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Martinique Between Fanon and Naipaul

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Antillean society is a neurotic society, a *comparison* society. Hence we are referred back from the individual to the social structure. If there is a flaw, it lies not in the 'soul' of the individual, but in his environment.

– Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*

Martinique is full of little French villages.

– Naipaul, *The Middle Passage*

What is Martinique to Frantz Fanon and to V.S. Naipaul? And who is Fanon to Naipaul, Naipaul to Fanon? This is our intellectual imaginary, our space, in what follows.

At first glance, they are two very different, if not outright opposed, thinkers. Naipaul, for all of the writerly brilliance, is famous for his critical dismissal of the Caribbean as a non-place. This dismissal underlies the melancholy of his essays, travelogues, and much of his fiction. *Naipaul, writer of the spiritually homeless*. Fanon, for all of the complexity of his thinking, is famous for his blunt and radical anti-colonial politics, his commitment to the future of Black people in his early work, then later to the colonized more broadly, and his commitment to a new future of and for the human. These commitments add an important flair to his rhetoric and plenty of urgency to his arguments. *Fanon, writer of the revolutionary moment*.

But I want to ask a contrary question: could it be that Fanon and Naipaul, in the end, have largely, if not precisely, the same understanding and critical assessment of the Caribbean? This might seem more a provocation than sober analysis, but my motivation actually lies in a key conceptual and analytical shift in Caribbean thought. I am thinking specifically Édouard Glissant's remark in *Caribbean Discourse* that Fanon *acted* on his ideas, a

remark that *suggests* and has been read by some as a moment of praise or reverence, which is a reading that reflects the primary mode of scholarly engagement with Fanon: edification and iconicity. But that is not Glissant's aim at all. Glissant, the thinker of *Antillanité* without restraint or boundary, does not in *Caribbean Discourse* understand Fanon as simply a praiseworthy man of action. Rather, Glissant wants to underscore how (or even *that*) Fanon chose to leave Martinique for Algeria because, like Naipaul, Fanon saw only desolation in the Caribbean cultural landscape. This is the mid-century moment, indeed; there is nothing particularly exceptional here. Aimé Césaire, Fanon, and Naipaul each dedicate the best of their intellect to documenting the abjection of the Caribbean as a cultural, political, and theoretical geography. And then Fanon *acted* on that. In a strange kind of temporal leap, a time puzzle embedded in acton, Algeria is for Fanon a kind of *future nostalgia*, a place where and for which one longs for what one knows is to come. Violent resistance, new identity formation, openness to/toward radical transformation, and the unprecedented art of postcolonial statecraft – this is Fanon's Algeria, but always an Algeria *avenir* and *à-venir*. It is that move toward a future nostalgia, bending time back ahead, then behind, that surely distinguishes Fanon from Naipaul. Naipaul will sit with abjection, absorb the melancholia of his (and Fanon's) diagnostic, and refuse the promise of reinvention, remaking, and new forms of being *after* the apocalypse.

Fanon: the hopeful messianic.

Naipaul: the abject wanderer.

In the sketches of Fanon and Naipaul that follow, then, I will argue that the differences between Fanon and the early Naipaul are largely at the level of affect and rhetorical sensibility – a difference that reflects and produces another kind of relation to time. The past interrupts the future in Fanon's work, irrupting into the present and opening the possibility of new forms of the human. Radical, revolutionary action and becoming. The time of hope. The past drags across the existential stretch of historical memory in Naipaul's work, a contagion akin to a negative sublime that produces wandering, homeless postcolonial subjects, the strange and estranged ruins of Mr. Biswas' house, men set adrift at a bend in the river. Timeless melancholia. Between hope and melancholia, there is Martinique, an interval toward an immovable present – little French villages – or another present, then future – a shift in environment, Algeria as nostalgia that comes from the future. Across these differences, and motivated by it, Fanon and Naipaul fundamentally agree about the character of the Caribbean as a colonized, then postcolonial, space. For both, the Caribbean is *abject space* – a shared commitment, between Fanon and Naipaul, to the notion that the Caribbean has no history and must either be abandoned (Naipaul) or be completely made new (Fanon).

My argument here is rooted in a nine-year period, 1952-1961. This period is their shared mid-century moment, a moment full of independence

struggle, global south revolution, and visions of possible ways of being *after* the colonial. I'm thinking, in particular, of how we see such important or even uncanny resonance between Naipaul's travel journal *The Middle Passage* and Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* and essays from the mid-1950s. In Naipaul's reflection on Martinique in *The Middle Passage*, he recalls the saying that it's as if a "highway" runs from Fort-de-France to Paris in order to underscore the terms of colonial alienation. This mythical highway, this absolute proximity of the metropole to Caribbean consciousness, leads Naipaul to the famous conclusion that "History is built around achievement and creation; and nothing was created in the West Indies."¹ Though it deploys a very different rhetoric, Naipaul's conclusion is not altogether different than Fanon's characterization of Martinique in the same period. Fanon's claim that Martiniquans are "an ironic people" in a 1955 essay extends his account of colonial alienation in *Black Skin, White Masks*. The function of colonialism inside the psyche as guilt, shame, and inferiority further informs Fanon's brief, yet decisive, remarks on blues, jazz, creole, pidgin, and other vernacular cultural forms; the rejection of vernacular cultural formation is rooted in a vision of the world as object *at its very foundation*, without resistance or difference – a robust afropessimism. Fanon's conclusion to *Black Skin, White Masks* and his reflection the new humanism in *The Wretched of the Earth* brings that rejection of vernacular culture to conceptual fruition by eschewing history and imagining a future without precedent.

