

Weariness: Dismembered Time, Colonialism, Pandemics

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ABSTRACT: Though fatigue appears a constant of this pandemic year, I argue that we may not all be living the same pandemic. I highlight the non-belonging of most racialized and colonized peoples to a world where flourishing is taken for granted as norm. To think this, I use the term “weariness.” I want to evoke, *wearing out*, *wearing down*, as well as the medical concept of *weathering*. Drawing on Césaire, Fanon, Hartman, Scott, and Spillers, my concept of weariness articulates an exhausting and enduring experience—the eroding, grating, and crumbling of racialized flesh—through repetitive colonial duration, not simply for a year, but over a *longue durée*. I read this as a wounding that needs to be thought not simply in terms of health outcomes and disease, but in terms of affective experience and dismembered possibility.

KEY WORDS: weariness, fatigue, racism, colonialism, COVID-19, pandemic, duration, flesh, affect, possibility

Fatigue has been a constant theme of this pandemic year, seemingly as widespread and equalizing an experience as infection with SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes the disease COVID-19, was initially presented to be. Yet, just as that infection, and subsequent development of disease and mortality, have not proven to be equalizing experiences (even if we take into account age, or how easily one might get access to a diagnostic test in order to prove infection, to medical treatment for disease, or to a death being *counted*), so has that fatigue not been thought in sufficiently differential terms. But to speak of inequality and difference might mislead us into thinking this to be a phenomenon that can be *measured* or parsed as matters of degree. What I want to argue is that “we” may not all be living the same pandemic, just as we live, and have been living, different worlds. More so, these pandemics bring into

focus the *non-belonging* of most racialized and colonized peoples to a world where flourishing is taken for granted as norm or end-point. The world where *hope* still governs the horizon of an open-ended future time is more clearly than ever a colonial or “white destiny” (to use a term from Fanon 1952: 10).

To think this, conceptually and affectively, I use the term “weariness.” With this, I want to evoke, *wearing out*, *wearing down*, as well as the medical concept of *weathering*. I find this weariness in Frantz Fanon’s *Peau noire, masques blancs*: “From time to time one would like to stop. To state reality is a wearing task [*Exprimer le réel est chose ardue*]” (Fanon 1952: 134; 1967: 137). “*Ardu*” brings with it the sense of being difficult, tiring, and heavy, burdensome and enduring. What I want to echo with the concept of weariness is how exhausting and durational an experience this is—the eroding, grating, and crumbling involved—through repetitive cycling of time, intensifying through the weight of its own duration, not simply for a year, but over centuries.

The weariness I want to broach is, then, neither the fatigue of this pandemic (whether fatigue as a result of its length or its effects), nor fatigue at the measures that have been needed to protect ourselves during its unfurling, nor is it even the chronic fatigue that is one of the many symptoms of long-term COVID (which I think needs to be taken more seriously, and is likely inseparable from gendered and racialized experience of this disease). While in linear terms, I would agree with others that this pandemic has exacerbated and made even more visible power and racial dynamics, I think that these dynamics were *already tangible* in lived, bodily terms (but ignored by those who benefit from them). More so, it is unclear that understanding this additively, as *serial* or *layered* experience, does justice to the ways in which racialization and colonization intertwine with and inform how what was a common enough leap-frogging virus became pandemic.

Here, I want to go beyond analogy or juxtaposition in thinking of racism as *another* pandemic, or colonialism as *pathogen*—infecting us with toxic foreign bodies (Fanon 1952: 33). This is not only to avoid naturalizing racism and colonialism, but also because pandemics should make us question the self-evidence of any natural/social distinction, since so much of transmission and spread has to do with social behaviour, public health policy, and accessibility of care, as with the contingent travels and workings of a virus. That public health measures attend to white health over Black and indigenous debility and death needs repeating. How much do we remember that public health has, in the *longue durée* of slavery and colonialism, been about sustaining and nourishing white comfort through Black subjugation and segregation (Hartman 1997: 206)? In the rush to find a saviour in medicine, should we disregard its colonial complicities and experimentation on enslaved bodies (Spillers 1987: 68)? That in 2020, public health authorities *forgot* that Black and racialized neighbourhoods in Montreal would be more at risk than others, neglected to speak to their inhabitants, and foresaw neither protection nor

support—refusing to even collect data on race—is telling of the “active ignorance” that disregards the way racism shapes, and is intensified by, the becoming of this pandemic.¹ When disproportionately many racialized, Indigenous, and Black bodies are policed and fined (Montreal, Canada), when lockdown is imposed on areas with large Muslim communities just before Eid (Manchester, UK), and when racialized and indigenous pain is not taken seriously, refused care and hospitalization (Canada, UK, and US), it becomes apparent how public health measures continue to be used as instruments of racialization, fulfilling a pessimistic cycle.²

