

The Secret Life of Violence

Elena Flores Ruíz
Michigan State University

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I. *Structural Witnessing*

In the state of Michigan where I teach, it is illegal for incarcerated people to read the work of Frantz Fanon. The Michigan Department of Corrections places texts like Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* alongside Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf* as a threat to the order of the institution for 'advocating racial supremacy.'¹ Fanon scholars have argued publicly against the ban, noting that whoever made the decision did so without having read a word of what they were censoring.² Fanon, after all, had a deep commitment to democratic humanism but without the structural contradictions that disenfranchise people of color or debase them as subhuman; he sought equality, not supremacy. As of this writing, the ban remains in place. If it is lifted, another one, morphed in form but similar in function, will likely take its place. As a structural feminist thinker, this is one way I engage with productive aspects of Fanon's work: structural witnessing.

Structural witnessing is the ability to acknowledge the systematicity of power asymmetries hidden in society without the supporting conventions of language and official history to aid one. It has an epistemological and existential component. First, the knowledge generated about one's situation is not dependent on dominant hermeneutic resources (or licensed meanings) that are readily available to structurally advantaged communities. Second, the sense of asymmetrical worldhood generated by this knowledge is itself rooted in bodily experience and its social interstices. It is, in less scientific terms, the tragic gift of the not-yet killed to know with one's whole body what the dominant world around you says you cannot know, cannot witness, name, and take your rightful place in adjudicating or bringing into balance. It is a knowledge practice rooted in the diverse lineages and long traditions of witnessing in Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and women of color writings in the aftermath of colonialism.

Fanon's structural witnessing had visionary strengths and severe limitations. Despite his stances on women's key role in revolutionary society, he remained blind to many of the forces bearing down on the lives of the women he wrote about. He had no intersectional consciousness. His strengths, like those of anti-colonial thinkers before him, honed in on the tacit operations of colonial systems in Abya Yala, Turtle Island, Aotearoa, Alkebulan and other ancestral lands dispossessed by settler logics of the bourgeois nation-state. What is distinct in Fanon's vision of structural oppression is the particular shape it takes in identifying the systemic and latticed nature of colonial power through the function of race and its rationalization in society. Racism, he believed, is *structural*. As such, 'the habit of considering racism as a mental quirk, a psychological flaw, must be abandoned.'³ He built a revolutionary program on the idea that social change requires radical breaks and transformations, especially at the ontological level. This flows from the (almost biological) necessity he saw as constitutive of structures of oppression and the day-to-day operations of colonial violence. But Fanon could not abandon his own role in the abiding colonial systems of gendered oppression; he failed to witness the ways gender-based violence flows through the basic mechanisms of colonial violence and his own body. He failed to see how the habit of considering *racist sexism* a mental quirk must also be abandoned if the colonial system is to be challenged at the roots. This failure, which still bedrocks many strains of anti-colonial thinking today, demands an accounting.

This chapter proceeds in two ways. First, I argue that Fanon's structural witnessing of racism yields important insights about the nature of violence that challenges the settler colonial concept of violence as the extra-legal use of force. Second, I argue that his analysis of violence is insufficient for combating colonial racism and violence because, using the terms of his own analysis, it leaves intact logics and mechanisms that allow racism to structurally renew itself in perpetuity: violence against women. Without a critical feminism that tracks the alterities of structural violence against women, and women of color in particular, Fanonianism is just another lifeline of colonialism. I thus caution against uncritical uses of Fanon's structural account of violence for any emancipatory social theory that fails to acknowledge the attendant alterities, asymmetries, and axes of coordinated subordination involved in racialized violence against women.

II. *Fanon on Violence*

Fanon is generally seen as an icon of anti-colonial revolutionary strategy and ardent supporter of armed violence in national struggles for liberation. He has become synonymous with African independence and justifications for the ethical suspension of moral universals in defense of one's freedom: 'as soon as you and your fellow men are cut

down like dogs,' he writes, 'there is no other solution but to use every means available to reestablish your weight as a human being.'⁴ At the time of his death, little had been written about his extensive psychiatric writings and humanitarian work as a medical doctor, much less his plays, philosophical engagements with existentialism and phenomenology, or even his public support of non-violent strategies in anti-colonial independence movements.⁵ Instead, the posthumous image crafted in the Anglo-European world was that of a radically politicized writer and rising architect of Black liberation in the Third World – 'the Jean-Jacques Rousseau of the Algerian Revolution' – one who posed a significant threat to the order and stability of western nations' interests abroad.⁶ He was called 'the disciple of violence' and his works indexed under subjects suited more to the study of military combat and organized warfare between nations than cultural or philosophical confrontations with the legacies of colonialism. The historical reception of his view of violence was, needless to say, shaped by colonialism itself.

