

The Colour of The Skin

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The color, visible element of the external world, is at the same time inscribed in a powerful way within the skin of a person, in his/her history, his/her infantile experience. The skin is the place from which human sexuality will emerge. Place of desires and satisfactions, it is the cradle of auto-erotisms and fantasy life, which are founding experiences of the psyche, marked by repression. In 1923 Freud speaks of an ego 'derived from bodily sensations, mainly from those which have their source in the surface of the body' [1]. In 1968, in her seminal article, Esther Bick shows how the containing object is 'experienced concretely as a skin' [2]. The skin concerns the psychoanalyst [3] as a place of *anaclisis* of narcissism, an erogenous zone and a place of specific attacks, as it was indicated by Didier Anzieu, who elaborated the concept of the skin-ego [4] in 1974.

What has to do with the color of the skin is indissolubly linked to the psyche, whether on the side of the one who wears the skin, or on the side of the beholder. It is immediately visible in the other and readily echoes within the viewer sensory intimacy and mobilizes the fantasy life [5], sometimes in an uncanny manner. All human skins have a color; there is no such thing as achromatic skin: whatever the name given to it, it always has a visually identifiable hue, even if the term 'colored skin' is generally, for historical reasons, attributed to dark skins called 'black' [6]. The more colorful other could have been fantasied all along history as bearing shamefully on his skin, in color, in an infantile and projective logic, traces of his intense sexuality (image of hypersexualization of colored skin men). Thus, extraordinary theories stemmed from these fantasies linking skin color and sexuality, such as the theory of visual fertilization unfold by Le Cat, a well-known medical personality. According to this theory [7] a pregnant woman will give birth to a 'colored child' because her 'eyes have been caught' by a different skin color to which she has been visually exposed. Color is a polysemous element that can intervene in individual or collective registers, or in different contexts and at different psychic levels. From family romances to the management of incestuous fantasies, via manic defenses and feminine rivalries, skin color is used in many ways. The repertoire of its use by the psyche is vast: from fertile openness to others to a persecutory organization. Like a projective test, this repertoire tells us a great deal about the psychic functioning of those who look at the skin.

The slave trade and slavery, where the color of the skin became 'consubstantial' with a slave 'socio-racial' order [8], played a fundamental role in its fate. The 'acute fear' [9], the talionic fear of reprisals inspired by slaves, the obsession of the slave system to 'contain black people' were permanent. The devaluation, guilt and human degradation of slavery were projected onto the slaves themselves and gave rise to what was called in France at the time the 'stain of slavery' [10]. The colored other embodied the stain of slavery projected on his/her skin and transmitted through begetting at the same time as he/she transmitted life. Thus, even outside the status of slave, the projections linked to the so-called 'black skin' remained as an inheritance, fixed on the skin even after the freeing from slavery, and marked the destiny of the generations to be, now binarized - and hierarchized - into 'whites' and 'blacks'.

Equally noteworthy, in addition to being in the skin, the color is evident in the face-to-face exchange. When we meet someone, in a few seconds, a look is cast (or not), and we accept (or not) this representation of a different other that emerges. The look accepts with receptivity what is reaching out to it by opening up to the difference, or closes, even reflects and sends back to the one being exposed, a representation of the latter distorted by projection. These intimate moments are never

neutral and they touch on the essential because no human being has direct access to his/her own face. He or she can only see himself/herself psychically through the mirror of another human being [11]. The fact that the face is an invisible part of ourselves gives a remarkable effectiveness to what happens in this primary exchange zone (that of sucking at the dawn of life) which Jacques André describes as the 'erogenous zone of narcissism' and the 'representation of the total object' [12]. The moments of loss of one's face, not reflected in the gaze of the other, with a distorting and devaluating projective return, are part of these painful experiences of 'deshumanity' linked to the 'destitution of the resemblance of the fellow creature' [13]. The absence of psychic depth and the alteration of the psychic space of both the viewer and the beholder are characteristic of these moments of lack of visual reflexivity [14].

