

Serubiri Moses
**Violent
Dreaming**

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Violent Dreaming

1. Violence

If postcolonial thought can be said to have a cinematic dimension, we might begin by asking how violence operates as a fantasy.¹ But first, it is important to define what we understand violence to be. In law, violence is “the unlawful exercise of physical force or intimidation by the exhibition of such force.”² There are distinctions between lawful and unlawful violence, where criminal violence is carried out illegally – against the state, for instance – and lawful violence is most often carried out by the state, which is also responsible for laws and their enforcement. Herbert Spencer has written: “Not only does magisterial power exist because of evil, but it exists by evil. Violence is employed to maintain it; and all violence involves criminality.”³

In the legal use of violence in various forms of law enforcement, one often encounters an interchangeability of right with violence. Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right* connected the discourse of right to self-consciousness, absolute free will, and moral rightness, where right is “freedom as idea” and “something holy, because it is the embodiment of self-conscious freedom.”⁴ Karl Marx referred to right in relation to property and ownership, or what Hegel had previously called “the absolute right of appropriation which man has over all things.”⁵ Marx’s statement on the function of commodities and wealth in chattel slavery reflects the Hegelian notion of right: “The sale and purchase of slaves is formally also a sale and purchase of commodities. But money cannot perform this function without the existence of slavery. If slavery exists, then money can be invested in the purchase of slaves.”⁶

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, however, suggested that “the words right and slave contradict each other.”⁷ Insofar as slaves were considered property and commodities, any violence carried out against them was considered as *right*, and thus lawful. Similarly, violence was deemed lawful when carried out against natives of an occupied territory (as in the colonization of San Domingo by Spain, and later France). In the postcolony and in postcolonial analysis, the question of violence is premised on events occurring in the colonies or within occupied territories, where the notion of right, or lawful violence, has a subject, which is the colonizing subject. How, then, do we interrogate the idea of free will and freedom in occupied lands and colonies? When nature, land, and enslaved persons are most often considered as the exclusive property of white colonizers, lawful violence becomes the right and abstract free will of white colonizers.

Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) touched on the theme of whiteness, which he explored in greater detail in his earlier *Black*

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A classic of anti-colonialism in which 'the Third World finds *itself* and speaks to *itself* through his voice' – Jean-Paul Sartre



Frantz Fanon

THE WRETCHED OF THE EARTH

Cover of the Penguin edition of Frantz Fanon's book *The Wretched of the Earth*.

Skin, White Masks (1952). Consider Fanon's statements concerning property, race, wealth, and colonial occupation: "There is no native who doesn't dream at least once a day of setting himself up in the settler's place," and "You are rich because you are white."⁸ Clearly, Fanon considered the right to wealth – and the abstract relation of right to wealth – to be one of the foundational myths of European colonialism. The theorist further described the colonial enterprise as if it were a business, writing of French colonial Algeria that "the colonies have become a market."⁹

2. Fantasy

There are tensions between Fanon's two books from 1952 and 1961. The question of desire does not transpose very well from one text to the other. The racial pathology that Fanon observed in Martinique – "this desire to be suddenly *white*" – is not the pathology he witnessed in French Algeria among the Algerian soldiers who were his patients.¹⁰ Racial pathology – the deeply internalized racism causing blacks and people of color, perhaps unconsciously, to desire whiteness – contrasts with the horrific fantasies of his Algerian patients haunted by guilt from their military service during the Algerian War, which led them to have terrifying visions of those they had killed. Could it be described as a

pathology inherent to postcolonial nationalism (a topic he devotes an entire chapter to in *Wretched of the Earth*)?

In *Black Skin, White Masks* Fanon describes how mulatto women in Martinique were deemed superior to blacks (both men and women) in the territory because white male French colonists found them desirable – a desire that approximated mulatto women's freedom: "From one day to the next the mulatto went from the class of slaves to that of masters."¹¹ The pathology of blacks in Martinique had to do with this slippage in their social status. Martinican poet and philosopher Édouard Glissant observed something similar in the US, where an obsession with family ancestry was haunted by "the intrusion of Negro blood."¹² The Algerian soldiers, on the other hand, fighting a war of independence that Fanon himself later joined, were embroiled in a national struggle in which the use of violence was undeniable, yet they remained haunted by the guilt of killing innocent Algerians.

