

Meditations on Fanon: A Review Essay on John Edgar Wideman's *Fanon: A Novel*

John Edgar Wideman, *Fanon: A Novel*. Boston: Mariner Books, 2008

by

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If one came of political and social age during the Black Liberation Movement and the African Liberation Movement in America, on the continent of Africa, and in the African Diaspora during the 1960s and 1970s, then the Martiniquen born, French colonized, and Algerian psychiatrist and philosopher of revolution Frantz Fanon likely informed one's political and social imagination about the possibilities of African people finding their human authenticity and agency to organize their collective beings against colonial domination, racial domination, and psychological wretchedness. Fanon's corpus of work on how colonized African people had to find their humanity in order to overthrow European settler colonialism provided the template for understanding the psychological dimension of what slavery and colonialism had done to wrench the humanity and the source of inherent ontological being from African people. Concomitantly, Fanon provided a theory of revolution that evolved from the experiences of the Algerian national liberation struggle. While Fanon did not propagate that Africans on the continent and in the diaspora had identical experiences with domination, he did provide meta-analytical conceptual tools in order to grasp the commonalities of the similar experiences.

Fanon's books *Black Skins, White Masks* (1952), *A Dying Colonialism* (1959), *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), and *Toward the African Revolution* (1964) were required reading for young Black Marxists and Black revolutionary nationalists in the mid-20th century. The Oakland, California based Black Panther Party of Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale held up Fanon as a central philosopher and political theorist of the revolutionary vanguard role of the Black urban lumpen proletariat. Newton, Seale, and other ideologues of Black revolutionary nationalism, believed they had found in Fanon's theories the rationalization for advocating self-defense tactics and violent resistance to racial domination and *Gestapo* police terrorism that structured life for Black people in America's urban centers.

To be sure, Fanon was not decontextualized by Black Marxists and revolutionary nationalists. In *The Wretched of Earth*, which describes Algerians within a colonial, urban milieu fighting against the France and their own self-marginalization, Fanon tells a story that is similar to the ethos of Black urban life in the United States. The African (native) *Manichaean personality*, Fanon views and describes through his psychiatric lens, tells of the universal struggle African people in the American diaspora faced since they were brought to the shores of the North American continent as slaves.

Fanon has been in the critical consciousness of Black people inside the United States since the mid-20th century. His theories of revolution have informed the internal psychological agency and external guttural urgencies of Black people to confront the oppressive, dominant American state. Therefore, Wideman's *Fanon* represents a sort of post-modernist statement on Fanon's place in the Black imaginary, as it evokes us to look back on a time when many of us, coming of age in 1950s, 1960s, and the 1970s, really believed revolution was possible and it would happen in our times. After all, it had happened in Algeria in the mid-1950s and it had happened in the national liberation struggles of the Portuguese colonies of Guinea Bissau, Angola and Mozambique in the 1960s.

Wideman's novel can be described as a meditation on Fanon. His narrator seems to be in search of a way to find Fanon both within Wideman's own literary process and his effort to find in Fanon a *thought-voice* through which to understand the troubles of an early-21st century world in which the old *Third World* has forced its way onto the gaze and into the consciousness of a western world that has long since dispossessed it. But, Wideman's *Fanon* cannot write of these things in clear, unambiguous terms, because he knows the world is his narrator. Those who are writing to Fanon and his writer, Thomas, and who are writing about Fanon, must confront many of the symbols and signs of the old world that will not dissipate. Will *race* go away? Will *race* continue to define humanity? Will human beings be diminished if they are continually *raced*? These are big questions that Wideman needs his narrator or Thomas or Fanon to answer. But, they are questions Wideman can continue to beg, because the Fanon we know, from his books, was unable to escape the "moral evil" of *race*. The colonial, slavery, racial domination projects were and are about *race* and power.

Why Fanon? Wideman's brother Rob, who is serving a life sentence for murder and is the subject of Wideman's critically acclaimed 1995 memoir, *Brothers and Keepers*, asks. Wideman never really answers the question. Though, he does provide a meditation of sorts. He uses Fanon as a vessel through which questions of the navigation of the human project might be proffered. Wideman brings together autobiography, biography, fiction, and memoir. He places Fanon in the midst of late-20th century and early-21st century cultural moments and social questions. *Fanon* reads like a search for a certain kind of meaning in life and Frantz Fanon is Wideman's muse in this search.

For those of us who continue to re-read and rethink Fanon's philosophy, Wideman leaves enough space in his search and use of Fanon to permit us to make this search ours too.