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**Article (Accepted version)  
(Refereed)**

**Original citation:**

Hook, Derek and Truscott, Ross (2013) Fanonian ambivalence: on psychoanalysis and postcolonial critique. [Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology](#), 33 (3). pp. 155-169. ISSN 1068-8471

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Available in LSE Research Online: November 2014

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## **Abstract**

In this paper the place of psychoanalysis in thinking about postcolonial subjectivities is considered, and reference is made to the contemporary South African situation. The paper is divided into two sections. First, it is shown that, with its attention to the unconscious, to the past and its disguised repetition, psychoanalysis is especially attuned to the displaced routes of colonial desire after the end of official colonial (or apartheid) rule. The second section then considers Frantz Fanon's strategic deployment of psychoanalysis, focussing on the way Fanon reworked key psychoanalytic concepts in *Black Skin, White Masks*, emphasizing what he referred to as 'sociogeny,' the way colonial neuroses are produced out of an internalization – or 'epidermalization' in Fanon's terms – of racist social structure. The argument made is that psychoanalysis must, if it is to be a part of a critical frame for postcolonial subjectivities, be rendered not only instrument but also object of analysis, a part of the very social structure towards which Fanon shifted his attention. Psychoanalysis is adept at throwing into relief repetitions of the colonial past. Nonetheless, psychoanalytic thinking, pervasive in a post-apartheid context – i.e. not simply at the isolated level of clinical or scholarly practice, but as a discursive lens for engagements with the South African national past, as exemplified in the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission – emerges as itself a particular kind of acting out the colonial past at an epistemological level.

**Key words:** Psychoanalysis, Freud, Fanon, postcolonial, post-apartheid, neurosis, memory, repetition

## **Fanonian ambivalence: On psychoanalysis and postcolonial critique**

### **Introduction**

In this paper we draw attention to some of the dilemmas in thinking about postcolonial subjectivities, placing Frantz Fanon's (1952) *Black Skin, White Masks* – the most explicitly psychoanalytical of his texts – at the centre of our concerns. To be specific, it is Fanon's ambivalent relation to psychoanalysis, his repetition of its concepts, often against their origins, aware always of their potential to transmit, re-inscribe and reify certain ideologically-loaded Eurocentric ideas (Adams, 1970; Bulhan, 1985), that we want to propose as a productive way to think about postcolonial subjectivities.<sup>1</sup>

Critical psychology, the discipline from which we write, has long since registered the influence of French philosopher and historian, Michel Foucault (Hook, 2009), and along with it, a shift towards the socio-historical constitution of the subject, towards the way discursive practices “systematically form the objects of which they speak” (Foucault, 1972, p. 54). This line of theory casts serious doubts over notions of psychical structures and operations, including those of psychoanalytic theory. This de-psychologizing of critical psychology was no doubt necessary as a corrective to the universalizing tendencies of mainstream psychology (Parker, 1997). However, warnings against the perils of psychological reductionism too often provide an excuse to dismiss from serious consideration the psychical dimensions of power. If subjectivities are not merely the effect of colonial and neocolonial distributions of power, but are also their conduits, their channels of transmission, then a key question revolves around how one might critically and strategically draw on psychoanalytic concepts as a

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<sup>1</sup> Fanon's ideas are not, of course, beyond reproach, and this becomes important particularly when one considers those less celebrated aspects of his writings, such as his passages on homosexuality and black women, which have put him on the sharp end of feminist and gender studies critiques. While conceding this, it is not our central concern here.

means of thinking about a psychic dimension to the persistence of colonialism (House, 2005). We suggest, with reference to Fanon's (1952, 1961) work, an approach that not only deploys psychoanalysis to read the unconscious repetitions of the colonial past in the present, indeed, the displacements of colonial desire in postcolonial subjectivities (Seshadri-Crooks, 2000), but one that also draws upon a growing body of scholarship that foregrounds the colonality and/or racism of psychoanalytic thinking itself (Berger, 1999; Campbell, 2000; Frosh, 2010; Spillers, 1996). The aim is thus to render psychoanalysis both instrument and object of postcolonial critique (Khanna, 2003).

Early on in *Black Skin* Fanon (1952) makes two assertions. Firstly, he establishes the pathological nature of the colonial situation that stems from and is articulated in two distinct but intertwined desires: "The black man wants to be white. The white man is desperately trying to achieve the rank of man" (p. xiii). Secondly, Fanon asserts the centrality of psychoanalysis for a critique of colonialism; indeed, for Fanon, "only a psychoanalytic interpretation of the black problem can reveal the affective disorders responsible for this network of complexes" (p. xiv). The desire to be white is what Fanon would go on to diagnose, in the language of psychoanalysis, as a kind of neurosis. Likewise, psychoanalysis for Fanon was crucial in characterising and critiquing the place occupied within the colonial relation by the colonizer, and in this regard he piled up the diagnoses of the colonizer's paranoid and neurotic disorders (Macey, 2000; McCulloch, 1983).

We are not, despite the elision of 'the psychological' that has taken place in the wake of Foucault-inspired critical psychology, averse to Foucauldian analytics. Indeed, a key text in proposing Fanonian ambivalence towards psychoanalysis as a productive way to think about postcolonial subjectivities is Foucault's (1970) *The Order of Things*, specifically the final chapter of that book. While Fanon uses psychoanalysis to diagnose the white man's production of 'the black other' in achieving the "rank of man," Foucault places

psychoanalysis within the human sciences, through which “Western culture had given itself in one century a certain image of man” (p. 361). In a counter intuitive move, Foucault reads the seemingly unrelated texts of psychoanalysis and ethnology – the colonial discipline par excellence, concerned with the creation of Western man through what he is *not*, the racial other, ‘the primitive’ – alongside one another. Foucault suggests that both psychoanalysis and ethnology depend on the same underlying notion of History. For Foucault, this is what grounds all of the human sciences, but while the human sciences construct the *consciousness* of Western man, what he is and ought to be, towards which he is always supposedly developing, psychoanalysis and ethnology are directed to that which cannot be admitted to civilization, and, in Foucault’s words, “we see the destiny of man being spun before our very eyes, but being spun backwards; it is being led back by those strange bobbins, to the form of its birth” (p. 381).

