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College Literature, Volume 45, Number 1, Winter 2018, pp. 24-31 (Article)



Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/lit.2018.0003>

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“WHAT MATTERS NOW”: READING FANON’S CALL FOR DECOLONIZATION AND HUMANIZATION IN THE CONTEMPORARY UNITED STATES

COURTNEY L. GILDERSLEEVE

In a passage from the “Conclusion” of *The Wretched of the Earth*,¹ some of Frantz Fanon’s last printed words before his death in 1961, he cautions his comrades throughout the decolonizing world against adopting any aspects of the model through which “a particular Europe” had long brutalized humanity.² Fanon identifies colonialism and capitalism, and the racism and racialized violence on which they are predicated, as systems that must be thoroughly overcome for human life to persist, making clear that the work of decolonization is not complete after formal independence. With a palpable sense of urgency, he writes:

What matters now is not a question of profitability, not a question of increased productivity, not a question of production rates. . . . It is the very basic question of not dragging man in directions which mutilate him, of not imposing on his brain tempos that rapidly obliterate and unhinge it. The notion of catching up must not be used as a pretext to brutalize man, to tear him from himself and his inner consciousness, to break him, to kill him. (Fanon 2004, 238)

Speaking from his lived knowledge of the colonial order in Martinique, Algeria, and France, Fanon advocates a categorical rejection of colonialism at all levels of society, and within the body and mind of the human being. As we see in the passage, this task crucially involves renouncing a capitalist notion of progress. Such efforts would inaugurate a radical transformation, ultimately effecting, in Fanon's words, the creation of a "new man." Fanon's work resonates strongly today because "not dragging man in directions which mutilate him" arguably remains a "very basic question." From ongoing drone strikes, to mass deportations, to military occupation, to assaults on basic social services, to various forms of terrorism, not only can one name countless instances of the breaking of human bodies and minds, and the destruction of lives, but the "mutilation of the human" seems to stand as a dominant feature of this age.³

It is not enough, however, simply to lament the current state of the world, in which the dehumanizing conditions that Fanon so fiercely contested in his work and his life persist. We know that his methodology, grounded in psychiatric practice, involves a precise naming of the ills of a society and an attempt to diagnose their origin, and, as a revolutionary, taking actions to fundamentally transform what causes harm. With regard to the still-existing colonial rule in his time, Fanon theorized what one might call the corrective role of violence in destroying colonialism. Rather than assert an absolute position toward Fanon's analysis of violence, much less speak of violence in abstract terms, I want to locate this matter within another core preoccupation of his work. Coming to Fanon with a concern for the current proliferation of extreme brutality, but wary of merely moralistic appeals to nonviolence, what I am most interested in highlighting is the capacious notion of human agency that his work develops, and of which violence is but one part.

When he states that "the dreams of the colonial subject are dreams of action, dreams of aggressive vitality," Fanon identifies that fundamental to colonialism's pathology is a reliance on inhibiting, even destroying, the mobility and agential capacity of a whole group or groups of people (2004, 15). It is such petrification—and the means of reproducing it—that must be challenged. One of the most generative aspects of Fanon's work is his advocacy of human agency—his foregrounding of the human as a being who can act in and upon the world, and in history. For one thing, this way of thinking presents an antidote against the threat of powerlessness that one might experience before the problems of our time, and arguably

against systems of oppression at large. In this spirit, and in order to move beyond a general commentary on the unjust global order, another moment in the “Conclusion” begs our attention.

In urging his comrades in the anti-colonial struggle to choose a path very different from that of Europe, Fanon provides a warning through the counter-example of the United States. As he writes: “Two centuries ago, a former European colony took into its head to catch up with Europe. It has been so successful that the United States of America has become a monster where the flaws, sickness, and inhumanity of Europe have reached frightening proportions” (2004, 237). Reading his assessment nearly sixty years later from the location of the United States, many of us will recognize this picture all too well: a country marred by social and economic inequality, systemic racism, and seemingly unable to acknowledge its colonial provenance or its continuing imperialist position in the world. While Fanon himself seemed to have little hope for the United States, given its history of slavery, and the rampant lynching and economic disenfranchisement of African Americans which he saw persist throughout his lifetime,⁴ his thought nonetheless pushes one to consider the possibility of recreating one’s society, rather than resigning to the inevitability of a dehumanizing order. In my view, it is imperative to receive Fanon’s appraisal as the first dose of a remedy; truth-telling is an initial move toward confronting, among other things, the harmful nationalist mythologies that one is often asked to consume and that have long-lasting and damaging effects on the social body.

