

BLACK WOMEN IN FANON'S *BLACK SKIN, WHITE MASKS*:

The Intersection of Race, Gender,
and Oppression



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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I focus on the representations of Black women in contrast to Black men found within Frantz Fanon's philosophical work *Black Skin, White Masks*. I propose that while Fanon's racial dialectical work is very significant, he often lacks acknowledgement of the multidimensionality of the Black woman's lived experience specifically. Drawing on the theory of intersectionality, coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, I argue that Fanon does not recognize the different layers of oppression operating in Black women's lives to the degree that he fails to include them within his framework of both liberation and resistance from racial oppression.



Throughout the work, *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon outlines the layers and nuances that compose both the Black lived experience as well as the opportunities for resistance and liberation from oppression.¹ He primarily focuses on the inferiority complex generated by the enforced superiority of the White man. Fanon also writes within a heteronormative framework of gender with the conception of only two separate genders. Furthermore, Kimberlé Crenshaw's work in 1989 provides us with a more comprehensive way of looking at the structures of oppression through her conception of intersectionality, which notes the multiplicity of perspectives and identities involved with oppression.² While Crenshaw inaugurated the word, she drew upon many other prior thinkers like “Anna Julia Cooper, and Maria Stewart in the 19th century in the US, all the way through Angela Davis and Deborah King.”³ For the purposes of this essay, we will use the term intersectionality specifically in Crenshaw's adaptation. We will address the multidimensionality of the Black female identity while also examining the multiple forms of oppression the Black woman faces (like that of racism and sexism combined). Fanon did not consider this contemporary view of intersectionality as he wrote prior to the construction of this word, although he lived in a time of Black feminism. Yet, his works still heavily contribute to critical race theory in general. In this paper, I will argue that Fanon's argument lacks more contemporary gendered intersectionality—specifically failing to acknowledge the differences in oppression and lived experiences that the Black woman faces—as he only conceptualizes the Black man as capable of recognizing and escaping the inferiority complex created in relation to the White man. His works then must be adapted to fit a more contemporary schema of resistance and liberation that better includes the thinkers which Crenshaw draws upon and Black activists working today.

The inferiority complex that White people enforce in order to maintain their superiority in part generates the Black lived experience for Black men and women. According to Fanon, the promotion of the White individual throughout society creates this inferiority complex where Black individuals, alongside other people of color, are taught

1 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008).

2 Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241-99. 10.2307/1229039.

3 Bim Adewunmi, “Kimberlé Crenshaw on Intersectionality: ‘I Wanted to Come up with an Everyday Metaphor that Anyone Could Use,’” *New Statesman*, April 2, 2014, <https://www.newstatesman.com/lifestyle/2014/04/kimberl-crenshaw-intersectionality-i-wanted-come-everyday-metaphor-anyone-could>.

to perceive themselves as lesser beings. Fanon posits that the complex manifests in different ways for men and women, but both genders have the impression that they must get close to the “superior” White individual. He writes that, “from the moment the Black man accepts the split imposed by the European, there is no longer any respite, and ‘from that moment on, isn’t it understandable that he will try to elevate himself to the White man’s level?’”⁴ With this concept of aspiration, Fanon argues that the Black man aligns himself with and becomes more like the White man because of the societal conditioning specifying his inferiority. He attempts to be closer to the White man so that he can obtain the same degree of subjectivity, or the ability to operate without limitations, while being fully seen as a person with an identity. Fanon writes that the Black woman specifically feels so inferior “that she aspires to win admittance into the white world.”⁵ Here, Fanon posits that the Black woman acts similarly to the Black man in that they both desire to be closer to the ascribed superiority of the White man. For the Black woman, Fanon adds another layer to their desire to be closer to the White world; specifically, he means that the Black woman desires to become Whiter and join their world, not just becoming more similar.

Although Fanon initially frames his argument regarding Black men and women to be somewhat similar in their lived experiences through their governing inferiority complex, his argument only includes the Black woman’s experience in relation to men, either Black or White. Throughout *Black Skin, White Masks*, he contextualizes himself using language solely surrounding men and having the default of personhood as a man. He continually uses vocabulary with a masculine connotation such as mankind, brothers, and he/him/his pronouns when referring to all of humanity. While it could be argued that his language is historically accurate to the way that many used “man” as a default for humanity as a whole, Fanon’s arguments, then, do not explicitly include the Black woman. Gwen Bergner notes how Fanon “takes the male as the norm.”⁶ Bergner argues that for Fanon, “women are considered as subjects almost exclusively in terms of their sexual relationships with men.”⁷ The subject and object relationship will be explored more in depth later in this essay. However, women are only granted identity when in relation to men. They do not operate solely as themselves but almost strictly in their desires to be Whiter and to be in

4 Fanon, *Black Skin*, 63.

5 Fanon, *Black Skin*, 41.

6 Gwen Bergner, “Who Is that Masked Woman? Or, the Role of Gender in Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*,” *PLMA* 110, no. 1 (1995): 75–88, 10.2307/463196.