An expert psychoanalyst, Fanon made seamless connections between racial and colonial pathologies for which questions of desire are inescapable. Regarding Algeria, his analysis is embedded in a study of postcolonial nationalism, and for Martinique, in a study of whiteness. To reference Fanon's remark once



Film still from Göran Hugo Olsson's documentary *Concerning Violence* (2014).

more: “There is no native who doesn’t dream at least once a day of setting himself up in the settler’s place.”¹³ By uttering this fantasy of the colonized, Fanon awakens and brings this fantasy into language.

It is hard not to think of cinema when philosopher and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva writes that “the role of language is essential for the formation of fantasies.”¹⁴ She also remarks: “Analytical work consists of making the fantasy conscious – formulating the phantasmatic narrative and interpreting it – in order to dissolve the symptom.”¹⁵ Could we use this same formulation to suggest that, for Fanon, analytical work consisted of revealing these unconscious fantasies in the realm of his patient’s experiences of racism and colonial war? The use of violence, which Spencer called evil, to protect wealth and property caused the pathologies Fanon theorized. Fanon considered violence to be the basis of life in the colony; it was part of the quotidian experience of colonial subjects. Could we thus argue that Fanon built narratives of violence in order to diagnose these pathologies in his patients?

Fanon’s narratives of his patients’ fantasies articulate desires for the settler’s house, desires to own what the white man owns, for the right to be free. We see such desires portrayed in Göran Hugo Olsson’s 2014 film *Concerning Violence*:

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Nine Scenes from the Anti-Imperialist Self-Defense, when a white settler in Rhodesia says that a black servant told his female master as he washed her car that he would one day be driving it.¹⁶ To this conscious spoken fantasy, the white settler being interviewed in the film retorted, “Before getting out we would turn the lights off,” suggesting something more violent – that they would burn the car before giving it to the natives. Or as Fanon might have said, the unspoken fear of the settler is: “They want to take our place.”

As a cinematic work, *Concerning Violence* predominantly draws from European television footage of different anti-colonial uprisings in Africa: Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Angola, and Guinea-Conakry. What desires can be identified in these images and what unconscious fantasies are implied by those same desires? In an earlier criticism of this film, I argued that the Non-Aligned Movement – the organization of independent Asian and African nation-states – constituted a form of anti-colonial self-defense.¹⁷ Why was the Bandung Conference, concurrent with the Mau Mau (aka Kenya Land and Freedom Army) Uprising, not considered an instance of anti-imperialist self-defense by Fanon (and therefore by Olsson)? The omission of this significant project in the film is surprising. I have seen footage of Fanon attending a Pan-African conference in Zaire, where he met Patrice



Film still from Göran Hugo Olsson’s documentary *Concerning Violence* (2014).

Lumumba. Why was this special encounter not part of the film's singular depiction of the anti-colonial movement in Africa?

3. Alienation

In postcolonial historian C. L. R. James's analysis of eighteenth-century events in Haiti leading up to the Haitian Revolution, the idea of "return" offered a kind of freedom where death and cultural retention coincided: "Life was hard and death, they believed, meant not only release but a return to Africa."¹⁸ For James, freedom is also the insurrectionary memory that caused black revolt. In a complimentary sense, for Fanon, forms of freedom manifest in desire and revelations of desire in racial and colonial pathologies. For Fanon, freedom is premised on the native's violent confrontations with whiteness, and her ultimate anthropophagia of whiteness. James's analysis considers Haitians' cultural memory of Africa and uses both ethnography and Marxist analysis to give evidence of African consciousness and its revolutionary potential.

Unlike Isaac Julien's 1995 documentary feature film *Frantz Fanon: Black Skin, White Mask*, which depicted Fanon as a psychiatrist, Olsson's film remains didactic in its approach to Fanon's text. However, the film reflects another pragmatic philosophy. When we see women fighters in Mozambique at a typing and copying station they have set up for printing and publishing at a forest camp, it becomes evident that for Olsson, knowledge production is key. One of the characters in this scene conveys to the camera something that had previously been unspoken – that a strategy of colonialism was to disempower the native by denying them education. But, if the right to education is a right to freedom, this line of thinking would diverge from Fanon's thesis on the freedom and liberation of oppressed Algerians: "What is the true nature of violence? We have seen that it is the true intuition of the colonized masses that their liberation must, and can only, be achieved by force."¹⁹ While Fanon's use of the Hegelian alienation of "self and other" was fundamental to his assessment of the condition of colonization, Olsson's film exhibits a pragmatic approach by showing sites of knowledge production as manifesting freedom.

