



Universität St.Gallen

Glossary Entry:

# **“Black Skin, White Masks”**

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# Black Skin, White Masks

## 1. Color of skin

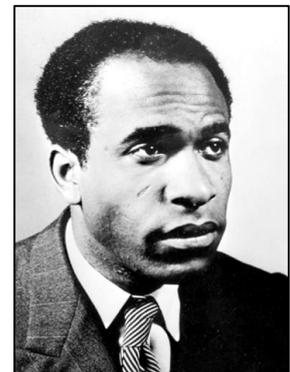
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The color of skin defines people's cultural identity. This provoking statement summarizes Frantz Fanon's key message of his concept 'Black Skin, White Masks'. It addresses how non-white people are judged and culturally identified based only on the color of their skin. In Fanon's book *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) he describes the struggles of himself, a black man, who is living in a world dominated by white people. In this world the white man is imposing a historical-racial schema (Fanon, 1952, p.84) upon black people which is based on the color of their skin. This picture, created by what Fanon calls the white man's eyes (Fanon, 1952, p. 83) is coined by stereotypes which roots go far back to the beginnings of colonialization. Even though many people might say that we left the times of discrimination and stereotyping based on physical appearance behind us, reality shows that this is not the case. Initiatives such as 'Black Lives Matter' in the USA or the initiative 'No to racism' by the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) demonstrate that the problem, discussed by Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*, is still of high relevance nowadays. To transfer Fanon's concept to today's challenges of black people, it is crucial to understand who Frantz Fanon was and in which historical context he wrote the book *Black Skin, White Masks*.

## 2. Frantz Fanon

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Fanon was born in 1925 on the island Martinique and received his early education from an elite school (Chachage, 2011). Growing up on Martinique, which was a French colony until 1946, Fanon saw the colonized and post-colonized world first hand and experienced what racial differentiation means in a very early stage of his life. According to Archie Mafeje (1992, p.13), the people of Martinique were facing "dehumanizing oppression of colonial domination and suppression of the black people". In 1943 Fanon joined the Free French forces in World War II at only 17 years of age and was later awarded the 'Croix de Guerre' for his heroism in combat (Alessandrini, 1999, p.2). He, however, left disillusioned by the racism he faced in the army (Newlove, 2016). After WWII he accepted a scholarship for his service (Gale, 2005) and started to study medicine and psychiatry in Lyon, France. During his time as a psychiatrist, he noticed that some French patients



Frantz Fanon

refused to be treated by him. (Booker, 2005, p. 249). This notable encounter made Fanon realize, that the inferior treatment by the white society due to the color of his skin could not be prevented by high education or skill. According to the Panaf Great Lives Series (1975) Fanon experienced the racism and objectification that he analyzes in his book during the time he was in Lyon. It was also during this time that Fanon wrote 'The Fact of Blackness' which would later be the 5<sup>th</sup> chapter of his book *Black Skin, White Masks*. In this chapter he addresses his experiences of living as/ being a black man and describes the process of accommodation and alienation of black people in a white society. In times of post-colonialization and re-orientation, with people looking for self-consciousness and identity, the book gained high recognition.

### **3. The Fact of Blackness**

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In the chapter 'The Fact of Blackness', Fanon describes how the identity of black people is not something that can be self-created but rather something, which is imposed upon them by the society in which they live in, purely based on the color of their skin. It reflects the initial statement, that the color of skin defines cultural identity and is key for Fanon's concept *Black Skin, White Masks*. Fanon is showing this by the monologue which describes his search - the search of a black man in a post-colonized world - for self-consciousness. Due to many quotations and jumps in the text, the 5<sup>th</sup> chapter is rather complicated to read and sometimes hard to follow. From my point of view, it is advisable to separate Fanon's search for self-consciousness into five phases in order to understand the full extent of The Fact of Blackness.

#### **3.1. Phase 1 - Fanon is aware of the "black problem" but never problematized it**

In the first phase, Fanon is describing how black people amongst one another will have no occasion, to experience what he calls the "black problem" (Fanon, 1952, p.82). The "black problem" for Fanon is the experienced inferiority of black people, which is created by the white society (Fanon, 1952, p.83). Fanon himself says, that he was aware and talked about the "black problem" with friends, or, more rarely with American Negroes (Fanon, 1952, p.83) but the real burden of being black hit him for the first time, when he became aware of the man's gaze. He realizes that "in the white man's world the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema. Consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity. It is a third-person consciousness." (Fanon, 1952, p.83) What Fanon is trying to express by this is simply, that the white man defines a person's cultural identity by

the color of the others skin. It is not about how you are culturally influenced by your family, friends or education. It is purely the color of your skin that makes the white man judge who you are. Fanon expresses that he was satisfied with an intellectual understanding of the “black problem” until he met the white man’s eyes for the first time.