Les Damnés de la Terre

Much of what is known today about Fanon's view of violence comes from the historical reception of the section entitled 'On Violence' that makes up the first part of *Les Damnés de la Terre* (1961) [trans. as *The Wretched of the Earth* in 1963]. In this section, Fanon justifies the use of armed violence by colonized peoples in ways historically limited to legitimate use by Anglo-European nation states and peoples: in defense of one's freedom. But Fanon had a more nuanced, structural account of violence that the predominantly colonialist reception of *The Wretched of the Earth* obscured. Swiftly dictated on his deathbed, the work tolls Fanon's most basic bearing on the life he inhabited; it is his resounding *no* to the kind of world he most feared would outlive his efforts. It is his great refusal to succumb to the fire, famine, and misery that the colonial system cast on Native peoples across generations, continents, and seas. It gives a noticeably different impression of the fate of the colonial system than some of his early writings, which tended to render very clinical, cultural diagnoses of French colonialism at the micrological (psychological) levels of experience: what it is, how to treat it, what treatments might work under what conditions... the agonism in these early writings was both personal and detached, measured and conceptual. As a doctor, he rejected the systematic dehumanization of Native peoples under French colonialism and its appending cultural apparatuses – foremost, colonial psychiatry in Algeria. However, by the time he tackles in-depth analyses of macrological (political, economic, cultural) features of colonialism – from the writings that make up *A Dying Colonialism* to the section on violence in *The Wretched of the Earth* – what is militant in his refusal is existential, not measured and conceptual. It is a clue to the toll colonialism takes, not in the abstract but in the flesh.

While I don't think *Wretched* is a good indicator of the complexity of Fanon's structural views on violence, owing both to the conditions of its writing and its historical reception, I do think it illuminates some of his most important structural commitments to understanding oppression. He notes, for instance, that 'challenging the colonial world is not a rational confrontation of viewpoints' in the sense of western systems of rational thought that unilaterally derive from Greek logic.⁷ No amount of interpersonal confrontations with racial bias will dismantle the inveterate mechanisms of racist prejudice and colonial violence without a transformation of the supporting infrastructural conditions in society. Fanon, a trained psychiatrist, famously resigned from his post as medical director of the psychiatric hospital at Blida-Joinville on these grounds:

If psychiatry is the medical technique that aims to enable man no longer to be a stranger to his environment, I owe it to myself to affirm that the Arab, permanently an alien in his own country, lives in a state of absolute depersonalization... *The social structure existing in Algeria was hostile to any attempt to put the individual back where he belonged.* ...The events in Algeria are the logical consequence of an abortive attempt to decerebralize a people... The function of a social structure is to set up institutions to serve man's needs. A society that drives its members to desperate solutions is a non-viable society, a society to be replaced.⁸

Sartrean interpretations of Fanon often overlook this point. While Fanon clearly had an ontological commitment to existential humanism through his approach to psychiatry, he thought the pervasive dissemination of racism in the colonial world constituted a prior violence to identity that western humanism, even in the existential tradition, was structurally complicit in.⁹ Concrete social and historical structures therefore come first in Fanon's philosophical imagination— if physical violence is a defensively necessary 'desperate solution,' brought about by historical conditions against colonized peoples, then the revolt is ultimately not against individual colonizers but against the colonial structure.

This move to *preconditions for existence* allows Fanon to bring in temporal dimensions to his account of structural violence that western discourses of temporality do not attend to. Because the colonized are operating in the ontologically abject zone-of-non-being, the bi-directional folding of past and futurity into the present is not a smooth, continuous event. It is ruptured at every moment of possible existence, thus constituting an ontological harm (one Fanon thinks is worked out in dreams and aggression) and is yet another layer of settler violence to the colonized's sense of worldhood. Upturning this is of primary importance. Thus, as Fanon sees it, anti-colonial violence is not a purely

destructive, backwards looking phenomenon that attempts to right past wrongs. That's simply the level at which western ethics evaluates anti-colonial violence at (rather than seeing it as the struggle for a livable future).

For Fanon, anti-colonial violence is also part of a postcolonial world-building move motivated towards a multi-level restructuring of culture and its social structures, including the very agency of the colonized subject (who is always implicitly male for Fanon). A large part of *Wretched* is dedicated to the idea that a widespread restructuring of social, individual, material, and economic relations will be necessary to build a truly postcolonial world— a world where equality is not based on the structural contradictions that allow racial prejudice to exist seamlessly alongside democratic institutions. But, as we will later see, the future Fanon dreams of bringing into being through revolutionary violence is limited to a particular kind of colonized subject; without attending to the alterity of violences against women, Fanon is unable to build a vision of a world where colonized women are also free of colonial violence. This criticism is lost in the colonial reception of Fanon's texts. Instead, the focus remains on a narrow analytic judgment of whether retributive violence can ever be a feature of a just act. It is well known that Fanon is often charged with being as dualist, reductive, Manichean, and divisive about 'what species, what race one belongs to' as the settler colonial racists he denounces, so that he may be dismissed as a racial nationalist.¹⁰ In 1959, he wrote the following:

The new [post-revolutionary] relations are not the result of one barbarism replacing another barbarism, of one crushing of man replacing another crushing of man. What we Algerians want is to discover the man behind the colonizer; this man who is both the organizer and the victim of *a system* that has choked him and reduced him to silence... we want an Algeria open to all, in which every kind of genius may grow.¹¹

