



Through the Hellish Zone of Nonbeing **Thinking through Fanon, Disaster, and the** **Damned of the Earth**

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Abstract: This article offers a reading of Fanon's mythopoetic imagery of hell and damnation to illuminate the question of violence in the context of disastrous subjectivity.

Fanon Studies has gone through a considerable set of changes since the days of prescient scholarship by Renate Zahar and critics such as Hannah Arendt and Jack Woddis in the wake of his death and the set of 1960s and 1970s radicals who looked to him as a prophet of "the revolution."

In those days, where the thought of a black intellectual who did not stand as an apostle of nonviolence was enough to inaugurate the firing of professors who wrote on him and the expansion of secret service files on those who cited him, one could never imagine a future conference on university campuses as those held at Purdue University in 1995 and New York University in 1996, and the ones in 2007 at Lewis University and the University of Massachusetts Boston, in addition to a meeting on his work in the fall of 2007 organized in

Paris by UNESCO. Particularly striking at the University of Massachusetts meeting is that Winston Langley, the Associate Provost for Academic Affairs and Professor of Political Science and International Relations at that university, presented a talk on "Fanon: Violence and the Search of Human Dignity."

Fanon's thought has gone through several stages from that of ideological critique to postcolonial anxiety to engagement with his *thought*. In my work, I have argued that a great black thinker should be engaged as one would any other great thinker.¹ One could not imagine, for instance, writing a book on Kant, Hegel, Marx, or Sartre that was concerned solely with the biography of those thinkers without addressing their thought. If the intellectual is worthy, his or her ideas should offer much fruit for the de-

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velopment of our own intellectual work. Fanon's being also a *black* thinker unfortunately stimulated the usual antipathies to what he had to say.

The problem is that critics of black thinkers often place them under the yoke of experiential phenomena. This was at first done for noble reasons of combating the modern notion of black people as beings without an inner life, without an "inside," without consciousness. The focus on experience afforded the assertion of an inner being, of an agent, with a point of view. But this at first important admission was eventually subverted into a dialectical reassertion of subordination. "Black" became so heavily associated with "experience" that the two fell into a symbiosis. In the academic realm, the study of black folk is often followed, after ellipsis, of their experience: "...the black experience." The danger, however, is the subjectivism of experience itself. Much of the critical force of black plight loses its impact when entrapped in the language of experience that slides into affect and eventually oversensitivity. How often are patterns of antiblack racism characterized as "feelings" of discrimination? What happens to the legitimacy of protest when injustice is presented as "perceived," "believed," or "felt"?

An insidious dimension of experience-reductionism is the structural posing of thought as an inauthentic imposition on experiential beings. Experience by itself is insufficient for the understanding of reality. Think of the experience of trying to figure out our experiences. The meaning of experience requires theoretical and interpretive

resources. The collapse of color into experience entails a reliance on other theoretically informed narratives to bring meaning to that experience. The result is a form of epistemological dependency. At a structural level in the academy, this took the form of the black world of experience, and the non-black, often white world of theory and reason brought to that experience. The connection between that way of thinking and the tendency to treat a black intellectual such as Fanon solely in terms of his biography comes to the fore.

Fanon's writings have affected the lives of so many people. He argued in *Black Skin, White Masks* that he was trying to make people *actional*.² I have interpreted this as a call to transform people from self-implosion, of being without impact on the social world to the point of expressing their humanity solely through self-inscription, through adverbially acting upon themselves to the point of becoming, as Foucault would put it, bodies imprisoned by their soul. It is difficult to read Fanon and stay still. I have heard many stories over the years. A relative during difficult times sought refuge in my home. He stayed on the futon in my office. There, he came upon Fanon's books. A short time later, he greeted me with his bags packed.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"I've read Fanon," he replied. "I do not know where. I only know it's time to go." The postscript is one of much success.

An unruly teenager in a high school in Baltimore was suspended for another case of bad behavior. Frustrated, his social studies teacher threw a book at him as he left for his mini-vacation at home in the projects. The book, *The Wretched of the Earth*, came to the youth's attention on the second day of his pedagogical exile.³ Reading the first few pages on the settler's home versus the na-

¹ See, e.g., Lewis R. Gordon, *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man: An Essay on Philosophy and the Human Sciences* (New York: Routledge, 1995) and *Existential Africana: Understanding African Existential Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2000). For discussion of the various stages of Fanon Studies, see the introduction to *Fanon: A Critical Reader*, edited by Lewis R. Gordon, T. Deane Sharpley-Whiting and Renée T. White (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1996).

² Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove, 1967).

tives', he looked around and thought about the projects in which he lived and the affluent white neighborhoods nearby. He decided to read more. He subsequently returned to school, enrolled in a community college, went on to achieving his undergraduate degree at a historic black college, and then his PhD and began teaching at the local college in the community where he grew up. A colleague mentioned reading Fanon in high school in Chile and of how his thought helped her through times of difficult political upheavals. Fanon came into my life through one of my maternal uncles, a Rastafarian who purchased nearly any book he could find with the words "black" and "revolution" in them. He oddly never read these books. But they were there, on his bookshelves, and I read them although it took a long while for me to understand them. Fanon's prose was so poetic that it seemed magical. Like the blues, his words offered a tragic understanding of the maturation process of life.

My subsequent work as a scholar focuses on, among other things, conditions of appearance. I look into the lived-reality of people hidden in plain sight—people who are submerged and, as a consequence, supposedly "do not exist." It has always struck me as odd that people could be invisible while standing right before us. It was, as Fanon himself experienced, an even stranger realization to experience such invisibility. Fanon understood the role and impact of colonial forces on appearance in the modern world—that appearing raised the question of what one appears *as*. Like the Akanian response to the Cartesian *Cogito ergo sum*, where "I think, therefore I am" raises the question, "Am what?" Fanon reminds us that we always appear *as* something. Here we find the existential dimension of his thought. The etymology of

the word "existence" points to standing out—*ex sistere*—to emerge. Appearance is a form emergence.

I will not here offer my interpretation on the correct way to read Fanon. The social theory forum that occasion this collection of articles present a variety of readings of his work. Instead, I should like simply to offer observation on a particular theme in his work. This theme relates to my own work in several ways. Africana philosophy, I have argued over the years, raises questions of philosophical anthropology, social transformation and freedom, and metacritical reflection on reason.⁴ Fanon's thought pertains to all three. Although not all people of African descent were enslaved in the modern world, the impact of modern slavery, its correlative racist rationalization, and global colonization by European nations led to the discourse of questioned legitimacy of such people as members of the human community.

The initial response of demonstrating the humanity of African Diasporic peoples betrayed some of the problems of reductive experience: To prove that black people were as human as white people presupposed white people as the human standard. Given the injustice unleashed against people of color in the modern world, a critical response would be that such a standard would be a very low one. An added problem, as Fanon demonstrates in his discussion of language in *Black Skin, White Masks*, is that the posing of the white as the standard for a dialectic of recognition renders the plight for black humanity a stillborn one with only one solution for the black—become white. The humanity of black folk, then, requires meditation on what it means to be human. Issues of social transformation and liberation link philosophical anthropology to the question of freedom;

³ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington, preface by Jean-Paul Sartre (New York: Grove, 1963).

⁴ For elaboration, see Lewis R. Gordon, *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming 2008).

what kind of subject, in other words, is it to which or to whom the question of freedom is relevant? An important distinction arises here between liberty and freedom. The former is purely negative (the absence of constraints) and exemplifies what we share with other animals, whereas the latter entails responsibility and maturation. One could have liberty without freedom.

The metacritique of reason addresses the epistemic conditions of the first two. As in the aforementioned discussion of epistemic dependency, what emerges here is the importance of a critique of epistemic colonization. Fanon put it this way: Colonization made rigorous entails subjugation at the methodological level. Since the method and its logic call for critique, neither can be presupposed in an analysis without begging the question of the scope of colonization. Fanon thus had to be willing to examine human phenomena at the level of their failures. This placed him in a paradoxical relation to his own work. For their failure was a metatextual assessment. That means that the internal consistency of the text could be a manifestation of its failure. Fanon argued that this relationship of external triumph over internal failure, or external failure over internal triumph, called for an appeal to the understanding of meanings generated by the social world, which he called sociogenic phenomena.

Fanon's reflections on failure are linked to his appeal to psychoanalysis. Although he explored a variety of psychoanalytical concepts, one of crucial importance is the subject-forming effect of melancholia, an insight subsequently explored by Judith Butler and Paul Gilroy in the contexts of gender, race, and Postcoloniality. Melancholia is a form of suffering that is a consequence of a loss that is distinct from bereavement. In the case of death, there is not a chance of reconciliation with the lost object. But in the case of melancholia, there is a continued presence of that which has been lost. The separation of child from par-

ent, for example, is lived as melancholic where the parent continues to be present but out of bound. Various forms of loss that continue this process are manifested in transitions from infancy to childhood to adolescence and then adulthood. As Fanon was fond of saying, echoing Jean-Jacques Rousseau through Friedrich Nietzsche, "Man's tragedy ... is that he was once a child." One could think of modernity as inaugurating a unique form of melancholia that formed the black subject. The situation is a frustrating one of a longing for a precolonial existence *as what one is*, of longing for black existence in a form that blacks could never have existed. Fanon's infamous criticisms of history and the past come from this insight: There is no place in the past for black people; there is no place to which black people can *return*.

