in mediating this shift.

A more recent example of this libidinal dynamic is to be found in the historical portrayals of Nelson Mandela. In his youth, Mandela was represented as a fiercely uncompromising African Nationalist, an advocate of armed struggle, a committed revolutionary, often depicted as anti-white, a communist, a terrorist. By the time he became president of South Africa, Mandela was represented in a very different way, as the benign father of the nation, as the embodiment of hope and national reconciliation, as, to borrow a phrase from Wolfe, 'Eternally… grinning' (1949, p. 21).

Whereas in Mandela's case, these two types of imagery are separated by a significant historical divide, this is not always the case. If we were to suggest an example from popular culture where both such facets of white fantasies of the Black man are rapidly juxtaposed, it would the character of John Coffey in the book and film versions of Stephen King's 1930's prison drama *The Green Mile* (directed by Frank Darabont). The figure of Coffey (played by Michael Clarke Duncan in the film version), is described as 'a gentle giant of a prisoner… who brings a sense of spirit and humanity to his guards and fellow inmates' in publicity materials for the film. Coffey is a particularly effective example of the deeply lovable, good Black man who stoically endures his suffering and thereby alleviates white fears regards the multiple threats posed by Black masculinity. The huge figure of Coffey—the film constantly reiterates his imposing, muscular physical form, along with his simple-minded nature (he is afraid of the dark)—is initially assumed to be guilty of raping and murdering two white girls, until the white

protagonist, prison officer Paul Edgecomb (played by Tom Hanks) discovers that he is innocent. In fact, not only is Coffey innocent, but he is a kind of spiritual healer, who selflessly absorbs the pain and ailments of others (he has been attempting to heal the two girls who he was accused of killing). By the end of the story Coffey is—predictably enough—executed, despite his innocence, a plot device which adds a further turn of the screw to the masochistic *jouissance* the story evokes. The popularity of King's story presumably had much to do with how the narrative took its audience from a threatening to a non-threatening stereotype of Black masculinity.

We can take a further step here once we consider the Freudian postulate according to which the key to masturbation is not so much the physical act itself but rather the *accompanying fantasy*. There is a self-pleasuring dimension to this ebb and flow between intense masochistic stimulation and the assuaging, pacifying—and much loved—images of the neutralized Black man who, resigned to his fate, has been rendered benevolent and docile ('this gentle, melancholy old slave with his eternal grin' [Fanon, 1967, p. 175, n. 35]). Crude an analogy as this might be—the masochistic enjoyment of racism as effectively masturbatory—it seems nonetheless apt: we have the initial excitation of the fantasmatic image, which is heightened, made painfully arousing, only for this libidinal charge to be relieved in a type of assuaging release, which is itself made possible by the soothing, narcissistically affirming image of the impotent, ever-smiling, ever-faithful Black man or woman. This rhythm of arousal and satiation is proper to fantasy itself, and here we cannot but be reminded of Lacan's notion that fantasy both stages castration and provides a remedy of sorts—a kind of stoppage, reversal, or suspension—of the threatened castration. It is interesting in this respect that Lacan's (2020) illustration of this idea in *Seminar IV*, his reference to a frozen cinema image, a type of screen-memory—which implies stasis, fixedness, unchangeability—is also evident in the fetishistic, iconic imagery of the smiling aged Black man that we are discussing, at least in so far as this figure—as both Fanon and Wolfe emphasize is to again refer to Wolfe's phrase, 'Eternally… grinning' (1949, p. 31). Likewise interesting here is the fact that Lacan offers such remarks in a commentary on Freud's account of beating fantasies, which of course is fundamentally concerned with masochism—and which we turn to in due course—and that he, Lacan, was focused precisely on the *perverse* 'valorization' of such images (Lacan, 2020). It is surely just such an instance of perverse (or fetishistic) valorization of an image that we are concerned with here.

