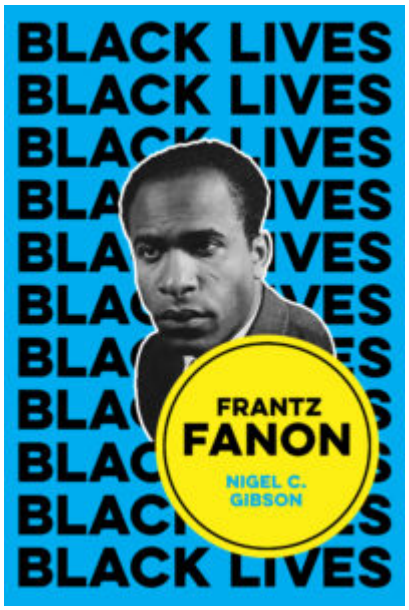
Nigel Gibson’s Preface to Frantz Fanon: Combat Breathing

written by Nigel Gibson | August 12, 2024



What would Fanon say?

The original impetus behind writing *Frantz Fanon: Combat Breathing* was the Black Lives Matter movement that exploded across the world after the 2020 police murder of George Floyd. Although the book was already at the publisher when the horrific Hamas attacks on Israeli citizens (as well as on military occupation facilities) took place, followed by Israel’s immediate catastrophic response (a collective punishment resulting in a genocide of Palestinians in Gaza), I felt compelled to add a short preface to this book as another global movement is emerging in support of Palestinian national self-determination.

There is a remarkable staying power and urgency to Fanon’s thought. Just short of one hundred years after his birth, he always seems to have something to say that connects with our contemporary moment. In the critique of orientalism expressed in one of his first articles, “The ‘North African Syndrome,’” he lays out the thesis that when North Africans (i.e., Arabs) come “on the scene,” they enter “into a pre-existing framework.” This pre-existing orientalist framework extending beyond North Africa is seen every day in the commentaries about the Arab’s constitutional inferiority, violence, fanaticism and lies. This ideology reemerged unmistakably after October 7, 2023 when Hamas fighters stormed into villages in southern Israel and killed civilians, young and old, many of whom were opposed to Netanyahu and the settlers. The prevailing orientalist discourse emanated not only from the Israeli state, but also became the dominant narrative across the Western media: Hamas came to represent the generic Arab. Of course, the violence and daily brutality required to police Israel’s Manichean world of colonizer and colonized was normalized and remained so even after October 7th as the world began to watch on a genocide.

Israel’s European “brightly lit” cities with their vibrant night life on the one-hand and the high-tech border fences and military guards of the occupied territories on the other, “a world without spaciousness”[1] harkens back to the Manichean geography of the colonial world described by Fanon. It is a juridical world of compartments, divided by the police and the military. However, after

October 7, the survival of Gaza—an "open-air prison"—itself came into doubt as daily atrocities and massacres were unleashed against Palestinian civilians there who have nowhere to escape to. This obliteration is justified in the indisputable moral name of "never again."

The reference to the Holocaust takes us back to Fanon's first book, *Black Skin, White Masks,* in which in connecting anti-Semitism with negrophobia he is reminded of his philosophy teacher from the Antilles saying, "'When you hear someone insulting the Jews, pay attention; he is talking about you.' And I believed at the time he was universally right, meaning that I was responsible in my body and soul for the fate reserved for my brother." It was around that time that Fanon left Martinique to join the Free French Army, which was committed to the anti-Nazi fight. "Since then," he added, "I have understood that what he meant quite simply was that the anti-Semite is inevitably a negrophobe."[2] Back in Martinique in late 1945, Fanon heard a speech from Aimé Césaire's political campaign, "When I switch on my radio and hear that Black men are being lynched in America, I say that they have lied to us: Hitler isn't dead. When I switch on my radio and hear that Jews are being insulted, persecuted, and massacred, I say that they have lied to us: Hitler isn't dead" (Fanon, 2008: 70). Just a few years later, Césaire would argue that Nazism is the product of a "boomerang effect" of European colonialism, where the exclusive savagery, violence and brutality—the racism—toward non-European people rebounds with the largest holocaust in history, the systematic elimination of six million Jews. "At the end of formal humanism," Césaire adds, "there is Hitler,"[3] making it clear that Hitler was not dead but would continue to appear in new forms.