But it does not really matter that Fanon disavowed dualistic thinking when abstracted from the operations of colonial systems. As a structural thinker, Fanon himself presaged the ways this failure of audibility is set up in advance, how it was always destined to fail due to the unique stronghold of colonial violences in culture. It is not universal Reason that will heal but the collective *and infrastructural* recognition of the existence of a deeper unreason that allows racism to continue as a rationalized process in culture. Fanon's structural witnessing saw the power of what I'm describing here as 'revolutionary reabsorption' – the neutralizing of anti-revolutionary potential by reabsorbing challenges to authority back into a system in scalable versions that can be redeployed in non-revolutionary ways. Fanon shared this idea with Latin American liberation thinkers – in

fact, this is a core thesis in *Guerilla Warfare*, published the same year as *Wretched* - as well as with some critical theory and, of course, generations of women of color who theorized oppression as complex systems and their intersections.

Despite the colonial reception of *Wretched*, I contend that Fanon held the view that violence is not a simple act - a physical discharge of force reducible to a moment in time. This seems patently false for readers of *Wretched*, as Fanon often speaks of the discrete distension and contraction of the human musculature - of the need to exert oneself in space by force - in response to the horrors and abuses of colonial repression. But he regards this as a consequence, outcome, or better yet, a reflexive *symptom* of a prior violence that certainly includes physical violence, widespread torture and confinement, but is not reducible to it. Violence to flesh is irreducible. But without other supporting forms of violence to shroud colonial authority in mystery and create the status quo, colonialism simply could not have been carried out in its historical manner - whether as the systemic torture of flesh or the background gaslighting of a whole collective in our daily interactions with public structures. On this view, *violentus*, the use of force in excess of normative limits relative to a given time and place, is not an objective, universal phenomenon. It is a *cultural production* that serves a normative function relative to power differences in society. As I read him, violence under colonialism is a deeper, cultural, epistemic, and discursive phenomenon that supports the internal consistency of colonial power by *limiting the domain of intelligibility* - what violence can *appear as* - to settler colonial logics.¹² As a hermeneutic reading of Fanon's project, this suggests that people who experience colonial violence must learn to redescribe experience through the lens of languages and logics historically (non-accidentally) devoid of cultural meanings adequate for capturing one's experiences (a point he makes in "The Negro and Language"). This is why structural witnessing becomes important for unraveling structural aspects of colonial violence, and why critical feminist practices of witnessing must also be attendant in this narrative.

Structural Violence as Organized Domination

In 1956, Fanon gave a speech in Paris at the First Congress of Negro Writers and Artists that helps us understand his structural views on violence. This speech first appeared in print in the June-November issue of *Présence Africaine* in 1956 and later as the essay "Racism and Culture" in *Pour la Révolution Africaine* (1964, trans. 1967 as *Towards the African Revolution*). In it, Fanon lays the groundwork for a theory of organized domination' that helps explain the longevity, intractability, and resilience of European colonialism as a structural phenomenon.

Organized domination, according to Fanon, is made up of positive and negative oppressions. It is not like the bivalent distinctions of positive and negative liberty, as in freedom *to* and freedom *from*. For Fanon, positive oppressions include physical enslavement and even more intangible phenomena like economic indenture because they can emerge as intelligible phenomena in the discursive domains of settler culture. They are brutalizing and annihilating experiences. The fact that they *can* come to be seen, acknowledged, or written about in history textbooks, however, does not help colonized peoples much, as this in no way lessens the functioning of white European cultural supremacy as the arbiter of moral history. Just as they can be seen, they can be denied at any point; making racism and enslavement legitimate objects of scientific observation does not preclude the emergence of scientific arguments in support of racial supremacy, or historical theses that challenge the facticity of enslavement (as we've seen in recent times). Because this logic shows up as a necessary feature of the most legitimate instruments of generating truth in the West – deliberative principles based on falsifiability of truth claims – it does not come to be seen as a problem by settlers in settler colonial cultures. This is not an epistemic accident. It is the product of a deeper violence that operates in synchronicity with positive oppressions. Fanon understands this next register as negative oppression.

One way to understand negative oppression is as the multi-level suppression of cultural alternatives to European settler supremacy. It is an ongoing undoing, unmaking, erasing, 'decerebralization,' whitewashing and structured forgetting of non-European cultural traditions for the purposes of *organizing domination as a logical affair*. He refers to negative oppression as *deculturation*: 'the enterprise of deculturation turns out to be the negative of a more gigantic work of economic, and even biological enslavement.'¹³ He suggests that for positive oppressions to work long term, enslavement has to look like positive oppression but function on the basis of negative oppressions. A culture can regenerate, resist, renew itself if it has 'fertile lines of force,' as in resources of meaning and interpretation to organize resistance and communication around.¹⁴ Dispossessing Native peoples of cultural resources of interpretation like language is thus intimately linked to the dispossession of lands, territories, and bodies. Colonialism is a long game, and for this, a Native culture's 'systems of reference have to be broken,' and ultimately liquidated.¹⁵ 'Expropriation, spoliation, raids, objective murder, are matched by the sacking of cultural patterns, or at least condition such sacking. The social panorama is destructed; values are flaunted, crushed, emptied.'¹⁶ I call this hermeneutic violence. Hermeneutic violence occurs when violence is done to structures of meaning and interpretation, such as language.¹⁷ Because meaning is relational and lived, hermeneutic violence includes violence done to rivers, lands, temples, textiles, gender, and other constitutive social relations that sustain the referential network of a culture's social panorama. It can immobilize peoples

and communities in settler social spaces, and that *is a tactic of war*. On this view, it is nonsensical to talk about epistemic ‘bad luck’ or accidental cases of hermeneutic injustice against people of color, unless, of course, one is operating under a settler colonial logic and supportive infrastructural economy.

