

# Caliban's Future:

## Black Lived Experience and Disalienation in Aimé Césaire's *A Tempest* and Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*

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**ABSTRACT:** The philosopher Frantz Fanon (1925-1961) and the poet Aimé Césaire (1913-2008), two of the foremost Afro-Caribbean intellectuals of the 20th century, offer competing visions of the future of humanity in light of the racism of the present. In this essay, I examine these competing visions as expressed in Fanon's book *Black Skin, White Masks* and Césaire's play *A Tempest*. I begin by comparing Fanon's description of black lived experience, which reflects existentialist ideas, to the experience of Césaire's character Caliban. I then discuss how Césaire's Caliban, in departure from Fanon, reveals a commitment to *négritude*, a black pride movement championed by Césaire. I close by reflecting on the insights into the prospect of black disalienation revealed by a critical comparison of these texts.

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**KEYWORDS:** Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, *Négritude*, race, Shakespeare

How should we appraise and respond to the categories through which others understand us? Should we embrace and transform them, or should we reject them altogether? The subject of this essay is how two 20th-century Afro-Caribbean intellectuals—the philosopher Frantz Fanon (1925-1961) and his mentor, the poet Aimé Césaire (1913-2008)—answer such questions. Fanon draws on existentialist themes (such as othering, alienation, transcendence, and the particular existence of human beings) to critique the lived experience of being black in the West. Césaire, meanwhile, champions *négritude*, a Pan-African intellectual movement hailed as “the first diasporic ‘black pride’ movement” (Kelley 2002, vii). In what follows, I will compare Fanon’s anti-racist existentialism to Césaire’s *négritude* through readings of Fanon’s book *Black Skin, White Masks*, a critical examination of black lived experience, and Césaire’s play *A Tempest*, a postcolonial retelling of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*. In (I), I will argue that the black slave Caliban’s experience in *A Tempest* exemplifies the alienated lived experience of blackness that Fanon discusses. However, I argue in (II), Césaire’s Caliban departs from Fanon by drawing on a romantic vision of the Afro-Caribbean world to assert his moral equality to Prospero. Here, Césaire and Fanon are at odds: the former advances an image of essential blackness while the latter instead envisions a post-racial future. In (III), I will discuss the philosophical challenges these texts pose to each other and the prospects for humanity they together articulate.

## I

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon’s central project is to analyse the psychological damages of anti-black racism, and in doing so, to discern how to rectify them. In the book’s fifth chapter, “The Fact of Blackness,” he searches for a way to understand the meaning of black identity.<sup>[1]</sup> Fanon considers several accounts of the supposed essence of blackness—from primal nature magic to advanced African civilization—but finds each of them to be inadequate caricatures of the black person. He further describes how white society stymies the existential development of black people, particularly concerning their experience of their own bodies. By Fanon’s account, white society renders the black body as an inhuman other, an object in the world to marvel at, attack, or fear. For this reason, the black subject cannot relate to their body without employing the dehumanizing racial categories of understanding imposed by white colonial hegemony. Thus, their bodily experience becomes what Fanon calls a purely epidermal experience: an experience of living in a given skin rather than in a richly sensorial, multifarious human body. By Fanon’s account, this epidermal experience

reduces black subjectivity from a token of the general human condition to a particular historically defined racial condition. The black subject, he contends, is thereby constrained to be a particular racial object.

Fanon weaves himself into the text as a literary persona, describing his own epidermal experience from the inside. In his words, “I am the slave [...] of my own appearance” (Fanon 2008, 87). As a human being, Fanon says, he “came into the world imbued with the will to find a meaning in things” (Fanon 2008, 82). But as a black man, he says, he has been unable to fully exercise this will to find meaning, obstructed as he is by the experience of being “an object in the midst of other objects” (Fanon 2008, 82). Fanon’s psychological predicament as a black man, he recounts, has emerged from being an object of the white gaze. In his homeland of the Antilles, Fanon claims, the racial difference between whites, mulattos, and blacks was “not really dramatic” (Fanon 2008, 83), but his migration to white-majority France engendered in him an acute sense of racial objecthood. While the experience of being an object for others is common to all human subjects, Fanon claims, the black subject’s racialized self-understanding in white society compounds this common existential problem. For this reason, Fanon argues, the ultimate legacy of slavery and colonialism is the alienation of black people from themselves. Just as he struggles to grab hold of his identity in a white world, Fanon argues, black people the world over struggle to find purchase over their identity, their labour, and their dignity. Practically speaking, black people must carefully monitor their behaviour and appearance to conform to the norms of white society. To survive their black skin, black people must don white masks.