After October 7th, the mention of the Holocaust in Israel became weaponized as a justification for the removal (and, indeed, the wished-for annihilation) of Palestinians. It is true that the idea of self-determination for Jews after the Holocaust contained contradictory tendencies, including liberal and socialist. More importantly, there is also a direct line of Zionism in power—from the Fascist-terrorist Irgun, through Manachem Begin to Benjamin Netanyahu—that from its inception cared more about consolidating land and power than adhering to the principle of the self-determination of nations that declares no nation can be free if it oppresses another nation.

In *Les damnés de la terre (The Wretched of the Earth)*, Fanon describes the colonial world as Manichean (going back to the Persian religion of Mani, which viewed the creators of the world, God and the Devil, as still fighting it out). From the colonizer's standpoint, the colonized do not lack values but are simply evil. Thus, the police and army play the role of containing the colonized and keeping them in place (and as Fanon critically points out, they play the same role in the post-independence neocolonial national regime).

To return to Fanon's conception of colonial Manicheanism, its relevance now is borne out by the use of the term apartheid to describe conditions of life for Palestinians. Introduced after World War II in South Africa with genuinely fascist connections, apartheid was about "population control" (i.e., labor control) of South Africa's Africans, including pass laws and the forced removal of people. The creation of Homelands or "Bantustans" for 87% of the population on 13% of the land was an attempt by late settler colonialism to develop a system of indirect rule based on apartheid state sanctioned and supported "tribal" rule outside of "White South Africa." In apartheid Israel, the "Bantustans" of Gaza and the West Bank are not primarily about labor control—though the pass laws work similarly—but about keeping the Palestinian population fixed in their exiled place, as in Gaza where this surplus population is essentially locked down. Fanon's writings, focused as they are on the lived experience of being denied freedom of movement, hemmed into "this narrow world, strewn with prohibitions" (1968: 37), have an immediate resonance. In *Les Damnés de la terre*, for example, he writes of a million Algerian hostages behind barbed wire and 300,000 refugees on the Moroccan and Tunisian frontiers forced there by the French. The unheard of levels of brutality, terror, and vengeance unleashed on the populace, creates a continuous "apocalyptic atmosphere" that he concludes is "the sole message [of] French democracy."[4] In extreme poverty and precarious living

conditions, Fanon continues, the colonized live in permanent insecurity; in flight from endless aerial bombardments, families are broken up and there is hardly anyone who does not suffer from mental disorders. This "shameless colonialism," Fanon continues, is only matched by apartheid South Africa (1965: 26). Palestinians live under similar conditions and are also expected to express an emotional and affective control of the self that is situationally impossible. As Hamas' bloody murders of Israeli civilians on October 7th dominated the news, it was quickly forgotten that those breaching the fences and breaking into "forbidden quarters" (1968: 40) were experiencing a physical moment of liberation. As a psychiatrist and political theorist, Fanon engaged these contradictory and dehumanized realities. While recognizing the role that Hamas' October 7th attacks have played in putting the Palestinian question back on a global stage, Fanon would be critical of Hamas' ideology and its authoritarianism. Concerned about the difficult question of how to rebuild a resistance that is democratic, his warning in 1959 could very much be directed at Hamas:

> Because we want a democratic and a renovated Algeria, because we believe one cannot rise and liberate oneself in one area and sink in another, we condemn, with pain in our hearts, those brothers who have flung themselves into revolutionary action with the almost physiological brutality that centuries of oppression give rise to and feed (1965: 25).