A dimension of philosophical anthropology that is often overlooked is that it involves an investigation into a subject that is the source of its own inquiry. This means that there is always a breakdown of identity claims as the inquiring subject transforms itself into an object of study. Given the critique of methodological assumptions, a danger emerges where the human subject is squeezed into the disciplinary presumptions by which it is studied. The discipline would, in other words, become deontological or absolute; its methodological assumptions would be presumed isomorphic with the intentional life of its subject as well as reality itself. I call this presumption disciplinary decadence. Such a phenomenon occurs when a discipline turns away from reality by presupposing the absoluteness of its method, of its unlimited application. One result of such decadence is that one discipline presupposes its supremacy over all others. In the human sciences, a consequence has been the methodological presupposition of the illegitimacy of religious and mythic life. That Fanon raises psychoanalytical questions means also the consideration of the mythic

life that informs symbolic order. Myth is not here at the level of content but also at that of form and grammar.

Fanon was aware that the grammar of meaning is premised also on the resources of mythic life. That understanding enables him to articulate the imagery of human subordination in the modern world. Although we speak today of Europe, it should be borne in mind that such a concept relies more on geopolitics than coherent notions of a continent. One look at any contemporary map reveals the absurdity of Europe as anything short of a western peninsula of Asia. What has become Europe was in fact a region governed by a geopolitical theological constellation known as Christendom. That terrain suffered a recession of its geographical reach by the eighth century as Islam became the theological-geopolitical order under the leadership of the Moors that reached through the Iberian Peninsula into the borders of France. Muslim control of Mediterranean trade devastated the northern economies and collapsed Christendom into underdevelopment. What is today understood as modernity began with the expulsion of the Moors from Grenada in January 1492. It was the “reconquest,” as the Christians called it, in the name of Christendom. One could imagine how different history might have been if the hermeneutics of those events were anti-colonial instead of a celebration of conquest. The notion of reconquest brought the mythopoetics of that expansion.⁵

By March 1492, the Reconquest became the Inquisition, which called for vanquishing the damned. The word “damned” is from the Latin word *damna*, which refers to the hurt, the lost. We would be remiss to

end our etymological excursion here. I have found that ancient Latin words often have foundations in Greek and Kamitian or ancient Egyptian ones, interestingly often also mediated by Hebrew terms. The peculiar connection here with the Hebrew *adamah* (ground), which is also related to the Kamitian/Egyptian *Atum*, which in turn comes from *'dem* (man and clay or ground). Oddly enough, there is a connection between being damned and being put down; one could interpret this as the consequence of what happens when man attempts to be god. Recall that in both Judaism and Christianity, man is the result of a fall. What, however, happens when a human being falls below humanity? The result is to go below ground. This motif of being put down, to fall, echoes the concept of, in Christendom, Hell.

Ironically, there is no actual biblical imagery of Hell. Much of the hellish poetics have been inherited over the ages by Dante's depiction in his *Inferno*.⁶ Many themes of sadistic suffering exacted according to one's vices are familiar enough to most readers, but what is often overlooked is the concluding ethical message of the text. At the end of Canto XXXII, the protagonist, guided by Virgil, encounters the horrid image of two heads stuck in ice from the neck down next to each other. One (Count Ugolino) is consumed by hatred to the point of becoming consumption itself. He stretches over and chews at the head of his enemy (Archbishop Ruggieri) so as to exact revenge on him. After witnessing this ghastly consequence of a soul consumed—literally—by revenge, he is released by his own sinful attachments and the path unfolds as follows at Canto XXXIV, 127–139:

⁵ For more discussion, see *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy*, introduction and chapter 1, and see also Cedric Robinson, *An Anthropology of Marxism* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2001) and *The Golden Age of the Moor*, edited by Ivan Van Sertima (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1992).

⁶ Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*, vol. 1, *Inferno*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum (Toronto, Canada: Bantam Books, 1982).

There is a place below, the limit of
 that cave, its farthest point from
 Beelzebub,
 a place one cannot see: it is discovered
 by ear—there is a sounding stream that
 flows
 along the hollow of a rock eroded
 by winding waters, and the slope is
 easy.
 My guide and I came on that hidden
 road
 to make our way back into the bright
 word;
 and with no care for any rest, we
 climbed—
 he first, I following—until I saw,
 through a round opening, some of
 those things
 of beauty Heaven bears. It was from
 there
 that we emerged, to see—once more—
 the stars.

