

# Coping with Epistemic Trauma

The Africana Pursuit of New Humanism

Jeremias Zunguze



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## Abstract

This article discusses how Frantz Fanon diagnoses the epistemic trauma that African people have experienced, resulting from Eurocentric epistemic violence, while prescribing the pursuit of new humanism as a coping mechanism. In the last five centuries, European modernity's racialized ideals of humanity have mapped the world by excluding African people, disrupting their sense of humanism, and throwing them into existential downward spiral. In fact, Western modernity questioned whether African people are "humans", and it concluded that they are not. This assumption has justified various interventions to deliver African people from objecthood. The consequences have been colonialism, enslavement, and apartheid, which have attempted to remove Africans from the realm of humanity. The epistemic trauma persists today as African people continue to search for new humanism. Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) diagnoses epistemic trauma in African people while prescribing "decolonization" as an act that "triggers a . . . psycho-effective equilibrium" in the pursuit of new humanism and humanity. His Africana critical theory—envisioning philosophy in relation to humanities and social sciences as a means to social transformation—proposes new humanism and humanity founded on decolonization, thus moving beyond Eurocentric ideals of humanity.

## 1. Introduction

The epistemic trauma that African people have experienced throughout modernity, with its racialized ideals of humanity, compelled Frantz Fanon to pursue "new humanism."<sup>1</sup> By humanism, I mean "a value system that places priority on the welfare, worth, and dignity of human beings."<sup>2</sup> Epistemic trauma results from exposing people to experiences that deprive them from the means to humanism—such as economy, polity, knowledge, and subjectivity—and distorting, disfiguring, or destroying the episteme or knowledge and system of knowing that shape the "welfare, worth, and dignity of human beings." These events affect the body and mind viscerally. They misrepresent human beings, placing them outside the realm of humanity, disrupting their sense of being human. The epistemic trauma that African people have experienced in the last five centuries results from "epistemic violence," an institutionalization of social orders that exclude those people

presumed others.<sup>3</sup> Thanks to Eurocentric domination, humanity and humanism have suffered unprecedented levels of racial, gendered, and sexualized othering through colonization, slavery, and apartheid. These Eurocentric practices have been assumed as normative by reproducing African people as deviant. Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* diagnoses epistemic trauma, prescribing political and epistemic "decolonization"<sup>4</sup> as a coping mechanism in pursuit of new humanism and humanity.

Fanon exposes us to secondary epistemic trauma as we excruciatingly read *The Wretched of the Earth's* depictions of the post-epistemic-traumatic stress syndrome that colonized people have experienced after centuries of exposure to epistemic violence. Fanon does so by engaging in "Africana critical theory"<sup>5</sup> or philosophy in relation to humanities and social sciences as a means to "social transformation and . . . reduction and elimination of human

1. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 236.

2. Lewis R. Gordon, *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008), 186.

3. Vincent Leitch, ed., *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), 2193.

4. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 35-106.

5. Reiland Rabaka, *Africana Critical Theory* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2009).

misery.”<sup>6</sup> Although it sounds like a chronicle of victimization and escape, Fanon’s Africana critical theory is altogether symptomatic, diagnostic, and prescriptive of remedies for epistemic trauma. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, he examines the psychology of the “colonialized world,”<sup>7</sup> a site infested with racial violence, leaving the colonized to challenge colonialism, reclaim land, and retrieve their past in pursuit of “psycho-effective equilibrium.”<sup>8</sup> The psycho-effective equilibrium, or psychic balance, occurs when one’s value system, particularly the one undergirding humanism, aligns with the environment in which one exists. Racial colonialism creates a mental disequilibrium by making the environment of the colonized hostile; violating their bodies, minds, and value systems; reducing them to a state of nonhuman. Beyond exposing us to the post-epistemic-traumatic stress African people have experienced, Fanon’s work provides both a theory and a practice for coping and searching for new humanism. This is shown through his own experience as a dedicated psychiatrist, a devoted revolutionary, and a relentless critical theorist. His resignation of French citizenship, journey to Africa, and struggle for Algerian independence, as well as his burial on the continent are all prescriptive epistemic tactics to cope with epistemic trauma, trigger psychological equilibrium, and aid in the pursuit of new humanism and humanity.