Although it is not perfectly clear in his writings, there seem to be at least two kinds of negative oppression for Fanon: deculturation and *acculturation*. They are interrelated. Acculturation is the *imposition* of European conceptual orthodoxies as the universal basis for meaning-making and legitimate knowledge practices in culture. As deculturation deteriorates Native epistemic resources, ‘in their stead a new system of values is imposed, not proposed but affirmed by the heavy weight of cannons and sabers.’¹⁸ Acculturation shows that the lingua franca of a settler culture is always already based on violence: ‘thus we witness the setting up of archaic, inert institutions, functioning under the oppressor’s supervision and patterned like a caricature of formerly fertile institutions,’ such as a government-run Bureau of Native Affairs.¹⁹ *Acculturation is needed to organize domination as a logical affair* because it provides the official (i.e., carrying salience in institutions) ordering domains for talking about and thinking through experiences of domination; it naturalizes the appearance of oppression as the routine ordering of reality and mystifies challenges to it. First among these ordering domains is universal thinking since it allows colonial logics to operate as *the* epistemic standpoint that acknowledges the existence of difference. One culture structures what counts as ‘cultural difference’ and develops official languages internal to its system, like ‘multiculturalism.’ Acculturation makes it so that, eventually, the first thing one thinks of to resist positive oppressions is based on the limits set forth by negative oppressions. On this view, rights-based claims to progressive emancipation have been filtered by (a) settler logics of European political traditions (capitalist cis-ableist-heteropatriarchy and white supremacy) that limit *the emancipatory futurity* of people of color, and (b) a prior/ongoing deculturation of non-western political alternatives. Negative oppressions thus seem to be a two-fold move that make their way to positive registers in an ideological manner. This, again, is not totally clear; Fanon seems to be relying on Marxist models of a superstructure, with negative oppressions for the base/relations of production and a Hegelian dialectic freed from ideal theory as Eurocentric history and Reason. What Fanon is clear on, however, is that the goal of negative oppressions is to preempt cultural resistance to colonialism by allowing it to regenerate – to form new bloodlines – in less and less visible ways. This is why he states that ‘the specificity of neocolonialism is to pre-empt revolutionary situations by introducing scalable methods into its system’ that are internal to the system itself.²⁰ Acculturation is thus about *power*, including the power to retain control over the very means of interpretation in culture.²¹ I call this *interpretive power* and, relatedly, the hermeneutic accumulation of

interpretive wealth as a structural basis for settler epistemic standpoints – interpretive power, among other things, produces internally consistent claims to innocence and epistemic ignorance *while perpetuating the conditions for the futurity of colonial violence*.

One clue to Fanon's understanding of the interrelations of colonial violence is his training as a medical doctor. Morphology seems to be central to the processes he describes, especially when seen in the transitions from colonialism to neocolonialism to neoliberalism and so forth.²² One of his concerns is that, over time, through morphology, acculturation works to produce empirical claims that correlate diminished awareness of violence with a material reality of diminished violence when that's clearly not the case for people of color. Alternatively, he writes, 'the truth is that the rigor of the system made the daily affirmation of a [European cultural] superiority superfluous.'²³

The metonymic power of structural violence mystifies our experiences with it. This suggests that one way of retaining control over the means of interpretation in culture is precisely by *blurring* the connections and interdependencies between positive and negative oppressions and their violences. Fanon's main example of this interdependency is the colonial phenomenon of racism.

Racism as Structural

Fanon saw structures as more than biological patterns that organize life forms in determinate ways, such as chemical bonds and molecular structures. His views on how things fit together in terms of functional (automated) patterns – especially those that are not always visible to colonial clinicians – had multiple influences that included Marxism, psychoanalysis, and his own embodied experience of racism. His main idea was that racism is not reducible to a mental habit or psychological feeling controlled by individual will. Racism is a structural phenomenon that serves a critical function in the maintenance of colonialism through its morphological processes. One of the ways racism shows up *is* as an individual prejudice, but that is the product of settler cultural dominance itself. As such, 'it is... not as a result of the evolution of people's minds that racism loses its virulence. No inner revolution can explain this necessity for racism to seek more subtle forms, to evolve.'²⁴ That is why it is not possible to eradicate racism at the individual level; it doesn't operate the way it always seems to 'show up.' Negative oppressions are thus critical in the emergence of racism as a structural phenomenon that includes positive oppression manifestations of racism, *but can persist without them* (as in a 'post-racial' society).

