

# Fanon's Vision of Embodied Racism for Psychoanalytic Theory and Practice

Kenyona Young

## ABSTRACT

Fanon's *Vision of Embodied Racism for Psychoanalytic Theory and Practice* is a self-exploration of appeasement as a body defense that moves beyond the binary into the subconscious and preconscious states, going further still into the fabric of American caste. Scholars like Fanon, Hardy, and Knoblauch boldly explored how hierarchal structures of race and racism live in our interstitium. In this way, we must all examine ourselves and how we have been complicit in systems of oppression, and are subjects of a white ideology. This self-examination begins with interrupting the patterns of appeasement and enactment.

**Keywords:** Fanon, appeasement, body defense, annihilation, social self, race, racism, phantasies, Other

Submitted: 26.02.2023

Accepted: 29.04.2023

International Body Psychotherapy Journal  
The Art and Science of Somatic Praxis

Volume 22, Number 1,  
Summer 2023, pp. 125-131

ISSN 2169-4745 Printing, ISSN 2168-1279 Online

© Author and USABP/EABP.

Reprints and permissions: [secretariat@eabp.org](mailto:secretariat@eabp.org)

In exploring Fanon's *Vision of Embodied Racism for Psychoanalytic Theory and Practice*, author Steven H. Knoblauch discusses his limitation in supporting his Black client, Waverley, described as "... an encounter consisting of my phantasies as rescuer in interaction with my patient's victimization, located in a space constructed out of the oppressive economic and political arrangement shaped in great part by racist assumptions and practices" (Knoblauch, 2020, p. 299). Stephen Hartman further expounds upon Knoblauch's vision of Fanon's sociogenic concept, inserting the importance of going beyond body-to-body understanding, and into the systems that make up our society. Hartman suggests that "our theories are stained with racial projections that we cannot collectively overlook (Carter, 2018; Christensen, 2019) just as our institutes sit on redlined real estate" (2020, p. 318). As the micro- and mezzo-systems are situated within a continuous feedback loop, Fanon's concepts of the *phobogenic* (causing fear/phobia) object and *lactification* (to make white/to whiten the Black race), explores and makes clear the loss of human connection as Black folx were made the Other. In the creation of the Other, all bodies formed, fractured, and became rigid composites that operate within *enactments* – the process of acting out conscious

“  
Slavery officially ended  
in 1865 but the structure of caste  
remained intact not only  
surviving but hardening...

—Isabel Wilkerson

***As clinicians engage in therapeutic work,  
further exploration into the body as preverbal and preconscious states  
that sit just outside of our awareness is warranted  
in exploring the ways in which Black, White, and all Othered bodies  
are deeply affected.***

and preconscious states of being, from the body defense of *appeasement* – a profound biosocial response to relieve anxiety and protect us from the intersubjective spaces and the preconscious spaces of “traumatic sociohistorical events” (Knoblauch, 2020, p. 307) Both Knoblauch and Hartman are henchmen in the same boat, with Fanon at the helm, in exploring the deep anxieties that live contextually throughout our lives and hold foundation to how we make meaning. As clinicians engage in therapeutic work, further exploration into the body as preverbal and preconscious states that sit just outside of our awareness is warranted in exploring the ways in which Black, White, and all Othered bodies are deeply affected.

In Stephen Hartman’s article, *Binded by the White: A Discussion of “Fanon’s Vision of Embodied Racism for Psychoanalytic Theory and Practice”* (Hartman, 2020), he discusses the failures of psychoanalytic thought and theory, and emphasizes the importance of avoiding the “bonds of Whiteness” when working with clients, asserting, “White analysts pursue acts of self-analysis that confirm risk differently than we commonly understood “destruction and survival” in a “good-enough psychoanalysis,” and furthers this point in stating, “White analysis cannot understand the violence that slavery and its aftermath wrought from any other position than a position of Whiteness, so the position of the empathic ally who survives destructiveness is ever suspect” (Hartman, 2020, p. 319). White anxiety around approval lives within the body, preconscious, and is a part of the glue that bonds the work of the white analyst. Consequently, [White people] can’t see the *white-constructed invisible fences*, barriers, walls, and *ways of being* that aggressively encroach on the lives of Black and Brown people over the course of a lifetime (Hardy, 2022, p. 9). “White anxiety around approval lives within the body, preconscious; it is “the internalized myth of White superiority that tells White people they are good, beautiful, just, moral, knowledgeable, deserving,

and rightful heads of the human table” (McGoldrick & Hardy, Eds., 2019, p. 202).

