

Reflections on a Feminist Now in Places of Undying Colonialism

June 7, 2017 | Sarika Talve-Goodman

The recent conference staged as a collaboration between our ERC project, APARTHEID-STOPS, The World Literatures: Cosmopolitan and Vernacular Dynamics Research Programme at Stockholm University and the Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research (WISER) in Johannesburg presented the opportunity for participants to enter into dialogue concerning our different localized and ongoing political struggles. Upon arriving in South Africa, we learned that a massive stay-away was being organized to remove Jacob Zuma from office.

Interventions such as a conference paper on failed utopias in post-apartheid literature, or one on Frantz Fanon's warnings for postcolonial societies, called critical attention to our uneven, localized, and transnational emplacements. (Place: not the same as home, but where you find yourself embedded, entangled, implicated, located.)



As a researcher currently working in Israel- Palestine on topics relate to South Africa, the USA, and the global anti-apartheid movement, I've often struggled with my own position as a Jewish American feminist dissident academic, one embedded in continuing structures of colonialism and oppression. I've struggled with the question of how to navigate the academic boycott, for example, when some of my academic allies and lifelines are here, or what it means to critique ongoing legacies of colonial violence and slavery from university buildings that overlook Palestinian refugee camps and slums.

I recently learned from Louise Bethlehem, citing Isabel Hofmeyr, that Frantz Fanon—the anticolonial revolutionary psychiatrist and writer—remains, along with Steve Biko and Achille Mbembe, one of the most stolen authors from the libraries of South Africa. This made sense to me, since it was in South Africa twelve years ago that I first read Fanon. I was 20 years old, an idealistic university student from The Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, a historically white institution in the center of a predominantly black and struggling city. I was on a human rights summer exchange program at the University of Western Cape and University of Cape Town organized through Bard College. It was the ten-year anniversary of the end of apartheid, and the conversation, whether with faculty and students, or drunk people on street corners, was urgent. I felt called into a sense of localized but globally connected struggles that were political, cultural, personal, and historical. I learned to own the whiteness and class



privilege that shaped my life experiences, without them becoming—as they were in the United States—sources of guilt, or barriers against relation and solidarity.

That summer, the loudest narrative of anti-colonial struggle in the now, one that I heard from the majority of my cohort of black male African students from South Africa and surrounding countries—citing thinkers like Fanon and Biko—was an exclusionary and

masculinist one. I remember one moment in class when one of these students called out the handful of white students for being silent, and I remember thinking, *but I don't know how to answer to that address*. The fact of my being a woman, as well as my Jewishness—my own lived experiences and history of racialized, gendered, and sexualized difference and violence, especially growing up in Missouri—were too easily ignored, or swallowed up by discussions of whiteness.

This failure, or discomfort, in speaking on behalf of whiteness in South Africa is when I started seeking out feminism in a different way. It was something that first came from my grandmother, who wanted her daughters to have financial independence, and then from my mother, who brought feminism together with Jewishness and anti-racism, and then became mine and lived. Growing up in the racist and segregated city of St. Louis, I learned that both feminism and Jewishness—and the histories of loss, genocide, displacement, statelessness, and immigration carried within modern Jewishness—meant showing up for and fighting alongside anyone oppressed, excluded, or marked as Other. I learned early on from having an activist mother that a life of struggling against injustice and solidarity work isn't clear, easy, or romantic. It's messy, and sweaty, and often painful. We are pitted against each other, we are discredited, we are broken down, we are slandered in public and in private, we are hated, but we continue to speak up.

It wasn't the life I wanted—my fantasy was to be some kind of healer in the mountains—but I was called into feminism through encounters with violence, exclusion, and the feeling of being at odds, that something is wrong. It came from an overwhelming sense of injustice, especially the unbearable politics around the idea of home in the current world in which we live. When I returned to Baltimore from South Africa, Hurricane Katrina had just hit, and busloads of mostly African American refugees from Louisiana and Mississippi arrived with no place to go. It was there and then that I became consciously emplaced within a historical and global struggle against structural racism—and the sexism, homophobia, and ableism built into it—rooted in shared, uneven, and ongoing histories of violence.

After this I also began to explore my own Jewish entanglements and histories between Europe, the USA, and Israel-Palestine—the politics of violence and exclusion brought home. (For a powerful exploration of the politics of home as one of violence and

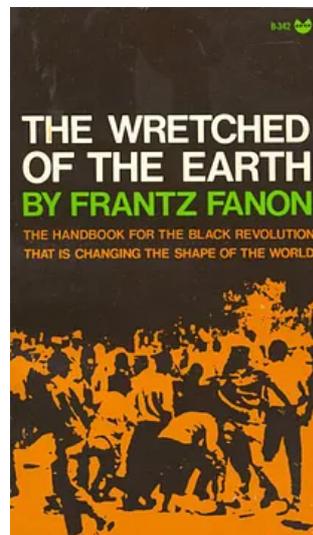
exclusion see Rosemary George's *The Politics of Home*.) I went to study abroad in Israel, which one day would bring me back as a doctoral and then postdoctoral researcher. Being here, in Israel, is what finally brought me, over a decade later—via the ERC project—back to South Africa, and back to Fanon.