### **3.2. Phase 2 - Fanon experiences the “black problem” and is shocked**

“Mama, see the Negro! I’m frightened!”. (Fanon, 1952, p.84) This incident on a train is the moment when Fanon’s search for self-consciousness begins. A little boy is afraid of him solely because of the color of his skin. It is now that he realizes, that he his battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, and slave ships (Fanon, 1952, p.84f.). Fanon no longer has control over his identity and his body/corporeality and how other people see him. He realizes, that “the white world, the only honorable one, barred me from all participation. [...] I was expected to behave like a black man – or at least like a nigger.” (Fanon, 1952, p.86)

Fanon describes the problem, that “overnight the Negro has been given two frames of reference within which he has had to place himself. His metaphysics, or less, pretentiously, his customs and the sources on which they were based, were wiped out because they were in conflict with a civilization that he did not know and that imposed itself on him.” (Fanon, 1952, p.83) What he is saying by this is that the white people as colonizers defined the habits, customs and rites of the black people as barbaric. They considered themselves as superior and justified colonialization as well as slavery with these stereotypes of the black man. The black man was forced to assimilate the customs and habits of the white man.

Fanon, searching for self-consciousness realizes that the black man is caught between two frames. The frame of his ancestors whose customs and habits were wiped out and the frame of the white society which is denying to see him as an equal human being. In this moment, Fanon fully understands the “black problem“ which is based solely on the color of his skin. Fanon sees himself (the black man) woven out of thousands of details, anecdotes and stories by the white man. (Fanon, 1952, p.84) For Fanon as an academic and psychiatrist it seemed highly irrational to be characterized based only on the color of skin. He decides that “since the other hesitated to recognize me, there remained only one solution: to make myself known” (Fanon, 1952, p.87).

### **3.3. Phase 3 - Fanon goes into offense and tries to argue the “black problem” with rational arguments**

In this phase, Fanon is quoting a lot of different philosophers and authors to fight the “black problem” in a rational way. He wants to prove that black people are equal to white people. To him the term negro stands for savages, brutes and illiterates – characteristics, that he does not see for himself and other blacks. He rather sees the myth of the negro as something which is outdated. (Fanon, 1952, p.88) However, people are still using the term when talking about black people. Fanon sees this as a burden. For example, as soon as a Negro doctor makes a mistake, this mistake is projected on all black doctors. “What could one expect, after all, from a Negro physician?” (Fanon, 1952, p.88) In hope to find something in the history books, Fanon quotes scientists, who “had conceded that the Negro was a human being. [...] same morphology, the same histology.” (Fanon, 1952, p.90) He was confident, he could convince the white man that black people are equal human beings but also had to take into consideration, that the white man remained intractable in certain points. “Under no conditions did he wish any intimacy between the races, for it is a truism that ‘crossing between widely different races can lower the physical and mental level ... Until we have a more definite knowledge of the effect of race-crossings we shall certainly do the best to avoid crossings between widely different races.’” (Fanon, 1952, p.90f.) At this point, Fanon understands, that he cannot convince something unreasoned and irrational. He cannot win the discussion concerning stereotyping of black people with rational arguments. Fanon describes it as the total inability to liquidate the past once and for all and states that “there will always be a world – a white world – between you [the black man] and us [the white people]” (Fanon, 1952, p.92).

### **3.4. Phase 4 - Fanon sees negritude as the solution for the “black problem”**

Seeing that he cannot convince the white man that he, a black person, is equal to them, Fanon is looking for a new approach on where to place himself in the world. He himself states: “I had rationalized the world and the world rejected me on the basis of color prejudice. Since no agreement was possible on the level of reason, I threw myself back toward unreason” (Fanon, 1952, p.93). He found a new approach with the concept of Négritude. According to the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, the movement of Négritude has its roots in the 1930s and was launched by black students of French colonies in Africa and the Caribbean territories. They strived for the recovery of African self-determination, self-reliance, and self-respect. The new race consciousness, was

(re)discovering a new authentic self for black people. The followers of the Négritude concept wanted to unleash the chains of Western domination, stereotyping, anti-black racism, enslavement and colonization by acknowledging their culture, history and achievements. They were fighting for their rightful place in the world (Banoum, 2013).

