

## Fanon's Humanism: An Interview with Nigel Gibson

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### Abstract

Humanism is obviously a crucial facet of a humanistic psychology, and a new—or decolonial—humanism is likewise crucial for Frantz Fanon's work, but these two areas of scholarship and practice have seldom been put into a sustained dialogue. As a way of beginning such a dialogue, Nigel Gibson, one of the foremost experts on the work of Frantz Fanon, speaks with Derek Hook and Leswin Laubscher about Fanon's ideas of a new humanism, agency, action, and liberatory practice in the context of colonial oppression and dehumanization. Key conceptualizations from Fanon's pioneering books—*Black Skin, White Masks*, *The Wretched of the Earth*, and *A Dying Colonialism*—are discussed and clarified. Gibson also refers to sections of Fanon's recently translated psychiatric writings. Drawing on several of Gibson's books on Fanon—including *Combat Breathing* (2025)—this far-ranging discussion explores topics such as Fanon's notion of combined action (psychotherapeutic and political action), self-actualization, socio-therapy, African Humanism, and Fanon's views on violence.

### Keywords

self-actualization, Fanon, new humanism, agency, anti-racism

### Introduction

Nigel Gibson is one of the world's pre-eminent Fanon scholars and an expert in the fields of Africana studies and postcolonialism. He has presented his work and delivered scholarly talks on Fanon across the globe, and his books (e.g., Gibson, 1999, 2003, 2011a, 2020, 2021, 2024; Gibson & Beneduce, 2017) are compulsory reading for any student of Fanon's. A particular interest of Gibson's pertains to Fanon's legacy and application within South Africa, where he has spent a considerable amount of his time doing research and immersing himself in its intellectual, political, and cultural life (some of his writing directly pertinent to that engagement include: Gibson, 2003, 2011b; Mngxitama, et al., 2008). Gibson is currently a professor at the Marlboro Institute of Interdisciplinary Studies at Emerson College in Boston and an Honorary Professor in the Humanities at Rhodes University, South Africa.

We (Derek Hook and Leswin Laubscher) interviewed Gibson, attempting to bring his considerable insights about Fanon to bear on concepts and issues we thought of particular

importance to psychologists, specifically humanistic and existential phenomenological psychologists.

**Hook:** Our interview is to be published in the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*: Notions of humanism and human being are thus ontologically and epistemologically important to our readers, and how they conceptualize theory and practice. In your book, *Fanonian Practices in South Africa* (Gibson, 2011b), you consider Fanon’s humanism alongside questions of agency, action, and dialogue in important ways. In that book, you say, for example, that:

“Fanon [placed] emphasis on agency and action – on becoming human in the very activity of liberation. . . . Fanon . . . underscored the necessary challenge of a new humanism grounded in the spaces opened up by the epoch of anti-colonial struggles, while remaining cognizant that the possibility of a new beginning could be stamped out and that the space for dialogue could be closed off, not only by the colonial powers but by the anti-colonial movement itself” (Gibson, 2011b, p. 12).

**Gibson:** The anti-colonial struggle opens up new spaces, new subjectivities, as well as new questions. What kind of society are we trying to build, and how will we get there? Fanon is convinced that the people want to know and that the intellectual-activist’s job is not only to explain the current moment and its challenges but also concretely articulate what is being fought for and what the goals are, while also encouraging discussion and debate so that the masses of people involved in the struggle are inspired to think for themselves: question, discuss, and thus become enlightened. He considers African forms of democracy that need to be re-enlivened, alongside new forms of community involvement in discussions and debate, such as with “This is the voice of Algeria” in *A Dying Colonialism* (Fanon, 1965). Fanon’s book focuses on the changes in action and thinking, the centrality of women’s actions and changes in social relations within the family promoting a vision of Algeria, which, in Fanon’s eyes, is “no longer in future heaven” (Fanon, 1965, p. 30) but in people’s day-to-day lives and social relations. But the counterrevolution within the revolution comes quickly. And thus, *The Wretched of the Earth* had to address this issue, the reality that

“a new beginning could be stamped out and that the space for dialogue could be closed off, not only by the colonial powers but inside the anti-colonial movement itself” (Gibson, 2011b, p. 11).

