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Fanon and Hair

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Moi-même, au début, j'avais du mal à aller au travail en afro. J'ai fait des nattes pendant un temps, puis j'ai porté un bandeau, avant de les laisser naturels. J'étais assez fière. Mes collègues rechignaient sans oser me dire franchement qu'ils n'aimaient pas mon allure. A leur réaction, j'ai vu qu'ils préféraient les nattes à l'afro. Un jour, j'attendais le bus, une voiture s'est arrêtée et on m'a demandé si j'allais chez le coiffeur...C'est dur. J'avais besoin d'encouragements et d'aide pour faire les nattes et les vanilles. Maintenant, ça va, je gère. Je suis les conseils de coiffure sur YouTube. J'ai un peu peur que le mouvement nappy ne soit qu'un effet de mode éphémère. Ce serait dommage car on commence à s'habituer à voir des coiffures naturelles. Il ne faudrait pas que les générations futures souffrent des mêmes problèmes de cheveux que leurs aînées.

- Cynthia Tocny, Chef de projet informatique bancaire.

At first, I was uncomfortable going to work in an afro. I had braids for a while, then I wore a headband, before wearing my hair naturally. I was quite proud. My colleagues were hesitant and did not dare to tell me that quite frankly, they did not like my appearance. From their reaction, I saw that they preferred the braids to the afro. One day, I was waiting for the bus, a car stopped, and they asked me if I was going to the hairdresser... It's hard. I needed support and help to do the braids and the twists. But now, it is okay, I can manage it. I follow the hairstyle tips on YouTube. I am a bit fearful that the nappy movement is nothing but a trend. It would be a shame because we are getting used to seeing natural hairstyles. Future generations should not suffer from the same hair problems as their elders

*-Cynthia Tocny, IT project manager in Banking
(translation mine)*

What would it mean to think about Frantz Fanon's work on race, embodiment, and identity in the context of the contemporary cultural politics of Black hair? Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* offers us some key terms for deepening our engagement with this issue and, in that continuing relevance, his work tells us something important about the persistence of the colonial gaze in contemporary life. The discourse around Black hair has evolved to mean more than what it meant in the 1960s and 1970s, even with all the resonant continuities. Though it continues to revolve around the symbol of Black beauty, celebration and resistance, the symbol is not exclusive to one single hairstyle choice. One of the perils of freedom is the ability to exercise the right of choice. That includes the freedom to choose how you want to look and what language you want to speak. This is about giving agency to Black bodies to make choices that make meaning for them, self-invention between Black peoples, and thus to not define such meaning in terms of the white gaze or white ear. In trying to create safe spaces for self-invention, we must take caution as not to create barriers around emergent thoughts, visions, and ideas that are in some basic way uncategorizable. The existence of Blackness on its own terms, measured without the white gaze, has long been obscured so we should take caution to not dismiss or degrade any aesthetic that does not fit a specific type of (racial) mold.

An autobiographical note. As a Black woman born to Senegalese parents, raised in the United Arab Emirates and now living in the United States, I have always been around multiple cultures and that came with the ability to now speak multiple languages (Wolof, English, Arabic and French). And my hair journey has ranged from having an Afro, braids, perming my hair, going through a period of transition, wearing it natural, adding extensions and the list goes on. Many have tried to contest my Blackness for one reason or another – aesthetic and linguistic. But, in no way am I less Black than another because of a hairstyle choice or the languages I speak. My Blackness has always been spoken to me by my family. My Blackness is a constant reminder to me by society. My Blackness is rooted in my experiences. My Blackness is rooted in my very existence. As long as I continue to live in my Black body, no one can take away my Blackness, and all the marvelousness it is capable of. To this, Fanon might suggest I read his *Black Skin, White Masks* as a way to explain my back-and-forth hair journey between the natural and the permed, in order to deepen an understanding of the effects of colonialism on the Black psyche.

Though Fanon's perspective can explain so much this, I would like to put his text in dialogue with Rokhaya Diallo's *Afro*¹ a book project in which she compiles the experiences of 120 Afropeans, men and women living in France, documenting their experience of wearing their natural hair in an interracial public. Experiences range from those of professors, bankers to ministers and civil servants. And it works from the plain fact that hair dictates so many factors in a Black woman's life. Although the Afropeans in the study

are talking about hair, their experience conveys more broadly what it means for a Black *body* as such to exist in predominantly white spaces. By putting these two texts in dialogue, can we extend Fanon's discourse around that to which Black bodies must conform when existing in white spaces? To what extent does Fanon's theorization of Black bodies in white spaces hold up?

