



# Black Skin, Red Masques: Reading Frantz Fanon and Audre Lorde in Tension with Edgar Allan Poe

**SPECIAL COLLECTION:  
UNMASKING THE RED  
DEATH**

**ARTICLES -  
COMPARATIVE  
LITERATURE**

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## ABSTRACT

If we read Edgar Allan Poe's short story "Masque of the Red Death" as an allegory of the coronavirus crisis, how can we account for the resurgence of Black Lives Matter during this time? Scholars now agree that Poe held deeply racist beliefs about Black people: his Philadelphia was both a hub for scientific innovation and scientific racism coeval with being a site for a vibrant free Black community. I pair Frantz Fanon and Audre Lorde to juxtapose with Poe in order to read the tensions between Poe's racism versus Fanon's anticolonial critique and Lorde's Black feminism. Poe's story offers us a tale of privileged indulgence as a selfish refuge during broader social crisis, which can be troubled by Fanon's discussion of Black ontology and the "Prospero complex". In contrast, Lorde's *Burst of Light* presents an analysis for how self-care can be "an act of political warfare", with her battles against cancer amidst her global activism for social justice focused on Black, Indigenous, and other women of colour. In my essay I use the dynamic anachronistic convergence of their writings as an occasion to consider questions of the racial politics of self and collective care in the face of crises of pandemic and police brutality that disproportionately impact Black people.

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On March 23, 2020 the United Kingdom officially went into lockdown in response to the Covid-19 crisis. On May 25, 2020 George Floyd, an unarmed Black American, was killed by police in Minneapolis. The global coronavirus pandemic had been looming for months prior and would expose the structural fault lines of defunded healthcare, job precarity, and other widespread institutional inequalities that had been accruing for decades. Meanwhile, Floyd's murder reignited Black Lives Matter as a global movement against antiBlackness and specifically antiBlack police brutality. Under lockdown, even ignorant or apathetic global publics were forced to be attentive or, at worst, were bored enough to be hungry for morbid entertainment. While his death captured the mainstream imagination, activists are also campaigning for justice for the too-readily neglected police killings of Black women and gender minorities, such as Breonna Taylor on March 13 and trans man Tony McDade on May 27. The convergence between these crises is no coincidence: both are deadly symptoms of neoliberalism built upon the historical foundations of colonialism and imperialism. Both result in the disproportionate deaths of the most structurally vulnerable: Black death by different biopolitical means, but from the same colonial origins.<sup>1</sup>

If we read Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Masque of the Red Death" in light of the coronavirus crisis, how can we account for the resurgence of Black Lives Matter during this time? Black people—and anyone not white in general—appear to have no place in this Gothic fantasy of grim retribution against elites coded as white Europeans set in an unnamed country ravaged by the mysterious Red Death plague that leaves the faces of its victims crimson with blood. Blackness, however, is a significant presence. We are told that Prince Prospero's masked ball is held in an imperial suite of seven rooms, each with its own monochromatic aesthetic: "The seventh apartment was closely shrouded in black velvet tapestries that hung all over the ceiling and down the walls, falling in heavy folds upon a carpet of the same material and hue" (Poe, "The Masque of the Red Death" 300). The merrymakers are loathe to enter this ominous space, which is dominated by "a giant clock of ebony" that demarcates the time with ponderous ticking and hourly chimes that disrupt the gay music of the orchestra (Poe, "The Masque of the Red Death" 301). This "western or black chamber" is the only room not to have windows in the same shade as the rest of the room: they are blood red (Poe, "The Masque of the Red Death" 301). It is in the black chamber that the Red Death makes his fatal climactic confrontation and ultimate disappearance.

Let us confront something unpleasant about Edgar Allan Poe: despite his beloved place in popular culture as a predecessor to the Goth sensibilities of the likes of Tim Burton, he was a white man in antebellum America who was not an abolitionist. Poe's racism is widely recognized by critics of nineteenth-century American literary studies, who have been pushing back against his image as a curiously ahistorical point of origin for the morbidly quirky. Although he was not an enslaver himself, he came from the fringes of the Virginian establishment and wrote disparagingly about abolition and other progressive causes, corresponded with proslavery apologists (even dedicated a short story collection to one), and as an editor may have condoned a review of a text that celebrated the enslavement of Black people. As Maurice S. Lee notes in his overview of the controversy of Poe's racism, we cannot neglect Terence Whalen's insight that Poe avoided slavery as a topic in order to build a marketable national profile: Poe strategically peddled "an 'average racism' that a range of readers could support" (Lee 752). Scholars such as Lesley Ginsberg and Elise Lemire have made clear that the horrors and mysteries of classic Poe short stories such as "The Black Cat" and "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" create their signature disorienting effects through common proslavery tropes that associate Blackness with animality and degeneration or stoked fears about revolts against slavery through images of burning houses (Ginsberg; Lemire).