**Laubscher:** Humanism, then, is not a function of some internal or external essence. In fact, you link this new humanism to spaces opened up by the process of decolonization—a notion that has increasingly found its way into psychology. Could you offer us a few further thoughts on what decolonization means, both via Fanon and Fanon’s humanism—for psychologists today? For example, in your book *Fanonian Practices in South Africa*, you speak of decolonization as arising

“from the thought and action of live human beings . . . grounded in the lived experience of the damned of the earth . . . Fanon’s dialectic of liberation can be said to flow from the ‘underside of modernity,’ posing a new humanist challenge to the status quo of hegemonic, Western, imperialist humanism. Indeed, it is a new humanism that begins from the humanity and solidarity of the damned, who have been emptied of humanity and excluded from the human community” (Gibson, 2011b, p. 9).

**Gibson:** I have no disagreements with what I said there! It recycles your first question, inasmuch as the major work for the political party, the militants, and intellectuals, centers on the question of how to rehumanize a dehumanized people. The revolution and mass movements reanimate them, bringing new questions and subjectivities to the fore but also introducing new problems or what might be considered a return of the old in new clothing. Colonialism must go, but soon after it ends, a new status quo emerges that finds popular participation contrary to its plans. The chapter in Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (Fanon, 2004) on the pitfalls of national consciousness is not only a warning but a guide on how to involve the masses in nation-building. The chapter is not only critical of those leaders who want a piece of the colonial pie but also addresses radicals who want to introduce plans and policies from above. Fanon's new humanism is critical of the attitude that the masses are backward and will not understand and should not be involved in decision-making as equals. For example, Fanon argues,

“the important thing is not that three hundred people form a plan and decide upon carrying it out, but that the whole people plan and decide even if it takes them twice or three times as long. The fact is that the time taken up by explaining, the time ‘lost’ in treating the worker as a human being, will be caught up in the execution of the plan. People must know where they are going, and why” (1968, p. 193).

Fanon's new humanism is not just a set of principles but also a concept of action. It is a new humanism in practice, realized only through action.

Decolonization must become praxis and part of which involves questioning everything, as Fanon notes in *The Wretched of the Earth*. However, this questioning is not merely a classroom imperative; it requires the *connection* between radical intellectuals and the mass of people. Thus, decolonization is a process and an essential and ongoing part of political education.

**Hook:** Can you say more about what subjectivity might mean here in reference to Fanon's decolonial psychotherapeutic processes?

**Gibson:** Autonomy, movement, and self-determination, terms that are so important to Fanon's political thought, were fundamental to his socio-therapeutic approaches. One important example of the failure of the psychiatric practice is Fanon and Azoulay's (2021) critique of their socio-therapy reforms at Blida-Joinville Psychiatric Hospital. Blida-Joinville was a colonial hospital in a settler colony, Algeria, and Fanon had not gone there to join a revolution because that would not break out until the end of the following year. Rather, he went with plans to practice institutional therapy. That is, put into practice the ideas that he had learnt through his internship with François Tosquelles. Tosquelles' notion of Institutional Therapy was to create a new society within the hospital by changing the perspectives (control, function) and undermining the hierarchies, involving the “patients” in discussions and decisions and opening up the hospital to the outside. Fanon implemented a series of practical humanizing reforms at Blida-Joinville. The goal was for the patients to take action in their self-determination and thereby humanize subjectivity. While committed to psychiatric work, he also knew that there was a need to change the world.

