

Weeping and Suffering:

The Importance of Affect in Fanon

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Abstract

*Frantz Fanon does more than advocate a praxis for anti-colonial resistance or offer up a prayer when he writes of a need to weep in *Black Skin, White Masks*. Fanon alerts the reader to the suffocating and constricting existence of the Black subject and details the notion of a hidden, intrinsic “historical-racial schema” (Fanon 79). This complexity was important for Fanon to uncover, yet he does not go far enough in his analysis and leaves the reader wondering at the question: what is the function of weeping here? It is not a mere affect, as Saidiya Hartman spells out in *Scenes of Subjection (Innocent Amusements)*, nor a simple act of release. By engaging with Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s explication of the body schema in *Phenomenology of Perception* and fusing his idea with Hartman’s caution on emotion, I hope to strengthen Fanon’s argument by injecting it with a more visceral perspective that sheds light on this truly revolutionary act of weeping. First, as a cry for help, Fanon exemplifies the liminal space in which he is narrowly defined. Second, the cry as action—Fanon may be crippled and at a crossroads enforced by the oppressive culture, but he will yet impress his audience.*

In the realm of philosophy, and clearly with the state of the USA and global society at large, the need for critical phenomenology, both its theories and practices, has never been so great. The rising frequency of protests, especially on issues concerning racism and oppression at the systems-level, is evidence of a restlessness residing in people

which must no longer be set aside to be dealt with later or ignored. Rather, we must, like Frantz Fanon, do the work to bring awareness to such insidious problems and actively strategize against these systems en route to a lasting solution. Dogmatically ascribing to one set of possible answers can no longer bring humankind closer to achieving equality; standing stalwart in one political attitude or another only stifles our collective social progress. In essence, using known philosophical frameworks in tandem with each other must be our future course of action. To that end, this paper will converse with Chapter 5 in Fanon's work *Black Skin, White Masks* to build onto ideas which I believe Fanon did not pursue far enough; specifically, his use of affect as he describes through the book but never dwells too long to define its role in the struggle for anti-colonial resistance. Particularly, Fanon is aware of the potential weaponization of affects: he explicitly names how a colonizer's oppression might produce an "affective anaphylaxis," "affective erethism," or an "affective tetanization" (Fanon 32, 45, 80). Plain to the naked eye, his language is heavily influenced by his training as a psychiatrist and background steeped in the medical field. Not only that, but this emphasis on the visceral is what brings Fanon into contact with Merleau-Ponty's notion of the body schema, eventually prompting Fanon to discover an underlying "historical-racial schema" that provides the frame for these affects to take root. What is interesting, then, is how Fanon fights against the pressure to mummify his being or hide away his Blackness by crying:

Yet with all my being I refuse to accept this amputation. I feel my soul as vast as the world, truly a soul as deep as the deepest of rivers; my chest has the power to expand to infinity. I was made to give and they prescribe for me the humility of the cripple. When I opened my eyes yesterday I saw the sky in total revulsion. I tried to get up but the eviscerated silence surged toward me with paralyzed wings. Not responsible for my acts, at the crossroads between Nothingness and Infinity, I began to weep. (Fanon 100-101)

These words represent more than a prayer and do more than advocate a praxis. In this passage, Fanon's weeping is the realization of a kind of non-violent resistance—one which may contain the force to destroy the power of racist ideology. Yet, Fanon seems hesitant to completely commit to this course of action as exemplified by his chapter "On Violence" in *The Wretched of the Earth*.

It is also important to bring into this discussion Fanon's conception of subjectivity. Namely, how he perceives the colonized man to be so constricted and confined by the overwhelming gaze and societal pressure of the colonizer that possessing own thoughts and desires can be likened to a lost art, something that needs to be uncovered like Fanon's own "remarkable discovery" (Fanon 93). He writes of this experience as the Black, colonized man having his history lost and his unique desires and emotions suppressed. Therefore, I find it important to introduce Saidiya Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection*, specifically in the first chapter where she articulates the work of American abolitionist John Rankin and his efforts to reach into his own empathy to touch the lived