Fittingly, Césaire opens *A Tempest with a Master of Ceremonies* directing the chorus to choose masks of different characters for the play (Césaire 2002, 7). Just as Fanon’s book examines “white masks,” *A Tempest* attends to the literal and figurative masks people don as beings in the world in relation to others. Caliban’s opening line is “Uhuru!” a greeting in his native language that Prospero detests since he insists they speak in his “civilized” tongue (Césaire 2002, 17-18). As Prospero berates Caliban, he defends his colonial project as an effort to “drag [Caliban] up from the bestiality that still clings to [him]” (Césaire 2002, 17-18). Caliban, however, counters that Prospero taught him only to “jabber in [Prospero’s] own language so [he] could understand [his] orders,” and that without Prospero, he would be “King of the Island” (Césaire 2002, 17-18). Caliban then sings an ode to his deceased mother, the witch-queen Sycorax, much to Prospero’s chagrin (Césaire 2002, 17-18).

These introductory lines frame Prospero and Caliban's conflict over the course of the play: through his tyranny over the island, Prospero has stripped Caliban of his power, his dignity, and his identity. Later scenes reveal that Caliban's experience of oppression under Prospero's rule, much like Fanon's experience of being black in white society, has an important psychological dimension. In an impassioned speech towards the end of the play, Caliban admonishes Prospero for the double consciousness his tyranny has engendered in him:

Prospero, you're a great magician: / you're  
an old hand at deception. / And you lied  
to me so much, / about the world, about  
myself, / that you ended up by [sic] impos-  
ing on me / an image of myself: / underde-  
veloped, in your words, undercompetent /  
that's how you made me see myself! / And I  
hate that image [...] and it's false!  
(Césaire 2002, 62)

Here, Caliban's account of his lived experience clearly mirrors Fanon's in "The Fact of Blackness," in which he claims that white hegemony continually reaffirms the idea that "the Negro is an animal, the Negro is bad, the Negro is mean, the Negro is ugly" (Fanon 2008, 86). Like Fanon himself, Caliban originally lived contentedly on a Caribbean island among only other black and mulatto people (i.e., Sycorax and the mulatto fairy Ariel), enjoying security in his identity as a human subject. But after Prospero, the white colonizer, imposed his rule, Caliban too experienced alienation from his psychological and bodily experience. As Prospero's slave, Caliban must use his body for his master's purposes (at one point, for example, the young prince Ferdinand leaves a task undone and Prospero demands Caliban finish it) while leaving his mind to develop a pathological sense of inferiority. Prospero classifies Caliban as racially distinct from both him and Ariel, thereby pushing Caliban into an epidermal experience of his own body à la Fanon. In this way, Caliban's internalized self-image as "underdeveloped [...] undercompetent" (Césaire 2002, 62) dislocates his sense of himself as a human subject, replacing it with an alienating sense of himself as a racial object.

White characters in Caliban's proximity reinforce his alienation, paralleling the cries of "Look, a negro!" (Fanon 2008, 82) that Fanon describes as the typical way white people in France would react to black passersby. Upon discovering Caliban sleeping, the drunken fool Trinculo exclaims, "Ah, an Indian! Dead or alive? You never know with these tricky races. Yukkk!" (Césaire 2002, 40-42). His friend Stephano soon follows,