Fanon was fascinated by the Négritude movement at first. He states that “from the opposite end of the white world a magical Negro culture was hailing me. [...] I began to flush with pride. Was this our salvation?” (Fanon, 1952, p.93), he asks. Fanon realizes, however, that he cannot identify himself with the concept completely. “Black Magic, primitive mentality, animism, animal eroticism, it all floods over me. All of it is typical of peoples that have not kept pace with the evolution of the human race” (Fanon, 1952, p.96). He recognizes, that he as a person who is born on Martinique with close ties to France and the Western world could no longer be a part of the Négritude movement. It does not represent what he really is. “I am not a potentiality of something, I am wholly what I am.” (Fanon, 1952, p.103) This quote shows how Fanon realizes that even though he might feel connected to the Négritude movement to a certain degree, not everything what this movement stands for fits to his personality and to his way of thinking. Fanon realizes, that his blackness was only a minor term and just one of many things that made him what he really is. “In all truth, [...], my shoulders slipped out of the framework of the world, my feet could no longer feel the touch of the ground. Without a Negro past, without a Negro future, it was impossible for me to live my Negrohood. Not yet white, no longer wholly black, I was damned” (Fanon, 1952, p.106).

### 3.5. Phase 5 - Fanon realizes that he is caught between the “white world” and his ancestors

Realizing that he was not white, yet black, Fanon is grasping the dilemma, which I illustrated in Figure 1. The figure shows how he is stuck between the white world that is refusing him because of the color of his skin and his ancestors, with whose past he cannot identify. The barrier expresses how Fanon sees himself forced to decide between one of the two and how those two worlds cannot merge. He summarizes that “without responsibility, straddling Nothingness and Infinity, I began to weep” (Fanon, 1952, p.108). This is also the finishing sentence of the chapter ‘The Fact of Blackness’. Fanon does not find a solution for his struggle. He was looking for somewhere to fit in

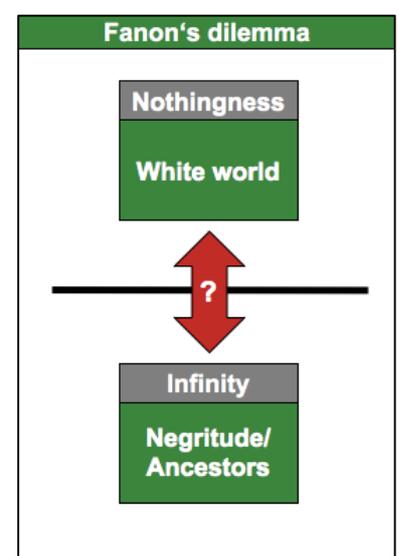


Figure 1 – Fanon's dilemma

to finish his search for self-consciousness but realizes that the white world does not let him enter because of the color of his skin and the Négritude movement does not fully represent him. His search for self-consciousness stays unanswered and he ended right where he started his search. This is probably why he ends the chapter with another anecdote where a crippled veteran goes to a black man and tells him to resign to his color the way he got used to his stump because they were both victims (Fanon, 1952, p.107). It is another situation where he fully faces the “black problem”. Realizing that his search brought him where he started, a world where he is still culturally identified based only on the color of their skin, he began to weep (Fanon, 1952, p.107).

### 3.6. The circle of Fanon’s search for self-consciousness

In order to illustrate the connection between the five phases, I conceptualize Figure 2, which shows the circle of Fanon’s search for self-consciousness. The whole time he is caught in the gaze of the white world. The gaze stands for a world dominated by white people and the stereotyping practiced by the white society that Fanon is living in.