This position must be at the very least acknowledged, with some steps taken towards dismantling, before allyship is broached.

## Considerations

In approaching the emotionally charged work of *appeasement* through a somatic lens as a body defense that exists within hierarchal societies, some foundational concepts and understandings are necessary. This work is situated within a framework that understands America as a settler colonial nation, which is to acknowledge the ways in which the history of America and its acute indoctrination of Otherness lives intergenerationally, as well as permeates the day-to-day lives of Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color who are pressed to the margins of society.

While body psychotherapy is a radical departure from the centering of the mind within psychodynamic discourse, it remains centered in whiteness, and has evolved within a staunch psychodynamic framework that limits its ability to fully explore the wholeness of humans. Furthermore, body psychotherapy has yet to effectively address the lack of human rights, which lives in the bodies of the marginalized. For this reason, it is imperative to voice the rage of the lived experience of Others, and to give it the dignity of being seen as fully human. This conceptual analysis will pull from the allied fields of sociology, psychology, psychiatry, social work, and education (e.g., Fanon, Hardy, DeGruy, Winnicott).

A final consideration and foundational point to make clear is how healing may often be considered within American discourse, leading one to believe that healing is a journey with the destination of “healed.” On the contrary, healing is a constant process without a destination.

## Appeasement as defense

Many of us live our lives in some performative state; caricatures, whose distortions live so deeply in the body that the enactment feels true. It is only when the pattern is disrupted that we can begin to contend with the lie. Jeffery Mangram writes, in *The Elephant is the Room* that the price that is paid for living our lives within these performative states is losing oneself to the caricature. Mangram reflects that there was a time when he could not separate himself from performance, and found that he lived in a state of “the performance of survival,” within all corners of his life, professional to personal. This “performance of survival,” is a form of appeasement, and speaks to the many ways we live with the betrayal of our defenses. This betrayal is usually only confronted at later points of reflection. This is in part due to the very nature of the body defenses, and the fact that they live within the interstium, neurons, and heartbeats of our lives, and are not always conscious. Appeasement speaks to the deeper automatic responses of the body, often in response to keep ourselves safe. When speaking of the marginalized, however, due to the hierarchical nature of our societies, and survival being relative to situations, status, and the like, appeasement will look very different for a middle-aged, cisgendered white man with all the privileges of our society in comparison to a middle-aged, cisgendered white woman, or a middle-aged Black man/woman. Appeasement is a defense, much like fight, flight, freeze, flop, and fawn. However, appeasement, unlike fawn, “cannot be solved by the individual alone.” It is specifically situated within hierarchal systems/structures, “a feature of social hierarchy of inequality,” and is a function of situational survival, safety, and our drive to be socially received (Ndefo, 2021).

America is built on chattel slavery, and Black folx have been fighting for the right to be truly accepted as human from the day the first African was considered something less than. In this frame, Black is at the bottom of the hierarchy, and white is positioned atop in the pigmentocracy of a white body

supremacist structure (Menakem, 2022) – which is why much of our discourse around race and race relations in America is often very black and white. This is also the reason so many of us yearn for nuance, and a period where scholars, writers, and thinkers will boldly, obtrusively, meddle with the greys (shout out to Black feminist scholar Brittany Cooper).

## Appeasement and I

I have been thinking a lot about appeasement lately, and how the body moves into this body defense without thought. For myself, by the time I am aware of the enactment, I am trapped in it. Deeply engaged, most often nonverbally, makes me think of how the body is “the first responder to trauma,” and how all the information within any given space is, “neurocepted through non-verbal cues.” In a fleeting period, my body has scanned for danger and prepared to respond (Galdos & Warren, 2022, p. 85). At some point, I become aware of both my body’s response and discomfort, the need to get free, and the need to survive this social situation, realizing that the right response could be beneficial and the wrong response detrimental.

While analyzing the literature on Fanon’s perspective and the importance of introducing clinicians to Fanon’s work, I reflected on innumerable exchanges with my white peers within the Somatics program at the California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS). I wondered; when my white peers engage with me, are they truly getting to know this body? Or are they (my white peers) attempting to become competent in who I am, a sort of individualized cultural competency, that may better support their skills development and lead to their overall ability to engage, interact, and treat Black people? Further, how is appeasement taking form in this body, living in the preconscious state, and engaging in enactments where I leave feeling exhausted and overwhelmed? This Black, female, queer body finds itself cursing allyship, and looking for accomplices, or co-conspirators. I long for the self-proclaimed ally to move beyond being a