saying, "My God, on Stephano's word, it looks like a Nindian! And that's just what it is! [...] An authentic Nindian from the Caribbean! That means real dough, or I'm the last of the idiots! (Césaire 2002, 40-42). Like the white French passersby Fanon describes, Césaire's fools see a black person first as an object—as monstrous, exploitable, less than human—before understanding them to be a full-fledged human subject. The first thought of each is how he might profit off of Caliban in European circuses. Stephano even delights when he mistakes Trinculo's head for another of Caliban's: "a Nindian with two heads and eight paws, that's really something!" (Césaire 2002, 44). In the minds of these miscreants, Caliban is rendered a mere means to the selfish ends of the would-be colonizers. Even after Stephano declares Caliban's linguistic ability to be "a scientific miracle" (Césaire 2002, 44), he and Trinculo name themselves as the island's new masters, relegating Caliban to a servant role. By Fanon's account, the white majority likewise sees him, a black intellectual in France, as a sort of miracle (Fanon 2008, 88-89). White hegemony metabolizes the abilities of Caliban and Fanon by reducing them to pet projects—objects of admiration, not revulsion, but objects all the same.

## II

Caliban, as a representative of Césaire's *négritude*, strives to vanquish Prospero and reclaim his identity as a black Afro-Caribbean islander as a source of pride and dignity. Act Two opens with Caliban singing an ode to Shango, the Yoruba hero-god of thunder. As Caliban sings, he gives voice to his thoughts of vengeance: "May he who eats his corn heedless of Shango be accursed!" (Césaire 2002, 25). Among the targets of this curse is, of course, Prospero, who is blithely ignorant of the nature gods to whom he owes the island's bounty. Caliban sings again in this vein before heading to battle against Prospero with Trinculo and Stephano: "[Shango] strikes and lies expire!" (Césaire 2002, 52). Here, Césaire has Caliban take up his own strategy of *négritude*, a strategy Fanon cites critically in "The Fact of Blackness" (Fanon 2008, 100): to legitimize one's self-assertion against white overlords by invoking an idealized history of African culture. Césaire further fleshes out Caliban's conception of black pride with romantic Afro-Caribbean nature imagery: in another song, Caliban describes the "[b]lack pecking creature of the savannas [...] the quetzal," who joins the "ringdove [which] dallies amid the trees, wandering the islands" to complement his chorus of "Freedom hi-day! Freedom hi-day!" (Césaire 2002, 45). Since Caliban's express purpose in this song is to "sing of winning the day and of an end to tyranny" (Césaire 2002, 45), he seems to see idyllic pan-African images like these as

ideological weapons against the psychological threats of Prospero's regime. This considered, Caliban maintains that black persons must see themselves as subjects who are proudly, mythopoetically, and fundamentally black if they are to achieve disalienation. For Caliban, that is, to be unabashedly Afro-Caribbean is to be properly human. Hence Césaire, speaking through Caliban, finds the essence of blackness in an idyllic Afro-Caribbean world—the world Prospero desolated (Césaire 2002, 45).

By contrast, Fanon eschews nostalgia for a lost African cultural history and rejects any notion of an essence of blackness. Instead, in the dramatic conclusion to *Black Skin, White Masks*, he resolves to disalienate himself by laying claim to a common human identity in the hopes of finding fellowship with humankind in general. It is here that Fanon's existentialist influences shine through most brightly: to use Jean-Paul Sartre's terminology, Fanon calls on each black subject to transcend their facticity—the extrinsic facts of their race, their culture, their colonial history—and instead embrace their freedom as a human individual. Fanon claims solidarity with any oppressed person, not just any black person, and a connection, by way of his common humanity, to any historical human accomplishment, not just those of black people. He lays claim as much to “the Peloponnesian War [...] as [to] the invention of the compass,” for “none the less [sic] [he is] a man” (Fanon 2008, 175). Remarking that “the discovery of the existence of a Negro civilization in the fifteenth century confers no patent of humanity on me” (Fanon 2008, 175), Fanon cautions against pinning black dignity on historical contingencies. He thereby counters the *négritude* movement's concern with recovering (an ideal vision of) African heritage, saying “[he] does not want to exalt the past at the expense of [his] present and of [his] future” (Fanon 2008, 176). Rather, Fanon says, he envisions a common future for all of humankind in which “it [will] be possible for [him] to discover and to love man, wherever he may be” (Fanon 2008, 180).