Neurosis in Freud’s (1918) thinking is a kind of regression to an earlier phase of development, to infantile primitivity, entailing a fixation on a particular erotogenic zone of the body. Commenting on Freud’s conception of primitivity in this developmental sense, on the one hand, and racialized primitivity in the anthropological sense, on the other, Celia Brickman (2003) has argued compellingly that they are not separable. Rather than being limited to a few unfortunate references to the anthropological primitive, Brickman reads Freud’s entire oeuvre as being underpinned by evolutionary theory:

Because the developmental trajectory in psychoanalysis was itself mapped onto an evolutionary trajectory, regression was believed to retrace not only the steps of individual development but also of human evolution: regression always moves (backwards) along an ontogenetic and phylogenetic path at one and the same time (p. 86).

In regressing to the early unremembered formative events of childhood, or in acting out a primal scene through an adult neurosis, one is, according to Freudian theory, recapitulating the early developmental history of the human species – thus, for example, the developing child’s ego displays features of cannibalism, its identification with its parents a process of taking the loved object or part thereof into the ego’s economy of drives (see Freud, 1923, 1921, 1917), and the anthropological primitive is constituted as being at a relatively early stage of human evolution, a child of man. There is, thus, no way of referring to psychological regression, as Freud does and as Fanon does in following Freud, without invoking a latent colonial discourse, as “the idea itself carries with it the imprint of the evolutionary premises with their racial entailments on which it was originally constructed” (Brickman, 2003, pp. 76-77).

The risk, then, in Fanon’s use of psychoanalysis, lies in this racially coded subtext, this excess that haunts psychoanalytic diagnoses. Freud’s work can be read as a critique of Western European society: not only did he propose that infantile primitivity persists into adulthood – in neuroses but also in those aspects of everyday life considered healthy, mature – he also suggested that primitivity, in the anthropological sense, against which Western Europe was defining itself, persists in what are taken to be markers of Western European civilization. Nevertheless, the opposition between primitivity and civilization is what grounds Freud’s thinking, enables it. If we follow Ranjana Khanna’s (2003) argument in *Dark Continents*, which builds on Foucault’s thesis, psychoanalysis – much like the disciplines of ethnology, anthropology and archaeology – was coextensive with colonialism. That is, the conditions of possibility for psychoanalytic thought were the same as those that made colonialism possible: an opposition between civilization and that which cannot be admitted to civilization, the primitive. This is enabled by linking this primitiveness to the past, thereby

situating European civilization at the pinnacle of human evolution. As Freud (1900) put it as early as *The Interpretation of Dreams* in his discussion of psychic regression, “that which is older in point of time is at the same time formally primitive” (p. 280).

While in terms of its effects and its context of application the psychoanalytic talking cure is quite different from the civilizing mission of colonialism – which sought to educate the primitivity out of the colonized, although not so much as to erase their difference, only enough to fetishize the so called native as not fully European, the same but not quite in Homi Bhabha’s (1994) formulation – psychoanalysis and ethnology do bear, as Foucault (1970) put it, a “profound kinship and symmetry” (p. 378), being issued from the same episteme. The crucial difference between ethnology and psychoanalysis is that the former is “traditionally the knowledge we have of people without history,” people relegated to timeless primitivity, excluded from the social, while the latter is a form of knowledge about those whose past is both held and withheld in the repetition of the past in the transference relationship (Foucault, 1970, p. 376). In “Remembering, Repeating and Working-through,” for instance, Freud’s (1914) central argument is that a repetition of the past in the transference relationship between analyst and analysand is, at once, a form of remembering and of resistance to remembering. As Freud put it, “the patient does not remember anything of what he has forgotten and repressed, but acts it out. He reproduces it not as a memory but as an action; he repeats it, without, of course, knowing that he is repeating it” (p. 150).

It is with the notion of repetition – precisely what psychoanalysis interprets – that we can treat psychoanalytic interpretations themselves as a form of acting out the colonial past. Psychoanalytic concepts have histories, and marshalling them for political use without careful genealogical work, as Diana Fuss (1994) has argued, is bound to repeat the effects of the concept’s unremembered past or, at least, an unacknowledged relation to its epistemological foundations (Khanna, 2003).



In our engagement with Fanon, we refer to the South African context. South African (neo)colonialism may have been in certain respects different to and – in its apartheid incarnation – more extreme and prolonged than in other places in the world, but the contemporary South African situation exemplifies the persistence of the colonial past.<sup>2</sup> We use it as a point of focus, then, not only because it is a context with which we're familiar, but also because it dramatizes the challenges at hand.

The working example we use is a narrative submitted online to the Apartheid Archive, an inter-disciplinary research project (see <http://www.apartheidarchive.org/site/>) that “aims to examine the nature of the experiences of racism of (particularly ‘ordinary’) South Africans under the old apartheid order and their continuing effects on individual and group functioning in contemporary South Africa,” (Apartheid Archive Project, p. 1). The focus of this project is, in other words, on everyday racism as opposed to the gross human rights violations of a strictly political kind that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) heard in the 1990s. The narrative is used to demonstrate what a more orthodox Freudian reading might look like, focusing on an individual diagnosis. We then move to a Fanonian psychoanalytic ‘socio-diagnostics,’ making occasional reference back to the narrative. As we follow the trajectory that forms between Freud and Fanon – and we could well have focussed on Fanon’s reworking of a number of other psychoanalytic ideas, for instance, his critique and use of Jung, Adler, Mannoni or Lacan’s work (in this respect see Bulhan, 1985; Gibson, 2003) – we suggest that psychoanalytic discourse has to be taken as a part of the societal psycho-pathology diagnosed.

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<sup>2</sup> The ambiguous qualification of the (neo)colonial nature of apartheid stems from the fact that, strictly speaking, the independent republic of South Africa is already, by 1961, a ‘postcolonial’ state, free of colonial rule, despite that it implemented a system of racialised oppression commensurate with racist colonial regulation in other parts of the world.