To better grasp Fanon's understanding of Black bodies' existence in white spaces, our way into theorizing the culture and politics of Black hair, I want to begin by looking at his discourse on language in *Black Skin, White Masks*. When looking at Fanon's discourse on language, it is important to remember the time and period of this text, a time when the Vichy period had so deeply influenced people's attitudes towards their own Blackness. As Fanon states, "every West Indian, before the war of 1939, there was not only the certainty of superiority over the African, but the certainty of a fundamental difference. The African was a Negro and the West Indian a European."² Thus, when the Second World War broke out, Martinicans were caught in the untenable psychological position of believing that they were French, exactly like (and equal to) the metropole, while simultaneously rejecting and repressing their Black identity. From this, we can see how the text *Black Skin, White Masks* was influenced by this moment and the subsequent rise of Black consciousness—embracing one's Black identity and rejecting any association with the French metropole. This is highlighted in many moments throughout the text where Fanon signifies a clear divide between the Black and white body, while also maintaining an aspirational relationship. For example, Fanon notes how a Black person cannot exist in a white space without changing their true self: "Among a group of young Antilleans, he who can express himself, who masters the language, is the one to look out for: be wary of him; he's almost white. In France, they say 'to speak like a book.' In Martinique, they say 'to speak like a white man.'"³

Fanon's ambiguities in articulating an either/or framework of approaching language, either Black people speak their heritage language or that of the colonizer, follows the colonial ideology and value placed "one-language, one-state, and one-nation."⁴ I would like to shift away from an either/or framework and adopt a both/and framework, one that tolerates the coexistence of languages, cultures, and different views on the Black body. Black bodies have been used and extracted from, but what happens when the Black body takes autonomy and agency and can exist in multiple different spaces in multiple different modes? Fanon emphasizes his argument by looking to the Antillean living abroad, namely France, and being an altered individual upon their return home. However, we can see how Diallo's arguments in *Afro* demonstrates critical narratives about selfhood and the body and that, although it may be challenging to keep one's Black essence, it is still possible to do so while existing in white spaces.

As a way of seeing the effects of additional languages on the Black tongue, we can also look to English Language Learning (ELL) for adults. The

reason for looking to ELLs is because they are perfect examples of individuals who are both heritage speakers and gaining the language proficiency of European languages. In an essay on decolonizing language and linguistic practices for ELLs, Chaka Chaka argues the need to revisit the learner labels attributed to ELLs, as they are often often framed negatively, resulting in “raciolinguistic profiling of these learners, as they end up being classified by their race, panethnicity, nationality, immigrant/refugee status, regionality, and at times, by their skin color in addition to their language abilities.”⁵ Chaka points to how ELL remediation models that hope to fix ELL’s English language errors are problematic. One of the reasons Chaka points to is that the othering of ELLs leads to a “belief that ELLs are different from dominant, monolingual English speakers.”⁶ In doing this, these models follow “the different ideology, or on what Gutiérrez and Orellana refer to as *genres of difference*, which do exactly what they are intended to do: frame difference (e.g., multilingualism) as a pathology or characterize ELLs as *linguistic others*. Additionally, such models are driven by the essentialized and racialized notion of whiteness. Whiteness adopts and appropriates a dominant and normalizing vantage point that frames and conceptualizes other racial groups differentially.”⁷ Furthermore, Chaka points to how,

equating the native speaker to Standard English is an ideological tendency that is oblivious to correct varieties of English used and spoken by people of color, as well as by those who are not necessarily natives as implied by the native speaker construct. The same applies to equating the native speaker to whiteness: there are native speakers of English who are not White. So, this metonymic equation tends to erase native non-White speakers of English from existence.⁸