DEFENSIVE IDENTIFICATIONS

While Fanon evidently approves of Wolfe's analysis, he seems to find it incomplete—suspecting, perhaps, that it does not pinpoint a clear psychical mechanism underlying masochism—and he subsequently goes on to offer a series of further elaborations of Wolfe's psychoanalytic thesis. Such folktales, says Fanon, allow the Black man and woman to 'work

off… [their] aggression' (1967, p. 176). This, for Wolfe—interestingly—amounts to a type of sadism, a type of sadistic *jouissance* of which the Black man and woman remain largely unaware. The white man's unconscious 'justifies this aggression', continues Fanon, and 'gives it worth by turning it on himself, thus justifying the classic schema of masochism' (1967, p. 176). While Fanon moves very quickly here—seemingly omitting a series of intermediary steps in his analysis (we could ask: *Why would the white man be willing to take the Black man's aggression onto himself?*)—he is in fact staying close to Freud. In his 'Three Essays on Sexuality', Freud after all argued that 'masochism is nothing more than an extension of sadism turned round upon the subject's self' (1905, p. 158).

It is worth bearing in mind the sublimated and thereby largely unconscious form of what Fanon is describing. The medium of folktales and/or children's literature, is crucial: this is what allows whites to receive Black aggressions—even if in a disguised and severely attenuated form—and for a type of comeuppance to be delivered and masochistically enjoyed. Yet what Fanon is describing also occurs in less sublimated forms, and so further reference to Freud is justified. Freud's account in his 'Three Essays on Sexuality' stresses that any 'person who feels pleasure in producing pain in someone else'—an endemic feature of colonial racism/anti-Blackness—'is also capable of enjoying pleasure in pain' (Freud, 1905, p. 159). So, while we are unsurprised to find that sadism is an active drive component within anti-Blackness, we should likewise be unsurprised to discover that masochism—an inherent and indissociable element of sadism (for Freud, at least)—will invariably be present also. We are thus led to consider that masochism of some sort may be a regular feature within varying forms of racism and anti-Blackness. Nonetheless, Fanon's assertion still begs a question: why does the white man's unconscious 'justify' the Black man's aggression? As if anticipating this question, Fanon (1967) immediately adds a footnote:

> the white man behaves in an offensive manner toward the [Black man because]… he realizes that in the [Black man's] place he would have no mercy on his oppressors. Therefore it is not surprising to see that he identifies himself with the [Black]… white blues and spiritual singers, white authors writing novels in which the [Black man]… proclaims his grievances, whites in blackface. (p. 177)

Once again, we need to step carefully here. Although Fanon's answer to the above question is, implicitly, *identification*—it is only when the white man puts himself in the Black man's place that he realizes that he, the white, is fully deserving of aggression—we need to keep in mind that, psychoanalytically, there are multiple types of identification. What is in question is not a 'sympathetic' identification, an identification based on a sense of affinity, or a basic emotional tie, but rather, so it would seem, a tacit and under-acknowledged awareness that should I, the white, be put in such a position of subjugation, I would wish furious revenge on my oppressors.

What Fanon points to, as an initial factor then, is more a moment of conscious realization ('he realizes that in the [Black man's] place'). This is a transitory and at best provisional

identification *with the situation of the other*. At the risk of repetition, for Freud (1921), such an identification implies no affectionate bond, no necessary perception of likeness or similarity, and works perfectly well under conditions of hate, resentment, or aggression. Behaviors such as proclaiming the grievances of the Black man, adopting Black musical genres, etc., seem to be essentially *defenses*. Such identifications remain fundamentally narcissistic. An interesting implication of Fanon's analysis is that there is—perhaps contrary to expectation—nothing inherently progressive in whites making identifications with Black culture or Black suffering (his inclusion of 'whites in blackface' [1967, p. 177] alongside other instantiations of white identification with Blackness drives this point home). Identifications of this sort can be a self-protective or narcissistic gesture, motivated more by fear and self-preservation rather than by anything approximating empathy—an instance, we might say, of *Black Masks, White Skin*.