Edgar Allan Poe's "average racism", specifically his antiBlackness, gives us a way into his text about a pandemic that underlines the salience of Black Lives Matter: he depicts a banal and ordinary structural racism that is far too easy for many to support—if not overtly, then through ignorance. In this essay I deliberately juxtapose Poe's nineteenth-century story with works by major twentieth-century Black thinkers Frantz Fanon and Audre Lorde, who write from their

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<sup>1</sup> For an excellent analysis of the structural overlaps between antiBlack racism and coronavirus lethality see historian T. J. Tallie's essay "Asymptomatic Lethality: Cooper, COVID-19, and the Potential for Black Death." *Nursing Clio*. June 8, 2020. <https://nursingclio.org/2020/06/08/asymptomatic-lethality-cooper-covid-19-and-the-potential-for-black-death/>.

differently situated perspectives as a Martinican anticolonial psychologist revolutionary and an American queer feminist poet respectively. The very incongruity of this assemblage of texts, I suggest, reflects the convergence of Covid-19 and Black Lives Matter in ways that can draw out the obscured enmeshments between their attendant constellations of issues and critiques. Poe's portrayal of oblivious white elites who use political and economic power to set themselves apart from the dying masses provides a frame against which we can position Fanon's exploration of the psychology of colonial racism and Lorde's discussion of self-care as political. Poe, like his Prince Prospero, is known for his signature "love of the *bizarre*" (Poe, "The Masque of the Red Death" 300): their wilfully escapist indulgences in the grotesque must come face to face with the deadly realities they attempt to sublimate and disavow.

## 1. WHITE MASKS/RED MASQUE

The original title of Poe's short story, published in the May 1842 issue of *Graham's Lady's and Gentleman's Magazine*, was "The Mask of the Red Death" rather than "The Masque of the Red Death", which was made standard in his subsequent revision (Poe, "The Mask of the Red Death" 257). The shift between homonyms indexes the change in emphasis from the mysterious individual to the entire bacchanal: the elites throw a masque to celebrate their privileged removal from the degradations around them, but are confronted by the masked figure who invades their sanctuary as the embodiment of what they fear outside. Wary of claiming equivalences, I draw attention to Poe's titular mask/masque for its resonances with anticolonial thinker Frantz Fanon's foundational *Black Skin, White Masks* (*Peau noire, masques blancs* in the original French (1952)). Fanon critiques the structural effects of antiBlack colonial racism on the individual psyche: the colonized Black subject who is reduced to the externalization of epidermalization and then internalizes the white colonizer's mask.

Poe's writings explore the psychological before psychology emerged as the modern medical discipline we know it today. Lee argues that, along with Poe's characteristic use of madness and paranoia as repeated themes, his deliberate exploration of the psyche hinges upon racism and slavery as "a crisis of the unconscious": "Poe, that is, seems less an author bedevilled by buried racial fears than one who prejudicially enacts a strategic metaphysics of race" (Lee 752). This particular short story can be viewed as a meditation on the specific psychological anxieties of his local context. Less than five years prior to the publication of the short story, Poe moved to Philadelphia in the same year as the occurrence of one of the city's most devastating antiBlack riots. Poe's Philadelphia was a vibrant centre for free Black communities who became targets for white resentment. The 1838 Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women was attacked by white anti-abolitionist rioters who mobbed and burned the Pennsylvania Hall for Free Discussion, which was the site of the convention, as well as a shelter for Black orphans and a Black church (Lemire 177). "The Masque of the Red Death" inverts these dynamics: Prince Prospero and his cronies guard themselves against the world without, but it is the feared presence of Blackness, not the very real threat of white racists, that seeks retribution.

Fanon, by contrast, was a practising psychiatrist, which informed his influential anticolonial critiques. The most famous passage from *Black Skin, White Masks* opens as such:

"Dirty n---!"<sup>2</sup> Or simply, "Look, a Negro!"