***America is built on chattel slavery, and Black folx  
have been fighting for the right to be truly accepted as human  
from the day the first African was considered something less than.***

bystander with “BLM” signs in the windows of their fancy homes, to owning accountability for their complacency and contributions to our racist society. That will show itself in willingness to align with the Black bodies in danger, assuming some of this danger in support of truly honoring that Black too equals human. Is it possible that appeasement allows for white complacency and contributions, and that allyship is the first step to co-conspirator? Does appeasement allow for my white peer to become stuck at this first step? Or is it that Black as less than human is so rooted in the DNA of America(ns) that it lives in our bodies, outside of consciousness? In my quest for co-conspirators, my awareness of appeasement in my body begs for the stillness within to shake and uproot me out of the day-to-day enactments.

The disconnection between my experience and that of my white peers leaves me to contend with my rage alone, leaving me to question if my rage is righteous, or if there is any dignity to be found. Rage, to the marginalized, is a foundational function of appeasement, automatic and slightly invisible (Nndefo, 2021). Rage that is swallowed so deep and for so long can be hard for Black folk to bear to touch. Ayana Young, host of *For the Wild* podcast, interviews Nkem Ndefo in an episode entitled “The Body as Compass.” Ndefo explained that those of us who live at the lowest levels of the social hierarchy spend “a great part of our existence in appeasement” (2021). Often, the phobogenic object (the object to be feared), we are the “embodied registrations... frequently shaped by traumatic sociohistorical events emotionally experienced as too unbearable for re-presentation/remembering as symbol/image in intersubjective space” (Knoblauch, 2020, p. 307). If this body is to truly be known, then my peers and “white analysts” must move beyond the “bonds of whiteness” into a radically different frame in which “clinical practice... is able to endure disruption and consequently alter its manner of clinical practice” (Hartman, 2020, p. 319), or reckon with this body and other Black bodies movement out of the stillness of enactments and beyond appeasement, as the rupture has already begun.

## Resilience and appeasement

Both Knoblauch's and Hartman's articles address the resilience factor of appeasement, and

how Black bodies are called into these enactments where we must draw upon resources to support us in getting through days where psychological violence is constantly minimized. It helps to think of appeasement in the subconscious as “confusion, or even cowardice... far from pacifying and resolving conflict, often only serves to postpone the inevitable confrontation, and so aggregates tension” (Laqueur, 1978). Here, I am called to body memories of engaging socially at CIIS in states of stress – where this body, tense with a heart rate steadily above normal, must slow and deepen its breath to keep the heart from escalating. Yet sweat, thick with proteins and lipids, continuously collects under my arms and around my groin. This mind moves between rage and disillusionment, fear, and containment. A prayer from somewhere beyond this soul and the cosmic center of the Earth: *When this body dies, give the flesh no time to rot. Burn it. Leave no evidence of the Blackness. God, bring me back white.*

## Fanon and I

The ruthlessness of the prayer above speaks to the turmoil that lives within Black bodies: the desire to move beyond this flesh that communicates subjugation, and the reality that only destruction and death of the current systems of colonization will allow for true freedom and liberation to live within an “expression of the true self” (Swartz, 2018, p. 525). Swartz writes that Winnicott, as Fanon, understood, “the ‘yes to life’ ... is not self-conscious but must be received without being modified into something other than itself” (Swartz, 2018, p. 525). Due to the deep anxiety that lives in both the conscious and preconscious body, white projections are made to avoid/deemphasize the personal investment one has in oppressive systems. To this end, some white folk may be well suited to situating themselves within some oppressive systems, and find themselves allying with Blacks and Others, while continuing to struggle with their involvement in anti-Black oppressive systems. Winnicott asserts that “the alternative to being is reacting, and reacting interrupts being and annihilates. Being and annihilation are the two alternatives” (Winnicott, 1986, p. 244). Annihilation is the diminished space where the social selves meet.

If the only options our bodies have is “being or annihilating,” as Winnicott suggested, then, I posit, America is filled with annihilation, a sort of trans-

***I found my heart heavy when confronting the ways  
in which internalized racism, sexism, and ableism live,  
and are stored deeply in my fascia.***

mutation, given that we are born into our authentic selves. We are socialized into the social self, leaving bodies disconnected from each other, Earth, and ultimately themselves. This lack of vitality is where appeasement lives, in the space of compliance where we dampen our true selves, and “the opposite of feeling alive is not feeling dead. The opposite of feeling alive is having to devote all one’s attention, time, and energy to others’ (originally mother’s) moods and expectations. The opposite of feeling alive is being a totally social self, reactive, compliant, and lacking in spontaneity” (1990). This body is struggling to maintain within the disconnected and chronically uncomfortable spaces of the “social self” and longs for its destruction as an opening to being.