## 2. The Concept of Epistemic Trauma

Epistemic trauma resonates with the growing field of Africana somatic psychology, including Joy DeGruy’s *Post-Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America’s Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing* (2005) and Resmaa Menakem’s *My Grandmother’s Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending our Hearts and Bodies* (2017). Both DeGruy and Menakem have expanded the civil debate around multigenerational trauma affecting Black Americans resulting from slavery, white supremacy, and systemic anti-Black racism, a socialization

to see black humanity as inferior,<sup>9</sup> calling for action for individual and collective “healing [of] our minds” and “mending [of] our hearts and bodies.” DeGruy prescribes mind-centered awareness towards healing, including building self-esteem, the spirit of family and community, and racial socialization.<sup>10</sup> Taking a body-centered perspective towards healing, Menakem prescribes building physical and emotional tolerance to effectively learn to settle and metabolize trauma as the first step towards “mending our hearts and bodies” in collective cultural practice.<sup>11</sup>

Menakem’s and DeGruy’s findings are part and parcel of the Africana search for new humanism beyond Eurocentric humanity, however, within the historical and racial confines of British imperialism. Epistemic trauma explores this topic in the context of European colonialism in general, through African critical theory as a means to social transformation, going beyond the United States-centric settings that DeGruy and Menakem investigate. DeGruy sees the seventeenth century as the beginning of racial trauma, when the first Africans were brought to North America to be enslaved, despite the fact that DeGruy has visited El Mina Castle-Dungeon in Ghana, Africa, built by the Portuguese, the pioneers of European modernity, in the fifteenth century. Although Menakem recognizes DeGruy’s historical limitations in addressing the fact that those “human beings were kidnapped, placed in chains, forcibly relocated, and sold into enslavement to immigrants from Europe and their descendants,”<sup>12</sup> he does not mention Africa as the first point of contact between European and Africans and therefore the point of origin for racial trauma. Enslaved Africans were brought to the New World already having experienced an overdose of racial trauma. And yet, Menakem traces the trauma from Medieval Europe to North America,<sup>13</sup> which, in my opinion, is a different kind of trauma based on class, religion, and other fac-

6. George Yancy, ed., *African-American Philosophers: 17 Conversations* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 22.

7. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 3-7.

8. *Ibid.*, 148.

9. Lewis R. Gordon, *Bad Faith and Anti-Black Racism* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1995).

10. Joy DeGruy, *Post-Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America’s Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing* (Milwaukie, Oregon: Uptone Press, 2005), 155-219.

11. Resmaa Menakem, *My Grandmother’s Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending our Hearts and Bodies* (Nevada: Central Recovery Press, 2017), 114-20.

12. *Ibid.*, 35.

13. *Ibid.*, 35-40.

tors, even if he later conflates that trauma with racial trauma. Racial-inflicted trauma, as part of epistemic trauma, is a global phenomenon affecting Africans and people of African descent as profoundly demonstrated in Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*.

### 3. A Decolonizing Prescription: Reclaiming the Past, Triggering Psycho-Effective Equilibrium

In the "Conclusion" of *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon no longer claims inclusion or recognition within European humanity. In fact, he renounces his French citizenship, "returns" to Africa, and avidly theorizes on decolonization while fighting for Algerian independence. As Gordon puts it, "Fanon realized that the more he asserted his membership in Western civilization the more he was pathologized, for the system's affirmation depends on its denial of ever having illegitimately excluded him."<sup>14</sup> This personal exclusion is actually representative of the collective experience of African and Indigenous peoples. That is why Fanon sends out a rallying cry appealing to us to "leave this Europe which never stops talking of man yet massacres him at every one of its street corners, at every corner of the world."<sup>15</sup> The psychiatrist Fanon is diagnosing almost half a millennium of Eurocentric modernity's humanistic psychosis, which has taken supremacist roles in humanity, inflicting epistemic violence on African people. This systemic violence, says Fanon, triggers a fight-or-flight response in the colonized, which is reified into decolonization. In his own words, "the 'thing' colonized becomes a man through the very process of liberation."<sup>16</sup> For Fanon, one can only free oneself from Eurocentric racialized ideals of humanity through decolonization, which provides a new humanism as a coping mechanism.

