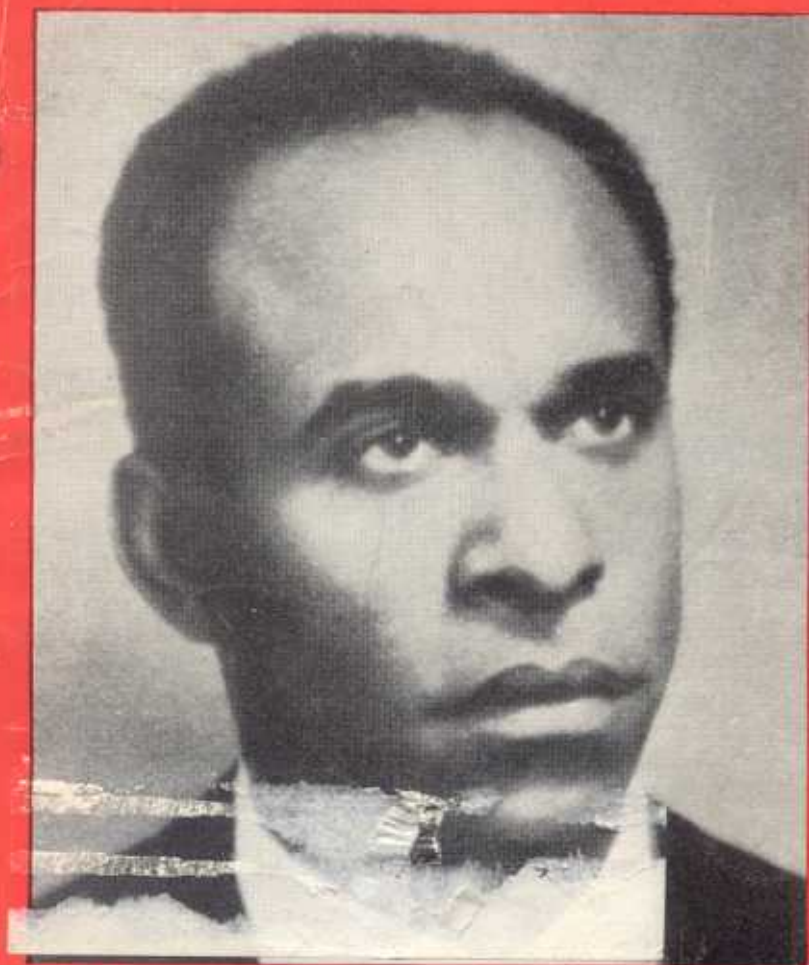


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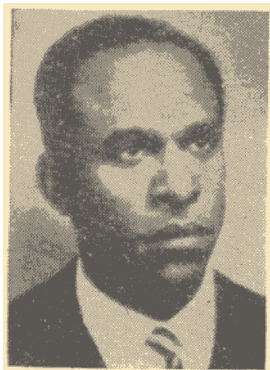


FRANTZ FANON: THE AWAKENER

An Evaluation of the Life and Work of the Martinique-Born Theoretician
of the BLACK REVOLUTION

FICTION: William Melvin Kelley

• KEORAPETSE KGOSITSILE



Power and Principle

FANON: THE AWAKENER

"To Fanon, culture meant only one thing—an environment shaped to help us and our children grow, shaped by ourselves in action against the system that enslaves us"

BY AYI KWEI ARMAH

(Note: To underline his own points and to guide the reader toward the Frantz Fanon original statements and ideas, author Ayi Kwei Armah has included quotes from the published works of Fanon. These quotes are the capitalized *Italic* sections throughout the article. The works from which they are excerpted are included at the end of the article.—The Editors)

The impotent talk endlessly of power. Beyond talk we do nothing. *I DO NOT TRUST FERVOR. FERVOR IS THE PREFERRED WEAPON OF THE IMPOTENT.*

We know who we are, where we are. We're slaves caught in a world constructed against us. We know what and where we wish we could be. It would be good to live masters of our own selves, in a world we've constructed to meet needs of our own.

THE DISASTER OF THE BLACK MAN LIES IN THE FACT THAT HE WAS ENSLAVED.