What are we to make of this unexpected proximity? To begin, it brings the postcolonial question of "the new" to the fore. How is the future to be imagined? In the postcolonial moment, we must imagine the future as a new culture, society, and politics. What is the relation of the new to the past? We learn from Fanon and Naipaul that any *radical* sense of the new proceeds from the abjection of life under colonialism. Further, and thinking after Fanon and Naipaul and their moment, that abjection of life lies at the root of critical questions raised by theorists of creoleness and creolization – in particular, the works of Derek Walcott and Glissant, but also Kamau Brathwaite, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphael Confiant. The creolist question returns thinking to vernacular forms and identifies in those forms – *pace* Fanon and Naipaul – complex, everyday strategies of resistance, voice, expression, and their own senses of the new. In that return to the vernacular, the meaning of decolonization, in its cultural context, takes on a very different tenor and aim, a tenor and aim that reveals key, even foundational aspects of Fanon's and Naipaul's thinking that *themselves* have to be decolonized.

The West Indies as History

In his 1962 travelogue *The Middle Passage: The Caribbean Revisited*, Naipaul offers a series of impressions of a cluster of Caribbean islands, remarking on the (putatively) stalled cultural formation he sees, the often destitute or

pathetic yearning he detects, and, throughout those impressions offers a conception of history *after* colonialism. Or, perhaps better put, Naipaul asks: what has happened to history in the Caribbean? And what are we to make of the Caribbean after its history? What was made of the Caribbean, and what remains in colonialism's aftermath?

But before that bit from *The Middle Passage*, let me pause for a moment to recount the crux of his argument, such as it is, in the chapter on Martinique. Here, Naipaul tells a story of Martinique one would expect. The island is afro-Caribbean, yet administered at every level by the French *even in the absence of the French*. This "even in the absence" is crucial. Colonialism, of course, is more than the domination of one geographic place by another locale. Colonialism manifests, in Naipaul's book, in his long descriptions of Martiniquan manners, values, habits, linguistic distinctions – descriptions which mirror Fanon's account of the importance of diction in *Black Skin, White Masks* – and Naipaul notes the presence of a very French antisemitism even in the absence of any Jewish presence. Frenchness, which is akin if not equivalent to whiteness, is the colonial *aspiration*. And so, in a passage that sounds like something from the opening chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks*, Naipaul writes:

At all levels in Martinique race is important and inescapable. This is one reason perhaps why Martiniquans are all Frenchmen. All cannot be white, but all can aspire to Frenchness, and in Frenchness all are equal.²

Naipaul, like Fanon, offers this vision of "equality" as a satirical, perhaps tragic and most certainly melancholic, commentary on how the wake of colonialism overwhelms desire, not just in terms of the fraught sexuality Fanon outlines in the central chapters of *Black Skin, White Masks*, but in the very desire to be. *French* is not just a language, a tool, or a geographic location. French and Frenchness is being itself.

Naipaul's description of Martinique is not merely observation. Rather, it is infused with a larger question of H/history and its meaning in the West Indies. If colonialism operates at the level of the repressive and ideological state apparatuses (something his chapter on Martinique details), and that operation produces a near-absolute identification of the colonized with the terms of their alienation, we have to ask: what does this reveal about the colonial condition in the colony? For Naipaul, it reveals the consequences – which are not only island-specific, but endemic to the archipelago as a whole – of colonialism's radical transformation of historical consciousness. That is, the brutality of Europe in the West Indies does *not* produce a landscape of ruins from which memory reactivates traces, and so the post- or anti-colonial critic and creative does not (or simply cannot) revitalize what has been rendered impotent (*pace* Césaire) by centuries of violence. Such revitalizing work is left to the fantasies of Négritude and other forms of pre- (and perhaps post-) black Atlantic nationalisms. Naipaul understands the brutality of

H/history embedded in the Caribbean landscape to be a signal of nothing except its own nothingness. The New World has never been new. Therefore, it has never been a world. In a famous passage, Naipaul writes:

How can the history of this West Indian futility be written? What tone shall the historian adopt? Shall he be as academic as Sir Alan Burns, protesting from time to time at some brutality, and setting West Indian brutality in the context of European brutality? Shall he, like Salvador de Madariaga, weigh one set of brutalities against another, and conclude that one has not been described in all its foulness and that this is unfair to Spain? Shall he, like the West Indian historians, who can only now begin to face their history, be icily detached and tell the story of the slave trade as if it were just another aspect of mercantilism? *The history of the islands can never be satisfactorily told. Brutality is not the only difficulty. History is built around achievement and creation; and nothing was created in the West Indies.*³

I quote at length because this passage bears within it some of the most complex issues of theorizing Caribbean memory, history, and identity. As well, it underscores key themes treated in the body of *The Middle Passage*, functioning as a thread that ties (or promises to tie) together a range of mediations as Naipaul travels from the metropole(s) to Trinidad, Guiana, Surinam, Martinique, and Jamaica. At each stop, brutality doubles itself in the abyss of non-creation. There is no history to be told. There is only melancholy and the aspiration to *be* the metropole. The metropole is being. Being is alienation *in* and *as* existential aspiration.

