

Diversifying Syllabi 2015 Text Summary and Teaching Tips

SECTION ONE: to be completed by presenter

Article/Essay Title: *Black Skin, White Masks*, introduction and Ch. 1

Author: Frantz Fanon

Readability: Easy/**Moderate**/Difficult

Thesis: Colonialism has shaped the self-understandings and psychology of black people in colonized places (and white people as well), and this needs to be undone. Philosophical arguments purporting to show the equality of blacks and whites will do little to help with this. This book aims to analyze the situation and provide some tools to address it.

Chapter 1 discusses the role and importance of language in black colonial experience (specifically in the Antilles, but it is meant to be generalized).

Key Definitions: there is some use of psychoanalytic terminology (particularly in later chapters), but I think you can get by without paying much attention to it (at least in chapter 1)

Brief Summary: The general aim is a political one, to decolonize black people's self-understandings/psychology.

- “By calling on humanity, on the belief in dignity, on love, on charity, it would be easy to prove, or to win the admission, that the black is the equal of the white. But my purpose is quite different: What I want to do is help the black man free himself of the arsenal of complexes that has been developed by the colonial environment” (19).
- “What is important is not to educate them [the fools], but to teach the Negro not to be the slave of their archetypes” (22).

Chapter one is an analysis of the role of language for black people in colonial contexts (using the Antilles as an example, but drawing more general conclusions). It's a very rich chapter, so I'll just outline some of the claims and examples he uses.

Fanon claims that language is essentially “about the other,” and is a way of supporting the “weight of a civilization.” “To speak a language is to take on a world, a culture” (25).

Fanon posits that black men (people?) have two ways of beings: one with other black men, and one with whites. First he considers the **relations between black men** and the role language plays there.

Fanon argues that for black men in the Antilles, speaking French (the language of the colonizer) means being closer to the “real” world. It is a sign of higher class but also of greater humanity: “he will come closer to being a real human being—in direct ratio to his mastery of the French language” (8).

- “The Antilles Negro who wants to be white will be whiter as he gains greater mastery of the cultural tool that language is” (25).
- There are pragmatic reasons for wanting to speak French: “Historically, it must be understood that the Negro wants to speak French because it is the key that can open doors which were still barred to him fifty years ago” (25).

- Speaking French properly is being in the “white world” (which = real world): “Nothing is more astonishing than to hear a black man express himself properly, for then in truth he is putting on the white world” (23).

Fanon discusses the ways in which black people who have visited France (the colonizing country of the Antilles) attain higher status (“deification”) when they return home.

- “He no longer understands the dialect, he talks about the Opera, which he may never have seen except from a distance, but above all he adopts a critical attitude toward his compatriots. Confronted with the most trivial occurrence, he becomes an oracle. He is the one who knows” (13).
- But this is a contested status, and if others find the man’s reports to be wanting then he is subject to a “lifelong shame”: “there is no forgiveness when one who claims a superiority falls below the standard” (14).

Fanon suggests that there is a significant psychological change that occurs in the black man who goes to France. This is reflected in his language: “Every dialect is a new way of thinking... and the fact that the newly returned Negro adopts a language different from that of the group into which he was born is evidence of a dislocation, a separation” (14).

On the relationship between black people and whites:

Fanon discusses the stereotyping of black people by whites, and details the ways in which whites who speak to black people in broken language is a way of stereotyping and exerting power over black people.

- Black people likely get angry when white people speak in broken language to them, though there may be no intention to insult or anger. Fanon argues that this absence of intent is part of the problem: “I grant this; but it is just this absence of wish, this lack of interest, this indifference, this automatic manner of classifying him, imprisoning him, primitivizing him, decivilizing him, that makes him angry” (20).
- “If a man who speaks pidgin to a man of color or an Arab does not see anything wrong or evil in such behavior, it is because he has never stopped to think” (20).
- To speak to black people like this is “to express this thought: ‘You’d better keep to your place’” (21).
- When a black person responds in an “unexpected way” by responding in perfect French, the white person is surprised/shocked: “when the opposite occurs, one must retract one’s pseudopodia and behave like a man. The whole structure crumbles. A black man who says to you: ‘I am in no sense your boy, Monsieur....’ Something new under the sun” (21).

Fanon discusses stereotyping of black people in society and in media.

- He argues that part of the problem is a denial of individuality, but also of history, culture. “I meet a Russian or a German who speaks French badly. With gestures I try to give him the information that he requests, but at the same time I can hardly forget that he has a language of his own, a country, and that perhaps he is a lawyer or an engineer there. In any case, he is foreign to my group, and his standards must be different. When it comes to the case of the Negro, nothing of the kind. He has no culture, no civilization, no ‘long historical past.’ This may be the reason for the strivings of contemporary Negroes: to prove the existence of a black civilization to the white world at all costs” (21-22).
- Black men who break stereotypes are seen as suspicious: “Yes the black man is supposed to be a good ***; once this has been laid down, the rest follows of itself. To make him talk pidgin is to fasten him to the effigy of him, to snare him, to imprison him, the eternal victim of an essence, of an *appearance* for which he is not responsible. And naturally,

just as a Jew who spends money without thinking about it is suspect, a black man who quotes Montesquieu had better be watched. Please understand me: watched in the sense that he is starting something” (22).