By focusing on the colonized world, Fanon's concepts of decolonization, humanism, and

humanity go beyond those studied by Hegel and Marx, respectively "the emancipation of spirit from all those forms of being that do not conform to its concepts" and the proletariat's "forcible overthrow of all existing [exploitative bourgeois] social conditions."<sup>17</sup> Both the Hegelian and Marxian liberation and revolution are particular to the history of Europe, where class is the structuring principle of society. Fanon's decolonization concerns the humanity colonized by Europe, where race is the organizing principle. That is why Fanon's decolonization and its new humanism are more encompassing than Marx's and Hegel's,<sup>18</sup> as Fanon's provides a new way and a new perspective from which to look and think about the value of human beings beyond Europeans. Fanon not only knows that "decolonization is truly the creation of new man"<sup>19</sup> but also that "this new humanity, for itself and for others, inevitably defines a new humanism."<sup>20</sup> Fanon's humanism is informed by an ethical desire to universalize the idea of human beings betrayed by Eurocentrism.

In the colonized world there is no margin for "mutual recognition" from a Hegelian human relations between the master and the slave.<sup>21</sup> In fact, the Hegelian social relations are rooted in European history, in which masters and slaves are both white, belonging more or less to the same cultural system, where they "recognize themselves as mutually recognizing each other."<sup>22</sup> In the colonial world of whites and Blacks that Fanon describes, because of racism the "White Master without conflict, recognized the Negro slave"<sup>23</sup> as a nonhuman or "non-dialectical being," abolishing any possibility of "mu-

14. Lewis R. Gordon, *Existential Africana: Understanding Africana Existential Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 5.

15. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 235.

16. *Ibid.*, 2.

17. Christoph Menke, "Hegel's Theory of Liberation: Law, Freedom, History, Society," *Symposium* 17, no. 1 (2013): 10, [www.artsrn.ualberta.ca](http://www.artsrn.ualberta.ca).

18. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 5; *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto Press, 1986), 216-22.

19. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 2.

20. *Ibid.*, 178.

21. George Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2018), 109-16; Nigel C. Gibson, *Fanon: The Postcolonial Imagination* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2003), 30; Phillip Honenberger, "'Le Nègre et Hegel': Fanon on Hegel, Colonialism, and the Dialectics of Recognition," *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge* 5, no. 3 (2007): 153, [www.okcir.com](http://www.okcir.com).

22. George Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2018), 110; Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto Press, 1986), 217.

23. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto Press, 1986), 217.

tual recognition.”<sup>24</sup> Also, the “colonial master does not want recognition from the slave but work. . . . The slave cannot achieve his freedom through labor upon the object. Rather, he focuses his attention on the (impossible) project like becoming like the Master—that is, becoming white.”<sup>25</sup> Because “there is not an open conflict between white and black,”<sup>26</sup> the “slave wants to make himself recognized”<sup>27</sup> or liberated as a human through violence or decolonization. As Nigel C. Gibson puts it, “Fanon can be considered a Marxist-humanist, in the sense that he is not championing a static notion of human nature, but a human ‘potential’ which can be ‘created by revolutionary beginnings,’ and where social relationships give meaning to life.”<sup>28</sup> Decolonization is also the foundation of a new humanism and humanity.

For Fanon, the quest of new humanism is achieved through a fight-or-flight response to the colonial world. In his own words, “the violence which governed the ordering of the colonial world, which tirelessly punctuated the destruction of the indigenous social fabric, and demolished unchecked the systems of reference . . . this same violence will be vindicated and appropriated when, taking history into their own hands, the colonized swarm into the forbidden cities.”<sup>29</sup> The colonial world is established through lines of demarcation, maintained through physical and metaphysical violence based on racism: “You are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich.”<sup>30</sup> Politically speaking, you are free because you are white, you are white because you are free. In terms of knowledge, you know because you are white, you are white because you know. Finally, in terms of subjectivity, you are human because you are white, you are white because you are human. The colonized is likewise represented in racist “superfluous”<sup>31</sup>