## **Psychoanalysis and the diagnosis of individual psycho-pathology**

We quote the narrative at length here as it provides a textured and quite florid impression of how the apartheid past is frequently remembered:

A black man in blue overalls – the ‘standard issue’ uniform of black labourers – was walking towards me as I left a cafe. The cafe was just across the road from a public toilet, essentially a black man’s toilet ... an intimidating, squalid little building where I never saw any whites go. The toilet was opposite a bottle store ... Black men would buy milk stout beer there, a type of beer (castle milk stout) somehow marked apart – black man’s beer. Even that was an upmarket product compared to that perfect marker of difference, ‘leopard beer’ I think it was called, a very cheap mass-produced beer which seemed perhaps to be a more traditional form of beer.... It looked toxic, too under-marketed, I would never drink that – you only bought that, presumably, if you had no other choice.

Alongside the bottle store was a little bicycle repair shop, grubby and uncared for ... Next to it was a greasy pie shop, likewise unclean, smelly. This row of shops, along with the ‘African toilet,’ which always smelt bad and whose walls seemed stained with piss, was a kind of infra-zone, a grey-area that somehow existed below (but within) the norms of a white suburb. The man who ran the bicycle shop was a tiny Greek man – ‘very Greek’ we would have said – perhaps like the cafe owner across the road (or perhaps Portuguese), a racial designation that didn’t matter all that much as long as one understood that it was one degree apart, at the edge of the degree-by-degree

differentiation of white from black. Low income whites made for something of a difficult-to-place category. It would be only later that I would be introduced to ‘poor whites,’ pointed out to me by my mother in Vrededorp, Johannesburg. They seemed more socially distant, more anxiety provoking even than blacks...

The toilet was scary – I always wondered what it looked like on the inside of those brick walls ... I was frightened, a little disturbed, I guess, of their ‘rights’ to be there. I was always too young, too small, too innocent, not man enough (not black man enough?) to go in there. There was also an open-air barber nearby... The question that sometimes presented itself to my mind but that went always unvoiced was whether I would ever get my hair cut there or at a place like this; whether it would even be possible, whether these were different clippers for different hair (‘peppercorns’ was the word used to describe black hair); or that this was ridiculous because such unhygienic conditions – dirty clippers, unclean scissors – would simply never be an option ... There were often bits of black hair scattered around this ungrassy, dusty section of ground that I crossed between my bus-stop and home. These little ‘scalped’ bits and squares of ‘peppercorn’ hair – which manifested themselves as throwaway tokens of worthlessness, of lives that didn’t matter, bodily scraps that connoted moral inferiority, a closeness to thingness – seemed always so different to my own.

He came towards me, heading into the cafe, in his blue overall. This was always a bit of an anxious moment, where one needed to obey the right rules of disinterest, to maintain a measured distance, nothing by way of confrontation. A kind of professional distance, in short, suitable for

interactions with those who worked for you. I only realized afterwards what had happened. He had moved his hand awkwardly, putting something away, obscuring something. His overalls had been open all the way down to the waist, open too low, and he had tucked himself back in. This was the first time I had ever seen (but had not seen, because it was black), a black penis. That question, never quite resolved, had come back once or twice after glimpses of black men in pornography: how could they not have a pink head, a pink *glans*, how could *that* flesh be black too? A question which seemed to suppose that actually, as when you saw a black man's, a black woman's hands, the less dark side, their palms, their fingernails, *there* bodily difference was minimal. The lightened areas, fingernails, that zone of the body closest to pink, to pale, those places could have been the opening possibility, the anxiety-deflating proof that ('they'), black people, seemed similar – similar but different too, no doubt – that there was a kind of reassuring, common-denominator similarity. That those parts of the body were more absent than present became the proof of difference (Compendium of Apartheid Archive narratives, Narrative 59, 2010).

Perhaps the most striking feature of this narrative is its highly reflexive tone. The narrator dwells within the racist logic of apartheid, conjuring the past with incredible attention to detail. He also problematizes the past; indeed, he conjures the past so as to problematize it, including who he was and how he saw things then. It is, we would suggest, less an account of the apartheid past than a reconstitution of the past, telling us much more about the post-apartheid present and the conditions according to which one can narrate the past. Because the narrative is, in a sense, an elaborate fantasy about something that may or may not have

happened, one can immediately see how useful psychoanalysis could be here, and at least two prominent psychoanalytic themes can be read in the text.

Following the first sentence, where the narrator alludes to what this story is about – how, for the first time, he “had ever seen (but had not seen, because it was black), a black penis” – he goes into a four-paragraph digression, picking up again at the start of the final paragraph. The digression is not without its significance, as we will see below; it will suffice at this stage, though, to point to how there is a formal replication here, in the first and last paragraphs, of how Freud described little boys encountering for the first time their mother’s absence of a penis, or, at least, how his adult neurotic patients recounted childhood memories of this formative event.

In “The Sexual Theories of Children” the first fantasy Freud (1908) outlined, a fantasy little boys have when confronted with sexual difference, “consists in *attributing to everyone, including females, the possession of a penis*, such as the boy knows from his own body” (p. 215, emphasis in original). Confronted with a body without a penis, the little boy disavows its absence, “the boy’s estimate of its value is logically reflected in his inability to imagine a person like himself who is without this essential constituent” (pp. 215-216). Here, though, the scene is framed in racial terms. Of course, the black penis is a familiar cast member in the theatre of white racial fantasies, and here it takes on an overdetermined role, at once threatening castration in its implied largeness, but also, in its absence of white skin – white skin as a phallic signifier in a racialized society like South Africa (see Seshadri-Crooks, 2000) – it comes to stand for the ‘social castration’ described throughout the rest of the narrative. The seeing and not seeing of the black penis, then, can stand for the poverty and abjection that is both seen and not seen, that is disavowed in an overly intellectualized narrative. And although it may be a stretch to propose palms and fingernails, those parts of

the body “closest to pink, to pale,” as a kind of fetish object, there is nevertheless, around these body parts, an anxious search for a “reassuring, common-denominator similarity.”