Fanon’s work forces the reader to take a long hard look into our souls, and with little resistance, I found my heart heavy when confronting the ways in which internalized racism, sexism, and ableism live, and are stored deeply in my fascia. All my encounters are colored by white supremacy; often I am pulled into enactments, lulled into spaces where only my defenses live. The psychodynamic/psychosomatic worldview threatens to put me in my place of acceptance of the dominant group’s perspectives on all things mind/body with little regard for the ways in which we are shaped as a national body through white supremacist frameworks that elevate the DOMS (dominant omnipresent mutilation of self/state), using the rest of us as stepstools.

### **Moving beyond silos into theory**

Much of what we think of or believe to be white/whiteness is an ideology. Dr. Kenneth Hardy explores this concept of the enduring, invisible, and ubiquitous centrality of whiteness (2022). He and others explore how “white” lives deeply in our subconscious: to be white is to be good, and to be good is to be socially acceptable. In this vein, DOMS is a state of being that marginalized folx hope to attain. In attempts to position myself in proximity to whiteness, due to Blacks’ inability to fully as-

similate like others in history such as (previously non-white) Italians and Jewish folx, who eventually found acceptance and received their white cards. Black folx can only pray for the next best thing to assimilation: proximity. This adds to Black anxiety, and causes us to raise our children with the belief that if they are good enough, their lives may be spared. Black cannot rub off in the shower; thus, we find proximity, via colonized ideas of good, bad, right, wrong, scholarship, and respectability politics. Appeasement speaks to how much of this anxiety refers to how we have internalized these beliefs.

In my relentless chase to obtain some proximity to whiteness, I have engaged in respectability politics, hated my skin, attempted to keep it as light as possible, straightened my hair, attempted to perfect my tone and speech patterns, smiled on cue, denied my sexuality, played good wife, attended many churches, and hated Others. I contorted my soul to fit into the white box, while somehow knowing I would never be fully accepted. My internalized racism informed me I was not worthy of the white card, but to keep trying as hard as I could, for the warmth of the light of white was the next best thing.

The current human condition that we refer to as “normal” is actually this annihilation or transmutation, this “totally social self” that robs us of our vitality.

We are, in part, so easily pulled into enactments where appeasement takes over due to the pervasiveness of holding patterns within micro- and mezzo-systems. Knoblauch brings this in through Fanon’s sociogenic concept, where he explains how the unconscious is situated within “categorization and hierarchical meaning” (Knoblauch, 2020, p. 307), and Ndefo (2021) situates appeasement within hierarchal social systems that surround our bodies in social engagements where we fall into enactments. Our subconscious body-to-body knowledge is informative, not only from a biological sense. When investigated in the slightest, we become aware of the knowledge our bodies collec-

tively hold. Schimdt discusses the family as a body: “We can say, for example, that the family as-a-unit has its own formative process, character, and armoring, which are both separate and different from the formative process, character, and armoring of each of its members” (Schimdt, n.d., p. 46). In efforts to continuously situate our bodies within micro- and mezzo-systems, this body believes not only in the “family body,” but also in the community body, societal body, and national body, and in the appeasement that these bodies are “wrought” with. This is exemplified by Bronfenbrenner’s bio-ecological model (1977), which systems therapists aim to serve from a socioculturally-attuned frame (McDowell et al., 2018).

Both Knoblauch and Heartman show an awareness of the preconscious dance of appeasement and our living through enactments, which many of my peers continue to struggle with, in part due to their “cognitive imperialism” (Battiste, 2017). Cognitive imperialism is a term that describes the mental, emotional, destructive, and traumatic effects of the experience of individuals and people forced to be educated and living under Eurocentric colonialism and imperialism (Fanon, 1965, 1967; Memmi, 1967, 2006). It is a form of cognitive manipulation used in social and educational systems to disclaim other knowledge systems and values, known as a banking model (Freire, 2004), cultural imperialism (Carnoy, 1974), mental colonization or colonization of the mind (Chinweze, 1987; Hotep, 2003), culturalism, cultural racism, epistemic violence, cultural genocide, or cognitive assimilation (Battiste, 2017, p. 183-188).