To explain this, it is helpful to remember that Fanon thinks colonialism is a *process*, not a historical event that came and went. As a process, colonialism has no 'endpoint' or

terminus to conquest; the telos of manifest destiny is inherent in its structure. The colonist will thus never be satisfied with settling or taking Native lands as a political act, for to settle is to reign as if *futurity* itself belongs to settlers. This means the possibility of non-futurity, a world in which Anglo-European culture is not in charge, is constantly guarded against:

In the colonialist perspective, a minimum of terror has to be upheld on the land being occupied. Police, racist administrators and prevaricators, colons of abominable dishonesty and perverse enjoyment, weave over the entire colonized country a very tight network within which the native comes to feel literally immobilized.²⁵

Whenever settler futurity is challenged a recirculation of racism will emerge in form and proportion to its challenge, even when some forms of racism have been thought surpassed. This is because the main function of racism is to immobilize colonized peoples – whether as a structural, psychological, or physical paralytic. The goal of colonialism is thus to find ways for social reorganizations of colonialism to emerge in tandem with cultural, economic, and technological changes without ever changing the very culture of coloniality. On this view, the burden will always fall on people of color to show how, precisely, the prison system is an extension of slavery; one will have to become an expert on their own oppression to make the case for the reality of oppression. This is why Fanon writes, ‘racism has not managed to *harden*. It has had to *renew* itself, to adapt itself, to change its appearance. It has had to undergo the fate of the cultural whole that informed it...[it] is only one element of a vaster whole: that of the *systematized oppression* of a people.’²⁶

Acculturation allows for the rationalization of the idea that racism is an interpersonal bias at its core – that it’s ultimately a fight over hearts and minds, not land or bodies. It also provides the backdrop for frameworks for thinking about violence as the extra-legal use of force that will always criminalize resistance to uses of force that *can* be litigated as ‘legal’ (because the infrastructural support is colonial), such as police, military, or state violence against people of color. This definition of violence, as the extra-legal use of force, was forged in Roman law and its intersections with enslavement and territorial expansion; when coupled with the universal rationalism of Enlightenment legal thinking, it easily came to provide the bedrock for legal thinking in settler, colonial, and imperial nations. The goal of the standard view of violence is thus to have an innocence-effect of scientific neutrality and impartiality on par with Newtonian laws of motion, but with the actual effect of securing settler futurity.

As a negative oppression that is the Janus-head of deculturation, acculturation produces what Fanon calls *rational racism*. Rational racism differs from the forms of racism made recognizable by positive oppression, such as “vulgar racism.”²⁷ Vulgar racism, ‘in its biological form corresponds to the period of crude exploitation of man’s arms and legs,’ but given that racism is a functional component of organized domination, Fanon thinks its formulations will morph alongside the developing means of exploitation in culture. Thus, ‘the perfecting of the means of production inevitably brings about the *camouflage* of the techniques by which man is exploited, hence the forms of racism.’²⁸ This camouflage does not erase the reality of racism for people of color, but it does shroud it in ‘verbal mystification.’ Organized domination suggests that settler ignorance is a structural benefit of colonial violence; settlers remain subjects of and in their own history. Meanwhile, ‘exploitation, tortures, raids, racism, collective liquidations, rational oppression take turns at different levels in order literally to make of the native an object in the hands of the occupying nation.’²⁹ This multi-level approach to domination is critical for recognizing that ‘the setting up of the colonial system does not of itself bring about the death of a native culture.’³⁰ Positive oppression is only one – albeit brutalizing – feature of colonial violence.

Ultimately, for Fanon, the experience of racism is never accidental but made possible by an interlocking web of material, social, economic, and epistemic conventions rooted in the Anglo-European colonial project, with colonial violence playing a central role. According to Fanon, racism has had *and will continue to have* a unique stronghold on cultures whose infrastructures and institutions are rooted in colonial violence. By colonial violence he means a multifaceted, ‘poly-dimensional,’ sustained cultural project of positive and negative oppressions aimed at maintaining a doctrine of cultural hierarchy through organized practices of domination, like racism. Racism is therefore not a logical concept (in the sense of timeless universals) or mental habit. Racism functions by helping to sustain organized domination as the uncoupling of the power of the dominated to resist from the resources that might help them do so, including their own sense of themselves and their lands. Colonial culture instrumentalizes universal frames of reference so that it is easy to maintain that racists and anti-racists are both violent in the same ways without contradiction, as in Donald Trump’s 2017 account of ‘violence on both sides’ in Charlottesville, Virginia. This suggests that whoever wields the parameters for defining, conceptualizing, and prohibiting violence wields the socio-economic engine of culture. It also suggests that progressive emancipation, the idea that ‘with time all this will disappear,’ is not a historical force but a colonial metafunction; a grand narrative that abjures what it promotes in name.³¹ As such, it will continue to generate contradictions in our lives whenever we run up against the poly-dimensional reemergence of colonial racism in so-called post-racial, multicultural democracies.