Even today, the degradation to which the skin has been subjected in history remains a legacy that influences the way in which the skin can be apprehended. In addition, the opportunity remains to the more individual movement at work to unload quite easily onto the colored skin of others devalued parts of oneself in order to make narcissism restored at little cost. Thus, a relative unpredictability inhabits each encounter as to the psychic use that may be made of the color of the other, issue that is not without effect on the different aspects of social life and notably in that of access to power. So, it seems essential to fight against discrimination and to give full value to the extraordinary common constructions and creations of those who have civilized all along history the very horror that oppressed them [15].

However, it is interesting to note that certain trends with a unitary aim are committed to claiming a so-called 'black identity', the former stigma becoming a sign of belonging [16]. This approach, which substantializes the question (and is very different from that of Césaire [17] or Fanon [18]), raises questions. It can be partly thought of in reference to Didier Houzel's concept of bisexuality of the psychic container [19]. It would aim to protect the psychic envelope by giving the skin strength, consistency, non-deformability and goal-orientation that allow it to better resist the attacks to which it is exposed due to its great receptivity [20]. However, this is at the risk of moving too far away from its receptive modalities by making this hard, strong and resistant aspect its only goal in the connection to the different other, and this by reducing again individuals to their skin color.

Probably the less anti-discrimination work is done, the more these approaches will tend to develop.

[1] Freud, S. (1923). The Ego and the Id, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIX (1923-1925) : The Ego and the Id and Other Works*, 1-66.

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[3] De Mijolla, A. (2013). *Dictionnaire international de la psychanalyse*, Fayard, 'Pluriel', 2^{ème} édition, p. 1253.

[4] Anzieu, D. (1974). Le Moi-peau, *Nouvelle revue de psychanalyse* 9 : 195-208.

[5] Belliard, S. (2012). *La couleur dans la peau, ce que voit l'inconscient*, Albin Michel.

[6] It is important to remember that the so-called 'white' skin is a skin color among others. It is, just like the color called 'black', not achromatic (we don't assess here the issue of albinism). Belliard, *Ibid.*

[7] Le Cat, C-N. (1765). *Traité de la couleur de la peau humaine en général, de celle des Nègres en particulier, et de la métamorphose d'une de ces couleurs en l'autre, soit de naissance, soit accidentellement*, Amsterdam.

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- [10] Gisler, *Ibid.*
- [11] Winnicott, D.W. (1971). *Playing and Reality*. London: Tavistock Publications.
- [12] Andre, J. (2011). *Les 100 mots de la psychanalyse*, Que sais-je, PUF.
- [13] Fedida, P. (2007). Humain/Déshumain : l'oubli, l'effacement des traces, l'éradication subjective, la disparition, in *Humain/déshumain : Pierre Fedida, la parole de l'œuvre / sous la dir. J. André*, Paris: PUF, pp. 11-124 (coll. Petite bibliothèque de psychanalyse).
- [14] Belliard, *Ibid.*
- [15] Morrison, T. (2019). *The Source of Self-Regard: Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditations*, Knopf.
- [16] Bonniol, *Ibid.*
- [17] Toumson, R. & Henry-Valmore, S. (2002). *Aimé Césaire : Le nègre inconsolé*, Paris: Vents d'ailleurs.
- The following quote of the authors is from: 'entrevistas con Aimé Césaire' , *revue Casa de las americas*, n°49, 1968: 'There is no predetermined negritude, there is no substance; there is a history and a living history'.
- [18] Fanon, F. (1952). *Black Skin, White Masks*, Grove Press, 2008.
- [19] Houzel, D. (2018). La bisexualité psychique et sa fonction contenant, in *Journal de la psychanalyse de l'enfant, nouvelle série*, 2018, 1, vol.8, 15-38. See also on this subject Agostini, D., Des défenses maniaques, *Adolescence*, 2008, 63, pp. 221-236.
- [20] This position helps to prevent moments of loss of the face (moments that are also the result of a cleavage of the psychic bisexuality of the containing function, but in this case in those who deny any equivalent value to the other person who is different because of their skin color).

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