The concept of genres of difference put forth applies to both hair and language for Black people. Both aesthetic qualities center their difference on the basis of a conception of whiteness as pathology. Chaka argues how “This culture of monoglot Standard has its roots in colonial modernity ideologies that privilege the primacy of one-language, one-state, and one-nation over multilingual states and pluriracial nations. This ideal, romantic, monolingual, and monocultural statehood and nationhood has given rise to the “coloniality of language.”⁹ There is a parallel between the discourse, we can see, on how ELLs are regarded and Fanon’s theory of the Black man and language. Fanon clarifies how the struggle is not about proving the Black man being equal to the white man, but how “What we are striving for is to liberate the Black man from the arsenal of complexes that germinated in a colonial situation.”¹⁰ With that being said, Chaka’s argument is also a sort of response to Fanon in that we must combat the framing of difference by adopting a both/and framework where we allow Black bodies to hold multiple identities and languages. To move away “from the arsenal of complexes that germinated in a colonial situation” is to combat it with an open system that gives agency to Black bodies to exist in a malleable way of their choosing.

In a study that looks at the experiences of Black women who wear their natural hair, Johnson and Bankhead present the historical role of hair and how inseparable it is from Black people's identity.¹¹ Dating from the 12th/13th century, Johnson and Bankhead present how there has always been a link between hairstyle choice and social messaging. For example, a young Wolof girl would partially shave her head to point out that she was not of a marrying age. During the slave trade, the Europeans took note on this and other significations of the value of hair within African communities. As a way of dominating the society and erasing their roots, slave owners shaved the heads of enslaved Africans upon their arrival to the Americas. They note how

[i]n an effort to dehumanize and break the African spirit, Europeans shaved the heads of enslaved Africans upon arrival to the Americas. This was not merely a random act, but rather a symbolic removal of African culture. The shaving of the hair represented a removal of any trace of African identity and further acted to dehumanize Africans coming to the Americas in bondage... Europeans deemed African hair unattractive and did not consider it to be hair at all; for them it was considered the fur of animals and was referred to as wool or wooly.¹²

Enslaved Africans who worked closely to the plantation masters had to wear hairstyles that followed the trend or norm of the time *or* cover their heads as to not "offend Whites, a concept that carries into our present society, in a somewhat more nuanced manner." The view of the "unattractiveness" of Black women's hair persists today. "Good" hair is perceived as the hair closest to European hair—long, straight, silky, bouncy, manageable, healthy, and shiny; while "bad" hair is "short, matted, kinky, nappy, coarse, brittle and wooly." Using the terms "good" hair is often synonymous for "White, straight hair" and "bad" hair linked to mean "highly textured African hair."¹³

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon notes that "whether he likes it or not, the Black man has to wear the livery the white man has fabricated for him."¹⁴ This is where we can place his text in dialogue with Diallo's *Afro*, as her collection of testimonies shows how times have changed to show how Black bodies have come to resist heteronormative norms by carrying their Blackness as Blackness into white spaces. The narratives presented in *Afro* demonstrate the psychic battle they endure of carrying their Blackness, via their hair, into these white spaces. However, these narratives also show us how they eventually break out of this psychic battle by de-centering the white gaze and choosing to focus on what the Black body wants and how the Black body wants to define itself regardless of the Other. In this case, the Other is not longer the Black and brown body, but the white body.

Although the stories in Diallo's *Afro* are told by Afropeans, these same stories and sentiments are shared by Black women in the United States. Notably, in the United States, the civil rights era had a deep impact on Black hair. During the 60s and 70s, the Afro hairstyle, or hairstyles that involved