Recognizing colonialism’s reliance on operative fictions about matters such as who has the “right” to rule, who “deserves” to have more, whose lives are of most “value,” and so on, Fanon was able to state unequivocally: “Truth is what hastens the dislocation of the colonial regime” (2004, 14). In a resonant mode of critique, there are now many people energized to transform the United States into a new country: many who are articulating an emergent national consciousness that does not accept the propagation of brutality and seeks to both face and, to the fullest extent possible, rectify the injuries of the past. One of the most sobering aspects of Fanon’s work, as one reads it from the contemporary United States, is that it actually gives one tools to name the coloniality of the country and to identify how racism is central to maintaining that order. In the space that remains, I want to thematize a few ways that Fanon’s work may

help us further address these matters. In so doing, I will highlight specific elements of his praxis that may serve as points of counsel as we face the ills of the present: a concern for the reality of the body and an understanding of the human person as a being constituted in relation to and therefore responsible to others.

Despite the formal end of segregation, the “compartmentalized world” that Fanon described as defining colonialism continues to be reproduced in countless ways throughout US society. One of the most devastating manifestations of this “compartmentalized world” is the use of physical violence and intimidation, most frequently against people of color. In recent years, the wave of murders of African American men, women, and children by police officers on public streets—including Jamar Clark (in November 2015) and Philando Castile (in July 2016) who were killed in the Twin Cities, where I live—bear painful witness to this order. Thinking structurally, we can also see how people who serve in the role of defending the state often do so through denying the humanity of their fellow citizens, increasingly with the aid of military-grade weapons. If we understand colonialism as a fundamentally dehumanizing order, we can recognize how operating in this capacity also diminishes the humanity of those who perform that role. However, there are important distinctions to be made. The violence of those who work for the state usually is seen as legitimate, whereas any kind of action, perceived as transgressive, by civilians—and often, simply the fact of existing as someone marked “other” in the society—is viewed as worthy of retributive violence and other forms of punishment. Fanon’s insight into how a colonial state often tries to rationalize such acts, and the consequent lack of justice for those victimized by them, remains poignant: “Confronted with a world configured by the colonizer, the colonized subject is always presumed guilty” (2004, 16). In other words, a principal way in which the colonial order preserves itself is through racialization.

The racism that underlies such killings also permeates recent acts of violence undertaken by individuals who do not occupy official roles in defense of the state, but who, nonetheless—often despite their own forms of economic and social disenfranchisement—uphold a colonialist mentality and seek to maintain a “compartmentalized world.” We see in the hate crimes of recent years, the deep internalization of this order: to name just two incidents within roughly the last year, the murder of Khalid Jabara, a Lebanese American man, by

his white neighbor, Vernon Majors (August 2016); and the murder of Indian-born engineer, Srinivas Kuchibhotla, by a white man he did not know, Adam Purinton (February 2017). If previously unrecognized by a considerable sector of the US population, the very recent tragedies of the neo-Nazi rally in Charlottesville, Virginia (August 2017) have brought to the fore the widespread malady of racialization in this country.

Another relevant aspect of Fanon's work is the space it provides for working through the psychological and lived dimensions of racism, and perhaps also a sense of hope of eventual liberation from racism and racialized thought at large. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon speaks of the alienation produced by a racist order, noting in particular how under such a system, "there are times when the black man becomes locked in his body" (1986, 175). While this bodily confinement is a way of inhibiting agency, it also has the capacity to mark the black person as *only* a body, or, as scholars like Sylvia Wynter and Donna Jones have articulated, a body that is seen and treated either as not human, or as lacking a distinct, individualized life.⁵ The group Black Lives Matter has been working tirelessly to redress this reality through deep social transformation, and its mobilization relies on an understanding of a subject that is arguably much more intersectional and specific than either Fanon's articulation of the human as "man," or his rather exclusive discussion of the black person in terms of manhood.