Thus, in deeper, nonlinear temporal terms, racialized and colonized weariness stems not simply from this pandemic but from the ways it repeats and reconfigures, again and again, what has already been suffered and continues to be undergone. We already came to this pandemic tired. We are worn out by the adaptive repetition of colonialism and rephrasing of racism that keep them intransigently in place. If colonization introduces “a principal of ruination [*un principe de ruine*],” as Aimé Césaire has said (1955: 22), then its duration is one where the erosion of colonized lives is the ground—the “walking fertilizer [*un fumier ambulant*]” (Césaire 2017: 114; Fanon 1952: 95)—upon which the predatory accumulation of colonial wealth is built, a festering Césaire likens to “gangrene” (1955: 12). The structural foundations of colonial societies—which Europe and its settler states continue to be—are rooted in this “destructuring [*destruction*]” of colonized peoples (Fanon 1952: 94).³ The medical metaphor of “weathering” tries to think this erosion of bodily systems under the cumulative stress of structural racism over time.⁴

But colonial (de)structuring also needs to be read as *wounding*—“blessure absolue” says Fanon (1952: 94), “tearing apart [*arrachement*],” excision (110), disjuncting and dismembering (111), at once, culturally and bodily, spatially and temporally. This wounding, I believe, needs to be thought not simply in terms of health outcomes, disease, and aging, but in terms of *affect* and *possibility*. Hortense Spillers’s concept of *flesh* (which lies in excess of what I can say here) may open the way to thinking this weathered and weary flesh as having “registered the wounding” (1987: 67).⁵ Here, it is not only that organs and systems have been worn down through stress, become chronically sensitive and inflamed, prone to hyper-reaction, but that flesh feels and registers the affective underbelly of this erosion in its duration (see also Scott 2020). Elsewhere, I call this *colonial duration*—a past that coexists with and affectively weighs on the present, a time that snowballs, immanently reconfigured through its own duration (Al-Saji 2018). As memory, the present is haunted not only by the past but by those configurations of the past that it forecloses, the possibilities that are felt in its warp and weft but that have been cut off and made unrealizable, even unimaginable.⁶ This is a time like tattered rags, a dismembered time.⁷

Left out of most thinking about racism and pandemics has been the role of colonial and imperial formations in this ruination of possibility, this dismember-

ing of time. I turn to Iraq to try to make this loss tangible.⁸ With only enough electricity from the national grid for half a day, water that is no longer potable, and intergenerational households, it would seem like the conditions of possibility of a ravaging pandemic—and disproportionately unexplained death⁹—could be blamed on our own “delayed” development. An outcome of years of destruction of infrastructure and culture, theft of resources, and programmed corruption, however, this systematic wearing-down was also a winding back. Health care that was universal and free crumbled under, not just wars, but sanctions; the electrical grid was destroyed in the US-led invasion and neglected through a colonial model of governance that encouraged corruption. Cuts in pensions and public sector salaries make it impossible to stay at home, if you barely have enough to survive; with no state support, those with nothing rely on charity or starve. Worn down through a *longue durée* of colonization and occupation, direct or by proxy,¹⁰ and through an economy of theft, life impoverished, land exhausted, and deaths that do not count become eroded landscape.

