

Understanding Fanon's Struggle in *Black Skin, White Masks* through the Eyes of Maalouf's
"Deadly Identities"

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“The problem is important. I propose nothing short of the liberation of the man of color from himself. We shall go very slowly, for there are two camps: the white and the black. Stubbornly we shall investigate both metaphysics and we shall find that they are often quite fluid. We shall have no mercy for the former governors, the former missionaries. To us, the man who adores the Negro is as “sick” as the man who abominates him. Conversely, the black man who wants to turn his race white is as miserable as he who preaches hatred for the whites.”¹

“It reveals to me a dangerous and common attitude men have. When I am asked who I am ‘deep inside of myself,’ it means there is, deep inside each one of us, one ‘belonging’ that matters, our profound truth, in a way, our ‘essence’ that is determined once and for all at our birth and never changes. As for the rest, all of the rest - the path of a free man, the beliefs he acquires, his preferences, his own sensitivity, his affinities, his life- all these things do not count. And when we push our contemporaries to state their identity, which we do very often these days, we are asking them to search deep inside of themselves for this so-called fundamental belonging, that is often religious, nationalistic, racial or ethnic and to boast it, even to a point of provocation. Whoever claims a more complex identity becomes marginalized.”²

¹ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, (Pluto Press, 2008), 2.

² Amin Maalouf, “Deadly Identities” in *Deadly Identities* | Al Jadid, 2.

When reading Fanon's "*Black Skin, White Masks*" for the first time, I misinterpreted Fanon's overarching point as him encouraging the black population to assimilate into white culture. But, by using Maalouf's guidance to assist my analysis of Fanon, I uncovered Fanon's passion and frustration about the dehumanization of people of color who feel they have no true and accepted identity in a white, Western society. Through Maalouf, I now interpret Fanon's piece as a call-to-action after highlighting that there is no way for full equality to be achieved as there will always be a double standard for minorities.

To begin my dissection of Fanon's piece about "the black man who wants to turn his race white," I looked at Maalouf's response to his most hated identity question.³ Maalouf argues with those who believe that every person has one "profound truth," one singular "essence" creating his/her entire character.⁴ Since Maalouf spent his childhood in Lebanon speaking Arabic and his adult life in France conversing in French, he considers himself both Lebanese and French. Not only is he legally a citizen of both countries, he also identifies as belonging to both cultures. Larger social constructions endorsing the white majority target Maalouf and force him to feel outcast in both of his own cultures. Fanon is also communicating that black people often feel they belong to either two societies or none at all. If they choose to speak in Anglo-Saxon English and dress accordingly, then they are outcast from their black communities. But if they stay sheltered and withdrawn from the epicenter of white society, then they will be condemned by the white majority.

³ Fanon, 2.

⁴ Maalouf, 2.

By using “the” as his chosen article adjective when stating “the white and the black,” Fanon is drawing attention to the us versus them mentality in society.⁵ Through this diction, Fanon is distinctly emphasizing that two exclusive groups exist and a person must belong to one of the two. While shifting allegiances between both groups is seemingly possible, it is discouraged because it can be seen as turning one’s back on one’s own race. Maalouf, along with other people with mixed identities, experiences this hardship every day. People judge and categorize others based on appearance and an assumed “fundamental belonging,” not on their deepest personal experiences that shape their personality and character.⁶ Because of this instinct to categorize, the beauty in our individuality is lost and undervalued.

When re-reading Fanon’s passage about “the black man who wants to turn his race white,” I turned to Maalouf’s text to gain a well-rounded understanding of identity formation and why one would want to change his/her identity.⁷ By using repetition to illuminate that “the beliefs he acquires, his preferences, his own sensitivity, his affinities, his life” are all necessary puzzle pieces to understanding a person, Maalouf is encouraging readers to look past outward appearance and to see a person’s full identity.⁸ By understanding who a person is fundamentally, the strangers can connect and realize the common threads of humanity that make them alike. This type of human connection and communication between two people with opposite appearances allows for a greater level of acceptance. Maalouf is suggesting people embrace their own identities because humans are capable of loving others in spite of their differences. Fanon is criticizing the people who desire to change their identity due to social construction. Additionally,

⁵ Fanon, 2.