It would, surely, be going too far to maintain that all white identifications with Blackness work in a predominantly self-protective or narcissistic way. Then again, given the racist conditions under which 'The white man is sealed in his whiteness. The black man in his blackness' (Fanon, 1967, p. 9), the presumption would have to be that in colonial contexts, the majority do. Yet, given the complex and intimate nature of unconscious identifications between white and Black remain an abiding concern of Fanon's throughout *Black Skin White Masks*, we should be careful not to be reductive or too quickly dismissive in how we treat this topic. Despite the Manichean social structuring of the colonial world, which implies mutually exclusive categories of identification, there is a sense in which whiteness and blackness are irreducibly enmeshed, inextricably entangled in one another, even if this inextricability remains consciously disavowed (certainly so for the white/colonizer), and as such often most dynamically alive at the level of the unconscious. We may take up the psychoanalytic implications of this point as follows: a paradoxical condition for narcissism in the colony (as elsewhere), is *a type of differentiating reliance on the figure of the other*. This is, of course, one of the points Fanon can be said to be making in his adaptation of Lacan's mirror stage ('the…Other for the white man is and will continue to the black man. And conversely' [1967, p. 161]).

Why then have I spent so much time focusing on 'cross-racial' identifications given that this was a focus of many early psychoanalytic/postcolonial engagements with Fanon? Well, firstly, I wanted to take the opportunity to push back against a commonplace assumption of many psychological accounts which assume that racism and 'cross-racial' identifications are mutually exclusive. By contrast, the possibility of identifying with some aspect of other (be it their place or situation, or some signifier or trait associated with them) is an immanent possibility. This is the case even if such processes of identification involve aggressive forms of counter-identification. Counter-identification, after all, can be said to occur in the context of an initial earlier (if unconscious) identification (the force of the counter-identification being typically proportionate to the initial identification).

If one of Fanon's achievements is to highlight the sexual dimension—the libidinal economy—of colonial racism, then he is likewise to be credited with grasping also the intensities and complexities of cross-racial identifications and their related instances of aggressive counter-identification. For some readers of Fanon this might seem unnecessary to reiterate, and yet I would suggest that this is a timely reminder. Why so? Well, while it may be useful to push back against once popular postcolonial notions of 'ambivalent identification' (Bhabha, 1994)—which surely under-estimate the sheer force of aggressive counter-identifications and of anti-Blackness as such—it is also the case that accounts which prioritize anti-Blackness risk losing sight of this crucial psychoanalytic dimension of racism (i.e., that it involves various instances of cross-racial identification). To insist that anti-Blackness situates outside the parameters of the human—as is the case for Afro-pessimist thought—seems to imply that Blackness is beyond the parameters of identification, which in a Fanonian analysis, is not, I think, the case.

VICISSITUDES OF MASOCHISM

Let us return now to our close reading of relevant sections of *Black Skin White Masks*. This, for Fanon, is the basic sequence of psychical maneuvers made by whiteness within circumstances of coloniality/anti-Blackness for Fanon: an unacknowledged identification with the figure of the enslaved/denigrated Black man delivers a moment of anxiety (in the form of a fear of reprisal); this anxiety is alleviated, *gratified* by a degree of punishment and humiliation, which, while temporarily assuaging the anxiety, also, in turn, fortifies *the need for a further aggressive response*. A circular pattern is thereby set in place. This helps explain why a further speculation, which Fanon (1967) presents as '[a]nother solution', might be said to supplement the explanation he has already offered:

> There is… a sadistic aggression toward the Black man, followed by a guilt complex because of the sanction against such behavior by the democratic culture of the country in question. This aggression is then tolerated by the [Black man]: whence masochism. (pp. 177–178)

So, having offered an explanation prioritizing *the aggression of the Black man* and the masochism of the white (which eventually gives way to a sadistic reprisal), Fanon now prioritizes *the sadism of the white man*. Initially, the interconnecting term here between white sadism and white masochism seems not immediately apparent. Reading this section slowly reveals, however, that the interconnecting term is there: what is different in this second or supplementary account is the role of guilt ('a guilt complex').