II. *The Secret Life of Violence*

Structural Complicity

Fanon's structural witnessing was no prophetic gift. The capacity to identify the structural inner-workings of colonial violence is prevalent in the long quillwork of anti-colonial women of color feminist and Indigenous theorizing, as in the work of Audre Lorde and Lee Maracle. One of the reasons I think Fanon has risen to the scale of historical audibility in the commonwealth of screams against colonial violence is that his voice can operate in some of the same colonial registers he critiques. He was incontrovertibly homophobic, denying the existence of homosexuality in his native Martinique and expressing 'revulsion' at the thought of hearing one man say to another, 'he is so sensual!'³² His sexism and misogynoir knew few bounds; in "Algeria Unveiled", he instrumentalized women's bodies in revolutionary struggle as collateral sites of actual detonation of violence. While Black men could, obliquely, regain their humanity through the physical violence pummeled into their oppressors, women paid with their lives to say *their* 'no more.' Unsurprisingly, his analysis of sexual violence almost always triangulated with men's experiences and women's alleged failures. He was especially critical of Black women's intellectual production when it challenged his theories, even if (or because) they were trailblazers, as was the case with Mayotte Capécia's *Je suis Martiniquaise* (I am a Martinican Woman) (1948). While he pathologized the psychological narrative of a Black woman's confrontation with being abandoned, with child, by a white man, he makes no mention of his own abandonment of a woman and their child for a Frenchwoman. These are not contradictions, these are *complicities*. As such, they give him interpretive access to domains of intelligibility that carry salience in the epistemic registers of western European history and intellectual traditions. This does not erase the facticity of racism and colonial violences he writes about, but rather complicates it. It shows that colonial structural dominance is an even more powerful phenomenon because it performs its own critique, allowing the most salient features of the colonial panorama to be transmitted from generation to generation via challenges to it by colonized subjects: racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, casteism, and their intersections with sexual violence are very often administered by racialized men, even if the toxicity of what they administer did not originate with them but with settler colonial culture. Fanonianism without anti-colonial feminism is thus another lifeline of colonialism.

Recently, the fieldwork of Félix Germain has confirmed what some of us have long suspected about Fanon's relationship to women: he was a very violent man. As Germain reports,

During my fieldwork in Paris, I discovered that Fanon's private life, especially his relationship with his partner [Josie Fanon], was punctuated by violence. When I interviewed Paulin Joachim...[who] knew Fanon very well, he admitted witnessing a disturbing event during a social gathering at a cafe. Mr. Joachim, who had gone out with Fanon and his partner, saw the couple arguing. Eventually the argument escalated into a violent outburst. According to Mr. Joachim, Fanon lost his temper and slapped the woman in the face. Apparently, this was not an isolated incident. Mr. Joachim asserts, 'He used to hit his wife in the bedroom; he once did it in front of me, Ibrahim Seïd, and Ado Maurice. He did it to humiliate her, and he would say 'I avenge myself'. He was violent. He was a very violent man.' Professor Maryse Condé, who I later interviewed, also mentioned hearing similar stories from the mouths of his family members. Fanon's behavior, however, did not surprise her. She claimed, 'I am not surprised because we've learned to disassociate men's private relationships with their partner(s) from their intellectual accomplishments. Sometimes we expect these things'.³³

Josie Fanon committed suicide in Algiers in 1989, shortly after the public riots and uprisings that led to the fall of the *Front de libération nationale* (FLN) and the start of civil war. David Macey, perhaps the most noted of Fanon's biographers, is largely silent on this, adding only that Josie 'was always very reluctant to talk about her private life, and especially her life with Fanon, and their relationship has never really been described.'³⁴ This inattention is not accidental; one only thinks to look for what one already suspects to be missing. Antennas for detecting silences surrounding women's lives *and the circumstances that produce them* are critical components of anti-colonial theory. Without them, one can underwrite a tacit commitment to violences that support other violences – ones we sometimes track and make visible – but do not get at the root of the processes of automation and systemic violence that constitute colonial oppression. This is particularly important for tracking and identifying violences against racialized women – especially Indigenous women – who are perpetually made sub-audible by colonial violence.

The Alterity of Violence

Alterity describes what escapes articulation in dominant cultural registers yet forms an indelible feature of experience. When applied to violence, it does not mean violence is not a physical force, only that femicides and epistemicides alike take a toll on our collective bodies, spirits, and chances of survival; we should have tools that tackle the wide spectrum of harms and forces that interlock in support of coloniality and its multiple blows to our

lived bodies. But there are limits to alterity as a way to organize our thinking about structural violence against women of color. Using alterity to talk about violence can be dangerous; it can be used to prioritize interpretive dilemmas and incommensurabilities at a time when the only thing left to interpret are corpses and causes of death. It can also be used to suggest people who endure violence are unclear about the nature of what is happening to them.³⁵ While the traumatic impact of violence can register in profoundly different ways for each of us, I do not think that people who bear out the logics of colonial violences are generally in the dark about what is happening to them, or that one is in need of a generational seer, scientist, or structural account to make sense of things. I think violence is experienced and understood by those who live it; it is never so radically incommensurable that it is nothing. My bones know this. However, it is possible to become estranged from one's bodily knowledge when one seeks confirmation of one's experience amidst the public structures of settler colonial cultures. This confirmation is not existential or heuristic but motivated by the need to seek justice in an unjust world – to get help, quite literally, from a domestic violence shelter, a legal statute, or an institutional policy. Women of color all too often seek assistance from anti-violence advocacy organizations only to find that the supporting conventions of colonialism answer the doorbell. Caught in a web of violent responses to violence, you begin to question the trustworthiness of your own experience. So my concern is not with individual difference in the experience of violence but with the subordinated role our sense-making plays in the social institutions, discourses, and public logics most tied to colonial power (law, medicine, politics, education). This is where alterity can be useful as a conceptual tool – by linking lived experiences with their social *silencing*. It is also where Fanon's structural witnessing can *appear* to be helpful, since it looks at practices of silencing from the standpoint of the role they play in organized domination.