In Fanon's schematic mapping of anticolonial activity, he argues that resistance is determined by the colonizer. Fanon appreciated the power of this militant and Manichean anticolonial inversion, proclaiming that the colonized reply "to the living lie of the colonial situation by an equal falsehood" adding that in this colonist context "there is no truthful behavior: and the good is quite simply that which is evil for 'them'" (1968: 50). While recognizing the logic of this inversion of colonial Manicheanism, Fanon also considered it incredibly problematic, warning that, along with the "brutality of thought and a mistrust of subtlety which are typical of revolutions … there exists another kind of brutality which … is typically antirevolutionary, hazardous and anarchist." If it Is not "immediately combatted … this unmixed and total brutality … invariably leads to the defeat of the movement" (1968: 147). Political education, Fanon argues, is necessary to introduce "shades of meaning" and in doing so challenges the tendency among leaders to underestimate the people's reasoning capabilities. This might sound almost idealistic, but it is essential to the cognitive break that Fanon argues can be brought about by a revolutionary moment. This is not the old but a new politics, he argues, where "leaders and organizers living inside of history … take the lead with their brains and their muscles in the fight for freedom. These politics are national, revolutionary and social" (1968: 147).

Warning of the degeneration of nationalism into chauvinism and ethno-nationalism, Fanon argues in *Les damnés de la terre* that national consciousness is not nationalism, quickly adding that national consciousness also has to open up during the struggle for freedom: "If it is not enriched and deepened by a very rapid transformation into a consciousness of social and political needs, in other words into humanism, it leads to a dead-end" (1968: 204). We continue to see these dead-ends reappear in brutal and nihilistic ways, reminding us that developing this radical humanism mediated through political and social (human) action and thought requires both intention and clarity. This radical humanism calls for not only political organization, but also crucially an image of the future society based on human foundations that must be worked out and discussed with the people (reflecting their social needs) in the struggle for liberation.

For Fanon, to perceive the reason in revolt—which will be discussed throughout this book—requires the development of new ways of thinking and new ways of understanding that seem implausible. The attitudes to the bombing of Al Ahli Arab Hospital in Gaza City in mid-October 2023 expressed the Manichean situation and thinking that Fanon describes. While Israel and the US immediately insisted that it could not have been an Israeli bomb, across the region, mass demonstrations and expressions of outrage (including against their own Arab leaders) rejected that assessment. As

Fanon puts it, “the ‘truth’ of the oppressor” becomes “an absolute lie,” and is countered by “another, an acted truth” (1965: 76). Despite whatever proof was produced the masses had already made up their minds, connecting the violent destructive act directly to *their* experiences: the Palestinian experience of Israeli’s military might, as well as the fear of a genocide. They knew that this would happen, and that thousands upon thousands of Palestinian children would be killed by Israeli airstrikes.

To reiterate, the colonizer / colonized relationship is a Manichean one. The arming of the ultra-right wing Religious Zionists to steal Palestinian land and the silencing of opposition to the war inside Israel is a logical expression of the Manichean thinking. While there is some opposition among Israelis to the settlers, there is, at the same time, a widespread sense of existential dread of Arabs. Among these groups, it would not be surprising to hear them repeat what Fanon heard the Algerian colonists say, “Let’s each one of us take ten of them and bump them off and you ‘ll see the problem solved in no time” (1965: 56).

But colonialism is not only a simple occupation of a territory. It is also, argues Fanon, the occupation of body and mind where, “in its initial phase, the action … of the occupier … determine the resistance around which a people’s will to survive becomes organized” (1965: 47). After all the years since Fanon wrote these words, we keep returning to this initial phase, mediated by violence. As Gideon Levy put it in the liberal Israeli daily newspaper *Haaretz* immediately after the Hamas attacks: “They are already talking about wiping out entire neighborhoods in Gaza, about occupying the Strip and punishing Gaza ‘as it has never been punished before.’” Implicitly critical of the idea of Israel founding as a liberal democracy, he adds “Israel hasn’t stopped punishing Gaza since 1948, not for a moment … Gaza, most of whose residents are refugees created by Israel. Gaza, which has never known a single day of freedom.”