How does Fanon understand Martinique, and therefore the Caribbean as such? This question concerns both how Fanon's work works as a theory of the colonized and what it means that Fanon left the Caribbean for Algeria. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, the work in which we find the most thorough description of the West Indies, Fanon describes the Caribbean as a prison *without prospect*. The alienated Caribbean, as we know from both Naipaul and Fanon, sees Europe as liberation, but the schema of race, nation, and identity fates this strategy to failure. In his description of the prison and prospectless landscape, Fanon turns to Césaire's *Notebook*, which serves as a kind of ur-text for theorizing the meaning of place in the West Indies. Fanon writes:

The black Antillean, prisoner on his island, lost in an atmosphere without the slightest prospect, feels the call of Europe like a breath of fresh air. For we must admit that Césaire was overly generous in his *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*. The city of Fort-de-France is truly lackluster and shipwrecked. Over there on the slopes of the sun is...

And then Fanon quotes Aimé Césaire's *Notebook*:

...the city – flat, sprawled, tripped up by its common sense, inert, winded under the geometric weight of its eternally renewed cross, at

odds with its fate, mute, baffled, unable to circulate the pith of this ground, embarrassed, lopped, reduced, cut off from fauna and flora.⁴

This particular engagement with Césaire, brief as it is, turns Fanon's attention to the senses and landscape, and so how colonialism infects, damages, and even destroys the colonized subject at every level, all the way to our sensual embodied presence of the world. Place is uninhabitable *except* as or in the mode of alienation. Martiniquans are an "ironic" people. Words and values aren't grounded, but, at best, set at play. When that play of word and value is run through the epidermal schema of racism, the particular form of alienation described in *Black Skin, White Masks* takes root not only in the black body, but also in the landscape and place called the Caribbean. Naipaul's remark that nothing was created *here* starts to resonate even more with Fanon.

The ideological appropriation of the skin by racism - what Fanon simply calls epidermalization - is pushed deeper into the psyche and its possibilities by language and diction. Language is in part embedded in the landscape as the aural dimension of identification and place, but, as Fanon is quick to note, the aurality of identity is never placing, but always dis-placing. He writes:

All colonized people - in other words, people in whom an inferiority complex has taken root, whose local cultural originality has been committed to the grave - position themselves in relation to the civilizing language: i.e., the metropolitan culture. The more the colonized has assimilated the cultural values of the metropolis, the more he will have escaped the bush. The more he rejects his blackness and the bush, the whiter he will become.⁵

This passage touches on familiar themes from the early Fanon, namely, the relationship between inferiority complex and the metropole and the racialization of both. But he also sketches the peculiar geography of this dynamic by writing space and landscape through the deep intellectual, psychological, and cultural work of language. I think Fanon scholarship has for the most part understood the work of language on psyche and culture (Fanon's theory is not especially complicated), but I wonder if the link between language and place has been fully appreciated. History makes Martinique a prison. Language seals that prison in the psyche.

Language is everything in *Black Skin, White Masks*, and in some ways sets the terms of decolonization - both in terms of deepening the meaning of colonialism and therefore deepening the meaning of violence - in that text through *The Wretched of the Earth*. The "everything" of language becomes a matter of political action in the later Fanon, but that politics is rooted in the cultural question. Two short passages make this clear. First:

To speak means being able to use a certain syntax and possessing the morphology of such and such a language, but it means above all assuming a culture and bearing the weight of a civilization.⁶

And second:

To speak a language is to appropriate its world and culture. The Antillean who wants to be white will succeed, since he will have adopted the cultural tool of language.⁷

Language, like the intersubjective construction of the body's meaning, carries a racial schema. Language is ideological in Althusser's sense, in that language, for Fanon, both produces and reproduces the racialized and racist society in which it is rooted. Language as *Bildung*. Language as the bearing of the weight of a civilization's racism inside the black body and psyche. The racialization of language, the claim of Négritude upon which Fanon draws so strongly, thereby threads together the alienation "from fauna and flora" to the abstraction of language, imagination, intellect, and tradition to the body. We see this in Fanon's short remark on moral consciousness, where he writes:

Moral consciousness implies a kind of split, a fracture of consciousness between a dark and a light side. Moral standards require the black, the dark, and the black man to be eliminated from this consciousness. A black man, therefore, is constantly struggling against his own image.⁸

The affective life of Fanon's subject is therefore not just a description, but also (or instead) a systematically elaborated structure in which affective life is a symptom that draws out the deeper, broader structures that mark Martinique as a landscape of abjection. And so, with this accumulation of elements of anti-black colonial racism, Fanon has completed his argument for the provocative claim that "[t]here is nothing comparable when it comes to the black man. He has no culture, no civilization, and no 'long historical past.'"⁹

Was anything *made* or *created* in the West Indies?