Battiste confirms the importance of holding deep reverence for Fanon’s work, and the work of uprooting and interrogating the bonds of prejudice as it is built into history. Her work speaks to a holding

pattern that lives in our physical bodies, familial bodies, societal bodies, and national bodies – all of which are situated within. They constantly communicate, learning and informing each other, all of which are informed by the body defense of appeasement. As Fanon stated in *Black Skin, White Mask* (1967), sociogeny, or the phenomenological occurrence of appeasement, which likens itself to code-switching or double consciousness, live alongside ontogeny and phylogeny (Fanon, 1967). We have evolved to appease, to show up as our “totally socio selves,” to move with ease into enactments. While Fanon’s work, along with that of other Black scholars, have focused on Black bodies, my experience at CIIS leaves me to wonder about the white experience of appeasement, and how it plays a role in tethering white folk to current societal standards of living and being, or, as Winnicott would say, annihilation. I assert that the vast majority of us live within the event horizon that is white supremacy – pure annihilation.

## Onward with Fanon at the helm

The only way forward is to hold ourselves, our development, and our healing, with deep regard. In learning the Latin origins of the word respect or *respicere*, *re* (back) and *specere* (to look at), *respicere* means to look back at, to regard. How might regard be used in the service of assessing, intervening, learning from, and dismantling the “totally social self”? Or, to use Fanon’s work, how might we reflect, “emphasize, and critique the significance of racial prejudice expressed as hierarchy of development based on comparison of embodied characteristics, particularly skin color and fantasies of innate difference in physiological capacities”? (Knoblauch 2020, p. 300)



**Kenyona Young**, daughter of the matrilineal lines of Gipson, Young, and Wesley, identifies within the collective of Black folk who have cared for her; we are Black, womanist, and queer. An East Oakland native and currently a graduate student at the California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS), Kenyona’s dream is to work within the communities that have natured her.

## REFERENCES

- Battiste, M. (2017).** Cognitive imperialism. In Peters, M.A. (Ed.). *Encyclopedia of Educational Philosophy and Theory*. Singapore: Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-287-588-4\\_501](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-287-588-4_501)
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1977).** Toward an experimental ecology of human development. *American Psychologist*, 32(7), 513-531. DOI: 10.1037/0003-066X.32.7.513
- Fanon, F. (2008).** *Black skin, white mask*. New York, NY: Grove Press.
- Galdos, L., & Warren, M. (2022).** The body as cultural home: Exploring, embodying, and navigating the complexities of multiple identities. *Body, Movement and Dance in Psychotherapy*, 17(1), 81-97, DOI: 10.1080/17432979.2021.1996460
- Hardy, K. (2022).** *The enduring, invisible, and ubiquitous centrality of whiteness*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Hartman, S. (2020).** Binded by the white: A discussion of “Fanon’s vision of embodied racism for psychoanalytic theory and practice.” *Psychoanalytic Dialogue*, 30(3), 317-324, DOI: 10.1080/10481885.2020.1744965
- Knoblauch, S. (2020).** Fanon’s vision of embodied racism for psychoanalytic theory and practice. *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, 30(3), 299-316, DOI: 10.1080/10481885.2020.1744966
- Laqueur, W. (1978).** The psychology of appeasement. *Commentary (Pre-1986)*, 66, 44. <https://ciis.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/magazines/psychology-appeasement/docview/199563768/se-2>
- Menakem, R. (2022).** Foundations of somatic abolitionism training [MOOC]. Education for Racial Equity. <https://educationforracialequity.com/offerings/foundations-in-somatic-abolitionism/>
- McDowell, T., Knudson-Martin, C. & Bermudez, J. M. (2018).** *Socioculturally attuned family therapy: Guidelines for equitable theory and practice*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Schmidt, S. (n.d.).** *The family body*. Berkeley, CA: Center Press.
- Swartz, S. (2018).** Counter-recognition in decolonial struggle. *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, 28(5), 520-527, DOI: 10.1080/10481885.2018.1506227
- Wilkerson, I. (2020).** *Caste: The origins of our discontents* [audiobook]. New York, NY: Penguin Random House Audio.
- Winnicott, D. W. (1962).** The theory of the parent-infant relationship: Further remarks. *The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 43, 238.
- Winnicott, D. W. (1986).** The theory of the parent-infant relationship. *Essential papers on object relations*, 233-253. New York, NY: NYU Press.
- Young, A. (Executive Producer) (2021, March 24).** Nkem ndefo on the body as compass (227) [Audio podcast episode]. *For the wild*. Kalliopeia.org. <https://forthewild.world/podcast-transcripts/nkem-ndefo-on-the-body-as-compass-227>