A way in which Fanon's thought may surpass some contemporary conversations about race, however, is in the understanding of racialization through the broader idea of "compartmentalizing," including within the human being: specifically, the separation between the mind and body, so fundamental to historical colonialism. We considered Fanon's assessment of how, within the racist order, the black person becomes "locked" in his or her body. His work also seems to suggest the counterpart of that problem: denying that white people have or are bodies, and also that their lives, while treated as particularly "grieveable," to use Judith Butler's term, are in fact no more valuable than those of anyone else. In other words, while the lives and capital of the white population are typically defended by the dominant society, they are often so defended with the glorification of spiritual categories. This is a mystification that contributes considerably to a racialized order. Ta-Nehisi Coates has identified this dynamic in the United States as the singled-minded effort to "preserve the Dream" (2015, 33). In the face of similar conditions

in his own time, Fanon made an impassioned claim for the reality of the body, recasting it as the grounding site of thought and activity. Articulating a desire for a restored internal unity, he declares in quite intimate terms at the end of *Black Skin, White Masks*: “O, my body, make of me always a man who questions!” (1986, 181)

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon also opposes ways of thinking that deny bodily experience and rely on a perversion of the intellect. He denounces colonialism’s practice of deploying idealist notions in order to cover up or justify brutality and deprivation. Such practices both disavow the rawness of life (as he puts it, the living-dead reality) for the colonized, and attempt to disable certain tools of resistance. However, Fanon makes clear that colonized peoples are not duped. In a memorable passage, he writes:

For a colonized people, the most essential value, because it is the most meaningful, is first and foremost the land: the land, which must provide bread, and, naturally, dignity. But this dignity has nothing to do with “human” dignity. The colonized subject has never heard of such an ideal. All he has ever seen on his land is that he can be arrested, beaten, and starved with impunity; and no sermonizer on morals, no priest has ever stepped in to bear the blows in his place or share his bread. (Fanon 2004, 9)

While he remains unflinching in his effort to name the conditions of life for the colonized, Fanon also foregrounds what he sees as one of the most lacking elements of the colonial system and the racist, capitalist system of modern life at large: the poverty of the notion of the human as an individual who is only accountable to himself or herself. Again in *Black Skin, White Masks*, he offers a profound rebuttal to that notion. Recalling a lesson from a philosophy professor of his in Martinique, who was warning students about the propagation of Anti-Semitism, Fanon arrives at the conclusion, “I [am] answerable in my body and in my heart for what [is] done to my brother” (1986, 92).

Today, while we in the United States face many challenges to such an ethic, I think there are indications of a shift toward a more relational concept and practice of the human. The protests and mass mobilizations for a range of social justice issues that have been growing across the United States provide one site of hope in this vein. Communities of color, and other historically marginalized communities, have long been at the helm of this effort, and foregrounding that work is itself part of the effort of decolonization.⁶ In my view,

what is most significant about the current mobilizations is that they, not unlike violence in Fanon's discussion of decolonization, are also self-making activities which put one's body in a space with the bodies of others. These interactions also provide opportunities to share narratives that disrupt reified national fictions. They can transform a person's consciousness of himself or herself and the world, and create a sense of being an agent in history, someone with a capacity to change the current order. While protest may not have eliminated the drive to war, genocide, and occupation, it is among those things that can contribute to dismantling the injurious "compartments" that are continuously reproduced and held as sacred by racism and capitalism. If what one wants to achieve instead is a fundamentally deracialized and anticolonial society—one that is not predicated on the mutilation of the human being or the mystification of violence—Fanon's work continues to provide a steeling clarity, and a resounding voice of both fellowship and revolutionary counsel.

NOTES

- ¹ Throughout the essay I use Richard Philcox's 2004 retranslation of the 1961 *Les Damnés de la terre*.
- ² This phrase is that of Fanon's mentor, Aimé Césaire, in *Discourse on Colonialism*, a text which heavily influences this reflection on Fanon. Speaking of the enterprising Europe at the height of colonialism, Césaire writes: "the great historical tragedy of Africa . . . was . . . to encounter that particular Europe on our path, and that Europe is responsible before the human community for the highest heap of corpses in history" (1972, 45).
- ³ See Judith Butler's 2004 work, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, which carefully illuminates this reality, and presents a theorization of the stakes of the increasingly common experience of bodily precarity.
- ⁴ See Homi K. Bhabha's "Foreword: Framing Frantz Fanon," preceding Philcox's 2004 translation of *The Wretched of the Earth* (2004, vii).
- ⁵ See Sylvia Wynter (1994), "No Humans Involved," *Forum N.H.I.: Knowledge for the Twentieth Century* 1:1. Stanford, CA; and Donna V. Jones (2010), "Invidious Life," in *The Racial Discourses of Life Philosophy: Négritude, Vitalism, and Modernity*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- ⁶ If space permitted, I would detail the work of groups like the Black Panthers, who were dedicated to a multifaceted program social transformation, and of course were careful readers of Fanon. I would also go into further depth about the range of multi-issue groups currently involved in social justice efforts.

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