He also discusses the choice of Antilleans when they arrive in France (which might be generalized to other sorts of immigration from colonized places to the “motherland”).

- You must decide whether to “stand with the white world (that is to say, the real world), and, since they will speak French, to be able to confront certain problems and incline to a certain degree of universality in their conclusions; -- or to reject Europe...and cling together in their dialect” (24).
- “when one of us tries, in Paris or any other university city, to study a problem seriously, he is accused of self-aggrandizement, and the surest way of cutting him down is to remind him of the Antilles by exploding into dialect” (24).

NB: Chapter 5 is a phenomenological account of being black, which might be a good stand-alone selection as well. Also the concluding chapter might be helpful.

SECTION TWO: to be completed by note taker during discussion

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Two notes about teaching this text: First, it will be important to make clear to the students that the text is descriptive, not prescriptive — otherwise, students might think that Fanon is racist!

Second, when White students read about how Whites enact harms on minority groups without intending to do so, they often want to know: So what *should* I do (to be a good privileged person)? For example, Fanon criticizes French people who speak pidgin to Blacks. Be prepared for a White student to ask, “So should I just assume that everyone will understand me, even if contextual cues give me reason to think a person doesn’t speak my language?”

One strategy is to sidestep the question by pointing out that the text is attempting to articulate Fanon’s experience, and our job is just to understand why he would feel harmed by the French person’s assumption that he speaks pidgin.

Another strategy is to explore ways that we switch dialects as we navigate different social contexts, and what assumptions we make as we do so.

Possible Applications:

This text could be used to address various topics in **political philosophy**, especially the topic of **oppression** — e.g., cultural imperialism, psychology oppression, and the critique of egalitarianism as insufficient in practice.

For example, the text might illustrate one way that White people can **enact harms** on minority groups **without noticing**. (This idea is explored in Lisa Tessman’s “The

Ordinary Vices of Domination,” Chapter 3 of *Burdened Virtues*, where she discusses a variety of ways that society is set up to be racist while enabling Whites not to notice.) One example might be the micro-aggression of complementing members of minority groups for being “articulate.”

Another strategy would be to pair this text with Sartre’s preface to *Wretched of the Earth* and Arendt’s *On Violence*. According to Arendt’s tripartite distinction between *labor*, *work*, and *action*, violence cannot be action, because action essentially reduces to the realm of speech. Reading Fanon would help to illustrate the idea that, since marginalized people are excluded from the domain of **political speech**, they may see no alternative to **violence**.

The text would work especially well within discussions of the **phenomenological and political significance of dialect**.

For example, it would help illustrate important points about how we tend to **interpret dialects** as reflective all kinds of attitudes, as well as reflective of one’s racial identity, class, and so on. It would help facilitate a discussion of how we all **unconsciously change our own dialect** in different contexts to present ourselves in different ways—sometimes in ethically or politically problematic ways. (This discussion might make for an interesting complement to Liz Camp’s article “Slurring Perspectives,” where she argues that using slurs reveals something about one’s perspective on the world.)

The text could also be used as a way of **criticizing psychoanalysis**. (Fanon argues that neurosis should not always be located in an individual’s history, e.g., family dynamics. In a racist society, it would be troubling if a Black person were not “maladjusted”!)

Complementary Texts/Resources:

From Patricia Hill Collin’s *Black Feminist Thought*, “Mammies, matriarchs, and other controlling images”

Iris Marion Young, “Five Faces of Oppression” (especially the section on cultural imperialism)

“I lost my talk” by Rita Joe (a piece of literature describing cultural genocide via the destruction of native languages in residential schools)

Stuff on stereotype threat

Something on ebonics

Robin DiAngelo, “White Fragility”

Jean-Paul Sartre, “Preface” — preface to *Wretched of the Earth*

Hannah Arendt, *On Violence*

Liz Camp, “Slurring Perspectives”

→ Also check out Lewis Gordon’s numerous articles and books on Fanon, including *What Fanon Said* (2015)

Possible Class Activities:

- Watch *Concerning Violence* — a documentary on Fanon’s essay from *Wretched of the Earth* narrated by Lauryn Hill
- Watch Youtube video on teaching teaching students to code-switch between Ebonics and standard American dialect: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xX1-FgkfWo8>

- Watch “Thug Notes” video on Youtube, where a Black guy gives excellent literary analysis in a very thick African-American dialect:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pyb1nKY45Cw>
- Listen to this NPR story on how transsexual in transition seek vocal coaching to learn the subtle ways to change one’s dialect in order to pass as a man or a woman:
<http://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2014/10/14/354858420/can-changing-how-you-sound-help-you-find-your-voice>