Fanon's work is replete with similar imagery. He is not imitating Dante. He is, however, speaking from that grammar of condemnation. They are familiar to us: There is the fire in him that simmers but is not extinguished and the hell that the black cannot fall to because of already having occupied in the introduction to *Black Skin, White Masks*.⁷ There is Fanon's famous reference to the zone of nonbeing—a zone neither of appearance or disappearance. And then there is, of course, *Les Damnés de la terre*, "The Damned of the Earth," which continues to bear the English translation of "The Wretched of the Earth."

Fanon's texts take the reader through a

⁷ For more discussion, see Jane Anna Gordon and Lewis R. Gordon, *Of Divine Warning: Reading Disaster in the Modern Age* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, forthcoming 2008).

living hell. He functions like Virgil, but also as both guide and traveler. He guides the reader through this modern hell and attempts, in at least two installments, to demonstrate the dangers of consumed hatred. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, hope is in the interrogative prayer to the body at its conclusion. In *Les Damnés de la terre*, it is the ascent offered by the shedding of our skin and setting afoot a new man/day.

Much happens at sunrise. Dawn is a cleansing period. In the past, monsters are vanquished at sunrise. These themes of heaven and hell raise questions of the significance of disaster. The term "disaster" is astrological in its origin. It has roots in the Italian term *disastro*, meaning "ill-starred" or "bad planet," which in turn is from the Latin *astrum* and the Greek *astron*. Think of what it means for something, in effect, to fall from the heavens. Such a loss is a sign, and where it falls suffers. A problem raised from seeing such a sign is whether it signifies a continuum that falls upon the one who sees it. Such a continuation would be a disaster, a catastrophe (from the Greek from *katastrephein* (to fall down), which stimulates the wise counsel of looking away. Should one not look away, one could get caught up in the continuum of disaster, and the result of becoming a sign is also to have become a disaster. As a sign, the continuum is also a warning, a *monstrum* from which developed the term "monster." Fanon wrote much of disaster in all his works. Modern colonialism has created disastrous people, modern monsters.

The situation of such people becomes a neurotic one. There are a few levels of nonbeing: To appear means to over appear. Thus, to appear at all becomes a disaster. The political dimension becomes the frustrating situation of an anti-political politics. Politics is public, which entails appearance. But disastrous appearance privileges disappearance. The result is a politics that cannot be. The theme of melancholia—living loss—returns. For those who want to over-

come that loss, it requires an attachment to appear within the system. But the added frustration is that the pathologies of such appearance are generated by such a system. One can reject this and live with this melancholia. In the African Diaspora, it takes on many forms with many names. I call it the blues. The blues exemplify the loss required for mature existence in a world that militates against one's humanity.

There is also the disaster of recognition. Racist imposition has made the structure one of the white self and related Other, the black self and all Others, but no white self and black Other. This below-Otherness is the disaster of black existence. It is the Zone of Nonbeing.

The theme of damnation illuminates perhaps Fanon's most controversial reflection: on violence. The limited space available for this article affords no elaboration. In summary, damnation means that the black (or better, the blackened) lives the irrelevance of innocence. Without the possibility of innocence, the blackened lives the disaster of appearance where there is no room to appear as nonviolently. Acceptable being is nonexistence, nonappearance, or submergence. Today we speak, for instance, of nonviolent resistance in the Civil Rights Movement, but we should remember that the black activists from that period were chronicled as violent. At a more philosophical level, the absence of a Self-Other dialectic in racist situations means the eradication of ethical relations. Where ethics is derailed, all is permitted. The result is a twofold structure. The absence of ethical relations means living with what Abdul JanMohamed has called "death-bound subjectivity."⁸ It means living with the possibility of one's arbitrary death as a legitimate feature of a system. It also means witnessing concrete instances of arbitrary

death and social practices that demonstrate that one group of people's lives are less valuable than others' to the point of their not being considered to be really people at all. The second feature is the conservative response of being nonviolent by not changing anything. To change things is to appear, but to appear is to be violent since that group's appearance is illegitimate. Violence, in this sense, need not be a physical imposition. It need not be a consequence of guns and other weapons of destruction. It need simply be appearance.

There are many implications of such a frustrating outcome. Fanon was not a pessimist or a nihilist. The implications of such a mythopoetic vision must wait for another context. For now, what should be borne in mind is that a dimension of existential thought is an abiding faith in contingent dimensions of human affairs, which, in this context, amounts to *a luta continua*.

⁸ Abdul JanMohamed, *The Death-Bound-Subject: Richard Wright's Archaeology of Death* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

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