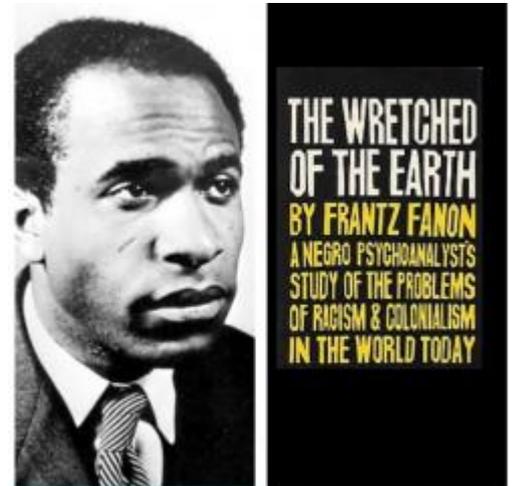


The Endurance of Race in a Postracial World: A Letter to Fanon

October 26, 2015



Dr. Fanon,

I am writing you in regards to your book *The Wretched of the Earth*. Before discussing your book in detail, I would like to thank you for writing it. Evidently it was written with passion. This letter serves as a means to recognize the continued resonance your work holds amidst our ever-changing geopolitical realities. Moreover your work, particularly its emphases on structures of power as well as experiential learning has had a direct impact on me. Increasing my understanding of my position in this world, *The Wretched of the Earth* has influenced my decision to relocate to South Africa as a volunteer with the Rural Women's Movement I anticipate the perspective gained from this experience will be incalculable.

To begin I would like to offer a modest summary of your work, followed by a brief critique of your discourse vis-à-vis the *Lumpenproletariat*, and contemporary color-blindness or the post-racial paradigm about which your work has proven prescient. I would also like to address the reflexive nature of your work, the romantic tendencies of *The Wretched of the Earth*, while placing you in dialogue with figures both present and past such as Arendt, Gelderloos and Wright.

The Wretched of the Earth is sweeping in its analysis of both the un/making of the colonial condition, claiming that a system created by violence can only be destroyed through violence. However, you certainly lay out the shortfalls of violence insofar as its destructive impact on those responsible for rebirthing the nation as well as the need to maintain discipline; unfettered or completely spontaneous violence is doomed to lead to a short-lived liberation struggle. Key to this is the necessity for the intellectual to provide a political education to the masses, himself undergoing revitalization during the experience. Perhaps most poignantly, you note the necessity to continue the struggle post-liberation, as white supremacy may take a new shape in an elite-led postcolonial order.

I find the text's discourse on the *Lumpenproletariat* or unemployed urbanites problematic insofar as your claim of this group's likelihood to become turncoats in the liberation struggle. If they are some of the most alienated or dehumanized of the colonized, and if violence is as cleansing as you claim, then would they not be some of the first and most eager to heed the liberation's call to arms? Would the liberation not provide the most relief to these individuals, as they would experience the greatest

reinvigoration of self?

One of my favorite passages from your book reads, "...for the colonized subject, objectivity is always directed against him." As I read this, I could not help but think of how relevant that sentiment is today - one could substitute the colonized for any marginalized group. I realized that your statement forms the basis for oppositional arguments to so-called post-racial or color-blind policies, policies that privilege and view formal equality as both fair and *the* solution to racism. Essentially, postracialism posits racism simply as a legal constraint thus when it is made formally illegal, such as with the end of legal segregation in America, no further action is needed; the *problem* disappears. Postracialism serves to problematize injustices, leading to a line of thought that ignores structural imperatives; imagining that once racist law is declared illegitimate politically, culturally or legally, racism will end. Similarly, once colonial powers withdraw, foreign exploitation will end.

Ideologies of color-blindness are inherently flawed as they fail to address various historical inequalities and privileges. Perhaps the greatest contemporary manifestation of color-blindness or postracialism and its inherent maniacal emphasis on the present is the rise of the model-minority phenomena; used to frame initiatives such as affirmative action not as historical correctives, but rather as special treatment at the expense of members of more meritorious communities. The model-minority argument posits a zero sum situation wherein groups such as South and East Asian communities succeed due to thrift and hard work; while African-Americans stagnate due to laziness, single parent homes and so on, thus policies that provide resources to African-American communities deprive more deserving Asian-American communities. Essentially a strong work ethic and fiscal responsibility are highlighted as the exclusive reasons for success while ignoring historical circumstances that inform the context in which communities operate. Author Vijay Prashad notes that these respective narratives or categorizations are superimposed onto a global context such as economic powerhouse East Asia and debt-ridden Africa.