It is often forgotten that in describing colonization as “thingification [*chosification*],” Césaire points not merely to objectification, but to the suppression of possibility (1955: 23). More so, colonization can be understood as *exhausted* and “mined out” possibility (Fanon 1952:118). While this exhaustion mines the lines of possibility drawn by a colonial world, the past possibilities of other, anticolonial, ways of life and time are severed and foreclosed; they abide in the past subjunctive of *what could have been* (Hartman 2008: 11). I think of this dual structuring of possibility, through exhaustion and foreclosure, as *dismembered possibility*. Vaccine futures are a case in point. Bought up by the United States, Europe, the UK, Canada, and other white colonial settler states, this “hope” is inaccessible to most colonized and racialized peoples.¹¹ That Canada has bought five times more than it needs to vaccinate its population, promising to donate *what is left over* to “third world” countries, is telling. In constructing a comfortable cushion of insurance for one’s own life at the cost of exhausting the survival chances of others, those others are projected backwards as paternalistic foil—as leftover, late, or throw-away people. Eroded is not only survival but the leeway for invention, whose ground is inseparable from schooling and work, from the affective tissue of social life and the collective rituals that surround death. Oriented toward a vanishingly general futurity that cannot be caught up with, this mode of immunization (or “Western” solipsism) excludes coexistence in a lived present upon which reciprocity could be built. This temporal non-relationality is a disjuncture of worlds and of pandemics.

NOTES

1. In particular, the neighbourhoods of Montréal-Nord, Côte-des-Neiges, and Parc-Extension. For “active ignorance,” see Medina (2013: 39, 57).
2. The painful suffering and death of Joyce Echaquan (of the Atikamekw nation) during the pandemic, who was derided by nurses in a Quebec hospital, while not a case of COVID-19, shows the ongoing colonial disregard for indigenous life in Canada.
3. More so, colonization turns the bodies of the colonized into instruments against them—fragmented into organs, digested and used up.
4. I draw on “weathering” from the work of Jacqueline Scott (2020) and Shannon Sullivan (2015). But Scott (2020) also goes beyond weathering in her concept of “meta-oppression” (and the despair and pessimism it brings on), a concept to which my understanding of weariness connects. While conceptually different from weathering, I am also thinking of Christina Sharpe’s *weather* (2016) and Jasbir Puar’s *debilitation* (2017). *Weathering* was coined by Arline Geronimus (1992), and her research has been instrumental in providing empirical evidence for the phenomenon. Weathering describes the gradual erosion of the body’s systems due to cumulative exposure to the stress of racism over time, making it more prone to disease, chronic health problems, and “biological” aging. Because severe COVID likely involves an excessive inflammatory response to the virus, the chronic inflammation that stress maintains over one’s lifetime may be an underlying factor in understanding how racialized people have poorer health outcomes and higher mortality with COVID-19. For instance, that being BAME (Black, Asian, and minority ethnic) in the UK puts one at excess risk of COVID-19 related death, with Black and South Asian people carrying the highest risk, was substantiated in Williamson et al. (2020); this study was able to show excess risk for “ethnicity,” having adjusted for other factors (pre-existing medical problems, co-morbidity, socioeconomic deprivation). See also the podcast *TWIV (This Week in Virology, episode 642)*.
5. “If we think of the ‘flesh’ as a primary narrative, then we mean its seared, divided, ripped-apartness, riveted to the ship’s hole, fallen, or ‘escaped’ overboard” (Spillers 1987: 67). Spillers’s flesh reinscribes an opacity that is that of the Middle Passage, and it is an open question whether colonization requires a different theorization of flesh. But Spillers also puts flesh “in the vestibule (or ‘pre-view’) of a colonized North America” (67) and includes “indigenous peoples” in dismemberment of flesh (67).
6. I draw on both Henri Bergson and Saidiya Hartman (2008) here.
7. I owe how I think the dismembering of time to Hartman who speaks of a “dismembered past” (1997: 11, 72–77). In dismembering, I hear echoes of dis-remembering and re-membering.
8. A note on my voice as diasporic Iraqi. I think of colonialism as continuing, under different guise, not only in settler colonial states but also in countries that have formally decolonized. Colonialism endures economically, militarily, materially, and culturally. In my case, for Iraq, to use the term “formerly colonized” would be to obscure the reality of rephrased colonization over a *longue durée* and its weight in the present.
9. Anecdotally, in younger Iraqis without co-morbidities.
10. To recall that the Ba’ath party came to power in a CIA-backed coup.
11. Even if aspirationally available within colonized North America, the racializing structures of medicine and healthcare undermine access for many BIPOC people.

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