For Freud, the reason the absence of the penis is disavowed – and here the reason social castration is seen but not fully appreciated – is not primarily concern for the other who bears this loss, but fear of castration. *If this other person has no penis*, the child imagines, *I, too, may lose mine*, and along with this there is the possibility of an accompanying fantasy that the woman may well have been on the receiving end of violence from the father, which lead to this loss. We see in the narrative an analogous process, the relating of racialized inequality to the possibility of the misfortune of inhabiting such a social space, the assertion that “I would never drink that,” the question of “whether I would ever get my hair cut there or at a place like this,” that is, the threat to one’s own position posed by one that “seemed always so different to my own.” It is perhaps for this reason that poor whites, “socially distant” and cut off from the white social body are “more anxiety provoking even than blacks.”

This, however, is to focus only on the first and last paragraphs; between them is a digression that bears a heightened awareness of markers of racialized difference, as well as a preoccupation with dirt associated with blackness and disassociated from whiteness. Accompanying these concerns is also a marked focus on the rituals performed when confronted with this difference, the need, for instance, “to obey the right rules of disinterest, to maintain a measured distance, nothing by way of confrontation.”

Useful in framing this aspect of the narrative is J.M. Coetzee’s (1991) essay “The Mind of Apartheid,” where he employed a Freudian metaphors of obsessional neurosis to read the texts of Geoffrey Cronjé, an apartheid ideologue plagued by fears of racial mixing and the contamination of white racial purity whose writings informed the drafting of apartheid policy. Although the Apartheid Archive narrative is not of the same racist tone as

Cronjé's writings, Coetzee's essay assists in reading the more 'obsessional neurotic' features of the Apartheid Archive narrative, but also in providing a picture of a more orthodox Freudian 'diagnosis' in the service of a postcolonial agenda.

Coetzee begins by pointing out a gap in orthodox historiographical explanations of how apartheid arose. The standard argument, he notes, was that apartheid legislation was a deplorable but nonetheless *rational* set of measures designed to bolster white privilege and improve the lot of the white Afrikaners, many of whom were poor in the 1940s. Coetzee does not deny that apartheid was in large part motivated by a material gain, but it was also a form of madness. "It did indeed flower out of self-interest and greed," he states, "but it also flowered out of desire and out of the hatred of desire" (p. 2). That is to say, poor whites living in close proximity with people of other races presented not only the threat of a loss of racialised material advantage over blacks, but also the disintegration of racial distinction. In Cronjé's words, "Unconsciously a gradual process of feeling equal (*gelykvoeling*) begins to take place in them," and pretty soon, through inter-racial socializing and – horror of horrors – marriage, "a single South African mishmash-society" emerges (cited in Coetzee, 1991, p. 11).

One of the characteristic features of obsessional neurosis is a reaction formation, the turning around of a forbidden wish into its opposite, from which a compromised form of gratification is derived, and, as Freud (1926) noted, "in order to achieve this end *it will often make us of the most ingenious associative paths* (p. 112, emphasis added). The last part of Freud's (1926) formulation, italicised above, is exactly what Coetzee focuses on in his reading of Cronjé's texts: he traces the condensations and displacements of Cronjé's texts, the way they are "continually bursting at the seams and leaking" (Coetzee, 1991, p. 20) with precisely what is so vehemently denied. Thus, Coetzee reads apartheid segregation policies –

the Population Registration Act, the Group Areas Act and the Mixed Marriages Act – as not only a “counterattack upon desire” (p. 17); on Coetzee’s reading, “the redrawing of the maps of cities, the redivision of the countryside, the removal and resettling of populations” (p. 17), all of this declares, symptomatically, desire displaced, lodged in its negation.

It is not simply the case, though, that Cronjé’s obsessions with racial purity, with strict prohibitions on racial mixing, with the segregation policies that would make racial mixing if not impossible then at least unlawful, *conjure* this forbidden desire with each prohibition. Certainly Coetzee suggests that Cronjé is fascinated with what he forbids – mixing, contamination, miscegenation – and in this way what he repudiates he is “again and again returned to by his imagination” (p. 16, emphasis in original). More than this, though, in the theory of obsessional neurosis prohibitions are thought to be *animated* by precisely the desire that is repressed. As Freud (1907) put it, obsessional rituals “always reproduce something of the pleasure they are designed to prevent; *they serve the repressed instinct no less than the agencies which are repressing it*” (p. 125, emphasis added). Thus, if the path for the satisfaction of desire is its prohibition, if it is prohibited desire that pulses through the prohibition, then this “counterattack upon desire” could only have lead to further anxiety, to a horrified sense of contamination, creating further need for rituals of purification, for stricter, tighter controls on segregation.

Anal erotism in Freud’s writings is central to his conceptualization of obsessional conduct (see, for e.g., Freud, 1918, 1909, 1908, 1907). And the conflicts of Freud’s obsessional patients frequently coalesced around issues of money; put differently, their anality played itself out over monetary concerns. Money, as Freud (1918) put it, is “a valuable substance, which in the course of the individual’s life, attracts the psychic interest which properly belongs to that product of the anal zone, faeces” (p. 82). On Coetzee’s reading, this is the site, the erotogenic zone, of Cronjé’s conflicts too. It is around a



“mishmash *mengelmoes* of races” (Cronjé cited in Coetzee, 1991, p. 9) that Cronjé’s text continually circles. And as Coetzee puts it, “In everyday usage the term *mengelmoes* is always derogatory. It implies a mixture in which not only individual character but all original structure has been lost; what is left behind is shapeless, undifferentiated and pulpy – much like faeces, in fact” (Coetzee, 1991, p. 10).<sup>3</sup>

What Cronjé fears most, then, is undifferentiation, the loss of racial difference. It is not, however, as noted above, a loss of racialized privilege that Cronjé fears, not in any simple sense and not primarily; in addition to these concerns over financial power, and conducted through them, are a set of anxious repudiations, aversions, that ward off death: if different races are allowed to mix, and if whites are allowed to intermarry, then “we as white people will eventually cease to exist” (Cronjé cited in Coetzee, 1991, p. 8). To extend the above line of argument, then, if this “counterattack upon desire” served as a neurotic mode of satisfying what was prohibited, it could only, with each forced removal of the object of forbidden desire, bring the obsessional subject ever nearer to death, the death that this desire spelled for whiteness, a contamination of its purity, constituting, in the true Freudian sense, a repetition compulsion, not simply a repetition of the past, but one that leads towards that inorganic, undifferentiated state from which all living matter has come, a “circuitous path to death” (Freud, 1920, pp. 50-51).