Origin Landscapes

In "Reading and Writing," Naipaul offers a short meditation on Joseph Conrad's work, work with which he feels a surprising and almost elliptical affinity, and Naipaul there turns to autobiography in order to describe the relationship between reading and a sense of place. This is important because it inscribes the question of place - what it means to belong, and therefore to flourish outside conditions of inexorable alienation (colonialism's cultural effect), but also what it means to be adrift in alienation - in language and storytelling. Writing and reading both reflect and create a sense of connection or disconnection to the world; in a word, writing and reading are ideological in the very same measure that they are existential (can we really separate the ideological and the existential under colonialism and in its wake?). Naipaul writes:

But when I went to the books themselves I found it hard to go beyond what had been read to me. What I already knew was magical; what I

tried to read on my own was very far away. The language was too hard; I lost my way in social or historical detail...When it came to the modern writers their stress on their own personalities shut me out: I couldn't pretend to be Maugham in London or Huxley or Ackerley in India.

I wished to be a writer. But together with the wish there had come the knowledge that the literature that had given me the wish came from another world, far away from our own.¹⁰

This distance becomes for Naipaul question of audience, but here in this passage it is a question of how to understand literature, influence, and culture as the *precondition* of writing. Reading makes writing, not in the sense that one must see *exactly* oneself in order to write without alienation (that's much too strong), but instead that a sense of *how* and *why* one belongs to a place *and* in a tradition is crucial. In "Conrad's Darkness and Mine," an essay devoted exclusively to Conrad's work, Naipaul revisits the theme:

To be a colonial was to know a kind of security; it was to inhabit a fixed world. And I suppose that in my fantasy I had seen myself coming to England as to some purely literary region, where, untrammelled by the accidents of history or background, I could make a romantic career for myself as a writer. But in the new world I felt that ground move below me.¹¹

This passage describes, in particular, Naipaul's time at Oxford and shortly after, where his life felt an utter failure, but it also describes how that particular moment embodies the larger question of the Antilles, colonialism, and the possibility of writing. And then, elsewhere in the same essay:

It came to me that the great novelists wrote about highly organized societies. I had no such society; I couldn't share the assumptions of the writers; I didn't see my world reflected in theirs. My colonial world was more mixed and secondhand, and more restricted.¹²

This last description is revealing and instructive. The mixed character of the colonial world is akin to Fanon's description (in the voice of a wounded soldier) of that world, and being black within it, as an *amputation*. A certain ideology of purity orients both Naipaul and Fanon, and they distinguish themselves from Césaire – whose relation to that same ideology produces the mourning that becomes Négritude – by the melancholia of Naipaul's reflections on place and the radical optimism in Fanon's imagination of a future. Naipaul's melancholy, and we can see this in the famous account of the Tulsis family home's decay and its oppressive disorder, is linked to a sense of ruin without promise; place, alienation, and death come from H/history, the house collapses, and so Mr. Biswas imagines a house of his own. Fanon's description of Martiniquans as "an ironic people" has the same fundamental resonance. Ironic, never sincere, the cultural and psychological space of Fanon's West Indies is unrooted and, in its unrooting, unproductive of

anything other than alienated mimicry (think here, again, of his reflections on diction in *Black Skin, White Masks*).

As well as a parallel description of place – with all the implications of history and memory – this is a question that produced so much critical reflection in the 1950s and 1960s in the Caribbean: what is an audience? And, particularly, what is an audience in colonized space for the anti- or post-colonial writer? To where does that writer write? As we have seen, Naipaul's writer writes from a fundamentally alienated place, toward a writerly culture – and here we would have to pose the question of audience that occupied so many anglophone writers in the 1950s and 1960s – that is still to come. But for Fanon, the writer, like every intellectual, is engaged, in the act of writing itself, in the process of decolonization, both as a charge for internal transformation and as an efficient cause in anti-colonial struggle. For both Fanon and Naipaul, writing is a question of the new, the future, the to-come which is, for the West Indies, unprecedented. What are we to make of this compulsion to think the new in such radical terms?

Let me pause, shift registers, and turn to two passages in order to open up the question of landscape, history, and culture. The first passage is from an old 1920s blues and string band lyric, a lyric and song that has many variations across genres in African American music, but returns each time to this turn of phrase:

If trouble don't kill me / I believe I'll never die

The lyric comes up a lot in profoundly sad and mournful songs, of course. It is a blues song. A song of mourning of life given only to death, which then produces fantasies of evasion, flight, and escape from the only thing known: trouble. But it is also a dance tune. I am thinking about this lyric alongside a passage from the “Coda” to Marisa Parham's *Haunting and Displacement* book. Parham writes, on death and blackness:

In speaking of a population generally familiar with the facts of living too hard and dying too soon, there is nothing new in saying that narratives of mourning and loss are foundational to African-American subjectivity and, by extension, black cultural expression. Perhaps such reaping is inevitable.¹³

These two snippets fit together in that they both begin with the notion of *troublin'* not as an event in life, but the condition of African American life itself. Trouble kills; Parham talks at the close of *Haunting and Displacement* about this notion of “ghetto miasma,” the idea that, folded into the 1920s lyric, trouble is not just beleaguerment, but it will kill you. It is life, which is death. Life is unimaginable without trouble, so if it weren't for *troublin'*, how could death even be imagined?