Having offered this additional perspective on the masochism of racism, Fanon imagines an interlocuter objecting to this explanation on the basis that it 'does not contain the elements of classic masochism' (1967, p. 178). This might seem a little odd, because although what

Fanon is describing fits better with Freud's (1924) account of *moral* masochism (as in 'The Economic Problem of Masochism')—which differs from the description in 'The Three Essays on Sexuality'—his model remains largely Freudian (certainly so in view of the reversible relation between sadism and masochism). Yet Fanon's subsequent remark is worth bearing in mind: 'this situation is not classic… [yet] it is the only way in which to explain the masochistic behavior of the white man' (1967, p. 178). We might suggest that for a decolonial psychoanalysis, one major category of masochism would need to be: *racial masochism* (in addition to the standard list [primary, secondary, erotogenic, feminine, moral, etc.]). Such a form of masochism would be a consistent—if repressed, disavowed—structural feature of racism/anti-Blackness as such, certainly so given that it would be the corollary of a more readily recognizable sadistic nature of racism/anti-Blackness.

Interestingly, to add a Lacanian twist, this particular form of masochism—the moral masochism of being racially/sexually humiliated ('cucked')—occurs not merely at the psychological (egoic/imaginary) level. It needs to be grasped also in relation to processes of symbolic identification, and, in relation to an aligned set of symbolic-legal operations. To put this in more Freudian terms, we could say that racial masochism plays its part in affirming and substantiating *group identifications* (in clarifying, consolidating, separating identity categories). In addition to sharpening demarcations and differentiations between categories of subject, it is also—utilizing more explicitly Lacanian terms—a factor in separating between the different orders (or different 'rights') of enjoyment, or, perhaps more significantly, between the prohibited forms of enjoyment pertaining to such categories of subject. It becomes, moreover, a potent basis for laws, for legal recrimination, for categories of censure and discrimination and so on. Racial masochism, in short, has a role to play in maintaining and extending a societal order, a network of laws and values. *This is a form of masochism that is inseparable from racial/colonial symbolic identity as such.*

We have then the basis of a Lacanian conceptualization of what Fanon sets in place with his provisional analysis of the masochistic *jouissance* of white racism: an account of racial/racist masochism as *a social link*, that is, as an anchoring mode of symbolic identification in colonial/anti-Black contexts. Such *jouissance* effects cannot, in other words, be dismissed as merely idiosyncratic or 'psychological' just as they cannot be qualified as simply aberrant, unrepresentative, as little more than the unsavory enjoyments of a handful of perverse racial fantasists. They are not, in short, peripheral to structures of racism/coloniality; rather, they play a foundational role, to draw on Frank Wilderson's (2020) terms of analysis, in *securing an order of life*, this order being that of anti-Blackness itself.

'[I]T IS THE WOMAN WHO RAPES HERSELF'

Fanon now announces that he will propose an explanation for the fantasy *a Black man is raping me*. This is curious insofar as this theme is broached as if he were entering into a different topic of investigation (female sexuality) when it is evidently a continuation of his exploration of masochism in white racism. His somewhat abrupt change of course can be read as an avoidance of the implication posed by his own argument, namely that the idea of sexual congress with—or rape at the hands of—a Black man *might also play a role in the unconscious fantasy of white men.*

Fanon's sampling of ideas from Helene Deutsche and Marie Bonaparte seems less than compelling, although it does serve to highlight the questions of feminine aggression in relation to sexuality and infantile fantasy. Then comes Fanon's own speculative explanation (clearly influenced by Freud's [1919] 'A child is being beaten'):

> First the little girl sees a sibling rival beaten by the father, a libidinal aggressive. At this stage… the father, who is now the pole of her libido, refuses to take up the aggression that the little girl's unconscious demands of him… [Because] this free-floating aggression requires an investment… [and] the girl is at the age in which the child begins to enter folklore and… culture… the [Black man] becomes the predestined depository of this aggression. (Fanon, 1967, p. 179)