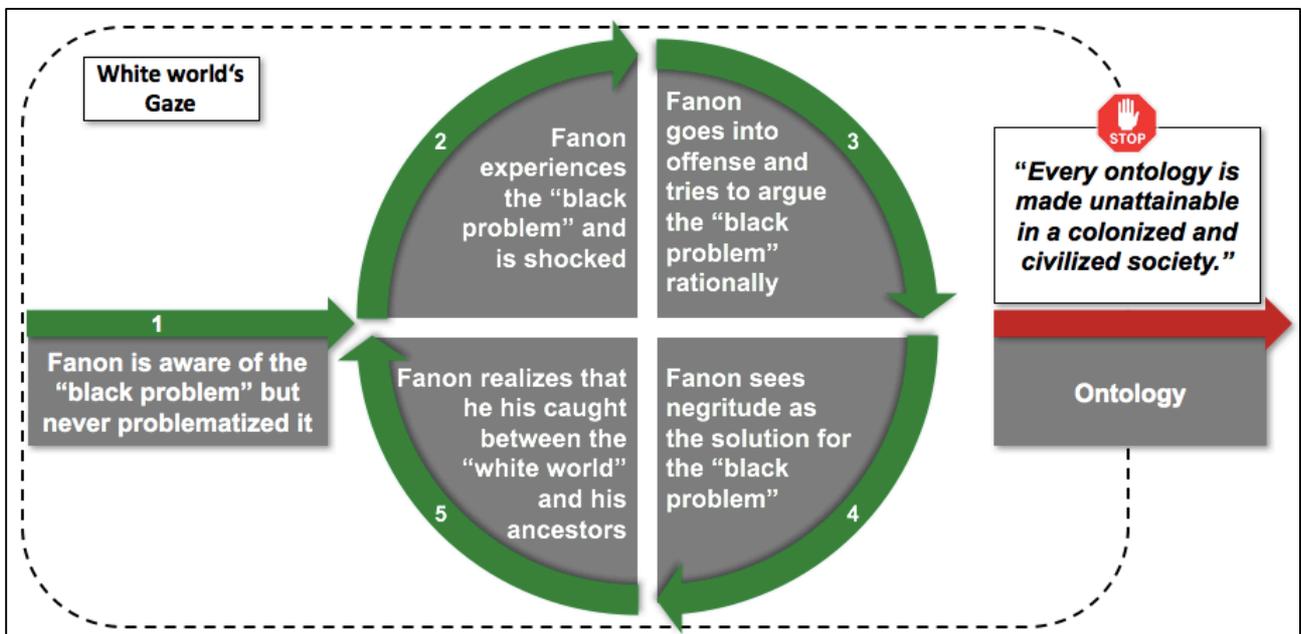


Figure 2 - Five stages of Fanon’s search for self-consciousness

The gaze traps black people in white imagination of what black people are (socially and culturally). At the beginning he is aware of this but never problematized it. As soon as he experiences the “black problem”, he enters the circle of search for self-consciousness. The described dilemma of phase 5 however leads him to where he started. He received no

answers and sees that he is given no chance to determine what he is by himself. Embedded within the white man's logic it is the color of his skin which defines his cultural identity. According to Fanon the only escape out of this cycle, "ontology, is made unattainable in a colonized and civilized society". (Fanon, 1952, p.82) Ontology is the theory of existence. It examines how things become. What Fanon means when he says that ontology is made unattainable, is that the white world's gaze decides what black people are. The black man cannot *become* anymore. He cannot influence what he *is* because the black man's identity, is determined from the second that someone sees the color of his skin.

What can be criticized is, that Fanon is only talking about the black man and not the black woman. Even though some critics such as Homi K. Bhabha think that the word 'man' is inclusive of man and woman (Bhabha, 1986, p.7ff), I disagree and do not see that Fanon meant all black people. I think it would be especially interesting to see the lived experiences of a black woman because they most likely differ significantly from those of a black man. Nevertheless, I think that black man and woman faced and are facing many similar challenges, such as getting stereotyped only based on the color of their skin, what is also the main issue expressed by Fanon in his book *Black Skin, White Masks*. That is why I decided to use the term 'black people', when I think a certain issue includes black man as well as black woman.

## **4. The meaning of 'Black Skin, White Masks'**

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Based on my previous analysis of Fanon's book *Black Skin, White Masks*, I suggest three different interpretations of the concept.

### **4.1. Black Skin, White Masks – Concept 1**

My first interpretation was that the black man tries to put on white masks in order to assimilate the white man and to pretend to be white. He is doing so by behaving, looking and speaking like a white man and tries to get rid of his stereotypes. His goal is to become a part of the white community or at least not to stand out negatively. In the introduction of the book, Fanon describes that the "Black men want to prove to white men, at all costs, the richness of their thought, the equal value of their intellect. [...] The black man wants to be white." (Fanon, 1952, p.3) He is shocked when he realizes that "they [black men] too reject me. They are almost white" (Fanon, 1952, p.88).