7 Bergner, “Masked Woman,” 77.



relationships with specifically White men. In his argument surrounding the Black woman's desire for a romantic relationship with a White man, Fanon writes that there are only two reactions for a woman of color in response to the White man: "The black woman has only one way open to her and one preoccupation—to whiten the race. The mulatto woman wants not only to become White but also to avoid slipping back."⁸ Fanon, thus, reduces the Black woman to her desire to be Whiter and to obtain a relationship with a White individual. He writes that the White man looks at the Black woman with distaste and that "she is not tolerated in certain circles, because she is a colored woman. Her facticity was the starting point for her resentment."⁹ The Black woman's desire for a relationship with a White man, as well as her wish to be Whiter, likely stems from her feelings of inferiority in comparison to the White person. Fanon argues that the Black woman's feelings of inferiority go beyond simple resentment for her non-Whiteness and the rejection this brings and into moving actively toward desiring the life of a Whiter individual. Repeatedly in his anecdotal evidence, Fanon describes Black women as solely focused on their goal to obtain a White partner. He juxtaposes two comments: one woman saying that, "it's not that [Black women] want to downplay the credentials of the Black man, but you know it's better to be white,"¹⁰ and the other saying to him, "there is a white potential in every one of us; some want to ignore it or quite simply reverse it. Me, I would never accept to marry [a Black man]."¹¹ In both of these comments, he posits that women fall prey to the continual indoctrination of White superiority and the desire for a similar status. These comments, taken from select individuals, are then used to generalize the Black woman's experience into something that only has her operating in pursuit of and in relation to men of either race rather than as her own autonomous being.

Fanon's argument on the relationship of subject and object positions the White individual into a place of superiority and subjectivity, granting them the full capacity of their identity alongside personal and bodily autonomy. The Black individual, however, is relegated into objecthood where they are continually deemed inferior and stripped of the fullness of their identity and agency. Throughout the majority of the text, but particularly in the chapter, "The Lived Experience of the Black Man," Fanon argues that the White man objectifies the Black man. However, with this relationship, he recognizes the Black man's experience of being objectified, yet only

8 Fanon, *Black Skin*, 37.

9 Fanon, *Black Skin*, 27.

10 Fanon, *Black Skin*, 30.

11 Fanon, *Black Skin*, 30.

minimally critiques the forced objectification that the Black woman suffers. He roots much of this argument in the Black man's experience in the relational qualities of the Black and White man, writing that, "not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man."¹² The White man's objectification of the Black man, through forced relation, generates the Black Man's lived experience for Fanon. The Black woman is objectified by both Black and White men, although for different reasons. As such, both of their views of her fully saturate her lived experience. Fanon's concept of the Black woman, in context to men, continues to relegate her into an objectified status by not referencing the multidimensionality of the Black woman's lived experience outside of the context of men. Crenshaw points out a similar idea in her landmark texts that define intersectionality, as she argues that Black women have to move through the world in a radically different way due to the multiplicity of oppressions that they face in the contemporary world.¹³ Many people, not simply White men, fragment the Black woman's identity through a combination of racism and misogyny. Angela Davis additionally writes on this within the context of American enslavement of Black people, and she argues that after emancipation, Black women had to evade gendered and sexualized violence by White men brought about through the combination of racism and sexism.¹⁴ While not as overt as the objectification of the Black man, in terms of the identity fragmentation crucial to Fanon's argument, the objectification of women by both Black and White men is pivotal to the Black woman's fundamentally distinct lived experience.

For Fanon, acknowledging oppression itself and understanding its perpetuation is one of the only ways of combatting racial oppression. He writes that the Black man "on his home territory is oblivious of the moment when his inferiority is determined by the Other."¹⁵ Despite Fanon's reference to the moment in which oppressive racial superiority was created and justified, he writes that Black people lacked the awareness of their imposed inferiority. Knowing and understanding this moment is key to Fanon's conception of liberation for both Black men and women. Furthermore, Fanon's premises of the body schema for the Black man are integral to his process of resistance and liberation. Much of his work involves the relationship of the body and the self, particularly in how the Black man must be aware of his body moving throughout the world. The body, for Fanon, moves through the world such that sight and race are intimately conjoined, forcing Black men to constantly be aware of their race. He writes that as he grew in

12 Fanon, *Black Skin*, 90.

13 Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins," 1241-99.

