

ICE Agents with Brown Faces

By Aurelio Montemayor

During the 1967-68 School Year, I taught junior English in the San Felipe ISD. I had in my third year as a teacher, divested myself from minimal approaches to teaching high school students to read and write, and moved to engage with critical concepts that stemmed from their own family and community experiences. For research, I decided to have the students create a study and carry it out. Each of my five classes went through a week of dialogue and open conversations, reaching consensus on their research question, and then proceeded to carry it out over the next few weeks.

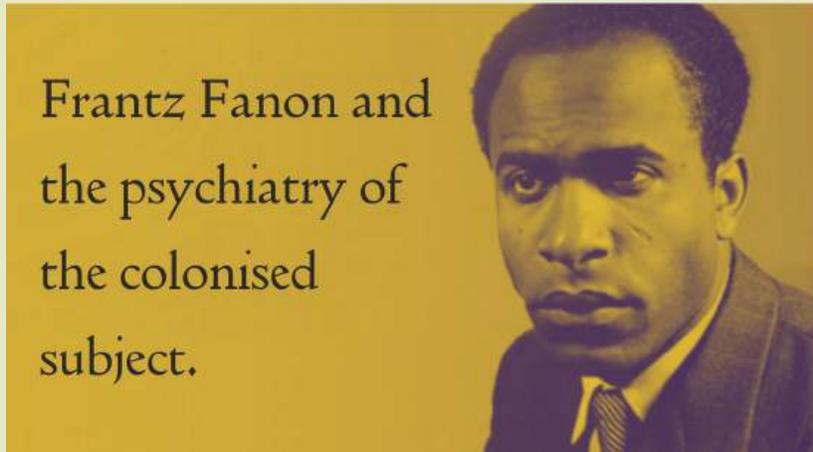
One class raised the question, “Does San Felipe have an inferiority complex?” That was how my students arrived at the very question Fanon poses: what he calls *epidermalization* of inferiority—a deep-seated belief that one’s own culture, people, and self are inherently inferior. San Felipe was a Mexican barrio in Del Rio, and the school district had been formed in response to the inferior and limited education the city-wide school district was providing. Their interviews caused such a stir that the superintendent called a meeting of all the juniors. I told him that the students were conducting research that they had designed. He told me to hurry them up and finish the project quickly.

I’ve been revisiting Fanon recently and how his ideas apply to what we are currently experiencing in the Migra attacks on those suspected of being here without papers. I’ve put together three pieces. The first, *Brown ICE Agents & Fanon*, is for my academic friends. The second, *Frantz Fanon and the Colonial Mind*, for those who might want to teach about this theme in their high school or college class. The third, “*Dialogue Between Don Chon and Geneva : La Máscara y la Migra*” is part of a series I’ve created about Don Chon and other people

from our neighborhoods. In this issue of *La Voz de Esperanza*, sections II and III are shared with readers.

Frantz Fanon and the Colonial Mind

Frantz Fanon was a psychiatrist, writer, and revolutionary born in Martinique, a French colony. His book *Black Skin, White Masks* focuses on how Black people living in colonized societies experience deep psychological trauma as they try to survive in a world dominated by whiteness. Fanon explains that colonized people often feel pressured to reject their own culture, language,



and identity in order to gain acceptance, opportunity, and protection within the colonizer’s world. This survival strategy leads to what he calls the “white mask”: a metaphor for behaving, speaking, and even thinking like the colonizer in order to avoid punishment or exclusion. Wearing the white mask might offer temporary rewards—like a job, a degree, or safety—but it comes at a cost. The person who wears the mask begins to lose touch with their own roots and develops shame about their community. This process is known as **internalized oppression**, and it leads people to believe that their own people are less intelligent, less civilized, or less deserving than those in power.