As I have shown, *A Tempest* and *Black Skin, White Masks* sketch contrasting visions of black humanity and black liberation. Advocating Césaire's *négritude*, Caliban seeks to overthrow a white tyrant by appealing to a mythopoetic vision of the Afro-Caribbean past. Advocating anti-racist existentialism, Fanon seeks to disalienate black people by appealing to a cosmopolitan vision of universal humanity. Césaire's Caliban grounds the dignity of black people in their blackness; Fanon grounds their dignity in their human freedom. Different in theory, so too in practice: Césaire's Caliban calls on black people to fight for black sovereignty,

while Fanon calls on all human beings to build a global fellowship. On Caliban's island, it is Ariel who sounds most like Fanon, telling Caliban of his “uplifting dream that one day Prospero, you, me, we would all three set out, like brothers, to build a wonderful world, each contributing his own special thing” (Césaire 2002, 27). If Fanon, not his mentor, had written *A Tempest*, I suspect that Ariel, not Caliban, may well have been the central sympathetic character.

### III

Césaire's exploration of black lived experience in *A Tempest* illuminates the damages of racialized alienation that Fanon examines. The play dramatizes the kind of epidermal experience Fanon describes, inviting the audience to empathise with a black character alienated from himself. Yet it also challenges Fanon's view that black disalienation could and should come by trading in one's racial identity for global fraternity. For Caliban to give up his black identity would be to accept the identity Prospero has imposed on him, the identity of the monstrous slave (Césaire 2002, 65-66). And Ariel's sentiments, if admirable, are naïve: Caliban can never expect Prospero to lay down his arms and accept him as an equal, let alone as a friend. Indeed, the play ends with Caliban and Prospero locked in a bitter and unending battle for the island (Césaire 2002, 65-66). Similarly, working-class black people, for example, cannot expect human fellowship from white capitalists. Contra Fanon, Caliban's narrative arc suggests that black people grappling with oppression can effectively use pride in their African heritage as motivational fuel for their goals of liberation. To use Fanon's example against him, “the Negro who works on a sugar plantation in Le Robert” could profit from “the discovery of a Negro past” (Fanon 2008, 174-175), since such a past could help support their claims of human equality to their oppressors.

That said, Fanon's critique of the *négritude* movement reveals the shortcomings of Césaire's Caliban. Caliban romanticizes the Afro-Caribbean world most forcefully in opposition to Prospero's rule. Hence, without Prospero as his enemy, Caliban's songs of Shango would lose their teeth. In the dialectical terms used by Sartre, whom Fanon cites approvingly (Fanon 2008, 101-102), Caliban's songs are the antithesis to the thesis of Prospero's tyranny. Yet neither combatant provides a synthesis, each thus condemning himself and his enemy to an eternal war. Likewise, essentialized black pride à la *négritude* is an apt antithesis to the thesis of white supremacy. Yet as Sartre and Fanon point out, *négritude* is only the middle term of the dialectic; Fanon's affirmation of universal human freedom provides the

necessary synthesis. If the story of Caliban is to be believed, Césaire’s *négritude* has the power to mobilize black liberation. But to defeat Prospero, Caliban needs Fanon to come to his aid. That is, Fanon’s anti-racist existentialism is the necessary next step after *négritude*: it unburdens human beings of their racial facticity, casting them as subjects with no essence but their common freedom. Imbued as we are with the will to find a meaning in things—if Fanon is to be believed—we, as free human subjects, have the power to freely reimagine ourselves and our world. Armed with such a power, we can hope and strive, as did Fanon, for a future of cosmopolitan solidarity among us all.

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[1] “The Fact of Blackness” is the fifth chapter’s title in Charles Lam Markmann’s English translation. However, Fanon’s original French title, ‘L’expérience vécue du noir’ is better translated as “The Lived Experience of the Black Man.”

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*[2] The title of Kelley's essay omits the acute accent elsewhere found on the "e" in "négritude."*