negative metaphors such as “a quintessence of evil” or a corruptor of values.<sup>32</sup> This is the process through which the colonizer establishes identity for himself and difference for the Other, which he uses to justify the so-called civilizing mission. The melanin of the colonized is seen not only as an impermeable surface through which values cannot reach the body, mind, and soul but also as a “corrosive element, destroying everything within his reach . . . everything which involves aesthetics or morals, an agent of malevolent powers.”<sup>33</sup> As Rabaka puts its “racial colonialism” reproduces African people as “sub-humans,”<sup>34</sup> or, at worst, nonhumans. As such, humanistic values are nonexistent among them as much as they are not applicable to them. Because the colonized are portrayed as a humanistic deficit, they are not recognized as members of the colonial civil society, thus a civil discourse is unthinkable between the colonizer and the colonized. Therefore, there is no institution that will protect the colonized. They “can be arrested, beaten, and starved with impunity; no sermonizer on morals, no priest has ever stepped in to bear the blows in his place or share his bread.”<sup>35</sup> When one’s humanhood is violated and yet no language, knowledge, or institution is able to convey and conceptualize the violation as to protect the victim, the event viscerally affects the victim’s body, mind, and soul, begging healing.

Signs of epistemic trauma may include dreams of the traumatizing space or event as a reenactment of the incident or a coping mechanism. That is why, says Fanon, “the dreams of the colonial subject are muscular dreams . . . of action . . . aggressive vitality. I dream I am jumping . . . running . . . leaping across a river and chased by a pack of cars that never catches up with me. . . . The colonized subject frees himself night after night between nine in the evening and six in the morning.”<sup>36</sup> These trauma-related cues sometimes become reality, “erupt[ing] into

24. Phillip Honenberger, “‘Le Nègre et Hegel’: Fanon on Hegel, Colonialism, and the Dialectics of Recognition,” *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge* 5, no. 3 (2007): 154, [www.okcir.com](http://www.okcir.com).

25. *Ibid.*

26. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto Press, 1986), 217.

27. *Ibid.*

28. Gibson, *Rethinking Fanon: The Continuing Dialogue* (Michigan: Humanity Books, 1999) 117.

29. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 5-6.

30. *Ibid.*, 5.

31. *Ibid.*, 4.

32. *Ibid.*, 6.

33. *Ibid.*, 6.

34. Reiland Rabaka, *The Negritude Movement: W. E. B. Du Bois, Leon Damas, Aimé Césaire, Leopold Senghor, Franz Fanon, and the Evolution of an Insurgent Idea* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2015), 290-92.

35. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 9.

36. *Ibid.*, 15.

bloody fighting"<sup>37</sup> or "dance and possession"<sup>38</sup> among the colonized to avoid, numb, or cope with trauma. They are also reified into violence, a fight response to the colonizer, the founder of the colonial world. Violence, according to Fanon, is the only language with which the colonized must confront the colonizer, staking their recognition before him. As Fanon puts it, "at the individual level, violence is a cleansing force. It rids the colonized of their inferiority complex, of their passive and despairing attitude. It emboldens them, and restores their self-confidence. . . . Violence hoists the people up to the level of the leader."<sup>39</sup> One of the greatest lessons that the colonized learn under the colonial world is that freedom is not granted but taken, not conceded but imposed. Violence or political decolonization reclaims "land," "the most essential value, [for the colonized] because it . . . provide[s] bread and, naturally, dignity."<sup>40</sup> Reclaiming the land is the first step for the colonized to, at last, rebuild that very same humanism destroyed by European colonialism, slavery, and apartheid. This political decolonization will "put an end to the history of colonization—the history of pillage—and to bring into existence the history of the nation."<sup>41</sup> The land then becomes the canvas on which the colonized will retrieve their systems of reference, the ground on which they will sit and heal from epistemic trauma in pursuit of a new humanism.