But behind us our past has been an endless disaster; our present is sheer impotence; and ahead of us even fools have begun to see destruction.

THE BLACK MAN HAS NO ONTOLOGICAL RESISTANCE IN THE EYES OF THE WHITE MAN. OVERNIGHT THE BLACK MAN HAS BEEN GIVEN TWO FRAMES OF REFERENCE WITHIN WHICH HE HAS HAD TO PLACE HIMSELF. HIS METAPHYSICS, OR, LESS PRETENTIOUSLY, HIS CUSTOMS AND THE SOURCES ON WHICH THEY WERE BASED, WERE WIPED OUT BECAUSE THEY WERE IN CONFLICT WITH A CIVILIZATION THAT HE DID NOT KNOW AND THAT IMPOSED ITSELF ON HIM.

The catastrophic drift could be stopped, if we could think clearly about where we are, decide where we want to be, then act to move

ourselves from here to there.

But thought is difficult, talk is easy. Decisive action is impossibly hard, and talk is so beautifully cool.

That's why the hottest soul food is never in short supply. Its brand name is bullshit.

In a week of days we do our ordered bit to keep this white world going above us, above our people. Weekends we meet to trade bold lies about our freedom, lost and found. Our power, lost and found. Our femininity, our masculinity: whether they were ever lost before they were found. Above all, we talk of our identity, also lost and found. Any boastful kind of talk, just so long as it keeps us from having to look into the nausea, the uselessness, the impotence of these our lives.

AT THE RISK OF AROUSING THE RESENTMENT OF MY COLORED BROTHERS, I WILL SAY THAT THE BLACK MAN IS NOT A MAN.

Our enslavers assure us we've been free these many years. One of us, looking far into this world we're bound in and deep into his own soul came up with the truth. Another murderous white lie.

THE WHITE MAN, IN THE CAPACITY OF MASTER, SAID TO THE NEGRO, "FROM NOW ON YOU ARE FREE."

We are not free. We're not even able to achieve our humanity, says Fanon. We're damned souls, aborted creatures suffering in hells

created by white people to sustain their crass heaven. The central fact of our lives, the central statement in all of Fanon's work is simply this: we're slaves.

THE BLACK MAN IS A TOY IN THE WHITE MAN'S HANDS.

Until we've looked hard at this fact not as a metaphor, not as some poetic figure of speech, but as a rock-hard statement of what we are, we can't even begin to understand Fanon. And without understanding him we'll never get where we need to go. We may move without him, but only blindly, wasting energy.

IF THIS COHERENCE IS NOT PRESENT THERE IS ONLY A BLIND WILL TOWARD FREEDOM, WITH THE TERRIBLY REACTIONARY RISKS WHICH IT ENTAILS.

Our enslavers have found a new sport these days; they speak of our anger. Black rage is a marketable passion now, slickly packaged after hot processing, then advertized and hustled through exclusive middlemen. A while back the going commodity was black nonviolence, and the cats hustling that were priest. Priests, not prophets Proph-

THE SETTLER KEEPS ALIVE IN THE NATIVE ANGER WHICH HE DEPRIVES OF OUTLET; THE NATIVE IS TRAPPED IN THE TIGHT LINKS OF THE CHAINS OF COLONIALISM. THE NATIVE'S MUSCULAR TENSION FINDS OUTLET REGULARLY

IN BLOODTHIRSTY EXPLOSIONS—IN TRIBAL WARFARE, IN FEUDS BETWEEN SEPTS, AND IN QUARRELS BETWEEN INDIVIDUALS.

ets die lean, railing against their people's suffering, fighting fate. Priests have always managed to live well off that suffering. Times have changed, though our slavery hasn't. A new breed of priests, psychiatrists, have sprung up not to live off the collective pain of whole congregations, but to deal in individual suffering in all commercial privacy. Money continues to change hands from sufferer to soothsayer, but now it's not a collection; it's a fee. In place of holy scriptures to keep the faithful good and blind there are profane scribblings aimed boldly at the marketplace, offering the exciting experience of black suffering to enslavers so hardened they need this splashing in someone else's blood so they can feel alive.