I came into the world imbued with the will to find meaning in things, my spirit filled with the desire to attain to the source of the world, and then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects. (Fanon 109)

Even in everyday life Black people have their ontology constructed only in relation to whiteness. They are alienated from their own bodies, reduced to mere object, and thus meant to represent an entire race based on what Fanon calls the process of epidermalization, the objectifying outsider gaze surveilling their Blackness that penetrates and restructures the sense of self. This hailing is the primal scene of sociogeny, Fanon's formulation of how social phenomena become linked to certain groups who are then stigmatized as biologically inclined to those phenomena. Unlike the luxurious refuge of Prospero's court so dramatically overthrown, this intimate invasion of the psyche by an antiBlack, colonial world is terrifying in how ordinary, how casual it is.

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2 As a nonblack person of colour I have chosen to omit the slur.

Fanon discusses the concept of the “Prospero complex” endemic to colonizer psychology: he writes, “It is defined as the sum of those unconscious neurotic tendencies that delineate at the same time the ‘picture’ of the paternalist colonial and the portrait of ‘the racist whose daughter has suffered an [imaginary] attempted rape at the hands of an inferior being” (Fanon 107). Poe introduces his Prince Prospero as “happy and dauntless, and sagacious,” whose sybaritic indulgences at the expense of his vassals are a moral failing of escapism (Poe, “The Masque of the Red Death” 300). Through Fanon we may question the foundations of Prospero’s privileged position: his fragile sense of self projects and disavows the violences perpetrated by the hierarchy that upholds his prosperous position onto those who actually experience structural violences in everyday life. Anxiety about mortality is universal, but it is no equalizer.

If Prince Prospero is so dedicated to denying the Red Death, then why does he have the ominous black chamber within his own quarters? The black chamber is presumably constructed and decorated according to his whims, like the rest of the abbey “the creation of the prince’s own eccentric yet august taste” (Poe, “The Masque of the Red Death” 300). Although it is forbidden to let the despair of the plague enter the prince’s refuge, the revelers avoid the seventh chamber because the light cast through the red windows of the chamber mimics the effects of Red Death, which marks casualties with bloody faces. There stands the ebony clock as the towering, ticking *memento mori* admonishing the frenzied masquerade: when it strikes midnight, the dreadful figure with the bloodied mask appears and makes his way through the succession of chambers unimpeded by the frightened court. Prospero rushes after the unknown guest and, in the black chamber, draws his dagger to attack—only to be struck dead onto the ebon carpet. The court rushes to arrest the figure, but the costume of gory mask and funeral clothes is found to be hollow: the presence of the Red Death has entered and no one is left alive. By creating the black chamber, the prince has been the literal architect of his own demise.

Through narrative sleight-of-hand, Poe conflates the Red Death and Blackness while evacuating the recognition of Black revolutionary agency. Although no characters are racialized, since the plague wreaks havoc on society’s dispossessed we should see echoes of the disproportionate mortality rates of Black and other minoritized peoples made vulnerable due to structural inequalities, without proper access to medical care and without the luxury of staying behind a castle’s walls. Indeed, Black people and any discussion of race are shut out of the narrative itself. The irony is that the plague becomes synonymous with those who are the most vulnerable to it, unrepresentable as people and instead present as an abstracted Blackness. The elites and the short story itself associate the black chamber and all that is black with the Red Death: the tale therefore culminates with the figure of the Red Death “within the shadow of the ebony clock” who “had come like a thief in the night” into the “black apartment” (Poe, “The Masque of the Red Death” 304). Like Fanon’s critique of the annihilation of Black ontology because of the white mask, the red mask of suffering marked by Blackness conceals nothing beneath itself either. Hence, the final sentence: “And Darkness and Decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all” (Poe, “The Masque of the Red Death” 304). Anxieties about the threat of Black revolt against the system of chattel slavery that would lead to white dispossession and death were a common cultural theme during the period: as Lee argues, metaphysical versions of this fear abound throughout Poe’s writings (Lee 756). In this story, a pathologized Blackness usurps the prince’s dominion, a dark mirror to his psyche rather than existing unto itself.

Consider the language of disease and rebellion: different facets of biopolitics, both are said to be “outbreaks”. Reading Fanon clarifies the psychological antiBlack hypocrisies of Poe’s short story. Fanon himself joined the *Front de Libération Nationale* during the Algerian revolution, the very spectre of Black revolution feared and sublimated by Poe and Prospero.