If socio-therapy meant challenging the cycle of agitation–restraint–agitation by democratizing the institution and eliminating the sadistic practices produced by the directive to control the patients, Fanon and Azoulay (2021) argued that their practice at Blida-Joinville had engaged in a program of “masked assimilation.” Among the reasons for failure, they added, was their inability to speak Arabic. Relying on interpreters vitiated the psychotherapeutic doctor–patient relationship and in the colonial situation, where interpreters were associated with the police, reinforced alienation. At Blida-Joinville, the translations told the doctors little as they stripped the patient’s speech of detail. Self-critically, Fanon and Azoulay (2021) summed up that because they uncritically tried to implement a “Western-based sociotherapy program,” they had unthinkingly adopted the politics of assimilation, disregarding the cultural and social particularities of the mentally ill. For Fanon, the failure became a dynamic of truth and a learning exercise.

**Laubscher:** You remind us of another example from a related and contemporaneous article, by Fanon and Geronimi (2021), namely how a wholesale adoption of the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) might render results of Muslim women as mentally “unorganized” and unimaginative, but that the pictured scenes were so unfamiliar to their lived experience that a violin might be a coffin, for example; and that the card that elicited the most imaginative responses from the women were the black and white card, putting paid to the notion of the test’s utility, let alone its results. We know as well that Fanon endeavored to design a projection test appropriate to the world of the Maghrebi Muslims, but that project never came to fruition as the war for liberation soon overtook such psychiatric practice goals. The implication from your earlier response and this additional example is, of course, that the sociopolitical and institutional context of any psychotherapeutic work is hugely significant; it can, in effect, capsize a treatment, particularly so if it, albeit unintentionally, extends existing structures of racism and further alienates those it had aimed to reach. We are reminded here of Fanon’s well-known remarks in *Black Skin White Masks* (Fanon, 1967a) where he calls for “combined action” at both psychotherapeutic and broader political levels:

“As a psychoanalyst, I should help my patient to become conscious of his unconscious and abandon his attempts at a hallucinatory whitening, but also to act in the direction of change in the social structure” (Fanon, 1967a, p. 100).

**Gibson:** Yes. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon stresses that “outside” the psychoanalytic office, he must convince the patient of the necessity of changing the world. He concludes that what emerges in this reflection “is a need for combined action on the individual and the group.” The work of the psychoanalyst is to help the patient become conscious of their unconscious desires and, once identified, enable them “to choose action with respect to the real source of the conflict, that is, the social structure” (2008, p. 80). His resignation from Blida-Joinville Psychiatric Hospital in 1956 is more acute. There, he argues that psychiatry is impossible because the social structure that exists in Algeria is hostile to any attempt to “put the individual back where they belong.” (Fanon, 1967b, p. 53). Fanon’s last word on mental health is the final chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth* (Fanon, 2004), “Colonial Wars and Mental Disorders.” There, he makes it clear that the project of psychiatric hospitals in the colonies is a colonizing one, as colonialism was “a fertile purveyor for psychiatric hospitals” (Fanon, 2004, p. 181), creating new pathologies. Hence, the work of disalienation had to be

individual, institutional, and social, being open to a constantly self-critical decolonization.

**Laubscher:** We imagine that, in the United States, which may be much less overtly colonial or blatantly oppressive as was the case in Fanon's Algeria, hegemonic economic systems and ideologies nonetheless pressure a certain kind of health and psychiatric care which, also, does not necessarily have the disalienation of the marginalized other as its primary or departure concern. Staying with Fanon and the anti-colonial struggle, though, could you give us some further examples of how this new humanism is grounded in spaces of anti-colonial struggle?

**Gibson:** I'll give two ideas that I discuss in my book *Combat Breathing* (Gibson, 2024). Both of these ideas refer to Fanon's discussion of the challenges arising in the historical period of anti-colonial struggle in Africa, in *The Wretched of the Earth* (2004). For Fanon, during the struggle, anti-colonial struggle militants needed to take responsibility for ideological clarification, which meant a critical engagement with the Manichean sloganeering that had been a powerful tool in its mobilization. They had to add nuance, explaining what kind of society they wanted to create and why not all the colonized supported that struggle. In place of the black and white terms, they needed to explain how some Arabs and Blacks supported colonialism, while some of the colonists supported the armed struggle.