Color-blind positions assume that all individuals are beginning with the same resources, with the same opportunities. This is of course not true as Mae Ngai notes that 48% of South Asian community in the United States belongs to the professional or business class. This is a result not of a stronger work ethic or thrift but rather American immigration policies that favored skilled immigrants and their relatives. Perhaps this social amnesia evinced by the viewing of formal equality as a fresh start or an erasure of history is a product of capitalism's ability to renew itself and reform our social relations. In some respects this is a domestic, metropolitan parallel to your concerns over the role of former African liberation leaders turned post-colonial politicians and their participation in the neo-colonial order. Instead of erasing the past to further exploitation, the past is hailed to justify contemporary conditions. In both situations historical narratives are manipulated or erased to foster continued inequalities.

Your insight into the intellectuals on the fringes of (and later expelled from) the nationalist parties was particularly important. These intellectuals gain much by living amongst and interacting with the peasantry; the nation's repository of spontaneity, sacrifice and vitality. Throughout this process the intellectual undergoes a psychological emancipation or a vitalization of consciousness in a Hegelian sense. It is through these interactions brought on by common cause of national liberation that the colonized intellectual frees him or herself intellectually, shedding the chains of colonial thought such as individualism.[i] One can easily see how you had grown intellectually from a young man in Martinique to embody these changes as a freedom fighter in Algeria, most notably by your repeated call "...that the last become the first." This specific, empathic sentiment is beautiful in its timeless social (and could be expanded to ecological) nature. Moreover, this ethic's continued demand to raise those at the bottom is dynamic and adaptive insofar as a counter to the destructive ability of capitalism to regenerate itself and reform our social relations; as new faces and spaces are designated as disposable by the logic of capital, so too does this tenet define a new front for

liberation and uplift.

As you note, these intellectuals are necessary to train, politically educate, and discipline the peasantry in order to prevent “total brutality” from laying ruins to any hope for a successful liberation struggle and also to provide the intellectual framework needed for a true liberation in the postcolonial age. While I admire the concept of the mutually beneficial elite-peasantry exchange, this analysis suffers from the absence of your own position in this affair; there is no guise of objectivity insofar as you are one of the progressive self-conscious elites that you describe and highlight the importance of. The argument would have been stronger had you placed yourself into it, or at least formally acknowledged your position. You essentially spoke to the importance of yourself and your colleagues; you are the intellectual who after “bunker[ing] down with the people...discover[ed] the falsity” of much of Western discourse. Your mind was emancipated from this experience as you were forced to reexamine and reconsider Western culture and your relationship to it. Due to this challenging of hegemonic intellectualism, your work gained credibility with readers sharing your space and epoch but also with readers elsewhere and beyond your time.

However, your work’s lack of personal reflexivity is all the more striking as through its rigorous analysis of class, race and coloniality, your work has informed an intellectual breakthrough in terms of positionality. Today it is hard to find both a scholar or even lay person who does not try to locate themselves in their writing; paradoxically you neglect to do so in your work. This is perhaps all the more notable as you emphasize the power and responsibility wielded by intellectuals; by writing this book, implicitly you recognize yourself as one.

Just a quick note, I do think it worthwhile to put your ideas about individuals such as yourself or conscious intellectuals into a historical context. It is very easy to draw parallels to the *vanguard* expounded by Lenin or even the notion of the *Talented Tenth* put forward by Du Bois, especially given that all of you were members of the elite yourself. Although, one key contrast between yourself and Lenin with early Du Bois is that rather than challenging capitalism, Du Bois pushed for inclusion within the capitalist framework. Working within the capitalist structure arose from early Du Bois partially because he was, uniquely, working as a racialized colonial citizen (paradoxical, right?) in a *metropolitan* context; this fundamentally alters one’s understanding of the possible and thus one’s aims. Perhaps this is similar to your less (albeit still very) radical work *Black Skin, White Masks* written while you were still in France.