In our haste to join the scramble for the gold they drop we have forgotten rage is not the disease, not even the only symptom, but one among an infinity of symptoms. At their root, not on the marketable surface, lies the real sickness: we are a people destroyed, a conquered people.

Conquest is a violent, destructive happening. It turns the conquered into broken, pliable things, objects upon which the conqueror acts, handling, shaping, manipulating them.

A Manichean world, Fanon calls it. Strange new word, but check it out: it describes the universe we live in. It's a Persian idea, meaning a never ending conflict between light and dark. The idea has a simple, moronic appeal.

Light is good. Darkness is evil. From this everything follows automatically. Whatever is light in color is morally good. Everything dark is bad. It's a perfect description of the kernel idea around which all white culture is constructed. It is the primary idea white men have worked so aggressively and so long to impose on the entire world. It is the governing rule of our slave lives today.

The most important effect of the success of this idea is this: all white people are born with inherited advantages on which to construct their lives. All black people are born with inherited disadvantages they must spend time overcoming if they're to have any kind of existence at all. Life in this our world is arranged with this main concern; how whites can keep and increase their advantages and at the same time keep us so tied up in our disadvantages we can't do anything but suffer impotently. This is the tone of life wherever the dominant power is white: in America, Latin and Anglo. All over Africa. In those parts of Asia still under white western power. In Australia.

That the original process of our conquest was violent and destructive we all know by now. The de-

struction of Africa, the killing of our people, the scattering of part across the earth to build a material heaven here for white Christians and Jews, the rest remaining slaves in our homeland, working to make a better life for Europeans, we know of all that violence.

THIS EUROPEAN OPULENCE IS LITERALLY SCANDALOUS, FOR IT HAS BEEN FOUNDED ON SLAVERY, IT HAS BEEN NOURISHED ON WITH THE BLOOD OF SLAVES AND IT COMES DIRECTLY FROM THE SOIL AND THE SUBSOIL OF THE UNDERDEVELOPED WORLD. THE WELL-BEING AND THE PROGRESS OF EUROPE HAVE BEEN BUILT UP WITH THE SWEAT AND THE DEAD BODIES OF NEGROES, ARABS, INDIANS AND THE YELLOW RACES.



But after this first knowledge we risk a dangerous ignorance.

Our conquest was not a momentary act of violence that staggered our ancestors alone and then was ended. Our conquest was only the beginning of an endless violence. Our present existence is this violence continued, sharpened and refined, institutionalized and made such a permanent part of our lives

we often suffer it without being able to understand or even notice it.

We're things, not human beings. We have dreams of the human beings we could become. But this western world is built to crack our dreams and wishes, to break us down till our best desires shrink and vanish, to be replaced with the small, mean, hustling ways we use to survive personally from one slave day to the next.

AT THE RISK OF AROUSING THE RESENTMENT OF MY COLORED BROTHERS, I WILL THAT THE BLACK MAN IS NOT A MAN.

It is a world constructed to keep us slaves eternally, this world in which our enslavers pursue their peculiar happinesses with such deadly ruthlessness and we learn to make adjustments to constant pain.

Apartheid is not some sickness peculiar to the white South African soul. It is the whitest, most brilliant expression of western Judeo-Christian values in Africa. Wherever the word of white westerners is law life is arranged so white people experience it as a blessing and it hits us with the force of damnation. Whatever could not be molded to the shape of these their values white people in their attack on the world have simply killed.

SOUTH AFRICA HAS A RACIST STRUCTURE. NOW I SHALL GO FARTHER AND SAY THAT EUROPE HAS A RACIST STRUCTURE.

Genocide is not a twentieth century German invention. It is the root of white western values everywhere, the exact basis on which white civilization rose here in North America, in South America, in Australia, in Africa. It is the prime method for keeping western values alive in Vietnam today.

"EXCEPT THE BOERS, THE AMERICANS ARE THE ONLY MODERN NATION THAT WITHIN LIVING MEMORY HAS COMPLETELY DRIVEN THE AUTOCHTHONOUS POPULATION OFF THE SOIL THAT IT HAD OCCUPIED." IN THIS CONNECTION, IT IS WORTH NOTING THAT THE CARBS EXPERIENCED THE SAME FATE AT THE HANDS OF FRENCH AND SPANISH EXPLORERS.