Thus far, Fanon is still on relatively safe ground. To contend that the figure of the Black man is heavily freighted with (racist) fantasy, and that this figure of intense fantasmatic investments is the destination ('predestined depository') of transferred forms of aggression, is uncontroversial, indeed, seemingly undeniable, in contexts of anti-Blackness. It is with the next step that Fanon (1967) takes, 'into the labyrinth', as he puts it, that he risks courting opprobrium: 'when a woman lives the fantasy of rape… it is in some way the fulfillment of… an inner wish' (p. 179).

Fanon is right to stress the danger inherent in what he is thinking through: to broach this topic is, typically, to say more about heterosexist male fantasies *about women* than the sexual fantasies of women. It risks ventriloquizing misogynistic presumptions about women. Nevertheless, if we trust Fanon's intuition, and if we remain on the level of psychoanalytic speculation focused on the task of exploring the unconscious speculation offered, moreover, in respect of the *pathological scene that is the colonial situation*, then his remarks are perhaps less controversial than they might at first appear.

Several factors are worth bearing in mind here. Firstly, there is nothing particularly alarming, from a psychoanalytic perspective, about the idea that fears are the inverted—or acceptable, expressible—form of repressed wishes. Secondly, to identify a prospective kernel of repressed sexual fantasy in an analysand is decidedly *not* to imply that they secretly desire for this to happen. The idea is precisely the opposite: the repressed unconscious fantasy is repressed for a reason; it needs to be kept at a distance, it needs, effectively, *not* to exist (recall Fanon's earlier qualification, that he will not attribute 'any reality' [p. 178] to the

fantasy he is discussing). If a truly repressed fantasy were to be brought into reality, if, indeed, the fantasizing subject were to be suddenly confronted with the real possibility of such a fantasized act being enacted, then this would constitute a traumatic event.

With these qualifications in place, we might let Fanon's assertion (regards the fantasy 'a Black man is raping me') resonate for a while such that we can hear in it a variation of his thesis in respect of the masochistic dimension of white racism. At basis, his argument, as questionable at points as it might be, is that 'it is the [white] woman who rapes herself' (Fanon, 1967, p. 197). She does so, moreover, via the transferential means of the fantasmatic figure (the imago) of the Black man, an imago that embodies all imaginable aggressive tendencies. The masochistic form of this fantasy is thus a passive voice variation, a reversal, of the sadistic drive to eviscerate a woman. Hence the unspoken injunction that Fanon attributes to the white woman in respect of the Black man: 'Hurt me as I would hurt me if I were in your place' (1967, p. 179).

While Fanon has found it necessary to switch between genders before making this assertion, we can suggest—perhaps beyond Fanon's intention—that this formula might hold also for the white colonial male/heterosexist standpoint such that we have the following: *it is the white man who rapes himself via the imago of the Black man*. Or, to move a little more slowly through the sequence of fantasmatic substitutions: a masochistic scene, such as 'I am beaten or abused by the Black man', is itself a variation on the sadistic impulse, 'I want to beat or abuse the Black man' (i.e., 'Hurt me as I would hurt me if I were in your place'). This returns us to the idea that a sequence of scene might be involved here.

This shifting from active to passive voices of the drive (i.e., from sadistic to masochistic scene) seems, at first glance, not to make sense. There is no shortage, after all, of instances of sadistic racism, so why would such a sadistic impulse need to be concealed behind a masochistic scene? Well, if we add back the crucial signifier that has been omitted (or repressed) from this sequence—namely, reference to rape, sexual subordination—then this becomes a lot more cogent, especially so within homophobic contexts of anti-Blackness: 'I am beaten or abused (*or raped*) by the Black man', is itself a variation on the sadistic impulse, 'I want to beat or abuse (*or rape*) the Black man'.