experience of the Black slave through prose—a move Fanon would immediately write off as narcissism. This is where I make my main argument: Fanon’s more narrow conception of subjectivity in *Black Skin, White Masks* does not allow for emotion to be weaponized for the good, and even blinds him from seeing how his own weeping may have been the strongest form of rebellion at his disposal at the time, and perhaps even in general. However, we must first investigate Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the body schema and understand how Fanon’s “historical-racial schema” adds to, or rather undergirds, it. The body schema, as Fanon explains in his own words, “creates a genuine dialectic between my body and the world” (Fanon 79). Similar to Socratic philosophy, the body and the soul are one and must be treated as such. The body is as much connected to the way we interact with the world as the mind molds our perception of our universe around us. By employing the notion of the body schema to the situation Fanon is living, we can clearly see that the Black man has been forced into a Platonistic way of life. A manner of living that separates his body from his mind, but punishes him for having both. The Black man’s existence has been splintered by colonization and thus “not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man” (Fanon 78). The Black man’s body, the way society identifies and classifies him, determines the confines of his opportunities. He exists in the liminal—between subjugated beast and free man. Merleau-Ponty writes in his *Phenomenology of Perception* that the body schema then represents “the global awareness of [one’s]

posture in the inter-sensory world” (Merleau-Ponty 102) firmly grounding the Black man where he is. Unable to change and his sense of identity stripped bare to be replaced with the garb of the colonizer. What is more, the body schema serves in the “anchoring of the active body in an object” only further strangling the Black man under a colonial gaze.

Fanon’s “historical-racial schema” expands on this thought by explaining that the Black man’s body is not only pressured by the present societal structures, but the body carries with it the memories of a history in shackles, generations of abuse, which are weaved into its fabric. Essentially, the Black man faces a war on every front: inside himself, all around him, and even temporally—his history chases him into a corner.

With the lens of an “historical-racial schema,” one denotes just how much freedom is taken from the Black man by simply finding himself in a colonized setting. The subjectivity a colonized person feels is so limited by the colonizer’s gaze, both passive and active acts of oppression, that Fanon would argue that in situations like these the Black man could scarcely call himself a subject. His thoughts have been corralled and squelched, his emotions have been bottled up and thrown aside. In the “Look, a Negro” sequences in *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon describes how “he gave [himself] up as an object” (Fanon 80) to be used as a lower being that reaffirms the White man’s need to be constantly recognized as human.

What does it mean for a human to relegate themselves to the station of object? For Fanon, it took a visceral form: “Peeling, stripping my skin, causing a hemorrhaging that left congealed black blood all over my body” (Fanon 80). “Yet,” he says, “this reconsideration of myself, this thematization, was not my idea” (Fanon 80) so that even the transformation from subject to object was out of his control. This focus on the visceral self is characteristic in Fanon’s philosophy and adds intrigue when we again bring the issue of his weeping to the foreground. Even though he previously gave up his subject position, his focus on the visceral body puts his subjectivity back in his hands as he later refuses what he describes as an “affective tetanization.” Fanon may not even realize this himself, but his subjectivity was returned to him, even if it was only for a single isolated moment, when he leaned into the visceral nature of his body—the connection of his body to the world. Even as society exerts its pressure to coerce the colonized person into conforming to the colonial way of life, that connection a Black man has to his body as he moves through the world must be surveyed. In fact, the visceral body seems to provide a toolbox which, in this particular situation, helps Fanon take back his authority as a Black subject and must be considered as part of the revolutionary tactic against racist, colonial sentiment. It would be unfair however, not to make note of complicated relationship starting to form. On the one hand, Fanon “gave himself up” and chose this recourse out of tiredness and a weakness borne from fighting colonial ideologies without end. On the other hand, he states that the transition from

subject to object in the White man's eyes was "not [his] idea." There is still a struggle Fanon sees as to where the Black man's subjectivity lies. While the Black man understands what is happening to him, has emotions and is aware of his conscious body, the colonial cage that applies constant pressure confuses the situation. In this case, the Black man can never be sure of who he is since his identity within the general term "captive" shifts moment by moment. For example, in one instant Fanon makes a "remarkable discovery" and finds strength in uncover a Black antiquity. Moments later, he reflects a helplessness leading to a later line of question near the end of *Black Skin, White Masks* where he asks of himself: "am I going to accumulate weapons?" (Fanon 159). And he is right to question; the possibility for non-violent recourse is coming closer and closer as not only a viable option, but a robust and firm means to overthrow colonial enforcement.

Being now aware of the intrinsic ability a colonized person has to reclaim their subjectivity through reconnection with their visceral self, Fanon could have entertained a different course of action than he ultimately chose; a movement of intense introspection that corrects the view of the colonized person and allows for their body, the very thing which the White man wished to trap, to be the vehicle through which progress in anti-colonial resistance be attained.