Dr. Fanon, you are fundamentally a romantic. In your call for a rethinking of the Third World and well, frankly *everything*, you propagate a paradigm shift towards “negation and transformation” such as exists in the Marxist tradition. You are echoing calls not to settle, but rather to struggle until a new dispensation is constructed. This is perhaps best articulated in your belief that for colonized peoples liberation is achievable through violence, as that is how their condition was established; systems and peoples made through violence must be remade through violence. However, this is not on an individual level, as you note the “militant...fully realized the price he had had to pay in his person for national independence.” Effectively, this reclamation of their futures and their world, by the people Alain Badiou frames as the “*inexistent*” or those *in* but not *of* the global order, is achieved at great cost.

Your book’s chapter “Colonial Wars and Mental Disorders” effectively demonstrates the personal ruin and sacrifice of a generation due to the liberation struggle. This should be taken to mean that the brutality experienced by individual martyrdom exists as part of a project to *recreate* humanity by re-instilling collective dignity. Herein lies your conception of history, as something progressively *made* by and *through* struggle.

“Colonial Wars and Mental Disorders” also serves to refute many critiques against your work

including the claim by Hannah Arendt that your work is riddled with “rhetorical excesses,” such as “hunger with dignity is preferable to bread eaten in slavery.” Firstly, Arendt is missing the aim of your text: *Wretched of the Earth* acts as a commentary or analysis on both colonialism and the condition of coloniality. While rhetorical or colorful writing is key, Arendt responds to your work as if it is strictly a manifesto. More importantly, had she read or given more weight to your final chapter she would have understood this quote better – individual sacrifice in the act of revolution is better than mild comfort in collective bondage.

Arendt’s observation that non-pacifism (as meaning the inclusion, or at least lack of rejection of violent tactics), progressed from philosophy and rhetoric to practice with the arrival of Black Power on American college campuses perhaps shows two things. Firstly, an affirmation that simple (exclusive) compromise fails to shake exploitive systems such as shown in your discussion of the attempts by the national bourgeoisie to maintain their positions. Secondly, that how we remember (non)violence is often mired in racism. For Arendt, many of the “Negro demands [were]... silly and outrageous,” part of efforts to “lower academic standards” and at times acceded due to white guilt.[ii] Perhaps concessions were made (albeit incomplete) as Black Power represented an actual threat to white supremacy.

Peter Gelderloos notes that the ethic of nonviolence often serves to sanitize historical narratives of struggle, pointing to the coopting of Dr. Martin Luther King’s memory and the consistent neglect of his support for the anti-imperial Vietnamese struggle as well as the anti-capitalist sentiments he espoused or the censorship of the March on Washington. By selecting pacified, “feel-good” segments from King, white anti-racists are able to stake their place in activist society without having to reconcile their own privilege. Arguably, Arendt does this in her presentation of Civil Rights era successes being attributed to nonviolent politics.

I would like to note one more issue with nonviolence, which you initially highlighted and Gelderloos has brought into contemporary terms. Much as you point out that the colonialist bourgeoisie propagation of nonviolence is based on their established comfort with colonialism and not with the masses, contemporary proponents of nonviolence rely on the violence of the state for protection. This reliance is an implicit acceptance of state violence thereby undermining the pacifist ethic, while leaving themselves helpless to state endorsed or accepted violence such as at the 1979 Greensboro Massacre. Perhaps what is most important about nonviolence *then and now*, is that it both relies on and derives from, the power of the (colonial) state and thus the powerlessness of the marginalized.

Gelderloos also notes that in *Wretched of the Earth’s* final chapter *Colonial Wars and Mental Disorders*, the costs of violent revolution are made clear; however he asks if pacifists are aware of the personal costs of their tactics. Noting that nonpacifist groups are often more effective because the cost of intimidating them is high, nonviolent activists make for easy prey for authorities. How do experiences with the security apparatuses of the state affect those who adhere to nonviolence?

One of my favorite arguments you make is that, “Europe is literally the creation of the Third World.” This has a few important implications: firstly as you note it makes altering the international order a priority; reparations and the like is not simply charity but rather a historical corrective (in many respects this argument is similar to the discussion on model-minorities but internationalized). Vitaly, you note this requires a change in consciousness both for the colonizers and the colonized.