## 2. SELF-CARE/SELFISH CARE

The coronavirus lockdown has taken its toll upon mental as well as physical health. “Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare”, writes Audre Lorde in her nonfiction collection *A Burst of Light* (1988), which, along with the *The Cancer Journals* (1980), chronicles her struggle with breast cancer (Lorde 130). These lines have become the basis for many memes on self-care circulating across different social media platforms. Decontextualized as a mere lifestyle slogan, Lorde’s words are taken to mean

that any self-care is inherently political warfare rather than part of the project of queer Black feminist survival in defiance of a hegemonic system that overdetermines Black morbidity. Reading Lorde's essays against Poe's short story, I consider opposing political models of self-care: how do we discern caring for the self as self-preservation from self-indulgence?

Akin to many a celebrity on Instagram, Prince Prospero and his cronies self-indulge under the guise of self-care safe behind the gates of his Gothic refuge. We are told that the death of half the population inspires him to initiate the months-long party. The happy prince invites only those who are "light-hearted" to enjoy these privileges—"it was folly to grieve, or to think"—thereby instituting a relentless happiness as the norm (Poe, "The Masque of the Red Death" 300). Toxic positivity reigns. There are hints of the class inequality that sustains the gaities: the narrator lists buffoons, improvisatori, ballet dancers, and musicians as the distractions for the idle courtiers. The story does not expand upon these other inhabitants of the abbey whose professions give them contingent access to safety. Their role is a grotesque variation on the beleaguered arts and culture sector during the coronavirus crisis: they are made essential workers who must make invisible their actual labour for the sake of the amusement of the elites.


When the masked figure appears, Prince Prospero's ejaculation is the only instance of direct speech in the short story. "Who dares?" he demanded hoarsely of the group that stood around him, "who dares thus to make mockery of our woes?" (Poe, "The Masque of the Red Death" 303) He calls for the unknown person to be punished. In this moment he admits that the masque is but a mask; however, his epiphany is limited. He speaks of "our woes" in a way that at best suggests an appropriation of the woes beyond the abbey gates or worse, the existential anxieties of the privileged in his court—or, most selfish of all, the use of the royal plural because he sees the plague as a personal affront that impacts only his psychological state. Regardless, his entitled reaction indicates that he, at least, sees himself as victimized by this red-masked intruder who reminds the glittering throng of disease and misery.

For Prospero and his coterie care for the self translates to selfishness that amounts to political warfare against the vulnerable whose marginalization enables the society that coddles the elite. When their luxurious self-isolation begins the narrator remarks they believed "The external world could take care of itself" (Poe, "The Masque of the Red Death" 300). Compare this to Audre Lorde's self-preservation: "I try to weave my life-prolonging treatments into a living context", she writes, mindful in her fight against cancer not to narrow the scope of the world to herself (Lorde 131). She reflects on other women living with cancer. She raises funds for women's collectives in Soweto and for small feminist presses. She speaks out against police brutality and lynchings in the United States. She travels internationally for medical care and to collaborate with feminist organizations such as the Afro-German Women's Group. Discussing the work of Indigenous and Black women, she remarks "Women of Color in struggle all over the world, our separateness, our connectedness, so many more options for survival. Whatever I call them, I know them for sister, mother, daughter, voice and teacher, inheritor of fire" (Lorde 104). Her field of vision is global. Her self-care is one facet of antiracist political warfare fought on multiple fronts. While the likes of Prince Prospero cower in their luxurious sanctuaries, the poet muses, "To acknowledge privilege is the first step in making it available for wider use" (Lorde 129).

### 3. CONCLUSION

In Poe's "The Mask (Masque) of the Red Death" the red mask of the unknown guest makes visible what the masque attempts to conceal. By the tale's close, the Red Death's gory mask descends upon the faces of the rich and poor alike. Reading Frantz Fanon and Audre Lorde alongside Poe underscores the generative ways we can approach the short story's subtitle "A Fantasy". Prospero's solipsistic fantasy is that a pandemic reflects his gilded existential angst. The narrative's overall fantasy is that the fatal scarlet mask of death is always already universal. However, the coronavirus crisis and Black Lives Matter are grim reminders of which lives matter and which do not. From their distinct but overlapping perspectives in colonial psychology and queer Black feminism, Fanon and Lorde unmask Black consciousness, agency, and self-care, which are simultaneously central to, and occluded from, the frame of Poe's narrative and the unfolding narrative of Covid-19.

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