Chicanos and the U.S. Immigration System

In the United States, many Mexican Americans, or Chicanos, have long histories of struggle against racism, segregation, language oppression, and economic exploitation. At the same time, many Chicanos have also served in law enforcement, the military, and other institutions that uphold the power of the state. This isn’t always a contradiction—people seek jobs, security, and

pride in their work—but when Chicanos work for *ICE* (*Immigration and Customs Enforcement*), which has been widely criticized for its brutal treatment of immigrants, it raises important questions.

Why would a Chicano officer join a force that targets immigrants, separates families, and contributes to a system of detention and deportation that often mirrors the same racism and discrimination that Mexican Americans have fought against for generations? Fanon's analysis helps us answer this question.

Wearing the Uniform, Wearing the Mask

A Chicano *ICE* agent may not see themselves as participating in racial injustice. They may believe they are simply “doing their job” or “enforcing the law.” But Fanon would encourage us to look deeper. What is the emotional and cultural cost of wearing the uniform that enforces anti-immigrant laws, especially when the people being arrested speak your grandmother's language, look like your cousin, or share your own last name?

According to Fanon, some oppressed individuals adopt the behaviors of the oppressor in order to feel safe or powerful. The *ICE* badge, in this case, becomes another kind of “white mask”—a symbol of power, order, and belonging in a country that often sees brown people as threats. By enforcing harsh laws against immigrants, the Chicano *ICE* agent may be unconsciously trying to prove that they are “not like them”—not undocumented, not poor, not foreign. They are seeking approval from a system that has never truly accepted their community. This desire for approval can become dangerous when it leads to dehumanizing others. If you begin to believe that immigrants are criminals, invaders, or burdens, you are repeating the same language that has been used against your own people for generations. That is how internalized oppression works: it tricks you into thinking that harming others is justified because you've been accepted by those in power.

Historical Parallels and Colonial Legacy

Fanon wrote about how colonial powers would train a small group of natives to help rule over their own people. These were often the most educated or the most ambitious individuals, and they were given special privileges for their loyalty. In some cases, they became the fiercest defenders of the colonial regime because they had something to lose if the system changed.

In the U.S., similar dynamics have existed. In the early 20th century, Mexican American children were taught to speak only English in school, and some came to see Spanish as a source of shame. Families were told to assimilate and

distance themselves from immigrants in order to succeed. These attitudes still exist. Some Latino public officials, including law enforcement, may embrace anti-immigrant rhetoric as a way to climb the ladder, gain political power, or avoid the stigma of being associated with the undocumented.

But as Fanon would argue, these masks are fragile. They cannot protect us forever from the reality that racism does not always distinguish between the “good Latino” and the “illegal alien.” The mask may crack the moment the system decides you no longer belong.

The Cost of the Mask

What is the cost of wearing this mask? For the individual, it may be a slow erosion of identity and cultural pride. For the community, it can cause division, mistrust, and fear. When a Chicano family sees one of their own working for *ICE*, it can feel like betrayal. It raises the painful question: Who are we fighting for—and who are we fighting against?

Fanon believed that true liberation required more than political change. It required **psychological decolonization**: freeing the mind from the belief that the colonizer's values are superior. For Chicanos and other Latinos in the U.S., this means rejecting the idea that we must prove our worth by attacking our own. It means standing in solidarity with immigrants, farmworkers, and refugees—not just because they are like us, but because they are us.

Conclusion: From Masks to Liberation

Fanon's message is ultimately one of healing and transformation. He asks us to take off the mask—not to become vulnerable, but to become real. In the context of Mexican American communities today, this means confronting the ways we may have internalized racism or assimilationist values. It also means holding accountable those who use their identity as a shield while participating in oppression.

The path forward lies not in enforcing the borders drawn by fear and power, but in building bridges of solidarity, justice, and cultural pride. As Fanon reminds us, decolonization is not a metaphor—it is a process that begins with the mind and the mirror. Let us look into that mirror, unmask ourselves, and ask: Who do we truly serve—and who do we truly stand with?