"Freedom manifests itself through moral law," Gabriella Basterra has written, reflecting on Kant.²⁰ While the origins of the law are not easily determined, and notwithstanding that freedom is not easily proven to exist in Kant, the law can still be grasped – it is actual and it exists. Thus, if freedom is inextricably linked to law, then law in the frame of colonization (e.g., the Black Code and other penal codes) shapes colonial

subjectivity, and embodies the "aspirations" to European values as protocol. Evident colonial anxieties that emerge from these subjectivities readily contradict such freedoms,²¹ further elucidating the subject of freedom in Fanon's writing about the "violence with which the supremacy of white values is affirmed and the aggressiveness which has permeated the victory of these values over the (native's) ways of life and thought."²² The violent and destructive policies of settler colonialism are, for Fanon, forms of dispossession: the burning and looting of anything the native owns, chasing them off their land, and repossessing it for the purpose of mineral extraction and economic exploitation. Fanon's reuse of Hegelian alienation applies to the redistribution of stolen wealth through violence, an everyday violence that seamlessly connects the Caribbean to French colonial Algeria.

4. Desire

In Fanon's chapter "Concerning Violence" in *The Wretched of the Earth* and its translation to cinema in Olsson's film, I am drawn to the former's suggestion that for the native, violence is the only means to real autonomy and freedom. He writes: "The colonized man finds his freedom in, and through, violence."²³ This impulse in Fanon's writing could be described as Kantian, in the sense that Basterra confirms that violence "prov[es] freedom's existence."²⁴ Basterra's inquiry asks whether we can know freedom at all, yet she adds that for Kant, practical reason was possibly aimed at revealing the power of desire.

Fanon followed Kant in his unwavering conviction to articulate and reveal the native's desires and fantasies. Basterra further explains how these ideas of analyzing freedom can be contradictory. How, for example, do we prove freedom's existence? In her book, *The Subject of Freedom*, Basterra makes clear that the ways "freedom constitutes the subject is not easy to explain."²⁵ She considers Kant's practical philosophy and its gesturing towards the power of desire, writing: "Proving freedom's existence and its causality in constituting the subject is the challenge Kant's practical philosophy must meet. Here, theoretical reason is charged with the formidable task of explaining how practical reason – a reason that does not reason – motivates the power of desire."²⁶

Through Basterra's readings of Kant, it becomes clear that Fanon's practical philosophy rests on the analytical work of his psychiatry. The challenge for Fanon, therefore, is identifying subjectivity through his patients' fantasies and, perhaps unconsciously, through their desires. Basterra names the unconditional freedom being

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called into question “excess,” a word that Kant also used. In Fanon, that same freedom unconditioned by colonial laws is a kind of anarchic fantasy, whether conscious or unconscious. Fanon’s analysis suggests that the colonial subject is shaped by dreams of anarchy, and the possibility of attaining these dreams – that is, his practical philosophy – is characterized by the power of desire, a desire masked, at least in part, by violent dreaming.

5. Nightmare

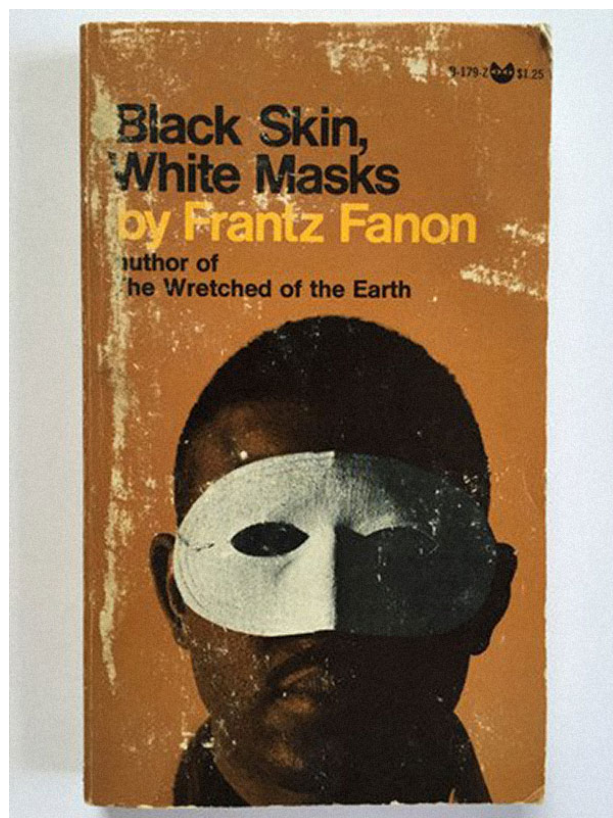
According to Kristeva, a condition is diagnosed by identifying both conscious and unconscious fantasies.²⁷ Fanon’s case studies in *The Wretched of the Earth* – his patients whose accounts are noted and reproduced in the book – provide the basis for his postcolonial critique and Kantian analysis. The invocation that “the colonized man finds his freedom in, and through, violence” emerges directly from Fanon’s dutiful study of his patients and his commitment to their psychological well-being. Among the many patients he examined, two stand out. The first is “Case No. 3,” an Algerian soldier fighting on behalf of the National Liberation Front (FLN), the Algerian nationalist anti-colonial organization: “When he started thinking of his mother, the