I think we can still make critical use of Fanon in a broader emancipatory social theory, but for this we have to read Fanon *against Fanon* through the alterity of violence. We can use alterity to show that what gets annihilated in the production (Mayotte Capécia, racialized women, Indigenous and non-binary identities, for example) of anti-colonial narratives like Fanon's, which is critically important for understanding that the *functional asymmetries* produced through structural violence in settler colonial societies rest on their *reproducibility*, not their identification. We can show, for example, that colonial institutions are built to give explanatory priority to commensurable differences – things that can be made intelligible if that difference has a *positive* valence – so that in the moment one speaks to power *through that power*, hospitable domains are identified as sites for colonial reproducibility. The secret life of violence thus tacitly rests on networks of negative valences – on the structural unintelligibility of cultural power as, for example, non-normative bodies, voices, corporeal connections to waterways, Native plants, and lands.

Structural justice, as a rejection of the organized failure of understanding that prevents infrastructural support for non-dominant peoples and communities, thus begins with a deep *refusal*.³⁶

Refusing Violence

Historically, anti-colonial theories of harm and violence that obscure the particularities of racialized and Indigenous women's realities are the standard, not the exception. Women's interests have been consistently subsumed under the broader goals of liberation struggles for generations; Fanon's structural witnessing of racism is no different.³⁷ Fanon saw how there is a range of harms produced when violence is held hostage to functions and definitions borne to only one cultural tradition – violence's secret life as an instrument of cultural power – yet he could not see it working in his own body. He was able to recognize the replication of *lytic* cycles of colonial violence, but not the *lysogenic* cycles. The latter would have required an epigenetic, intergenerational perspective that points to one's own embeddedness and incorporation into the host genome. The lysogenic view pushes one to see that one's witnessing of dispossession takes place on epistemic positionalities complicated by colonialism. To the fact, for example, that I write this as both an Indo-Mestizx Mexican woman resisting colonization and a settler living on (and theorizing from) Indigenous Pottawatomie, Ottawa, and Ojibwe lands in Michigan. Colonial violence has levels, and so should its examination.

There was a time in the so-called colorblind society of the post-civil rights era that tremendous energy was spent sounding the alarm of structural racism and the continuation of Jim Crow by other means: in schools, health care systems, prisons, and legal system. What has changed is the alleged 'reappearance' (because it is not new to many) of vulgar racism in culture and the corresponding need to make the same case. This alone should alarm. Vulgar racism is not foundational, an aberration located in 'in the hearts and minds' of those who espouse it. There is nothing new about Trumpism. We do not need Fanon to see that violence (codified as the extra-legal use of force) has been a cultural good reserved for those who *already participate in the system that systematizes violence* – its secret life in our lives as people of color living in settler colonial societies.

One does not need to have read Fanon to sense there is something strategically amiss in an institutional logic that censures the liberational consciousness of those it disproportionately institutes and extracts cheap labor from. That it is unsurprising, in the age of Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow* and *Black Lives Matter*, that Fanon remains

on the list of prohibited books alongside *The Black People's Prison Survival Guide* and *Independent Black Leadership in America*. The question is: what structures the sense of surprise in the first place? What logic engineers the social imagination to reveal fracture and discontinuity – the 'I can't believe this is so!' – where, from the standpoint of so many, it is mundanely so. Given the renewed force of racism and white supremacy once thought to have been surpassed in colorblind multicultural democracies, Fanon's work is poised for yet another renaissance, one I worry about in the context of structural violence against women of color.

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Notes

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- 1 Michigan Department of Corrections, "Restricted Publication List," Revised November 2014. I wish to thank Axelle Karera, Kristie Dotson and Nora Berenstain for their support and assistance with various stages of this project. I have benefited greatly from our conversations on oppression and resistance.
- 2 Alec Shea, "Banning Black Liberation," Accessed July 22, 2018.
<https://www.muckrock.com/news/archives/2017/aug/04/michigan-doc-fanon/>
- 3 Fanon, "Racism and Culture" in *Toward the African Revolution*, Trans. Haakon Chevalier (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 38.
- 4 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*. (New York: Grove Press, 2005), 221.
- 5 Fanon expressed public support of Dr. Kwame Nkrumah's non-violent strategies for gaining Ghanaian independence; for related documents see Jean Khalifa and Robert J.C. Young's *Frantz Fanon: Alienation and Freedom*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018.