This sexual/desiring dimension of (white, colonial) masculine masochism is what Fanon elides in his abrupt turn to conceptualizations of female sexuality, and there are two facets of this topic that need to be underscored. The first concerns the prospect of being 'feminized', or—bearing in mind the problematic nature of such historical and psychoanalytic gender-role assumptions—being put in something akin to a woman's (or 'feminine') position relative to a domineering male. The second concerns the possibility of sexual desire for the Black man. With this in mind, we might appreciate how, for white, racist heterosexist masculinity, even the disturbing masochistic scene (in which one is violently attacked by a Black man) might be preferable to one in which there is sexual contact or rape, and how a masochistic scene of

being raped by the Black man would be preferable to the realization of active desire for the Black man. The defensive operation here is the use of a fear or phobia, a nightmarish scenario, to hide a suppressed wish, a repressed desire.

This discussion, prompted by a symptomatic shift in Fanon's argument, alerts us to something crucial: the most troubling of all colonial sexual scenes is not—*or not only*—that *of the Black man having sex with the white woman*. It is rather—*or in addition*—that of *the Black man having sex with—dominating, subordinating*, 'feminizing'—*the white man*. None of this is to underestimate the libidinal and discursive force of the fantasmatic scene of the Black man and the white woman. Sexton (2002) speaks of the possibility of the white woman's sexual pursuit of the Black man as 'dreadful and unspeakable within racist culture' (p. 209). To clarify this issue, it helps to draw a distinction between *fear* and *repression*. The Black man having sex with the white woman is still the most *feared* (and *enjoyed*) of all colonial scenes, with fear here connoting the implications of fascination, allure, and repressed desire (as Fanon [1967] intimates in his reference to the notion of the 'phobogenic' object which 'must arouse' even as it entails 'both fear and revulsion' [p. 154]). Fear, obviously enough, is a conscious state, a state, which—as in the case of a phobia—designates a specific object or a situation. Hence, we have a scene that the white man has not—to use one of Fanon's terms—'unconsciousnessized'.

In this sense, the desiring sexual scene between the Black man and the white man is not feared simply because it is fundamentally *repressed*. The former sexual scene cannot easily *be spoken*, which means that it *can* be imagined, pictured, revisited, so much so in fact, that it becomes a properly fantasmatic preoccupation. The latter, by contrast, cannot readily be imagined or pictured, let alone verbally expressed. This is the difference between a fantasy that can be obliquely approached, put into words—if with some difficulty—and relayed to another, on the one hand, and a properly unconscious, which is to say *repressed ph*antasy, which an analysand will not be able to access or put into words, which, indeed, effectively *does not exist* and that can only be 'retrieved' via the analyst's work of construction.

Within the terms of Freud's (1919) 'A child is being beaten', this is the difference between the first in a sequence of beating fantasies, something that can be consciously considered, summoned into awareness ('My father is beating a child'), and a subsequent fantasy (' I am being beaten by my father') which, in Freud's words, has 'never had a real existence… [is] never remembered… [has] never succeeded in becoming conscious' (Freud, 1919, p. 185). Improvising on Freud's account of a changing sequence of fantasy scenes we can suggest that what we find, if we 'roll back the film' from a scene in which a Black man is beating a white woman (as I, the white male, watch on), is a scene in which *the Black man is beating me.*

PROBLEMATIZATIONS

Before concluding, we should respond to several foreseeable objections. Why, for a start, has more not been said about the Black woman in the above analysis? Why, moreover, has the rape of woman of color by white men, a regularly occurring event in the colonial world, not featured in a more central capacity (Doane, 1991; Vergès 1997)? Secondly—moving on now to a more conceptual objection—is the above discussion not limited in its apparent reliance on a primal sexual scene? Surely the possibilities of racial/racist fantasy are far more extensive than just this? Is it not reductive to rely on a single primal scene as a means of exploring something as complex, as flexible, and shifting as fantasy? We presumably need a more flexible conceptualization in respect of the multiple subject-positions and modalities of desire on offer.