preserving the naturalness of a Black woman's hair was embraced. Johnson and Bankhead state how "This was the era where hair that was once considered "bad," because of its tight curl, was now considered "good" because it was worn "free" from chemical or heat processing restraint."¹⁵ As early as 1905, studies show how Black women denounced hair straightening methods, as they were associated with trying to mirror European beauty standards. However, Johnson and Bankhead note how "some disagreed with this perspective, arguing that hair straightening was simply a style option and not an attempt to become white."¹⁶ Racial symbols overlay Black women's choice of hairstyle, whether they choose to use methods to straighten their hair, wear wigs, braid their hair or just wear their hair naturally. Although this movement challenged the norms of the beauty standard set by the West, it highlighted a divide within continental and diasporic Black communities putting those who wore their natural hair against those who did not and chose to wear socially acceptable hairstyles set by the West. A Black woman's hair and/or hairstyle choice can influence their social capital, as well as their social and political stance. This divide in the hair community persists today and is propagated by the media, such as BBC News, that releases articles such as "Empowering black women to embrace their natural hair."¹⁷ Although there may have been some good intentions behind such a piece, it propagates a narrative that *Black women* are the ones who refuse to embrace their natural hair. Considering the historic and psychological traumas that Black women had/have to endure in the past because of their hair, and knowing how hair is tied to one's social capital and can impact one's financial capital, does the problem lie with the Black woman or with society and their perceptions on what is acceptable hair? When we look at the African continent as well, we see propagation of colonial stereotypes and European hairstyles. In another BBC News article "Letter from Africa: Fighting 'uniform hairstyles' in Kenya"¹⁸ that came out in 2019, state that "not too long ago, the management of a national TV station sent a memo to female presenters saying they should not wear the Kenyan Hollywood star Lupita Nyong'o's look or natural hairstyles." This article also speaks on Black-on-Black discrimination when it comes to hair and the social order involved stating "the silkier it is [hair] the higher your status." Black women have long been judged by their hair and/or their hairstyle choices. Why does the aesthetic of hair offend many? What does it say about us as a society that we critique others based on the hair that goes from their scalp?

The raciolinguistic profile being done to ELLs is comparable to the profiling of Black women's hair and declaring which hairstyle is socially or culturally acceptable and why. Chaka's argument that ELL labeling is informed by whiteness, which mimics the logic of hair politics and the politics of what and how languages Black people speak. Fanon remarks that to be Black is to have whiteness as a destiny. "To speak a language" he writes, "is to appropriate its world and culture. The Antillean who wants to be white will succeed, since he will have adopted the cultural tool of language."¹⁹ This

framing privileges European languages and a colonial consciousness, but what would it mean for the Antillean, a Black body, to succeed not because they are able to speak French, but to succeed because of their ability to “adopt the cultural tool of language[s]” and metamorph into multiple different spaces? Fanon’s framing is obsessed with whiteness and so, to bring it back to hair, what would it look like if we decenter Black hair, negotiating aesthetics outside of whiteness? What if an afro could just mean *an afro* and a Black woman’s choice to perm her hair could just mean that? If we are to use the analogy Chaka develops, that “there are native speakers of English who are not White,” then we can say that this is similar to how there are Black women who do not have a kinky hair texture. Does *not* having the kinky hair texture negate one’s Blackness? Although it has its evils, one of the promises of social media is the ability to hear alternative narratives. For example, the dominant narrative around some Black women’s decision to perm their hair is rooted in wanting to mirror beauty standards set by the West. However, in so much social media, we see and hear so many reasons, such as not having enough time and/or the know-how to properly maintain natural hair.

Regardless of the reasons and rationales, Black women now have options for how they want to look. If we connect this to language and linguistic practice, what would it look like for a Kenyan to speak French and English fluently then turn around and speak Kikuyu? Instead of the colonial frame, which sees denigration when that Kenyan that speaks English and French is less Black compared to a Kenyan who only speaks Kikuyu, we should consider how both are fully inhabiting an authentic Blackness, even if it *sounds* different. This is not to say that Fanon’s argument about the psychological effects of colonialism on a Black person’s consciousness does not hold. Indeed, given our rapidly changing cultural moment, driven by seemingly endless access to information, I encourage us to expand how we define Blackness and Black bodies, and caution against creating restrictions – so often evocative of colonialism – in transition to new ways of thinking.

You may be wondering why I have gone on and on about Black hair. Though this phenomenon of the politics of Black hair is not new, I would like to draw attention to the similarities on the effects of hairstyle choices and the mastery (or lack of) of European language when it comes to Black people. Just like hairstyle choice, there has long been a discourse around Black people and language. The way a language is spoken is often linked to one’s social and socioeconomic status and can also affect their social and financial capital. Despite a growing recognition amongst linguists that there is no such thing as a correct way of speaking a language, we still see how the default accepted language is that of the American US or British, in other words, white standard European languages. Just like the choice of straightening one’s hair, there are historic and psychological underpinnings around the use of language for Black people. Just like hair, the socially accepted and default “correct” way of speaking was set by the European man. Any other style or way of speaking

was (and in some communities still is) seen as “incorrect” and/or lacking mastery of the language.