We would certainly stop short of diagnosing the narrator of the Apartheid Archive a racist in the mould of Cronjé; the obsessional features of the text, though, revolving around difference and sameness, mixture and separateness and the centrality of sexuality in the

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<sup>3</sup> Such a visceral reaction to the impure, to the mixing of what should not be mixed, of course brings to mind Kristeva’s (1982) seminal account of the abject. For a detailed discussion of the notion of abjection in its application to colonial forms of racism, see Hook (2011) and Oliver (1993).

narrator's anxieties about racial difference are certainly striking. We could also make a link here between castration anxieties and the obsessional features of this narrative, a connection made most clearly by Freud (1918) in his 'Wolf man' case. Freud's patient had the overwhelming need to exhale whenever he saw beggars, cripples and ugly or disfigured people, and this was connected to his ritualistic breathing in of the holy spirit, and breathing out of evil spirits, thus associatively linking the act of inhaling and exhaling to obsessional concerns with anal expulsion; more to the point, feces and dirt, money and fears of misfortune, and concerns about mixing and contamination with the dirtiness of the wretched, all these things coalesce within a single moment that is determined from two sides: that of castration anxiety (ending up in their position) and obsessional neurosis (mixing, undifferentiation, irreconcilable aggression towards the unfortunate). It is not too hard to propose, then, that an encounter with those living in abject conditions could provoke both castration anxieties and obsessional concerns over what must be cast aside to live as one does insulated by racialized privilege, producing a narrative shot through with both the disavowal of difference and a compulsive framing of the scene in terms of rigid segregations and differences.

This is, then, how a Freudian analysis of this narrative might proceed, the key point being that the problem, the 'pathogenic nucleus,' would be located, despite the obvious salience of the socio-cultural and political context, within the singular ego of the individual subject. The risk here is that individual diagnoses may prove a political impediment inasmuch as they lead away from more structural, sociological and economic modes of engagement and analysis (Adams, 1970; Sekyi-Out, 1996). Through the reification of psychological notions – obsessional neurosis, fetishism, castration anxiety and so on – such factors come to be viewed as foundational, as the primary mechanisms that establish and maintain structures of dispossession and inequality (Bulhan, 1980, 1985; Gibson, 2003). Fanon, as we show below,

steers away from the psychological reductionism that characterized many earlier attempts to use psychoanalysis beyond the clinic, attempting to direct his diagnostic attentions to pathological socio-historical conditions rather than to ‘colonial personalities.’ He nonetheless does not give up the locus of the individual and his diagnoses still pertain to subjectivities. As we will see, though, Fanon’s unorthodox borrowings from the history of psychoanalytic thought means that his is a strategic utilization of its concepts in order to produce a set of transformative theorizations.

### **Fanon’s vernacularization of Freudian psychoanalysis**

As noted in the introduction, Fanon (1952) focuses on two related desires that constitute the pathology of the colonial situation, which are worth reiterating: “The black man wants to be white. The white man is desperately trying to achieve the rank of man” (p. xiii). Fanon tracks the implications of the desire to be white across the domains of language, sexuality, dreams and behaviour, finding in each instance the persistence of this wish. As an unconscious desire, it is one that is never stated as a verbal proposition; it is closer to the fantasmatic urge that underlies a variety of behaviours – from taking on white European language and culture, to the desire for a white spouse or sexual partner, cosmetic treatments of skin whitening, hair-straightening, and so on. It is for this reason that Fanon draws inspiration from the clinical approach that Freud developed for the treatment of neurosis.

As one might expect, a sexual aetiology is established in Fanon’s understanding these ‘colonial disorders’; indeed, as Fanon (1952) asserts, “If we want to understand the racial situation psychoanalytically... considerable importance must be given to sexual phenomena” (p. 138). Fanon’s critical relationship to psychoanalysis, though, means that he revises crucial

Freudian conceptualizations.<sup>4</sup> This gains pace as his arguments build, so much so that the ostensible ‘neuroses of lactification’ – the wish to be white – he describes are perhaps better understood within the ambit of ‘epidermalization,’ the internalization of broader inequalities. As Fanon (1952) says of the black man’s sense of inferiority, “The inferiority complex can be ascribed to a double process: First, economic. Then, internalization or rather epidermalization of this inferiority” (pp. xiv-xv). For Fanon, concrete social and political inequalities – structural causes – lie at the root of what may otherwise be seen as the more idiosyncratic or subjective constituents of neuroses. Fanon thus privileges what he calls ‘sociogeny’ or a ‘sociodiagnostics.’ In this way it is more the pathological nature of society, “the neurotic structure of colonialism itself” (Fuss, 1994, p. 20) that is diagnosed, than an individual subject.

Important an assertion as this is, politically, in avoiding a simplistically individualizing register of analysis, things are perhaps not always quite so clear cut as this, as we shall see. For although Fanon clearly departs from much of Freud’s meta-psychology, many of his theorizations in *Black Skin, White Masks* are not easily separated from a Freudian understanding of neurosis, particularly so in view of the constituent factors of sexuality, trauma and singular psychological disturbance that the use of the concept of neurosis commits one to, as well as the centrality of the psychoanalytic notion of identification within Fanon’s conception of epidermalization.