#### 4.2. Black Skin, White Masks – Concept 2

It seemed to me that it could also be that it is not the black man who wears white masks but rather the white man who puts his stereotypes (masks) on the black man's face. Because the white man is stereotyping the black man, the black man cannot get rid of the stereotypes. Anecdotes and stories by the white man define how the black man is seen in a world dominated by white people (Fanon, 1952, p.84). It is the white man who is creating the black man by putting masks on his face. The mask can be understood as a metaphor for the characteristics which other people project on other persons. Thus the black man comes into existence only because of the white man who created him with stereotypes.

#### 4.3. Combining the two concepts – Concept 3

While asking myself, which of the two concepts is the most suitable one, I created a new concept, which is the combination of the two concepts and visualized in Figure 3.

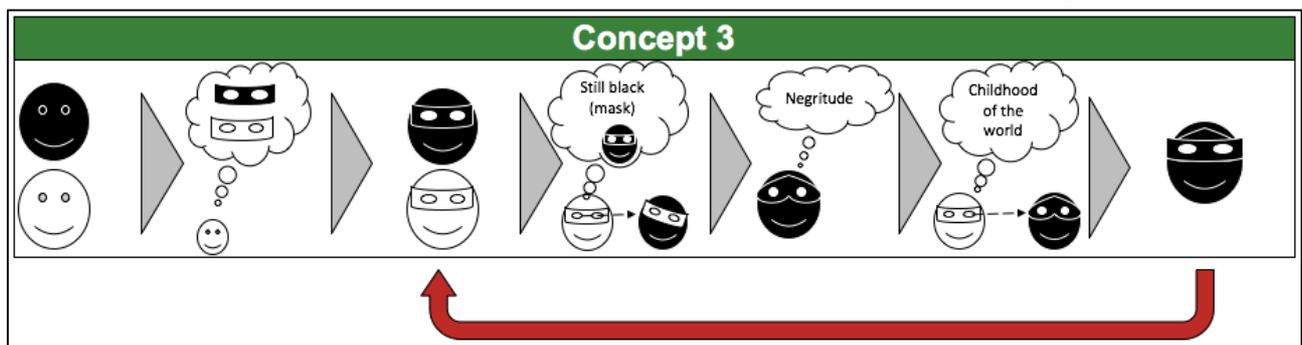


Figure 3 - Cultural identifiers in different approaches

Starting point of concept 3 is a black person and a white person. The white person is differentiating between himself and the black person and gives himself a white mask which is standing for all attributes of a white man such as civilization and superiority. At the same time, he is giving the black man a black mask which is standing for all the stereotypes and inferiority. The black man realizes that he is seen as inferior and is now behaving like a white man by putting on the white mask (Concept 1). The white man however does not care how the black man behaves or what he really is. He only sees the color of his skin and in his head, the black man is still wearing the black mask (Concept 2). The black man sees, that this cannot be the answer to escape his inferiority which the white man sees in him. That is why he puts on a new black mask which is representative for the term negritude. He is proud of his ancestors and their customs and rites. As a consequence, the white man sees his view that the black man is the childhood of the world (Fanon, 1952, p.101) as confirmed. Consequently, he still puts the same mask on the black man's face as he did before. This is the same situation as in step 3 – the white man is wearing a white mask and the black man

is wearing a black mask. Both masks are created by the white man. This circle is very similar to the circle of Fanon’s search for self-consciousness in Figure 2. In both concepts, the black man is given no chance (Fanon, 1952, p.87) and is trapped within the stereotypes, created by the white man only because of the color of his skin. In the end the black man cannot define himself out of himself but is trapped in the white man’s gaze which frames the black man and creates a hierarchy as well as superiority.

## 5. Today’s relevance of ‘Black Skin, White Masks’

Even though Fanon wrote ‘Black Skin, White Masks’ in 1952, the concept is still relevant in 2017. It seems that in Western countries such as the USA, people of color still do not have equal opportunities in the society. This is addressed by various movements and they point at the same problem as Fanon did – the “black problem”.