During the conference, we heard Richard Pithouse—a South African scholar and public intellectual—give a talk on Fanon, based on a piece he had just published for the popular press. What Pithouse gave us, through Fanon, were tools for thinking about how the Manichean logic of colonial modernity continues in the present, through the dynamics of what Achille Mbembe calls the postcolony (societies emerging out of colonialism and colonial violence), as well as in the logic of some progressive movements themselves.

Pithouse reads Fanon's last work, *The Damned of the Earth* (commonly translated as *The Wretched of the Earth*), as a warning against the likely pitfalls of the postcolony.

In this work, Fanon outlines how colonialism justified its violence through what he calls "Manichean delirium." Pithouse explains:

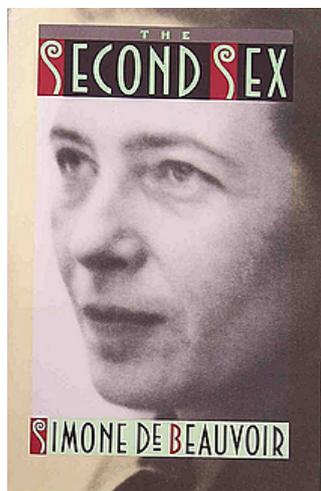
...for Fanon racism, as an ideology, is organised around the idea, whether explicitly asserted or implicitly assumed, that humanity is riven by a fundamental split that, while marked on the body, is ultimately ontological, a constitutive feature of being. Virtue, reason, beauty, maturity, civilization and hygiene are projected onto one side of this split, and their opposites, real or imagined, onto the other.



In his article, Pithouse explains that the government of Zuma works through seeking "to incite Manichean delirium as a mask for the preservation and extension of a predatory and repressive order." I thought about the connections between the authoritarian postcolony and predatory capitalism of Zuma's South Africa—which, Pithouse explains, has elements of the colony and the postcolony—and Netanyahu's Israel, and now Trump's USA. Pithouse gives the famous example of George Bush saying "either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists." We are still living in the age of Manichean delirium and colonial modernity. The conditions of the postcolony are shared.

Fanon probably first encountered the idea of Manichaeism—Pithouse posits in the article as an aside—through Simone de Beauvoir's brilliant book of feminist philosophy *The Second Sex*, where she explains that the "good" becomes defined through a Manichean destruction of the woman as Other.

I locate my own entry into Fanon, through feminist and queer readings of his work, which helped to bring it home to me, that is, to bring it into my own body and struggle in how to live in this world. These sources helped clarify my investments in thinking beyond and against the violence of the nation-state, in transnational modes of oppositional solidarity through difference. Fanon's often masculinist and homophobic politics—as Diana Fuss and many others have discussed—seem to offer little to anti-



homophobic or anti-misogynist agendas. Thinking Fanon with anti-racist feminist and queer thinkers is essential for helping to bring these tools of struggle into conversation with the now, in order to imagine something beyond racist, masculinist, and heteronormative epistemologies, beyond the political logic of borders and nation-states, and beyond the economic logic of a predatory and globalized capitalism that is actively destroying people's lives and the planet.

Pithouse discusses that for Fanon, Manichaeism was also a powerful tool against an external source of oppression, a resource for the colonized. But the goal, for Fanon, is that this Manichaeism is ultimately transcended through struggle. This happens through intellectual work and the philosophical concept of mutuality—a kind of radical participatory process of mutual recognition and learning. In Pithouse's words, this opens up "a radically democratic understanding of struggle, rooted in local practices in which dignity is affirmed, discussion carried out and decisions taken."

Pithouse ends hopefully by writing that Fanon "insisted that the pathologies of both the colony and the postcolony should be confronted with a radically democratic project, the constitution of popular counter-power, and the 'objective necessity of a social program which will appeal to the nation as a whole'. We should do the same." Yes, we should, and perhaps it starts, following Fanon, with transforming education into a radically democratic project of learning and activism on the ground. At the same time, we need to ask what a transformation of the nation as a whole would look like, following Audre Lorde's famous dictum that the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. We need to transform the master's house completely.

Fanon would probably see Black Lives Matter—based in the intersectional analytics of women of color feminism and queer of color critique—as a transcendence of Manichaeism through radical democratic struggle. The movement has no centralized leadership, addresses erasures and marginalizations that have occurred within progressive movements, and remains committed to creating modes of analysis and solidarity not based on homogenous identity categories but through difference. My hope—from where I am emplaced now, between the US and the Middle East—is that we transcend the polarizing Manichean rhetoric around Israel-Palestine to explore the transformative potential of transnational solidarities such as "Ferguson to Palestine." Then we can focus on the everyday work of opposing and transforming localized and

global systems of state-sanctioned violence, devaluation, terror, and death from where we are.



We must remember—from wherever we are situated in interlocking globalized systems of racialized, sexualized, and gendered oppression and privilege—that the possibilities for oppositional solidarity and struggle, for meaningful dialogue and change, are diverse, multiple, and open. As Sara Ahmed writes in her stunning and most recent book, *Living a Feminist Life*: “To build feminist dwellings, we need to dismantle what has already been assembled; we need to ask what it is we are against, what it is we are for, knowing full well that this we is not a foundation but what we are working toward.”

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