Clinically, neurosis connotes a variety of irrational behaviours and symptoms that need to be understood as the outcome of psychical conflict between unconscious urges and

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<sup>4</sup> For this reason one is tempted to side with Fanon against Macey’s (1999) charge of a “quite extraordinary misreading of Freud” (p. 12). While there is some truth to Macey’s assertion – Fanon arguably does not select the most appropriate Freudian text to grapple with dilemmas of neurosis – the point, it would seem, is that Fanon’s is a vernacular psychoanalysis; his is a precisely inventive recourse to Freud.

the social or cultural need to keep these urges outside of the conscious mind. Or in Fanon's (1952) own description:

The neurotic structure of an individual is precisely the elaboration, the formation, and the birth of conflicting *knots* in the ego, stemming on the one hand from the environment and on the other from the entirely personal way this individual reacts to these influences (p. 62, emphasis in original).

One appreciates then the intractability of the psychological dilemma that Fanon sketches, that of the 'dream of turning white,' the wish to attain the level of humanity accorded to whites in racist or colonial contexts, as it comes into conflict with being in a black body within a racist society, which make this wish impossible.

In searching for the cause, and thereby the potential cure, of neurotic disturbances, one is obliged – following Fanon's reading of Freud – to turn to the childhood history of the individual. The symptoms of neurosis, furthermore, will always be linked to a trauma of sorts, which lends these symptoms their own distinctive, individual character. More than this, we are not necessarily looking for a single event, for the cause of the symptom most often arises out of "multiple traumas, frequently analogous and repeated" (Freud cited in Fanon, 1952, p. 123). More importantly, this trauma need not have been that of an objective, empirical reality, an 'actual' event, it may just as well have been fantasized. It is this important conceptual leap which means that psychoanalysis can focus its curative efforts almost completely on elements of fantasy, on 'psychical reality' rather than on the facts of consensual objectivity. Hence, the neurosis of the black man or woman need not then have stemmed from actual experiences (the witnessing of the lynching of one's father is the example Fanon gives), but rather from fantasized experiences, or, more to the point, from

indirect or cultural forms of oppression or trauma. Then again, one might argue, traumatic examples of racist violence, abuse and denigration would seem quite commonplace in the colonial domain.

Describing this trauma Fanon (1952) states, drawing on Sartre, “It is the racist who creates the inferiorized” (p. 73). For Fanon, what makes a black person “an object among other objects” is the white gaze; as he stated, in a frequently cited passage, recounting how he was interpellated by the fearful gaze of a white child, “Look! A Negro!” (p. 89), the child says, “Mama, look, a Negro; I’m scared!” (p. 91). There is a misrecognition of the black man here; but – and it is here that Fanon’s notion of ‘lactification’ emerges – it is through a “total identification with the white man” (p. 124), an identification with this white gaze, that the black man begins to misrecognize himself too: “I cast an objective gaze over myself, discovered my blackness, my ethnic features; deafened by cannibalism, backwardness, fetishism, racial stigmas, slave traders” (p. 92).

To return to the Apartheid Archive narrative, one way to frame it is as an instance in which the black man is phantasmatically produced, objectified. However, one might suggest, following Fanon, that the potentially neurotic element of this encounter lies in the degree to which this is how the “black man in blue overalls” walking towards the narrator comes to see himself too, not only as belonging within certain racially designated zones, doing things that are characteristically black, but also *through the white gaze*, with which he has identified. Within the stark and pervasive racism of the colonial context, blackness is for the black man or woman, no less than for the white, in Fanon’s view, associated with “filth,” “thingness,” “squalor,” “worthlessness,” “moral inferiority”. It is, in Khanna’s (2003) terms, “a violence done to the black man so that he too sees other black men through white eyes” (p. 173), but the key insight Fanon offers is that the black man and the black woman come to see themselves through the same white gaze.

But it is not simply one encounter such as this that precipitates the neurosis Fanon describes. For Fanon, the colonial environment is so characterized by racism, by epistemic, psychological and physical types of oppression that these material and cultural forms of trauma may themselves, as opposed to more individual circumstances posited by Freud, act as the triggers of neurosis. Through the myriad racialized stories told to black and white children alike – stories in which “the Wolf, the Devil, the Wicked Genie, Evil, and the Savage are always represented by the Blacks or Indians” – the black child, Fanon argues, “identifies himself with the explorer, the civilizing colonizer, the white man who brings truth to the savages, a lily-white truth” (pp. 124-126). It is for this reason that Bhabha (1994) counts the young Fanon’s experience of racist Hollywood stereotypes of black men as one of the key ‘primal scenes’ of *Black Skin, White Masks*.

The neurotic quality of what Fanon is describing here results not only from the desire for, but identifications with whiteness. Fanon (1952) sketches this dilemma in the following terms: if it is the case that, within colonial discourse, all that is repugnant and undesirable is black, and that I, as a black man or woman, order my life like that of a moral person, then “The only thing I know is the purity of my conscience and the whiteness of my soul” (p. 169). Whiteness here functions as a moral category, as the basis, the template, of all that is positive. As Fanon puts it, “If I behave like a man with morals, I am not black” (p. 191). This process will always be a jarring one, because race is not, like other variables of discrimination – such as religion and ethnicity – easily hidden; it remains patently visible, particularly so in colonial regimes. It is for this reason that Fanon states that “the black man lives an ambiguity that is extraordinarily neurotic” (p. 169).

To approach identification within Fanon’s formulation from a slightly different angle, the concept of epidermalization bears some resemblance to the psychoanalytic notion of introjection, the psychic process of taking into the ego and its fantasy world objects from the

external world, prototypically parental objects or parts thereof.<sup>5</sup> Fanon's concept of epidermalization, though, has a far more politicized epistemology than that of introjection. Epidermalization, offers Hall (1996), is "literally, the inscription of race on the skin" (1996, p. 16). Or in Khanna's (2003) words, it is a conception of how "the *historical* and *economic* shape the perception of the *biological*" (p. 172, emphasis in original). We are better placed, then, to appreciate what Fanon attempts by way of his 'sociogenetic' diagnoses. These are diagnoses that have departed from the psychoanalytic premises that initially informed them. They are not predominantly clinical categories and they pertain less to individuals than to the socio-historical conditions in which the oppressed find themselves, a form of analysis that cannot easily be accused of vulgar psychologization. This makes for an important warning for a postcolonial psychoanalysis more broadly: in his recourse to a psychoanalytic interpretative approach, Fanon insists that such neuroses, despite being 'wired through' the sexual realms, through unconscious processes, are ultimately derived from inequalities present in wider social structures. They cannot as such be viewed as outcomes of personality factors of the colonized, or reduced to the internal psychical workings of individual subjects. There is, however, even in his 'socio-genetic' diagnoses, a need to account for the ways in which individual subjects become psychically fastened to colonial discourse, and identification functioned for Fanon as one such account.