My interest in this pairing – death and trouble – comes back to this consideration of Naipaul and Fanon, as well as a longer set of questions that

run through my readings elsewhere of Césaire and Lamming. For Naipaul and Fanon, and perhaps even at times Lamming, the Caribbean landscape is an unqualified, uncomplicated space of death. History and memory are the history and memory of the kind of massive, total and totalizing sense of *troublin'* that can only mean dying too soon after a life that was much too hard. We could in this context – of Naipaul and Fanon, but also of the black Americas more broadly – read the opening of Césaire's *Notebook* as a kind of *ur-text* for such thinking. The poem begins with a terrifying set of images from the Martiniquan landscape. Césaire writes:

*Au bout du petit matin, the extreme, deceptive desolate bed sore on the wound of the waters; the martyrs who do not bear witness; the flowers of blood that fade and scatter in the empty wind like the screeches of babbling parrots; an aged life mendaciously smiling, its lips opened by vacated agonies; an aged poverty rotting under the sun, silently; an aged silence bursting with tepid pustules, the awful futility of our raison d'être.*¹⁴

I quote this passage in full because it expresses the sentiment – which is really a metaphysics – of the Caribbean moment at the end of World War Two, thereafter: there is only and everywhere death, and death suffocates all possibility. Death is then doubled by colonialism. That is, death is the character of the landscape and its existential effects and affects and death is the end of possibility. This is why *Notebook* calls for the end of the world; Césaire's apocalyptic thinking is a response to this double effect of death.¹⁵

Death is also the condition for Naipaul's and Fanon's conceiving the Caribbean as abject space at every level, from the detailing of the police and commodity trading in the chapter on Martinique in *The Middle Passage* to the ideological apparatus of language, expression, and world in the opening chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks*. For both Fanon and Naipaul, there is just death here – their here, the West Indies – and so asking what it means to think and fashion life after colonialism, their shared postcolonial moment in the 1950s and into the 1960s, is tantamount to asking what is possible when there is only death. The answer is already written into the question: nothing is possible. This is the lesson to be drawn from Fanon's and Naipaul's accounts of the Caribbean, leaving the latter unmoored and melancholic, prompting the former's departure from the Americas and engagement with a wider, global struggle of the colonized where, perhaps, historical process could be conceived otherwise than indulgence of death.

But is death simply the impossibility of life? Or is death also a place in which complicated, haunted, and also profoundly beautiful senses of life take root? Are melancholy and flight our only modes of thinking in the colonial, then postcolonial landscape?

If trouble don't kill me, I believe I'll never die – this is the persistence of death and the impossibility of thinking or imagining without death.

Colonialism, like all those other persecutions of Black bodies, people, and life, is a landscape of death. By design. But inside that death world and its abjection is also a secret and secreted form of life, because this song, this lyrical turn, makes of death not only the quiet human beauty of a mournful blues lyric (could Fanon have been more wrong in describing the blues as a performance for white folks?), but also the playful, loud, shouting, sexy, hilarious, ecstatic dance of a string band tune. Or the rage of a juke player. Or the flirtation of the barrelhouse singer. And so on. This, for me, suggests a way of widening – and perhaps deepening – the question of vernacular cultural forms and their function inside abject space. It is not simply that such forms exist and have to be reckoned with (though that would be enough), but also that in many ways vernacularity is linked to death and, in that link, refuses the claim that death is finality and expiration.

This brings me back to the closing paragraph of Parham's *Haunting and Displacement*, where she turns to the inter-generational exchange in Julie Dash's film *Daughters of the Dust*. A discourse about inheritance and claiming on the terms of the abject who, in that inheritance and claiming, are no longer what the colonizer or enslaver or white segregationist makes of them. Parham writes:

In the care and exuberance of her narration we might come to understand how one might meet a ghost with grace and graciousness, and how simultaneously similar and dissimilar the past must always remain, remainder, from the future...Understanding recovery, understanding how lives might again become livable after terrible events, is necessary to the interpretation of any art growing out of such events. I remember and I recall, and this too must be claimed.¹⁶

How would claiming this ghost, this painful memory and recall, transform our understanding of history – a transformation brought about, let us be honest, by simply taking seriously what most cultural forms have already taken seriously over the past century – and, in that moment of claiming, witness what most immanently problematizes Fanon's and Naipaul's accounts of the Caribbean?

Let us turn to a familiar text that makes a complicated, if not just flatly wrong, claim. A wrong claim that, like so many stumbles, is instructive and clarifying. At the 1956 Paris Congress, Fanon makes a remark that leads to a series of conclusions about culture, history, and the Caribbean as abject space, but is here negotiated through a remark on African American culture. (It is also one of the few places in which Fanon remarks on slavery.) He writes:

The commercial undertaking of enslavement, of cultural destruction, progressively gave way to verbal mystification.