In other words, for a non-European to speak a European language, just like Black hair, the language had to be “straightened out” and stripped of all and any cultural identity to be accepted by the white ear. Heritage and creolized languages are often limited to the “home” just as some hairstyles are limited to the “home” in order to not offend the internalized and external white gaze. Johnson and Bankhead note how “Misrepresented, distorted or missing images send direct and indirect messages about what it means to be beautiful, and have beautiful hair and a beautiful body, as well as who has the power to define these beauty standards.” Just like language, racially hegemonic images dictate who sets the standard of the “correct” way of speaking which often involves stripping down of any non-European accent. Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* has long dominated discourses on the psychological effects of speaking European language with a Black tongue. In the opening chapter to *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon claims that to speak a language is to adopt another world, the civilization of another. Fanon contends that speaking the language of the colonizer is to actively participate in “one’s own oppression.”²⁰ And so Fanon poses a particularly difficult challenge for Black people, placing them between a rock and a hard place: if we keep our heritage or creolized language, then we risk being considered inferior to the rest of the world, the world of white hegemony, adding what Fanon sees as the psychological dimension that comes with economic and political senses of inferiority.

On the other hand, if we speak the language of the colonizer, we risk continuing the cycle of colonialism and doing the colonizer’s work *for them* by adopting their psyche, world, and culture through language practices. I wholeheartedly agree that speaking another language is to adopt the subjectivities of another civilization. But only for a moment. Although we may like to think things stay in neat packages (nothing stays neat forever), our personalities flow and seep into multiple areas of our life. Does the problem lie with those who choose to modify and transform the possibilities of what Fanon would call the colonizer’s language or with a society that has long privileged European languages and, through those languages, are gateways to economic freedom? I would like to flip Fanon’s argument on its head and, instead of seeing the addition of another language on the Black tongue as a disadvantage to a Black essence, see it as an additional “superpower” that can give access to Other worlds. We should not define Blackness by the languages that are spoken (or not) but by permitting Black bodies to engage with this world in a way that makes meaning for them. This can look like many different things. And that is precisely the point, to lift any and all limitations on how Blackness is defined for Black bodies.

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- ¹ Rokkaya Diallo, *Afro* (Paris: Éditions Les Arènes, 2015)
- ² Frantz Fanon, *Toward the African Revolution: Political Essays*, trs. Haakon Chevalier (New York: Grove Press, 1988), 20.
- ³ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trs. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 4-5.
- ⁴ Chaka Chaka, "English Language Learners, Labels, Purposes, Standard English, Whiteness, Deficit Views, and Unproblematic Framings: Toward Southern Decoloniality," *Journal of Contemporary Issues in Education*, 16, no. 2 (2021): 24.
- ⁵ Chaka, "English Language Learners, Labels, Purposes....," 21.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 23.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 24.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁰ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 14.
- ¹¹ Tabora A. Johnson and Teiahsha Bankhead, "Hair it is: Examining the Experiences of Black Women with Natural Hair," *Open Journal of Social Sciences* 2 (2014): 86-100. Johnson & Bankhead constructed a research project titled Black Hair Narratives and surveyed 529 Black women. They asked 52 questions and had discussions about natural hair, the acceptance of natural hair in different environments, and how they were received by other social groups. The goal of this project was to see the correlation between hair esteem levels and how Black women chose to wear their hair. From this sample, results showed how 95% wore their natural hair out, and that they felt that they were received favorably by others and the teasing, taunting and ridicule often came from family members and friends but not co-workers and/or supervisors. However, we should keep in mind that the sample set was a relatively young and highly educated population of Black women & that most people lived in New York. These results challenged the researchers' expectations about this study but Johnson & Bankhead note how these results could be limited to those who occupy a higher socioeconomic status for women living in urban settings.
- ¹² Johnson and Bankhead, "Hair it is," 6
- ¹³ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁴ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 14.
- ¹⁵ Johnson and Bankhead, "Hair it is," 4.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.
- ¹⁷ Everett, Samantha. "Empowering Black women to embrace their natural hair." June 20, 2018. <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/uk-england-44521629>
- ¹⁸ Warungu, Joseph. "Letter from Africa: Fighting 'uniform hairstyles' in Kenya." March 30, 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-47721869>
- ¹⁹ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 21.
- ²⁰ Drabinski, John. "Frantz Fanon (2019)," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.
<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/frantz-fanon>