In light of how centrally placed identification is in Fanon's (1952) thinking, it is worth taking seriously Fuss' (1994) argument regarding the coloniality of the concepts Fanon

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<sup>5</sup> Introjection is frequently defined in opposition to projection – the expulsion of unpleasant impulses, most often through repudiation – and usually denotes a merging with the object; as such, introjection is closely associated with psychoanalytic formulations of identification. Introjection is a phantasmatic process that finds its bodily analogue in orality, ingestion, as opposed to excretion. At a basic level, then, it is through introjection that a subject is able to assert, 'I am like this' (I have taken this in, I am identified with it), and through projection, 'I am not like that' (I have spat that out, excreted it) (Freud, 1925).



repeats, suggesting that identification “be placed squarely within its other historical genealogies, including colonial imperialism” (p. 20). Although Fanon undoubtedly complicates the teleology of Western civilization, the notion of incorporation, frequently associated with Hegelian dialectics but also inseparable from psychoanalytic formulations of ‘identification as introjection,’ is not only analogous to bodily processes – although Fuss does suggest the alimentary and the excretory when she refers to “the imperialist act of assimilation that drives Europe’s voracious colonialist appetite” (p. 23) – it also, as Fuss argues with reference to Robert Young, “mimics at a conceptual level the geographical and economic absorption of the non-European world by the West” (Young cited in Fuss, 1994, p. 23). Identification, Fuss suggests, is a kind of psychic geopolitics, “an imperial process, a form of violent appropriation in which the Other is deposed and assimilated into the lordly domain of Self” (p. 23). Although much more could be made of Fuss’ argument and of her discussion of Fanon’s use of identification, it should suffice to note that, even in the hands of Fanon, in his anti-colonial socio-diagnostic psychoanalysis, there is an indissoluble element of coloniality.

While Fuss focuses on identification in Fanon’s writing, we can push the point about the coloniality of psychoanalysis in a somewhat different direction, with reference to the Apartheid Archive narrative. Certainly there are some prominent psychoanalytic themes in the narrative. It is sometimes argued, however, that psychoanalysis ought to be a part of the arsenal of critical psychology not because it is able to discern the hidden, and therefore actual psychic mechanisms at work within a given setting, but rather because psychoanalysis has saturated commonsense conceptions of subjectivity, because it has attained a certain truth status and holds tremendous influence over how we understand ourselves as psychological

subjects (Billig, 1996; Parker, 2008, 2003).<sup>6</sup> Much of the literature proposing this has looked at a Western European or US context, where – to risk a generalization – being in analysis or therapy was once a rite of passage and a generation grew up watching Woody Allen and Alfred Hitchcock films, with their direct and – often more persuasive – implicit references to psychoanalytic ideas. Whereas Ian Parker, a key proponent in arguing for such an approach, sees the pervasive hold of psychoanalysis as the product of an increasingly industrialized society, the establishment of the nation state and – particularly important in his argument – the rise of capitalism (2010), we have already suggested above the related but somewhat different set of reasons psychoanalysis may have taken hold of commonsense in the former colonies: it found fertile ground in the logic of colonialism.

To apply such an approach to this narrative would mean, in Parker’s (2003) terms, that one should be less concerned with using psychoanalytic concepts to diagnose the remembering subject of this narrative as pathological; rather, one could presume that one is dealing with a text that is “already interpreted by psychoanalysis” (p. 22). That is to say, the recollection of the apartheid past is given its armature by a range of psychoanalytic ideas, which, despite going unreferenced, give the narrative a distinctly psychoanalytic shape.

It is worth emphasizing that the psychoanalytic regularities of the Apartheid Archive narrative are not its own, they are a part of a broader discourse on memory after apartheid. While it is unsurprising that an academic project like the Apartheid Archive would be guided by the notion that “traumatic experiences from the past will constantly attempt to re-inscribe themselves (often in masked form) in the present if they are not acknowledged, interrogated

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<sup>6</sup> Michael Billig (1999), for example, proposes that psychoanalysis not only reveals how repression happens, but also that, as a pervasive discourse, it offers repression as a resource for subjectivity, that is, it gives subjects a way of being and acting in the world.

and addressed,”<sup>7</sup> we see the wider influence of psychoanalysis when we consider “the psycho-theological tendencies of the TRC” (Feldman, 2003, p. 239), indeed how “much of the language of the TRC is inherently psychoanalytic” (Swartz & Drennan, 2000, p. 206). Consider two related objectives of the TRC: on the one hand, catharsis – which although it has its origins in the Greek *kátharsis*, purification, also has a psychoanalytic lineage in Freud’s early work with Breuer – and, on the other, to remember apartheid so as not to repeat it, that is, a national past was to be given words rather than acted out (see Freud, 1914). This is, in brief, what Feldman (2003) has called the TRC’s commitments to the “ad hoc therapeutics of ‘the talking cure’” (p. 239).<sup>8</sup>

Although psychoanalytic theorizing and practice in South Africa goes back some way, to the work of Wulf Sachs (1937) and I.D. Macrone (1937), Feldman (2004) has argued that the ‘talking cure’ dimensions of the TRC were driven largely by “the white-dominated media” (p. 174) and by “key actors in the TRC, as they negotiated their post-commission careers” (p. 184). Despite arguing that psychotherapeutics is not the whole story of the TRC, Feldman sees it as worthy of serious consideration: “What occurs,” he asks, “when historiography is grounded by a disciplinary concept that purports to exist outside of

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<sup>7</sup> Official Apartheid Archive website, accessed 10 April 2012

([http://www.apartheidarchive.org/site/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=4&Itemid=4](http://www.apartheidarchive.org/site/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=4&Itemid=4)).