14 Angela Davis, *Women, Race, and Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), 90.

15 Fanon, *Black Skin*, 90.



acknowledgment of racial oppression operating in his life, he “cast an objective gaze over [himself and his] blackness.”¹⁶ While this bodily awareness was imposed upon him by the White man in way of asserting bodily superiority, noting its genesis and its action on how Black men are forced to move in the world is a necessary step in acknowledgment.

By understanding the interacting power dynamics that operate to ensure the Black man’s inferiority and difference in societal movements, one can interpret Fanon’s argument on the acknowledgement of oppression for the Black woman. As laid out earlier in this paper, Fanon often does not consider the Black woman’s experience within his schema of race and power. His arguments for the necessity of acknowledgment as one of the first steps in combating racial oppression do not account for the Black woman and the multifaceted ways in which her identity can manifest. Through the previously mentioned anecdotes of the female students that Fanon encountered, he constructs the Black woman as wholly rejecting her identity and being singularly focused on her goal to become whiter. He critiques one such woman, writing that, “instead of acknowledging that she is black, she turns the fact into an accident.”¹⁷ Rather than looking at her identity in a more blatant and critical fashion, something that he posits the Black man does more of, Fanon determines that the Black woman refuses to engage with her own identity and deems it a mere coincidence. This lack of acknowledgement, for Fanon, prevents the next step of combatting racial oppression: actively moving against oppression and criticizing its effects on the body and the Black identity.

Fanon posits that Black masculine liberation requires directly fighting against racial oppression and its enforced lenses. Throughout his work, he details the various ways in which he, himself, directly confronts racial oppression. Beginning with speaking the same language as the White man, he attempts invisibility first, then the appeal to rationality in the terms that the White man set, and finally, the reservation to irrationality with the appeal to emotions. While not every attempt is successful, he continually tries to move against the imposed White superiority. In the final appeal to emotion through irrationality, he offers evidence of Black people using visual and literary arts as a way of understanding their own culture and promoting their “irrational” way of being in opposition to the “rational” way of being that White people control. Earlier, Fanon notes the sharp contrast between the White man and the Black man due to their societally-shaped lived experiences. The Black man’s culture and customs, Fanon argues, “were abolished because they were in contradiction with a

16 Fanon, *Black Skin*, 92.

17 Fanon, *Black Skin*, 28.

new civilization that imposed its own.”¹⁸ The use of these “inferior” cultural elements—poetry and song—allows the Black man to reclaim parts of his identity and history that were forcibly taken. Confronting this reality is necessary for Fanon’s conceptualization of resistance and his pathway of possible liberation from the forced hierarchy of race. Fanon, however, does not allow the Black woman to have access to this confrontation, nor does he include her in the Black man’s personal resistance.

Fanon’s portrayal of resistance against the White man only includes the Black man because only his direct actions are featured, while the Black woman is never mentioned nor included in this necessary clash against both the oppressor and the oppressive system. In one of the singular instances that Fanon does write on the Black woman in active resistance, he uses the words of Mayotte Capécia as she writes that when she was a child, “[she] took [her] inkwell and threw it, showering his head.”¹⁹ This woman attempts to use the ink in order to turn a White classmate of hers into someone visually more similar to her. By doing this, she has a degree of active resistance previously barred from her. However, immediately after, Fanon writes that, “this was her way of changing whites into blacks. But she realizes early on how vain her efforts were . . . so, unable to blacken or negrify the world, she endeavors to whiten it in her body and mind.”²⁰ He refocuses her moment of agency into her desire to be Whiter and to enter the White world. Rather than noting her different lived experiences and the different circumstances that create them (leading to these actions), Fanon presents her as generally lacking the knowledge necessary for resistance. For him, even if she did have recognition as a child, she turns away from this resistance and follows her imposed desire for a Whiter lifestyle. Myriam Chancy writes specifically on Fanon’s examination of Capécia’s writings, arguing that he explicitly overlooks complexities of her book. She detailed that later in her life, her Black father pushed her to find a White partner.²¹ Instead of actively engaging with this layer of sexism, Fanon maneuvers around it, pinning the blame of searching for a White partner solely upon Capécia herself. In these two examples, Fanon still places the Black woman within a different schema entirely and implies that she chooses her own oppression. In implying that the Black woman chooses her own oppression and barring her from his