BIO: Aurelio Montemayor is an IDRA senior education associate and family engagement coordinator. A life-long Chicano activist and fronterizo, he was county director of the VISTA program in Del Rio in the 60s and marched with the Mexican American Youth Organization (MAYO) in the 70s as part of the Chicano Civil Rights movement. A lifelong educator, Aurelio was co-founder of the first independent Chicano college, Colegio Jacinto Treviño and the Juárez-Lincoln College.

Dialogue Between Don Chon and Geneva : “La Máscara y la Migra”

(A conversation on ICE, identity, and self-betrayal in the barrio)

Setting: Don Chon Buendia is an older man living on The Eastside of San Antonio, where Black and Brown families reside. He’s a retired carpenter who was involved in some of the Chicano movement activism 50 years ago. He has also participated in *Black Lives Matter* events. One of his old-time friends is Geneva Williams, an African American woman who is close in age to Chon and has had a similar history of seeking justice for her community.

Late afternoon on The Eastside of San Antonio. Don Chon is sitting on an old folding chair under the shade of a mesquite tree. Geneva walks up with a plastic grocery bag and two cold sodas. The sun’s still hot, but the wind is finally picking up. The plática begins:

Geneva:

Mira, Don Chon, I brought you a soda. I know you don’t like the diet kind.

Don Chon:

Gracias, m’ija. My blood sugar’s probably high, but what the hell. If I die, I die sweet.

Geneva (chuckles):

Don’t say that. We still need you to set folks straight. Especially now—with all this *ICE* business tearing up families again.

Don Chon:

Ay, sí. I saw that video yesterday. One of them agents—dark like us—pulling that señora outta her car. She was crying, holding her baby, and he didn’t even blink. Like he was made of stone.

Geneva:

That’s what’s messin’ me up, Don. How can someone who looks like us do that? How can they treat raza like trash?

Don Chon:

‘Cause they forgot who they are, Geneva. Somewhere along the way, they started thinkin’ that wearing a badge makes ’em better than the rest of us. Makes ’em think they belong to the side that’s always been stepping on our necks.

Geneva:

Yeah, like they changed sides or something. But I don’t think

it’s just that. I think some of them really believe they’re doing “what’s right.” That they’re “protecting the country.”

Don Chon:

Protecting what? You ever notice how they only go after poor folks? People just trying to make a living? Ain’t no rich folks getting raided. Ain’t no Canadians getting yanked out of factories.

Geneva:

Facts. But you know what really breaks my heart? Some of those *ICE* agents are Chicanos, gente from the Valley or here from the Westside. Maybe they had uncles who picked crops or abuelos who crossed without papers. And now they’re knocking down doors and taking people away in front of their kids.

Don Chon:

It’s like they’re wearing a mask. Not a Halloween one—a mask that hides where they come from. Makes ’em forget abuelita’s tortillas, mamá’s Spanglish, or how we used to be afraid of la migra ourselves.

Geneva:

And now *they are* la migra. That’s what hurts. Like... how does someone go from being the chased to being the chaser?

Don Chon:

I’ll tell you how. It’s what this country’s been doing to brown and Black folks for generations. Telling us we’re less. Making us feel ashamed of our language, our color, our stories. So some of us try to “prove” we’re good Americans. And the fastest way to do that? Step on the ones still at the bottom.

Geneva:

Damn. That’s deep, Don. So it’s like... the system messes you up, and then uses you to mess up your own people?

Don Chon:

Exactly, *mija*. They turn us into tools. And if we ain't careful, we end up using their hammer to build our own cage.

Geneva (quietly):

I've seen it. Even some of our own people start saying things like, "They should've come legally," or "They're taking our jobs," like they forgot our history. Like they forgot the Braceros, the fields, the barrios, all of it.

Don Chon:

It's fear, too. Some folks think that if they act more American than the Americans, maybe they'll be safe. Maybe they won't be next.

Geneva:

But that safety's a lie, right?

Don Chon:

Claro. They'll always find a reason to remind you you're not one of them. Your skin, your name, your mama's accent—sooner or later, they'll come for you, too.