Fanon’s understanding of the pathology of colonialism is described in both *L’an V de la revolution algérienne* (*A Dying Colonialism*) and in *Les damnés de la terre*. At the same time, he recognizes the emergence of the new “reality of the nation” out of the process of decolonization. In *L’an V de la revolution algérienne*, he argues that a radical change in consciousness is taking place as a new reality of the nation is being born, and critically warns of the pathological excesses of violence. But Fanon’s relevance has to be understood in a context where no such new reality of the nation is emergent. Manicheanism reigns, reflecting and underlining Fanon’s discussion of violence as a ceaseless pathological dystopian reality of permanent social dysfunction manifested so vividly in Hamas’ politics of pathological violence. It is a politics which is held up to the world ostensibly as distinct from the religion-driven violence of ultra-orthodox Jewish settlers in the West Bank, the state-sponsored persecution of occupied Palestine, and the Arab state abandonment of the principle of Palestinian national self-determination. The massacre of Israeli civilians on October 7, 2023, a pathological act of anti-Jewish violence, exposed the multiple layers and facets of Palestinian oppression. And it is this dialectic which has elicited global responses of support for Palestinian national self-determination, as well as, not surprisingly, global anti-Semitic and Islamophobic rhetorical and actual violence. The images of Gaza as a graveyard of children have been seen around the world, motivating a global response, especially among youth, offering a challenge to both Israelis and Palestinians, as well as new possibilities. As Fanon puts it in the conclusion to *Black Skin, White Masks,* “to move away from the inhuman voices of their respective ancestors so that a genuine communication can be born … to touch the other, feel the other, discover each other” (2008: 206).

As you read this book, you will see how Fanon’s analysis and vision remain vital and speak powerfully to our situation. You will also read of Fanon’s consistent concern about human liberation and the crucial need for disalienation. In his 1960 speech “Why We Use Violence,” he responds to the colonist in Algeria who says that Algeria belongs to them, laying out his radical humanist

challenges:

We do not say … "You are a stranger, go away." We do not say … "We will take over the leadership of the country and make you pay for your crimes and those of your ancestors." We do not tell him that "to the past hatred of the Black we will oppose the present and future hatred of the White" … We say … "We are Algerians, banish all racism from our land, all forms of oppression and let us work for the flourishing and enrichment of humanity." We agree, Algeria belongs to all of us, let us build it on democratic bases and together build an Algeria that is commensurate with our ambition and our love.[5]

This is the "important theoretical problem" Fanon discusses at the end of *Les damnés de la terre*, which includes an existential self-critique, explaining that it is "necessary at all times and in all places to make explicit, to de-mystify, and to hunt down the insult to humankind that exists in oneself" (see 1968: 304). The theoretical problem concerns how to create a new society that supports and nurtures a liberating consciousness. It is a problem that Fanon addresses throughout his psychiatric and political work. Understanding that "people are imperceptibly transformed by revolutionary processes in perpetual renewal" he adds that "there must be no waiting until the nation has produced new people." Consciousness, Fanon insists, "must be helped" by giving people back their dignity and what he calls "opening the mind to human things" (1968: 304, 205). Indeed, we should not forget that the beginning of the end of apartheid in South Africa—the Soweto uprising of 1976—was opened up by a philosophy of liberation called Black Consciousness, for which Fanon was an essential theorist.[6] Revolutionary theory (and this is what makes *Les damnés de la terre* a "handbook of revolution"), must contribute to total and complete human liberation.

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Endnotes

[1] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (translated by Constance Farrington) Grove Press, 1968, p. 39. Further quotations from this book are included in the text.

[2] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (translated by Richard Philcox) Grove Press, 2008, p. 100. Further quotations from this book are included in the text.

[3] Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* Monthly Review, 2000, p. 37

[4] Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism,* Monthly Review, 1965, p. 26. Further quotations from this book are included in the text.

[5] Frantz Fanon, "Why we use violence," in *Frantz Fanon, Alienation and Freedom* edited by Jean Khalfa and Robert J.C. Young, London: Bloomsbury, 2018, p. 657.

[6] See Nigel C. Gibson, *Fanonian Practices in South Africa: From Steve Biko to Abahlali baseMjondolo*, Scottsville South Africa: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press and New York: Palgrave MacMillan.