18 Fanon, *Black Skin*, 90.

19 Fanon, *Black Skin*, 28.

20 Fanon, *Black Skin*, 28.

21 Myriam J. A. Chancy, “Subjectivity in Motion: Caribbean Women’s (Dis) Articulations of Being from Fanon/Capécia to the *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands*,” *Hypatia* 43, no. 2 (2015): 434–49, 10.1111/hypa.12138.



modes of resistance, Fanon's understanding of racial oppression and the Black lived experience does not include the Black woman in the manner that she should be represented.

An alternative interpretation of Fanon could yield an understanding that while Fanon does not often explicitly include the Black woman in his arguments, she is included through his holistic references to the general Black lived experience. Bergner writes that, "Fanon uses the term *le noir* 'the black man.' This masculine 'universal' refers not to humankind generally, however, but to actual men—since Fanon describes these colonized subjects as studying in Paris, lusting after white women, and competing with white men for intellectual recognition."²² By pointing out the specificity of Fanon's argument in relation to Black men as in Paris, Bergner argues that even considering Fanon's "universal language" as being universal could be erroneous. Although Fanon often uses the linguistic default of man and masculine terminology, not just referencing the Black men in Paris, he could also be interpreted as including women in those definitions. Furthermore, he writes that, "the black experience is ambiguous, for there is not one Negro—there are *many* black men."²³ Additionally, he writes that, "every experience ... has to become a component of reality and consequently play a part in the restructuring of this reality."²⁴ Together, these highlight Fanon's capability of including multiple perspectives that cover different experience's understandings and their possibilities of shaping others. However, even if Fanon implicitly includes the Black woman and her lived experience, he does not consider some of the more impactful aspects of oppression that might hinder a woman of color. Moreover, his argument of combatting racial oppression only features the Black man, thus leading to the inference that only the Black man can move with the level of agency required for resistance. Despite the possible interpretation that Fanon does include the Black woman into his matrix of combatting racial oppression, this inclusion only occurs at disparate moments and does not continue throughout his work.

Although Fanon's work largely disregards the Black woman's lived experience and displaces her from his framework of resistance to both racism and colonialism, his works still can be both adapted to be used contemporarily and also still be used as a basis for critical race theory. His writings still conceptualized Black ontology and the subject/object bodily dialect, something that remains incredibly important and worthy of note today. The Black Lives Matter movement, started in July 2013

22 Bergner, "Masked Woman," 76.

23 Fanon, *Black Skin*, 115.

24 Fanon, *Black Skin*, 31.

by three Black women—Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi—purportedly draws upon these ideas introduced by Fanon according to Kimberly Ann Harris. She writes on the many recent deaths of Black men like those of Mike Brown, Philando Castile, and Trayvon Martin, arguing that the fear of their objectified Black bodies was part of both their murders and their killers' court testimonies.²⁵ These contemporary thinkers and activists still consider Fanon's ideas on subjectivity, while others like Kimberlé Crenshaw, Angela Davis, and bell hooks are able to bring feminist philosophy and writings into conversation with Fanon's works.²⁶

Fanon's works are integral in discussing Black bodily ontology; however, with the coinage of the term intersectionality, it is also true that his framework of liberation and resistance must be adapted to better include the Black woman. In acknowledging their similar and also different layers of oppression, the totality of Black oppression can be better grappled with and resisted. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon presents the Black lived experience as wholly relating to the racial oppression forced upon Black individuals by the White man. He focuses on the impact of the imposed inferiority complex for both the Black man and the Black woman, arguing that each operate differently. Based on this interpretation, I point out that he does not consider the varying experiences that encompass the totality of the Black lived experience, and instead singularly focuses on the Black man. This analysis of the Black lived experience, alongside Fanon's exclusion of the Black woman within his conception of resistance and liberation, highlights the need for gendered intersectionality within frameworks of understanding racial oppression. Only with attention to multiple perspectives and identities can there be the full acknowledgement and resistance Fanon calls for.

25 Kimberly Ann Harris, "What Does it Mean to Move for Black Lives?," *Philosophy Today* 63, no. 2 (2019): 275-91, 10.5840/philtoday2019731265.

26 bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Abingdon: Taylor & Francis, 2014).





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