The easiest way to begin responding to these questions is to consult Luz Calvo's (2008) engagement in similar debates. For Calvo, who likewise utilizes the concept of a primal scene in her discussion of Fanon's 'a Black man is raping me' fantasy (albeit to designate the historical fear of miscegenation rather than as site of masochistic *jouissance*), the erasure of woman of color in Fanon's fantasy is a significant issue. Calvo refers to Mary Ann Doane's (1991) *Dark Continents: Epistemologies of Racial and Sexual Difference* to assert that Fanon does neglect the historical status of the white rape of Black women in choosing to highlight the white woman's fantasy. Intriguingly though, the critical charge that follows—the claim that in Fanon's analysis 'rape undergoes a displacement… from the white man's prerogative… to the white woman's fears/desire in the relation to the black man' (Doane, 1991, p. 222)—seems also to contain a viable response to the charge at hand. How so? Well, it is true that Fanon's account does not foreground the rape of Black women by white men. Yet it is also, crucially, the case that the scene he focusses on can be viewed as a *matrix* of colonial relations, one which permits various substitutions and displacements, one which operates—like Freud's sequence of beating fantasies—to conceal and replace other scenes to which it is related.

To approach the given primal scene in the way Freud approaches beating fantasies is already to presume that a more crucial scene has been subtracted from a sequence; whether this is due to psychic repression or socio-historical/ideological suppression (or both), we can be sure that a scene will have 'fallen out', and that what remains will always be in some ways a displacement of what has been extracted. So, if we bear in mind that the scene that Fanon focusses on is not singular, but is instead *one in a series*, one, moreover, that *affords multiple permutations*, then it necessarily bears the traces of other repressed scenes. We have already seen evidence of this: behind the heterosexual scene that Fanon highlights there is another—the homosexual masochistic scene—that he chooses not to speak of. It helps to bear in mind here the Lacanian idea that a fantasy is not encapsulated in a single narrative or one imagined scenario but rather comprises a series of logical relations. Calvo (2008) makes a similar point:

> The erasure of the woman of color (and… white men) in the fantasy [‘a Black man is raping me]… produces and is produced by the reversal of the sexual and racial trauma that is colonialism. The traumatic event—the rape of the woman of color by the slave owner/colonizer—is repressed only to return through a reversal: the fantasy of a white woman being raped by the native… Through ‘deferred action’ the historical event resurfaces in inverted form. (p. 67)

Having offered something of a response to how the rape of Black woman is nonetheless present—if in a displaced, reversed, or perhaps unintentional form—in Fanon’s account, we can now, via Calvo, respond to the objection that such a fixed scene (a ‘frozen tableau’) is a limiting or reductive way of conceptualizing fantasy:

> The fantasy [a Black man is raping me]… like all fantasies of this type—is open to various permutations. For the white woman, the fantasy may represent her desire to be loved/raped by the white man (who, instead, loves/rapes the black woman)... the fantasy could be the projection of the white man’s desire to be raped by the black man… As a fantasy, [‘a Black is raping me’] has a structure and a syntax, yet its positions are multiple and its identifications mobile... Any particular subject’s relationship to the fantasy will be structured by both their personal history and social location. What we might surmise… is that this public fantasy has gained currency, precisely because it is able to respond to diverse sets of private desires and social locations. (Calvo, 2008, p. 67)