### 5.1. ‘Black Skin, White Masks’ in today’s USA

The movement ‘Black lives Matter’ in the USA shows that the color line is still present. ‘Black lives Matter’ formatted in 2013 after an Afro-American boy was killed by a white man who was on neighborhood watch and intends to build connections between Black people and allies to fight anti-Black racism, to spark dialogue among Black people, and to facilitate the types of connections necessary to encourage social action and engagement. (BlackLivesMatter, 2017). It advocates for dignity, justice and respect for black people living in the USA. Racial profiling (the act of suspecting or targeting a person of a certain race based on a stereotype about their race), is happening on a daily basis in the USA and is something that is even promoted by leading politicians (Giulliani, 2016). Statistics show that



Figure 5 - Police controls in Ferguson, 2013

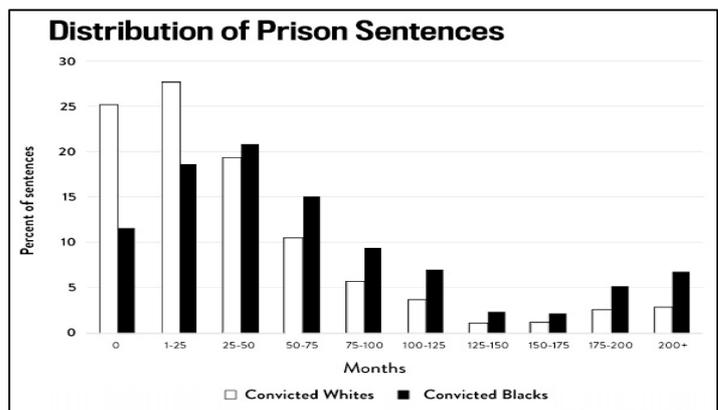


Figure 4 - Distribution Prison Sentences in USA, 2015

prison sentences for the same crime are higher for black people. After being arrested, African-Americans are 33% more likely than whites to be detained while facing a felony trial in New York. In 2010, the U.S. Sentencing Commission reported that African Americans receive 10% longer sentences than Whites through the federal system for the same crimes (DoSomething.org, 2014). Figure 4<sup>1</sup> shows that convicted black people are more like to get a high prison sentence. Figure 5<sup>2</sup> on the other hand shows, how black people are much likelier controlled by the police even though compared to white people, they were less often carrying illegal things with them. These examples show, that racial prejudices are still existent in the USA.

## 5.2. Barack Obama's search for self-consciousness

A famous US-American, who seemed to struggle with similar questions as Fanon did, is the President of the United States, Barack Obama. Barack Obama is a son of a Kenyan father and a white mother from Kansas, USA. In his book 'Dreams from My Father' he describes his life as a boy of mixed heritage, who was influenced by many cultures during his time in high school (Obama, 1995, p.73ff). As Fanon, Obama went through a search for self-consciousness as a teenager by "wrestling with words, locked in suddenly desperate argument, trying to reconcile the world as [he]'d found it with the terms of [his] birth" (Obama, 1995, p.86). Similarly, to Fanon, he cannot find the answers, he is looking in literature. It is after a high-school party, that Barack Obama is getting aware of what Fanon conceptualized in 'Black Skin, White Masks' – the "black problem". In the book he describes how he brings two of his very good (white) friends to an Afro-American party. Obama explains, that he "could see right away that the scene had taken my friends by surprise. [...]. After maybe an hour, they asked me if I'd be willing to take them home" (Obama, 1995, p.84). It was, however, not this observation that struck him but his friend's comment on the way back: "You know man, that really taught me something. I mean, I can see how it must be tough for you [...] sometimes, at school parties . . . being the only black guy and all" (Obama, 1995, p.84). After analyzing this statement by one of his best friends, Obama concludes that

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<sup>1</sup> Source: Slate

<sup>2</sup> Source: Missouri Attorney General

“they [the black kids] were always playing on the white man’s court” (Obama, 1995, p.86). It is a painful realization, that there is a white world that he cannot be fully part of the white American society – he is separated by a line of color. Like Fanon, he is experiencing the dilemma shown in Figure 1 as a teenager. He is excluded and unsure where he belongs. What Obama describes in his book is the core of ‘Black Skin, White Masks’ and representative for many Afro-Americans, living in the USA today. As M. Keith Booker put it, “the white society lures the African man with its promise of justice and equality. Deep inside, however, it treats him as a savage and inferior. The African’s high education or skill makes no difference in this equation” (Booker, 2005, p. 249). The concept of Fanon is thus still highly relevant. This is not only true for the United States of America, but everywhere, where people are stereotyped based only on their bodily appearance.

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