The interesting thing about this evolution is that racism was taken as a topic of meditation, sometimes even as a publicity technique.

Thus the blues – ‘the black slave lament’ – was offered up for the admiration of the oppressors. This modicum of stylized oppression is the exploiter's and the racist's rightful due. Without oppression and without racism you have no blues. The end of racism would sound the knell of great Negro music...

Racism bloats and disfigures the face of the culture that practices it.¹⁷

This is a remarkable passage, both troubling and revealing at the same time. What is troubling, for me, is straightforward: Fanon is unable to think seriously about vernacular cultural forms without folding them back into the white gaze. This is the part of his thought that still struggles with colonialism's deep effects and affects. Blues, on Fanon's account, is important because it is a certain performance for white people; “Armstrong's music has real meaning only in this perspective,” he writes in that same essay. What Fanon does not see is how these cultural forms are both part of strategies of resistance and survival *and* directed by Black people for other Black people. In other words, this is early work in the formation of tradition. In this case, the formation of tradition as both the African American intellectual tradition *and* American culture as such (the complexity of that is a whole other story and essay).

What is revealing, though, is how this remark (and many others like it) rejoins Fanon's thinking to that of Naipaul. For both, Caribbean history (and more generally the history of black people in the Americas) is always only abject. We just do not see any other accounting. So, the key question for theorizing *after* colonialism for both Fanon and Naipaul is how to begin with nothing or less than nothing. Naipaul is set adrift and his fiction and non-fiction offer plenty testimony to the melancholy and ambivalence that flows from that adriftedness, that homelessness. How different is Fanon, really? Fanon's funky optimism, about which I am never entirely sure how to theorize except as an apocalyptic thought, turns on a complete disavowal of history – I am not a slave to history, we want a pure future, everything hangs on the new humanism to come. It is always the same thing from Fanon, and he never draws upon interstitial histories and cultural formations. That optimism intervenes, along with a political identity of the global South conceived as the category of “the colonized” or “the wretched/damned,” in order to chart a path that avoids melancholy and ambivalence, moving outside Naipaul's affective orbit, in the name of militant precision and decisiveness. (*The Wretched of the Earth* is nothing if not decisive.)

But what really is the difference between melancholy and optimism? They seem to me to be open to one and the same interpretation, given the shared abjection of Caribbean space: symptoms of an inability to retrieve a history of resistance and expression *even under slavery and colonialism*. This retrieval is central to the thought of W.E.B. Du Bois, Alain Locke, and others in the African American tradition, with the emphasis on the Spirituals as a foundation of tradition, but we don't see it in Fanon or Naipaul. Instead, that

moment of recognition has to wait until later, when that generation of thinkers like Walcott, Brathwaite, Glissant, and others – born around the same time, but initiators of a very different orientation of thought – explores and explodes vernacular, pidgin, and creole cultural forms in the name of another future, one that does not eschew H/history, but instead makes that H/history as big as the whole world. Because it always contained a whole world in it.

History, Conclusion

The meaning of history is too much for any essay, to say the least, but let me conclude with two signature moments that frame my discussion here. At the 1956 Paris Congress, where Fanon delivered his “Racism and Culture” essay, Alioun Diop makes an important set of remarks. Diop remarks that history has “dishonored” black communities and that this dishonor come about not only through the systematic violence of four and a half centuries of slavery and colonialism, but also because *the meaning and significance* of H/history has always been at stake in coming to terms with that violence, both from its beginning in an economic desire through religious imperatives of conversion, civilizing mission, and postcolonial transition. European theorists of history have dominated the narrative that consigns only abjection to Africa and the diaspora. “[S]i cette Histoire, avec un grand H, n’était pas l’interprétation unilatérale de la vie du monde par l’Occident seul,” Diop writes, perhaps the historical meaning of Black people could have been different.¹⁸

Of course, it is with just that difference that the 1956 Congress wants to begin, following the Bandung Conference one year earlier, which focused so firmly on questions of politics and global South alliance, with a robust *cultural* programme informed largely by the metaphysics of Négritude. We could say that Diop’s remark, framed by Négritude’s epistemology of forgetting and retrieval, induces a sort of sigh. A sigh in the sense that he wants us to stop, consider the damage of the West’s story of History, and exhale at the thought of what *could have been* for people of African origin (Diop’s appeal in unifying the diaspora). Sighing over the thought for forgetting. Perhaps sighing as the work of retrieval begins.

What is a sigh? We know the physical act. We inhale and we exhale at some unexpected, always needed, depth. But sighing is so much more; it tells its own story, always so full of affect. The sigh is mournful, full of longing, expelling but also setting an affective relation to time. For what does the sigh long? What is the sigh in the New World context? There are many ways to sigh. Diop’s remark on History with a capital H is the perfect embodiment of the sigh of Négritude. The violence of European historiography and writerly practice dishonors Black history, that much is clear. This violence and dishonor, which induces forgetting in the diaspora at the level of writing and imagination, *ought*, for Diop, to induce a companion longing for the Old World of Africa – the before-times of diasporic peoples. But, of course, neither

Fanon nor Naipaul sigh over the ruins of the Americas. There is no mourning or longing that leads down the path of retrieval. Fanon rejects Négritude, whatever praise he might have for Césaire's *Notebook*, and Naipaul finds no home in south Asia. There is only the absoluteness of beginning (Fanon) and the irreducible, unaddressable melancholy of estrangement (Naipaul). Fanon derides the search for a great black past in *Black Skin, White Masks* as a nostalgia born of the flight from neurosis. Naipaul reads the Ramleela as a sad trace, a kind of cry into the abyss.