Beyond political decolonization, Fanon advocates for epistemic decolonization—or retrieving the demolished systems of reference—also a coping mechanism. European colonialism did not only impose its "law" upon the colonized, but it was also a process "of draining the colonized brain of any form or substance. With a kind of perverted logic, it turns its attention to the past of the colonized people and distorts it, disfigures it, and destroys it."<sup>42</sup> The obliteration of African people's knowledge and systems of knowing is at the root of epistemic trauma. Racial colonialism is also a "racialization

of thought,"<sup>43</sup> a distortion, disfiguring, and destruction of knowledge and systems of knowing of the colonized. Under such disgraced conditions, "reclaiming the past does not only rehabilitate or justify the promise of a national culture. It triggers a change of fundamental importance in the colonized's psycho-affective equilibrium."<sup>44</sup> Because epistemic trauma is a form of visceral disequilibrium of humanism and humanity, one form of bringing about balance on one's own is dialectically reversing the process. Epistemic decolonization asserts African people's excluded knowledge and systems of knowing, attributing them reason.

Epistemic decolonization, however, does not mean going back to a precolonial era, how things used to be. The African experience and subjectivity have viscerally been transformed by the very colonial experience. As such, the praxis of new humanism and humanity goes beyond both the colonial and precolonial experience. The new humanism and humanity have ingested the history of colonialism—its values, languages, and institutions. However, this condition does not kill the Africaness or the Blackness or make his new humanism and humanity exist under hybridity though interlocked within Eurocentrism. It is a politically conscious praxis that constantly rehabilitates the African past, present, and future as a coping mechanism, creating a truly universal humanism and humanity. As Fanon puts it, this praxis of "new humanity, for itself and for others, inevitably defines a new humanism."<sup>45</sup> By fusing a revolutionary tactic (the forceful end of colonialism) and an epistemic act (the archeology of indigeneity), the Fanonian new humanism truly redefines humanity to encompass all human beings regardless of race. Founded within the epistemic and political practices of the colonized—such as anti-racial colonialism, national liberation, the reclamation of Indigenous land, languages, knowledges, and systems of knowing—this new humanism also inherits the European colonial legacy, languages, institutions, and philosophies, meanwhile constantly interrogating its racist ideals of being human.

37. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 17.

38. *Ibid.*, 19.

39. *Ibid.*, 51.

40. *Ibid.*, 9.

41. *Ibid.*, 51.

42. *Ibid.*, 149.

43. Reiland Rabaka, *The Negritude Movement: W. E. B. Du Bois, Leon Damas, Aimé Césaire, Leopold Senghor, Franz Fanon, and the Evolution of an Insurgent Idea* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2015), 254.

44. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 148.

45. *Ibid.*, 178.

## 4. Conclusion

Fanon no longer claims inclusion within Eurocentric ideals of humanity even if interlocked within them. He has learned both from history and experience that inclusion of Blackness within Eurocentric humanity is a myth. In fact, the more he demands inclusion, the more he experiences those stressful cues of constantly being othered resulting from centuries of epistemic trauma. This pathology reduces Black human beings into violence or political and epistemic liberation. Both these actions are most importantly rehabilitative mechanisms as the political and epistemic actions reclaim the land, Indigenous tradition, and repressed history triggering a psycho-effective equilibrium. Fanon indeed engages in critical theory for liberating the oppressed,<sup>46</sup> diagnosing Eurocentric-inflicted epistemic trauma among African people, while proposing practical steps towards healing and dealing with it. By searching for new humanism and humanity, he visualizes philosophy in concrete engagement with humanities and social sciences towards social transformation, reeducation and elimination of dehumanization of the colonized.

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46. Reiland Rabaka, *Africana Critical Theory* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2009).

## Contributor Information

**Jeremias Zunguze** is an assistant professor of Africana and Lusophone Studies at the University of North Carolina, Asheville. He holds a Ph.D. in Hispanic Languages and Literatures from the University of California, Berkeley. His research interests include Africology, Africana Studies, and Africana critical theory. His book *Re-Reading African Cultural Producers in Portuguese: Ancestrality as a Decolonizing Project* is forthcoming with Lexington Books, 2021.

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