disembodied woman rose up before him in redoubled horror.”²⁸ The text mentions that the soldier had been part of a mission that left two Algerian civilians killed.

This is firstly a nightmare, but also an actual fantasy about a woman the soldier murdered while fighting for the FLN. Earlier, Fanon brings up the question of guilt, which he attributes in a footnote to Freud’s *Mourning and Melancholia*.²⁹ The thought of having survived a war in which others have perished returns in this section and with this patient. The terror brought by the wounded and dead woman in the nightmare is triggered, in the Freudian sense, possibly, by the guilt of having committed murder: “At nightfall that evening, as soon as the patient went to bed, the room was ‘invaded by women’ in spite of everything.”³⁰

While no actual adaptation of these fantasies appears in Olsson’s film, a battle scene in a forest with a wounded Portuguese soldier fighting in Guinea does approach horror. In this dire situation, four or five men perform a medical procedure on the wounded. The fantasy that Fanon identifies in these soldiers is mostly unconscious, and the patient is not necessarily aware of the impact of this fantasy on his psyche. The fantasy – in this case, of being

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Cover of an English edition of Frantz Fanon's book *Black Skin, White Masks*.



Film still from Göran Hugo Olsson's documentary *Concerning Violence* (2014).

haunted and terrorized by dead or zombie-like women – speaks to Fanon’s placement of violence and dispossession at the center of analysis, whether dispossession of property or the armed, gendered violence evident in the experiences of Case No. 3.

Following Basterra’s ideas on subjectivity and freedom, can we seek an unconditioned freedom in Fanon’s patients or in their fantasies? In observing the reality of the Algerian War (1954–62) – the war of independence between the French Army and the FLN – Fanon compares the case of a white army officer fighting for France to an Algerian officer fighting for the FLN. Now, if subjectivity is formed by the patient’s participation in violence, then how do the fantasies and desires of the white soldiers fighting on behalf of France diverge from those of the Algerian soldiers fighting for the FLN? In considering lawful violence, what can be said of the native Algerian soldiers fighting on behalf of colonial France? Are they to be seen as traitors? What happens to their subjectivity after the war is over? Subsequent accounts show that the French failed to repatriate the Algerian soldiers who fought on their behalf. After losing the war, these native soldiers were hunted down and killed.

Case No. 3 diagnoses the unavoidable banality of violence in the French colony during the Algerian War to reveal fantasies of “redoubled horror,” but similarly opens the question of the gendered nature of these pathologies.³¹ In her spoken preface to Olsson’s film, philosopher Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak points out that, though anti-colonial struggle temporarily brought women to the front lines in equal standing, old gender barriers returned once the war of liberation was won.³² Thus, fantasies of horror in Case No. 3’s experiences explicitly reference the violence inflicted upon native women in colonial Algeria.