Why mention the sigh of History, the sight over ruins? It is to recall Walcott's Nobel lecture, published in *What the Twilight Says*, "The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory." This phenomenal piece begins with the question of the sigh of History, and in the rejection of the sigh – or even just noting that it does not sound or resonate clearly in the Caribbean – and joins Fanon and Naipaul by throwing a deep skepticism over claims to great, retrievable civilizational pasts. Walcott writes:

The sigh of History rises over ruins, not over landscapes, and in the Antilles there are few ruins to sigh over, apart from the ruins of sugar estates and abandoned forts.¹⁹

In this moment, Walcott cleaves an important space between what Glissant and Antonio Benítez-Rojo call "continental" and "archipelagic" thinking. The sigh of History arises from thinking diaspora on the model of a continent, with natural and firm borders that contain a people. But Walcott, in a clear address to Naipaul, goes further when he writes:

Looking around slowly, as a camera would, taking in the low blue hills over Port of Spain, the village road and houses, the warrior-archers, the god-actors and their handlers, and music already on the sound track, I wanted to make a film that would be a long-drawn sigh over Felicity. I was filtering the afternoon with evocations of a lost India, but why 'evocations'? Why not 'celebrations of a real presence'? Why should India be 'lost' when none of these villagers ever really knew it, and why not 'continuing,' why not the perpetuation of joy in Felicity and in all the other nouns of the Central Plain...?²⁰

The claim here is straightforward, but with enormous consequences: without the lure of the sigh (longing is its own kind of comfort and restoration), there is the pleasure of performance. For Walcott, and he catches himself here oscillating between repudiating the sigh and falling back to it in a quasi-colonial habit, the festival is its own event. It refers only to itself, which means, in this case, the pleasure of the song, the costumes, the words, the dialects, the vernaculars, the creolizing food and dance – that is, life itself *in this landscape as home*.

While Walcott complements Fanon and Naipaul in the repudiation of the sigh of History, and so distances himself too from Diop's imagination of

liberating Black people from History as European historiography and writerly practice, he also suggests something quite provocative. The sigh of History might also function as a ghost in Fanon's and Naipaul's work, disclosing, perhaps, a trace of colonialism still at work in each. Perhaps the sigh of History still functions as a regulative ideal, making it possible to understand the terms of cultural success (producing or being unable to produce what is worth longing for) and cultural failure (abject landscape, "nothing was created here") and, in turn, framing vernacular forms of cultural production as derivative, imitative, and degraded versions of a larger civilizational force. Fanon and Naipaul respond to this failure of the sigh of History very differently; radical optimism is very different than wandering melancholy. That is clear enough. But it does make me wonder if in fact Fanon and Naipaul share not only an account of the Caribbean as a landscape of death and abjection, but also a quiet concession to the demands of colonial historiography in affirming the demand for something enormous like civilizational force to both frame an understanding of and a go beyond failed nostalgia, abject landscape, and the strange Fanonian vision of a future of the unprecedented. Colonialism here would function as a kind of transcendental field, delineating the conditions for the possibility of the full range of critical, decolonial, and postcolonial thinking. Perhaps. And if this is right, and we set aside Naipaul's legacy for a moment, then we have to wonder if and how it might it overturn our popular imagination of Fanon? A colonized Fanon? Unimaginable. And yet.

Audience and Periodization

One of my general aims here in critically re-reading Fanon is to historicize – in the plain sense of periodization – his thought. For me, this means in part critically evaluating how he understands the Caribbean in terms of memory, history, and culture, framed by developments *after* Fanon. Too much work in philosophy and theory begins and ends with Fanon, or reads him as a sort of timeless thinker. But periodizing also means asking how we might frame Fanon's work with the questions of his moment.

In this case, I am thinking about the question of audience. It is one of Naipaul's and George Lamming's signature questions, one that operates both at the level of explicit thematization (they write about it) and in terms of what I'd call a "structuring anxiety." By *structuring anxiety*, I mean an affect and cultural concern of the moment that puts the writer out of place with him or herself. That is, the anxiety of audience arises when the writer writes to a cultural place that has not yet come into being. An interesting temporality, for sure, but altogether disconcerting. For Naipaul, this is expressed concisely and richly in his claim that "nothing was created here," which underpins his larger characterization of the Caribbean as without history. Without a history, the Caribbean, for Naipaul, is without tradition. Without tradition, there is no

audience – audience is as much an abstraction as anything, which is revealed when we think about the writer's relation to the question of tradition. Lamming's "The Negro Writer and His World" elaborates the phases of the writer, beginning with introspection and ending (in the sense of *final purpose*) with a peculiar sense of the universal. But Lamming is also well-aware of how complicated this question is for the West Indian author. How can he write as a Black writer, working through the particularities of Caribbean alienation at home and abroad, without a tradition and audience *to* and *in* which it is all addressed? Part of writing, then, might be – or, lets just say it, *is* – the *creation* of audience. For Lamming. For Naipaul, it is a theme and end unto itself. For both, exile functions as a theme that accounts for the writer's alienation *as* the search for audience, *in* the search for audience, and writing without audience.