<sup>8</sup> Indeed, this injunction to remember so as not to repeat is also written into the constitution of South Africa, providing the conditions according to which one becomes a subject of the post-apartheid nation. This is the founding interpellation of the subject of the post-apartheid nation. “We, the people of South Africa / Recognize the injustices of our past,” as the preamble to *The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa*, begins. Thus, a person only becomes one of “the people of South Africa” through the recognition of the “injustices of our past” – this gaze towards the past as an injustice is “the mark of authenticity,” as Ivor Chipkin (2007, p. 102) puts it.

historical time to the degree that it is anchored in philosophical anthropology and its cognates medicine, psychology, law, or theodicy?” (p. 185).

One consequence, sharply criticised by many – and frequently prefaced by the observation that ‘national trauma’ and ‘national healing’ are misnomers, nations do not have psyches, people do – is that a picture of individualised, pathologised and depoliticised trauma is created, concealing systemic injustice and institutionalised racism, with memory and amnesty being substituted for economic redress and justice (Grunebaum, 2011; Mamdani, 1996). As Feldman puts it: “stressing memory’s therapeutic possibilities [often occurs] at the expense of establishing its pathogenic connection to institutional violence and that violence’s inherence in economic racism” (Feldman, 2003, p. 260; see also Craps, 2010; Feldman, 2004; Posel, 2002).

There is a less frequently noted but related consequence set in play by attempts at remembering South Africa’s national past. Such an impetus to remember has – in large part – been set in motion and given shape by the TRC. It was, after all the TRC that formalized the South African past *as an injustice* in order to inaugurate the post-apartheid national subject who recognizes it as such. This broad project of remembering deploys the same opposition between primitivity and civilization that proved so crucial to colonial relations of domination. The frame, however, is inverted: it is apartheid, specifically its violence – rather than the racially marked subject colonialism produced as its opposite and undeveloped other – that is linked to primitivity, and it is this that cannot be admitted to post-apartheid sociality. The TRC final report in fact cautions, at least in parts (see ‘Causes, Motives and Perspectives of Perpetrators,’ *Truth and Reconciliation of South Africa Report*, 1998 [2007], p. 276- 285), against the invocation of evolutionary theory to explain the violence of apartheid as a primordial or primitive throwback. The suggestion, then, that apartheid became, through the TRC, a form of primitivity against which the post-apartheid nation has constituted itself

seems unfounded. However, one might argue that rather than guiding the TRC – and the present it secured against this past – away from evolutionary, anthropological thinking, the report simply registered the risks of the process, which is precisely what it could not avoid. In Feldman’s (2004) words what we are called to witness is the “archaization of the past” (p. 169).

We have a paradoxical situation here, then: if the remembering of the apartheid past is underpinned by psychoanalytic notions of the talking cure then there is a latent form of coloniality at its very centre; not simply in the sense that it must keep coloniality on the threshold of death but nonetheless alive so as to negate it, so as to be anti-colonial or anti-apartheid, but rather that the negation, and the recognition of the past as an injustice, finds its very words in the language of a discourse that shares its epistemological foundations with colonialism.<sup>9</sup> Certainly there have been rigorous critiques of the positivism and empiricism of the TRC, which place it within a modernist epistemology; the colonial underpinnings of the TRC, however, its rootedness in evolutionary thinking, its spectacular recapitulation of the passage from primitivity to civilization – to draw on both Brickman (2003) and Feldman (2004) – needs to be acknowledged.

Thus, in the Apartheid Archive narrative, at one level the injustices of the apartheid past *are* recognized, they are given words rather than repeated; at another, though, at the epistemological level, that of the framework through which that past is recalled, an unacknowledged “kinship and symmetry” between psychoanalysis and colonialism is acted out; the narrator “repeats it,” as Freud (1914) says of the transference repetition of the analysand with the analyst, “without, of course, knowing that he is repeating it” (p. 15). Although the effects of this kind of repetition, this acting out at the epistemological level,

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<sup>9</sup> Of course, this is not a new problem; indeed, it is the central problem taken up by postcolonial theorists (see Bhabha, 1994) and, for that matter, the Subaltern Studies group too (see Spivak, 1988).

would no doubt be more subtle in many instances, in the Apartheid Archive narrative they are quite stark. No matter how reflexive the narrative at first appears, no matter how repugnant the narrator is able to find the race thinking of apartheid, at the end of the day he cannot recognize the human in the black man he sees walking towards him; the black man remains a body (an overdetermined black penis that threatens the white male with castration) without a consciousness. The effect of the repetition here, then, is that the encounter remains within the libidinal economy of a colonial fantasy.

## **Conclusion**

What we can say now, with the benefit of genealogies of psychoanalysis that had not been written at the time Fanon was alive, is that he made the first steps towards addressing psychoanalysis as a part of the very social structure he diagnosed. What Fanon's work demonstrates, though – despite the fact that he devoted as much time to critiquing and altering psychoanalytic concepts as he did analyzing colonial relations using psychoanalytic theory – is the impossibility of an un-colonial psychoanalysis. Indeed, in deploying psychoanalysis as a form of postcolonial critique, the very thing one is looking for – repetitions of the colonial past – resides, also, displaced, in the act of looking for it. This is a point dramatized in the Apartheid Archive narrative, but also, even if in less obvious ways, in more formal psychoanalytic studies such as Coetzee's (1991) and, indeed, Fanon's (1952).

It is, however, in the distance and difference between Freud and Fanon's ambivalent appropriation of the conceptual apparatus of psychoanalysis, in the movement from classical Freudian psychoanalysis to Fanon's vernacular psychoanalysis, that there lies the possibility of bringing into focus the enduring influence of colonial thought. This persistent influence exists, perhaps contrary to expectations, even in readings of coloniality, in ostensibly critical and progressive forms of remembering the past.



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