Geneva:

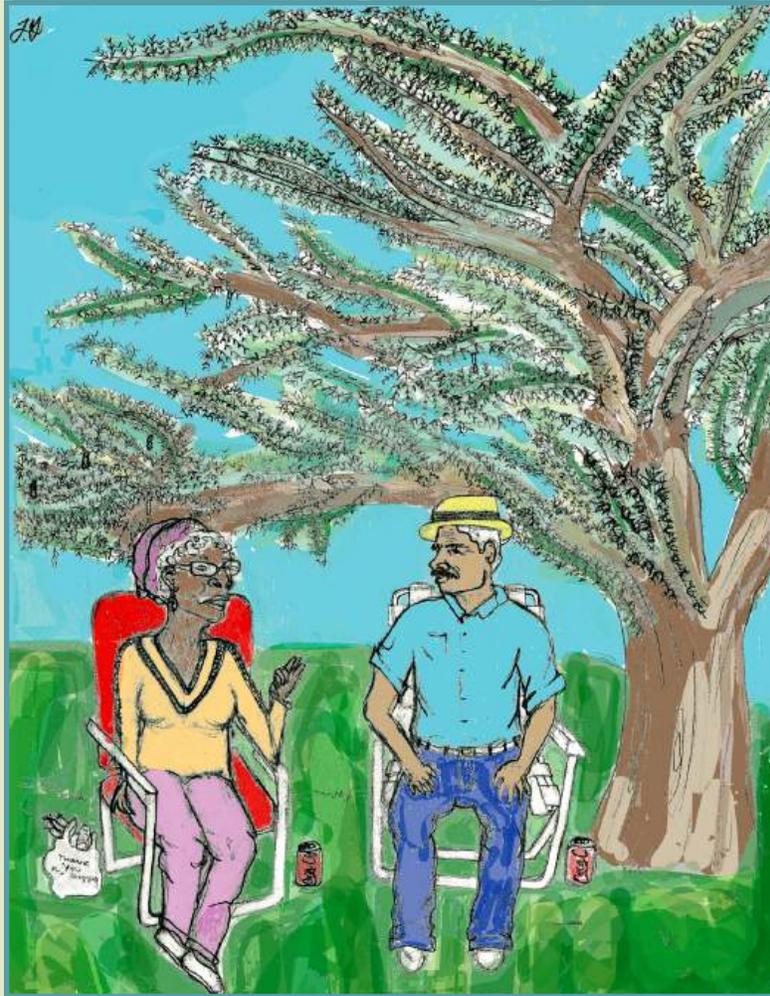
So what do we do, Don? How do we stop this?

Don Chon:

We gotta take off the mask. We gotta remind each other that we come from strong people—people who crossed rivers, climbed fences, worked two jobs, and still had time to love us. We gotta be proud of where we come from, not ashamed.

Geneva:

And we gotta speak up. Even when it's uncomfortable.



Don Chon Buendía chats with his friend, Geneva, as they cool down under the shade of a mesquite tree. Drawing by Jocelina Guerrero.

Even if our own cousin works for ICE.

Don Chon:

Especially then. And we gotta show the young ones that dignity don't come from a uniform. It comes from standing with your people, not against them.

Geneva:

You're right. This ain't just about immigration. It's about how we see ourselves.

Don Chon (nodding):

That's it, *mija*. Colonization ain't just soldiers and guns—it's in the mind. They get you to believe their lies, and you end up policing your own.

Geneva:

But if they taught us to hate ourselves, we can unlearn it, right?

Don Chon:

Damn right. We start by telling the truth. Even when it hurts.

Geneva (smiles):

Then let's do it. One truth at a time.

[Fade out as they sip their sodas and the sky turns a deep orange. Somewhere, a lowrider radio plays a slow ranchera. Don Chon leans back, eyes on the sky.]

Don Chon (softly):

You don't gotta wear a badge to be brave. You just gotta remember who you are.

—Monte Viejito

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