Calvo’s remarks are a pertinent reminder of the clinical imperative to bear in mind the singularity, the idiosyncratic distinctiveness of an individual subject’s fantasy, which cannot summarily be reduced to a presumed social fantasy. To extract a generic form from the historical contingencies and particularities of a given subject’s life is, for many clinicians, to risk losing the fabric of the fantasy; it is to reduce fantasy to a narrative (i.e., a type of secondary revision). Of course, we may contest this; Freud’s schema of beating fantasies seems to provide a means of avoiding the reduction of fantasy to a single scene of desire, to a single enactment, to a simple narrative. The complexity of Freud’s model—which as we have now seen, involves a sequence of scenes and the possibility of numerous permutations, displacements, and repressions—means that it is not—to revisit the objection voiced above—static, one-dimensional or, arguably, reductive. In an application of Freud’s schema to think through various facets of racist fantasy, Loren Dent (2023) maintains that in Freud’s model ‘fantasy is supple; a series of permutations and substitutions are possible in unfolding the sequence of witnessing, unconscious (masochistic) fantasy, and conscious (sadistic) fantasy’.

This tension between individual as opposed to social forms of fantasy, is, of course, a variation of the ontogeny or sociogeny question that Fanon so famously weighs in on, stressing the often overriding influence of the latter. While it is worth briefly noting that Fanon does not, perhaps contrary to certain depictions of his work, simply forego ontogeny in favor of sociogeny—even a brief perusal of the summary case studies included in *The Wretched of the Earth* demonstrates Fanon’s attention to individual factors—he importantly does issue a corrective to the de-politicizing psychical reductionism of many psychoanalytic thinkers. This corrective underlies Calvo’s careful qualification that a given public fantasy

exists because 'it is able to respond to diverse sets of private desires and social locations' (2008, p. 67). This point can also be made in more forthright Fanonian terms. Racist fantasy structures (the phobogenic imago of the Black man, the various productions of the European collective unconscious) are, in many respects, over-determining; they flow into and populate the material of individual fantasies.

CLOSING REFLECTIONS

We have covered a good deal of ground, even if, perhaps inevitably, there are a few remaining loose threads. There is, however, one last question that deserves our attention before moving on. We observed earlier, via Fanon, that something akin to a wish for revenge might be sparked in the white subject by virtue of a transitory identification with a Black man or woman ('he [the white man] recognizes that in [the Black man's] place he would have no mercy on his oppressors')? To whom is this drive for revenge directed? As we have seen, there are at least two answers to this question for Fanon. Firstly, this aggression is often directed back at the Black man himself (who is guilty, so we might put it, for the fact that the white man momentarily recognized himself in this [the Black man's] position). This helps us to stress a more socio-political point: the ideological value of scenes of white inferiority and humiliation is that they permit a vituperative response, one in which the avenging white subject needs feel no guilt whatsoever for exercising a violent reaction. The more there is a staging of humiliation, the more the violence of anti-Blackness is made moral, and is infused with a super-egoic injunction of what is Right.

Fanon's second answer to this question is, of course, that such a wish for revenge is converted into a masochistic need for punishment *from the Black man*. Yet might we not identify another target of this superegoic wish for retribution? It can, surely, be directed at other whites. This would provide one way of interpreting what has been referred to the aggressiveness (or 'predatory' aspect) of white antiracism. Badenhorst (2021), for example, speaks of how 'White-on-Black identity violence often comes to be displaced into White-on-White identity violence' (p. 296) via multiple defensive justifications and projections. I would add to Badenhorst's account that such potential re-directions of the wish for revenge characterizes not only the impetus of some progressive/liberal or 'woke' attacks on whites deemed less than progressive; it likewise features as a factor when such 'less progressive' whites—no less aggressively—lambast their progressive white counterparts in turn.

It is also the case that such gratifying humiliations of white racial masochism occur in a selective way, in a domain that is cordoned off, limited to a discrete facet of psychical or socio-political life, such that broader structures of oppression can continue apace. This is not dissimilar to situations in which relations of sexual masochism and submissiveness are privately enjoyed by persons who are otherwise dominant and powerful in other facets of

their lives. The masochism of white racism can thus take on a markedly fetishistic quality, operating via disavowal: 'I know anti-Blackness is a pervasive structure, but there is a sphere of psychical life in which I am thoroughly debased, shown up as inferior, and so, on this basis, I also can dismiss anti-Blackness as a pervasive structure'.

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