Intellectually, the realization of Europe’s reliance both materially and conceptually on the rest of the world has profound consequences. Evidently, we must reexamine and challenge existing historical, sociological and anthropological (among other) narratives to deconstruct the inherent binaries present. Moreover we need to retrieve lost stories, memories and histories previously discarded in order to further our collective understanding of humanity. Essentially, we need to look into what we

previously have emphasized and why. For instance, The Universal Declaration for Human Rights is a direct product of the horrors of World War Two. Césaire notes that Nazism was not new *to* Europe, it had just not been practiced *in* Europe; Nazism was colonialism returning home. You correctly add "...Nazism transformed the whole of Europe into a genuine colony." If the horrors of colonialism in Europe (yet ignored elsewhere) were strong enough to generate an entirely new field (Human Rights), is this discipline inherently Eurocentric at best, neocolonial or racist at worst? Moreover, what are the political implications of recovering colonial histories from the colonized? Lastly, if we view Nazism as an extension of colonialism making it a global phenomenon, what are the implications for global capitalism and other structures that are seemingly transcendent in nature?

Dr. Fanon, I think in many ways your analysis and passion matured between *Black Skin, White Masks* and *Wretched of the Earth*, in a somewhat similar way to the personal trajectory of the protagonist in Richard Wright's autobiographical text *Black Boy*. In your earlier work, your focus is on the colonial condition, evinced by analyses such as that of Europeanized black man who cannot escape his race. In some respects this mirrors Wright's frustration at having "...to feel that there were feelings denied me, that the very breath of life itself was beyond my reach." Just as Jean Veneuse is rejected by both white and black society, Wright speaks of the "stunted way of life" that is "mapped out" by white supremacy for black males and the internalization of these norms by his black contemporaries, creating a double alienation of sorts. Together these works serve to articulate the both the emotive and sociological structures of racism in their respective eras and geographies.

Conversely, your final work, written in the context of the Algerian War for Independence, emerges as a commentary threaded with fiery confidence. For instance, though you expect the complicity of the local elite in the neocolonial order, you do not fear this as you have greater faith in the masses. The change in your passion and your increased confidence is perhaps due to your change in location to Algeria but also the international geopolitical realities of the time, wherein the global maturation of capitalism had created a historical moment insofar as the colonized became "acutely aware of everything he does not possess" serving as the stimulus for the colonized individual to shift from an object acted upon to an agent.

As to your claim that "[t]he colonized, underdeveloped man is today a political creature in the most global sense of the term," this is affirmed by Wright's Hegelian informed coming-of-age realization that "the whites... [are] as miserable as their black victims." A shared global passion for and belief in revolution is also evinced in *Black Boy's* final phrase "I would hurl words into this darkness and wait for an echo, and if an echo sounded, no matter how faintly, I would send other words to tell, to march, to fight, to create a sense of the hunger for life that gnaws in us all, to keep alive in our hearts a sense of the inexpressibly human." This metaphysical humanity conveyed is expressed in *On Violence*, is worth the *Colonial Disorders*, and as such is justified by *any means necessary*.

In Richard Wright's most famous work, *Native Son*, following the discovery of the bones of the murdered Mary Dalton, the protagonist, Bigger Thomas, assuming that white society will accuse him of raping the victim, claims a greater predation by white supremacy against him. He describes himself as "...a long, taut piece of rubber which a thousand hands had stretched to the snapping point, and when he [Bigger] snapped it was rape." The all-consuming pressure described by Bigger is perhaps mirrored in your description of the colonial project's attempt to alienate the colonized from themselves in order to build a dependency relationship - lest the colonized revert to their natural barbarism. This attempt to devise self-hatred and a loss of a sense of self constitutes the greatest violation of one's dignity as recognized in your work.

Dr. Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* has become a seminal text in my personal library. Not only has it altered my perception of present as well as historical events, but more so my understanding of human nature. For instance, as I read Primo Levi describe the amorality of the conniving Jewish

“Prominents” or turncoats in Auschwitz, your conception of the collaboration and the loss of self experienced by the colonized intellectual came to the fore. This may be counterpoised with the intellectual who finds him/herself through exposure to the ostensible *other*, which has informed my decision to relocate to KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Though inequities of power persist, the flow of knowledge and perspective remains multidirectional potentially serving as liberating and revolutionary forces for social justice; an unalterable truth both in your time and ours.

Richard Raber

[i] Please note your call for gender equality: Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 142.

[ii] These comments reflect a flaw previously alluded to in liberalism; that as independent agents, all have the same opportunities. Rather than an effort to decrease academic standards, affirmative action was designed to provide opportunities for success for capable individuals belonging to previously excluded groups. Please see Arendt, *On Violence*, 18-19.