Fanon's work does not quite raise the question of audience. So, and this is a speculative remark (what else is a conclusion for?), I wonder if we should periodize Fanon's work with just this question. The question of audience is not a market question, nor is it simply a development of literacy question. It is, rather, a question of how colonialism's colonization of *thinking* constricts the space of thinkable possibilities, and the writer, when structurally anxious, exceeds that space and writes into a place that does not yet have historical location. The novel or poem *of* that excessive new space – and I presume as well the theory – has, in some sense, no time at all.

So when Fanon writes about a break with the past, a break that is clean and absolute, he is in some ways typical of the moment *precisely because it is a moment saturated with the question of writing into a non-space or a space-to-come*. This helps us place Fanon back into his moment, and in it we can ask the sorts of questions of Fanon that we have long grown accustomed to asking of Naipaul: why are all localities reduced to unredeemable alienation? Perhaps part of the problem is that the writer fantasizes too much about the new, rather than seeing the demands on the writer from a hidden, though utterly familiar, sense of the present and how that sense connects communities to place and memory *without exile*. In that sense, I wonder if Walcott's question to Naipaul in the former's Nobel lecture – where Walcott witnesses the Ramleela festival in Felicity and wonders why anyone (Naipaul) would feel compelled to see it as a copy, rather than an event referring only to itself and its place – could not be re-formed and asked back to Fanon regarding his treatment of cultural practices like pidgin, creole, blues, jazz, and so on. Why do those vernacular forms point to the white gaze, rather than to the audience and art of culture?

Rethinking Fanon with that question in mind is one thing. But understanding why Fanon would be framed in that way in the first place might be helped by an understanding of Fanon in the moment of a structural anxiety about audience. And perhaps that also helps us understand the deeper compulsion to write away from the Caribbean, into North Africa, as not just an identification of a shared experience by the colonized (though that

is certainly an important element), but also as a kind of resolution of a deep anxiety typical of that moment in Caribbean intellectual history. People wrote *after* Fanon. People wrote *after* Fanon *for* Fanon, without a doubt, and his transnational appeal is no doubt derived, in large part, from his travel to Algeria and participation in the revolution. But some of that writing *after* Fanon locates itself in the Caribbean, in a West Indian landscape that is rendered very differently than the abject space of Fanon's and Naipaul's work. This is not a matter, simply, of some sort of intellectual Verzus. Not at all. Rather, and this is the argument from periodization, what comes *after* helps us see what came *before*.

What do we see when we re-read *Black Skin, White Masks* after Glissant, after Walcott, after the creolists? What we see is a lesson in how to see. What landscape looks like outside the white gaze. What *Antillanité* might do with abjection and its pre-drawn conclusions. It is to see the possibilities of Fanon's early work – how could we understand vernacular cultural formation without the anxieties he outlines? – but also its limitations. The colonial subaltern made a lot of noise in Martinique. To hear it, to listen to its legacy of resistance and world-making, means stepping away from the relentless futurity of *Black Skin, White Masks* and into another interpretative frame altogether. To sigh over little histories, over big History, and theorize the archipelago as a figure for thought.

To think *this place* without an elsewhere.

¹ V.S. Naipaul, *The Middle Passage: The Caribbean Revisited* (New York: Vintage, 2002), 20.

² Naipaul, *The Middle Passage*, 206.

³ Naipaul, *The Middle Passage*, 20.

⁴ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 5.

⁵ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 2-3.

⁶ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 1-2.

⁷ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 21.

⁸ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 170.

⁹ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 17.

¹⁰ V.S. Naipaul, *Reading and Writing: A Personal Account* (New York: New York Review, 2000), 6.

¹¹ V.S. Naipaul, *Literary Occasions: Essays* (New York: Vintage, 2010), 170.

¹² Naipaul, *Literary Occasions*, 168.

- ¹³ Marisa Parham, *Haunting and Displacement in African American Literature and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 109.
- ¹⁴ Aimé Césaire, "Notebook of a Return to the Native Land," in *Aimé Césaire: The Collected Poetry*, trans. Clayton Eshleman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 35.
- ¹⁵ On Césaire and apocalypse, see my "Césaire's Apocalyptic Word," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 115, no. 3 (2016): 567-584.
- ¹⁶ Parham, *Haunting and Displacement*, 113.
- ¹⁷ Frantz Fanon, "Racism and Culture," in *Toward the African Revolution*, trans. Haakon Chevalier (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 37.
- ¹⁸ Alioune Diop, "Discours d'ouverture," *Presence Africaine* 8/10 (Juin-Novembre 1956): 10.
- ¹⁹ Derek Walcott, "The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory," in *What the Twilight Says* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1999), 68.
- ²⁰ Walcott, "The Antilles," 68-69.