And slavery isn't something we suffered accidentally and which white people stopped when they saw it was bad. It is simply the destiny of all people living under white man's rule.

If we've grown up thinking apartheid was some special abomination in a far off place; that genocide was one mad German's game; and that slavery ended when some lying white man said it did; it's because white civilization lives on many kinds of violence, and we're victims of that special violence meant to kill the mind.

In this Fanon was no exception.

Born in 1925 on the small French West Indian island of Mar-

tinique, he grew up in a world so messed up with white western values he didn't fully realize he was black until adulthood. As a youth he was clearly convinced he was a Frenchman. His delusion of belonging in a white French society should not be strange to black people who still consider themselves Americans. Fanon as a young man merely went along with certain assumptions we still consider normal. **THE WEST INDIAN DOES NOT THINK OF HIMSELF AS A BLACK MAN; HE THINKS OF HIMSELF AS A WEST INDIAN. THE BLACK MAN LIVES IN AFRICA.**

So deeply did he believe these assumptions, in fact, that during World War II, when the Germans conquered France, Fanon, just seventeen and quite unaware of his own slavery, went off to Europe to fight in defense of French freedom. **I HAVE REMARKED THAT CERTAIN THINGS SURPRISED ME. WHENEVER THERE HAS BEEN ANY ATTEMPT AT INSURRECTION, THE MILITARY AUTHORITIES HAVE ORDERED ONLY COLORED SOLDIERS INTO ACTION. THEY WERE "MEN OF COLOR" WHO NULLIFIED THE LIBERATION EFFORTS OF OTHER "MEN OF COLOR."**

The war, apart from hastening his maturity generally, brought him into contact with people and situations that filled his mind with questions, provided him with a

few answers and a multitude of hunches to work on. The most important of these questions and answers came from his encounter with the reality of Africa under European rule. Military service gave him a chance to observe western civilization in action, as it affected the Arabs of North Africa, West Indians fighting on the French side, and Senegalese soldiers also in the French army. Later he was to remember wondering why the French were so concerned to indoctrinate Arab Africans against black Africans, and vice versa; and why white officers always sent in black soldiers to kill other colonial peoples fighting for their freedom.

SOME TEN YEARS AGO I WAS ASTONISHED TO LEARN THAT THE NORTH AFRICANS DESPISED MEN OF COLOR. IT WAS ABSOLUTELY IMPOSSIBLE FOR ME TO MAKE ANY CONTACT WITH THE LOCAL POPULATION. I LEFT AFRICA AND WENT BACK TO FRANCE WITHOUT HAVING FATHOMED THE REASON FOR THIS HOSTILITY.

With the end of the war Fanon went back to France, registering as a medical student at the university in Lyon. He had always been an intense kind of person, and as he grew this quality did not disappear; it got deeper. Realizing he lacked that cold steadiness of nerve he

would have needed to be a surgeon, he chose to specialize in clinical psychiatry. He had no difficulty qualifying. Fanon who was not one of the breed of super-negroes who do fantastically well against black competition but are content to sink with a grateful sigh into mediocrity once they bump into whites. His was an active intelligence that grew more alert when faced with aggressive whites instead of getting paralyzed.

Life at the university in Lyon seems to have been pleasant enough for Fanon. He did not suffer for lack of personal friends. He married a French girl, and answered suspicions that he was making a sick choice by declaring he was going into marriage with both eyes wide open. The truth of that remains a private matter, but it's worth noting that his wife continues to live in Algeria as a citizen. It was she who in June, 1967, in response to the French philosopher Jean Paul-Sartre's anti-Arab, pro-Israel position after the Israeli attack, ordered Sartre's preface dropped from all subsequent printings of Fanon's most important book, *The Wretched of the Earth*. **I WISH TO BE ACKNOWLEDGED NOT AS BLACK BUT AS WHITE.**

. . . WHO BUT A WHITE WOMAN COULD DO THIS FOR ME? BY LOVING ME SHE PROVES THAT I AM WORTHY OF WHITE LOVE. I

(Continued on page 29)