

Cultural Daily

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A Sweltering Afternoon with Frantz Fanon

Laurie Collins · Wednesday, October 14th, 2015

A few weeks ago, I had never heard of Frantz Fanon. To be honest, even as I type this, I probably couldn't tell you much more about him. However, I was invited by a client of mine to attend a panel discussion, "Frantz Fanon's Humanist Legacy," at the Palms-Rancho Library in Los Angeles this afternoon (October 10, 2015). It was going to be satisfying just to step out of the sweltering heat on this day. Little did I know I would have much to relate to, and relay, about the late Afro-Caribbean psychiatrist, philosopher and author.

Leading up to this lecture, I did the cursory research on Fanon. Yes, I scanned through Wikipedia. (What else is there for us in this day and age that doesn't require more than dropping in our lap to gain our attention?) What I learned was that he was from Martinique, a French colony in the Caribbean at the time, who wrote extensively on the effects of colonization and racism.

Immediately, his background struck a chord. My maternal great-great-great grandmother, as the family story goes, was a mulatto who had to escape Haiti (another French colony) during the revolution. She landed in New Orleans among the community of Creoles or Free People of Color. The rest of her family, including many siblings, weren't so lucky. That's the price of being on the wrong side of a revolution.

"This may be a panel discussion I should attend," was my thought process in the weeks leading up to this event. It's been generations since my great-great-great grandmother's arrival in America, and as Louisiana Creoles were known to do, she and the generations that followed her mixed with their own kind. Leading to me – an extremely fair skinned, green eyed, kinky hair with blonde highlights, person of color who grew up in the predominantly black community of Inglewood, California. Fanon wrote of the psychological and social economic impact of colonization on black people. Just the title – THE TITLE! – "Black Skin, White Masks," may not be exactly the way I look, but it is most definitely the way I feel.

Librarian Frieda Afary, who put together this program, initiated the panel discussion with a fantastic profile of Frantz Fanon's life, accomplishments, philosophy and impact on the world. Guests speakers Derek Holt and Professor Wonda Powell brilliantly expanded upon Fanon's legacy as it relates to the history of the United States own colonial sins upon various minorities, most notably African-Americans. Most importantly, how from this point forward, Fanon's humanistic approach may be the best, maybe even the only, way to break us out of this continuing cycle of institutionalized racism.

Really for me to encapsulate what was said and its impact upon me is daunting. Because of the

way I look, I am seldom the victim of direct or overt racism. But my best friends, my neighbors, my cousins, my nieces and nephews, my community of brothers and sisters, the village that raised me, to see the injustice of their treatment by society at large strikes me to my core.

Ferguson hurts. Baltimore hurts. The loss of Trayvon Martin hurts. The loss of friends who may not have been the victim of police, but the oppression that pervades black communities in America that causes us to lash out at each other, hurts. Included in this group is my nephew, shot to death 10 years ago at the age of 19 by someone who could have been his mirror image.

I look at the generation of my family that follows me. Most of whom will not be able to stealthily mingle in mixed society as I have. (Watch what you say, folks. You really have no idea who you're saying it to.) Yes, they will benefit even more from the Civil Rights movement, the marches, the struggles and the fight that came before any of us. But they, particularly the males, are still very much endangered. With the effectiveness of the movement, the marches, the struggles and the fight seeing diminishing returns in the 21st Century, it is time for a new approach. Can we see just see each other as human and go from there?

I find it very interesting that I am being introduced to Frantz Fanon at this point in my life, and at this critical point in American history. A black president of the United States has brought out the worst in the dominant class of this country. But to cry racism to the most overtly prejudiced only makes them scream back louder. To say it to the more "accepting" puts them on the defensive and paralyzes them from any action. This is THE quagmire, my friends.

For too long finding the solution to institutionalized racism has been tasked to its victims. For too long the approach to engage the oppressors has been crippled by the language and tone of accusation. Could a reexamination of Fanon's humanist legacy, avoiding its oversimplification in the past, lead us to a much needed new approach?

As I stepped out of the library back into the triple digit heat of Los Angeles this afternoon, I realized I still knew very little about Frantz Fanon, other than I needed to know more.

Top image: photo of Frantz Fanon.

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