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- 6 This image was partly due to the dominance of European periodicals, editors and publishers on African affairs. Editorial descriptions rarely captured the complexity of Fanon's ideas and generally reduced them to political dogma for the FLN, particularly as international tensions in cold war politics heightened. It is often forgotten that the publication of *The Wretched of the Earth* coincided with the publication of Che Guevara's *Guerrilla Warfare* and the Cuban Revolution; this contributed to the heightening of securitization discourses against perceived leftist uprising and populist insurgency. In this context, *The Wretched of the Earth* easily became mythologized as nationalist war manual, "un livre de guerre" on par with Guevara's *Warfare*. See Robert Schwenger, *Review of The Wretched of the Earth*, *Monthly Labor Review*, Vol. 86, No. 2 (February 1963): 185-198; and Jean-Marie Domenach, "Les Damnés de la Terre" *Esprit*, Nouvelle série, No. 305 (4) (AVRIL 1962): 634-645.
- 7 Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 6.
- 8 Fanon, "Letter to the Resident Minister" in *Towards the African Revolution*, 53.
- 9 Elena Ruíz, "Existentialism for Postcolonials: Fanon and the Politics of Authenticity," *APA Newsletter on Hispanic /Latino Issues in Philosophy*, Vol. 15, no. 2, Spring 2016.
- 10 Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 5.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 32.
- 12 This framing of Fanon's work is most recognizable in his discussion of colonial medicine. See his 1952 essay, "The North African Syndrome."
- 13 Fanon, "Racism and Culture," 31.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 34.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 33, 38.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 33.
- 17 Language here is not reducible to speech acts. Fanon extends this idea in "The Negro and Language," in *Black Skin, White Masks*.
- 18 Fanon, "Racism and Culture," 34.
- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 Frantz Fanon, "National Independence: The Only Possible Outcome," *El Moudjahid*, No. 10, September, reprinted in Khalfa and Young, *Frantz Fanon: Alienation and Freedom*, 552.
- 21 One of the ways it does this is through logical universalism. When applied to culture, it promotes an understanding of culture as an organic, value-free phenomenon that results in the natural development, contraction or decay of cultural formations. This hides the instrumental function of universality, wherein one is 'concerned about Man but strangely not about the Arab' (Fanon, "Letter to a Frenchman," 48).
- 22 Part of Fanon's lexical imaginary for this process of structural self-regeneration comes from his medical training. Fanon often speaks of deculturation as a "sclerosis" or hardening of cultural arteries, and of colonial violence as a morphological process or angiogenesis that leads to cultural malignancies yet recedes into the background unnoticed. Angiogenesis is the formation of new blood vessels in the body; it involves the growth, migration, but also differentiation of certain kinds of cells that line blood vessel walls. While angiogenesis inhibitors were not yet a standard part of treatment protocols for hematologic malignancies like leukemia, it is remarkable to see the linkages between Fanon's thinking about structures, his own experience of illness (he died at 36 of leukemia), and the regenerative of qualities he attributes to colonialism as a kind of cancer.
- 23 Fanon, "Racism and Culture," 37.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 35.
- 25 Frantz Fanon, "The Cavalry of a People," *El Moudjahid*, No. 13, November 1958, reprinted in Khalfa and Young, *Frantz Fanon: Alienation and Freedom*, 617.
- 26 Fanon, "Racism and Culture," 32-33, emphasis added.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 35.
- 28 *Ibid.* Emphasis added.
- 29 *Ibid.*
- 30 *Ibid.*, 34.

31 Ibid., 39.

32 Denean Sharpley-Whitting, *Frantz Fanon: Conflicts and Feminisms*. (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997), 10; Also see Kobena Mercer, "Decolonization and Disappointment: Reading Fanon's Sexual Politics," in *The Fact of Blackness*, ed. Alan Read (Seattle: Bay Press, 1996), 114-31.

33 Félix Germain, *Decolonizing the Republic: African and Caribbean Migrants in Postwar Paris, 1946-1974*. (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2016), 90.

34 David Macey, *Frantz Fanon: A Biography*. (New York: Verso, 2012), 132.

35 I think Fanon was guilty of this on many levels, like when he used western psychiatric methods to critique colonialism (medicalizing the effects of racism as a psychological disorder at the individual level), or in his critique of Capécia's work. It denies the possibility that a Black Martinican woman, *Lucette Ceranus* – not her insightful pseudonym, Mayotte Capécia – is strategically or performatively controlling a narrative. No one questions Soren Kierkegaard (or attributes bad faith to him) through his many pseudonyms when they exemplify the aesthetic sphere he so loathed *because he is afforded the epistemic credibility* of self-awareness seldom given to women of color. Fanon did not operate at this register, famously writing 'as for the woman of color, I know nothing about her.' Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*. (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 50.

36 See Audra Simpson. "Ethnographic Refusal: Indigeneity, 'Voice,' and Colonial Citizenship," *Juctures: The Journal for Thematic Dialogue* 9 (2007): 67-80.

37 See Ofelia Schutte, *Cultural Identity and Social Liberation in Latin American Thought*. New York: State University of New York Press, 1993.