6. Horror

Horror and catharsis are fundamental to how history ends up being told, especially the history of the transition from being the colony of another nation to being an independent nation. Kristeva says that the ancient Greeks experienced catharsis through the myth of Oedipus,³³ and Glissant shows that this has persisted into the twentieth century, for example in Faulkner’s novel *Absalom! Absalom!* That cinema is particularly rich in horror as a subject reveals its debt to the plays of Shakespeare, Cervantes, and Schiller, among others. Fanon’s thesis in the section on violence in *Wretched* – once again, the claim that “the colonized subject attains his freedom in, and through, violence” – prompts me to ask how postcolonial horror and catharsis are

to be located in the cinematic frame. Though fantasies of anarchy can be traced back to Kant’s concept of unconditioned freedom, in the space of excess we also experience a “reason that does not reason,” in the words of Basterra.³⁴ The second noteworthy patient who Fanon examines in *Wretched* feels overwhelming guilt at “having murdered one’s mother.”³⁵ The patient’s recurring fantasy is a horror at carrying out violence on one’s own people, or one’s kin. A further horror neither depicted in *Wretched* nor in its film adaptation is the massacre of natives who fought on behalf of France in the war. According to anthropologist Mahmood Mamdani, “What ‘horrifices’ the modern political sensibility is not violence per se but violence that does not make sense.”³⁶ How does the idea of sense-making connect to the modern political sensibility? If violence is sensible when attached to progress, where can Fanon’s question of desire be placed or juxtaposed in relation to unlawful violence? In a modern political context, is the colonial subject meant to experience the unconditioned freedom that Basterra describes?

While Mamdani references Belgian colonial policy in Rwanda and customary law in Uganda focused on ethnic and racialized subjectivity, we are, as readers, still faced with his argument’s moral and theological challenge, which is rooted in the notion of the sensible and sense-making that he borrows from Paul Ricoeur, who “explored the problem of how to account for the existence of evil.”³⁷ For Mamdani, sense-making in the colonial contexts of Rwanda and Uganda begins with race and ethnicity as a means of identifying a process of colonial subject formation. Though there is little doubt as to which colonial policies and customary laws produce the racialized and ethnic subject, I am drawn here to Ricoeur’s interpretation predicated on a “making sense of the existence of evil.”³⁸ By shifting focus from the postcolonial violence that Mamdani has identified in the pluralist legal system, to evil *proper*, I aim to highlight the theological roots of Mamdani’s argument. Could it be that, by revealing the fantasies of anarchy that possess natives and their desires, Fanon is purposefully articulating both subjectivity and freedom? What can be made of Fanon’s reliance on Freudian analyses of guilt? Should we then uphold the idea that postcolonial violence is sinful? Where does this ethical line of thinking leave native soldiers who murdered innocent Algerian civilians? These questions of freedom and desire in the postcolony are always marked by pathologies and forms of anarchy that run the risk of betraying both progress and sense-making.

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Serubiri Moses is a writer and curator who lives in New York. He is cocurator of “Greater New York 2020,” MoMA PS1’s survey of contemporary art. Moses was part of the curatorial team for the Berlin Biennale X (2017–18). From 2013 to 2017, Moses traveled extensively to participate in curatorial residencies, conferences, and juries across Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Europe. In 2015, Moses held the position of Stadtschreiber at the Bayreuth Academy of Advanced African Studies, and in 2014 he cocurated the second public art biennial in Kampala, KLA ART – entitled “Unmapped” – and organized a four-part public program at the Goethe Zentrum Kampala. Moses completed his Masters of Arts in Curatorial Studies at Bard College, and is an Adjunct Assistant Professor in the Art Department at Hunter College.

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This essay is a version of a lecture I gave for the art theory course “Postcolonial Theory as Cinematic Fantasy” at the New Center for Research and Practice, Fall 2019. See also Serubiri Moses, “Notes on Postcolonial Theory as Cinematic Fantasy,” *Arts.Black*, December 15, 2015 <https://arts.black/essays/2015/12/notes-on-postcolonial-theory-as-cinematic-fantasy/>. The title “Violent Dreaming” is a play on the title of K. Sello Duiker’s novel *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* (2001).

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Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (Grove Press, 1963), 39, 40.

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Moses, “Notes on Postcolonial Theory as Cinematic Fantasy.”

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C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the Santo Domingo Revolution* (Vintage Books, 1963), 15, 16.

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Gabriella Basterra, *The Subject of Freedom: Kant, Levinas* (Fordham University Press, 2015), 9.

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Basterra, *The Subject of Freedom*, 8.

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Basterra, *The Subject of Freedom*, 8.

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Basterra, *The Subject of Freedom*, 8.

27

Kristeva, “Fantasy and Cinema.”

28

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29

“It was a matter of finding out whether we had to deal with an unconscious guilt complex following on the death of the mother, as Freud has described in *Mourning and Melancholia*.” Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 262.

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