Instead, Fanon digs his feet in further, pushing back against this possibility as well as the idea that empathy should play a part in the resistance. The lived experience of the

Black man is unique and is, in his perception, better left untouched by those outside. In Chapter 7, Fanon tackles the topic of recognition and tells the reader that in the subject-object struggle, the White man is like Narcissus—always wanting to see “reflected in the eyes of the other an image of myself that satisfies me” (Fanon 146). Holding to this idea, the lived experience of the Black man is only knowable to the Black man. And no one else. Following this logic, the White man who wishes to deconstruct his colonization can only be part of the solution by totally, and without hesitation, removing himself from the equation. According to Fanon, any other act is merely self-serving and reinforces the liminal cage where the Black man has learned to live. However, contemporary scholars are now finding this determination too harsh.

One such thinker is Saidiya Hartman, whose work *Scenes of Subjection* addresses the use of empathy to understand the Black man’s positionality in its first chapter. In the chapter titled “Innocent Amusements” Hartman introduces the reader to American Abolitionist John Rankin who often wrote slave narratives to be published and disseminated. Rankin would write of “the minutest detail of macabre acts of violence” (Hartman 18) stirring the absolute theatricality of the slave trade. The danger of narcissism is very real here, and Fanon is right to be incredulous. Hartman understands the danger of this empathy experiment causing the “obliteration of the other,” (Hartman 19) and cautions the reader of a “too-easy intimacy” (Hartman 20) that feels constructive but deceives. Yet, Hartman is still open to the idea that living life in the White man’s

skin does not preclude that person from employing empathy in a healthy and helpful way. To be sure, there is a fine line; traversing that line between narcissism and genuine concern might seem like an insurmountable task even. But the calling to decolonize society extends to every man because “pain provides the common language of humanity, it extends humanity to the dispossessed and, in turn, remedies the indifference of the callous” (Hartman 18). Empathizing with the Black man, feeling as much into our common language of pain as one can muster, does not inherently speak to a narcissism within oneself.

To the contrary, the ability to empathize with those who have been consistently Otherized in society demonstrates the growing awareness of how colonization is objectively bad, an evil, for both colonizer and the colonized. On this latter point, both Fanon and Hartman would agree, but Fanon would still sense a tension because no matter the objective moral evil of slavery, the colonized man’s empathy can be nothing less than oppressive and self-serving—even subconsciously. The narcissism pervading the colonizer’s being does not allow for him to assist in the anti-colonial revolution through empathy as it only strokes his ego. Again, Hartman notices the various roadblocks which make a pure form of empathy difficult for the colonizer writing “empathy is double-edged” (Hartman 19), but this warning does not render such empathy impossible.

By making use of Fanon’s own notion of the “historical-racial schema” and analyzing it to better understand where his idea of subjectivity might not be completely formed,

we are able to incorporate an empathy that he did not consider possible as part of decolonial revolution. Fanon, along with many other philosophers, is convinced that violence holds a necessary place in decolonization to fight against racism that is embedded in the very systems which structure our societies. This paper does not negate such claims, nor does it set out to do so. Rather, Fanon's understanding and explication of subjectivity in *Black Skin, White Masks*, which glosses over negative affects of suffering, misses a vital course of action that properly salutes moments like those found at the end of Chapter 5 as truly revolutionary. The practice of such an affect in our world posits a possible solution which actively decolonizes a space through non-violent acts of protest. Fanon's words echo out to us: "at the crossroads between Nothingness and Infinity, I began to weep;" these lines empower a praxis of non-violent resistance capable of restoring subjectivity to the colonized man and recognizes him as one innately deserving of humanity.

This non-violent resistance is often overlooked since Fanon's perhaps most notable book, *The Wretched of the Earth*, theorizes how violence is a language only spoken and understood by the colonizer and the retaliation of violent acts by a colonized group should be seen as a cleansing act. Many scholars take this word as final, yet tension remains. Harkening back to *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon asks "am I going to accumulate weapons?" (Fanon 159). The matter of using violence himself in the struggle of resistance is still unsettled. Only by investigating *The Wretched of the Earth* as the

beginnings of further research, attending to the affective language Fanon uses there, and by an analysis contrasting the two texts, will we uncover the very affective roots which led Fanon to take his final violent revolutionary stance. We cannot take for granted the notion that anti-colonial action necessitates violence. As seen in *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon quietly posited the possibility that the road to liberation may be paved by a reflection of the affective responses and reactions of both colonized and colonizer. In focusing on our own embodied experiences of suffering and what it means for us to be brought to tears, liberation from our current socially energized hierarchies of race or economic class may take peaceful form.

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