⁶ Maalouf, 2.

⁷ Fanon, 2.

⁸ Maalouf, 2.

Fanon is angry at those who believe that a person must fit a certain mold based on birth place, color, and more, for this belief discourages people from expressing their true characters.

To continue my examination of Fanon, I explored the definition of “metaphysics” in the context of my chosen passage.⁹ According to the Lexico Dictionary, metaphysics is “the branch of philosophy that deals with the first principles of things, including abstract concepts such as being, knowing, substance, cause, identity, time, and space.”¹⁰ In talking about both white and black skin colors, Fanon “investigate[s] both metaphysics and... find[s] that they are often quite fluid,” meaning that a black person’s identity fluctuates according to time, place, and social environment.¹¹ Maalouf highlights this point when writing about “a more complex identity” built from combining cultures.¹² While having a multifaceted identity can be beneficial when forging connections with others in the public sphere, it can also be seen as a betrayal to one’s assigned identity. This confining phenomenon explains why many minority groups today have not escaped the cycle of poverty and oppression, as white people only consider the color of a black person’s skin even if that person tries to assimilate. By speaking in a Western tone and dressing in a traditionally white way, a black person seemingly forgoes his/her identity as a black person, thus not treated equally by his/her peers. While metaphysics tries to explain the intricacies associated with creating an identity, it fails to explain why people should have to surrender a part of themselves to be accepted, and why an extensive identity is not encouraged in the first place. For progression to occur, the white majority must acknowledge that originality helps society prosper and should be embraced instead of shunned.

⁹ Fanon, 2.

¹⁰ “Metaphysics: Definition of Metaphysics by Lexico.” Lexico Dictionaries | English. Lexico Dictionaries.

¹¹ Fanon, 2.

¹² Maalouf, 2.

To uncover Fanon's underlying message, I attempted to unmask why Fanon would encourage the "liberation of the man of color from himself."¹³ This statement seems contradictory to Maalouf, who inspires all to own our unique and complex identity and who is vehemently opposed to the idea that each person has only one "'essence' that is determined once and for all at our birth and never changes."¹⁴ However, upon further examination, both authors are commenting on the same social issue: the double-standard placed on minority groups to be a part of two cultures that will never fully accept them for belonging to both. Fanon communicates that black people want to and have to be freed from their own skin in order to homogenize into a white dominated society. Regrettably, minority groups do not feel adequate in their own skin because of the traditional marginalization and out-group bias forced on them through history by the ruling class. Since the social construction of a singular identity criticized by Maalouf is perpetuated by the white class in power, it is practically impossible for minority groups to truly express identity and be accepted. Resultantly, many attempt to hide their ingrained sense of inferiority by assimilating, as white people are not willing to forego power to include minorities. This double-standard's purpose is twofold: it hinders a black person's ability to connect with his/her black identity for fear of being excluded from white culture, and it ensures the person will never be accepted into his/her black community because s/he will be seen as a traitor to the black race for constantly trying to be white. Thus, Fanon is not suggesting to disregard black culture, but he is rallying people to embrace their identity and use it as a force for changing the white definition of identity.

¹³ Fanon, 2.

¹⁴ Maalouf, 2.

Perhaps the most important aspect of Fanon's text is his title *Black Skin, White Masks*.¹⁵ Masks are primarily used to conceal the unwanted and to purposefully hide, as well as to threaten and subdue. When people of color wear a figurative mask, it signals they do not feel comfortable in their own skin because of binding social contracts. After analyzing Fanon through Maalouf's lens, it is clear that full equality will not be achieved with the current double-standard for minorities. Black citizens, and all minorities, will only achieve liberation when white people allow it, but white people will never accept the black race as doing so would disrupt their privilege. Thus, the black man who tries to convert "his race white is as miserable as" the black person who does not try to assimilate because both know that equality will not happen until society becomes amicable to changing the current binding racial structure.¹⁶ Once every person is valued and no one needs to wear a mask, society will be in a much better place.

¹⁵ Fanon, 1.

¹⁶ Fanon, 2.

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