Secondly, explaining the need to critically and openly address what he calls a "voluntarist shortcut" Fanon (2004, p. 139) argues that when confronted with a difficult problem during a meeting, it proves counterproductive if the leader answers with a simple directive, such as "All we need do is . . ." Fanon argues that this quickly silences questions and encourages unquestioning passivity. He insists that the militant does not need to be told that they are wrong but needs to be educated by following through their reasoning and taught to grasp "the often atrocious, inhuman, and finally sterile nature of this 'All you need do is . . .'" (2004, p. 139). Nobody has a monopoly on truth, he insists, and "the search for truth in local situations is the responsibility of the community" (2004, p. 139).

**Hook:** What you say here about the social or group dimension of political activity actually has an important connection with humanistic, existential, and even psychodynamic forms of therapy. In each of these cases, it is easy to imagine a scenario where one might seek to encourage the asking of certain questions, understanding the meaning of the client's silences, and perhaps—depending on circumstances and the nature of the clinical situation—even delicately query an apparent stance of passivity. Admittedly, such interventions are not typically thought of in political terms—and for Fanon, in the context of colonialism, the political dimension is of course irreducible and essential—but there is an interesting potential connection there, nevertheless.

We would like to return to your book *Fanonian Practices in South Africa*, where you highlight issues of agency in relation to oppression, particularly the idea of agency becoming enabled through struggle:

"The point – that the damned of the earth become agents of change through the struggle itself – is often lost on those commentators who, bombarded by Fanon's descriptions and proscriptions of violence in *The Wretched of the Earth* (2004) believe that Fanon's

philosophy of liberation and Fanonian practices can essentially be reduced to violence. They see violence as Fanon's original contribution. . . [despite that as] *A Dying Colonialism*. . . confirms, for Fanon, the 'original idea' is in fact the radical mutation in people's consciousness that results from the revolutionary struggle" (Gibson, 2011b, p. 11).

It occurs to us that many psychologists coming to Fanon for the first time might be concerned by what they've heard about Fanon's thoughts on violence. Obviously, it is important to stress that Fanon is referring to violence in relation to dehumanizing "total" structures of colonial racist oppression. Nonetheless, it would seem that there is an obvious tension or contradiction here: between the humanist Fanon and the Fanon who speaks of the role of violence. Your thoughts quoted above offer some clarification, but could you shed further light on this apparent contradiction?

**Gibson:** While Fanon certainly advocated organized violence, psychologists, and others in the mental health fields, encountering Fanon for the first time, should be open to understanding why this apparent contradiction exists and through a consciousness of it, work with and through it in order to understand it. At the basic level Fanon, as a psychiatrist, is interested in Black and colonized lived reality (see, for example, Fanon, 2008, pp. 89–119 and Fanon, 1967b, pp. 3–16). The experience of colonialism is totalitarian. The occupation of the colonized is total. The occupation of their land and their daily life is an ongoing oppressive experience reinforced by the police, the courts, and security systems. There is simply no escape, and life becomes constrained and hemmed in, and every breath a combat. Life under these conditions becomes a living death (Fanon, 1967b, p. 11). To understand this, we must shift the perspective to the majority who have had no voice and who have been the objects of colonial dehumanizing psychological and social studies constantly repeated in the media and by the government, where the colonized are portrayed as evil, untrustworthy, and bestial. In this context, taking a stand against colonialism requires enormous courage, and the anti-colonial fight represents this on a social scale. Those who were thought to be without reason, indeed as sub-human, living out a daily struggle to survive, become political subjects through considered action. And in the Manichean colonial world, violence is the coin of the realm. In this context, anti-colonial violence disrupts that realm. Emerging from daily and constant dehumanization, the realization that the colonizer are not supermen but can be killed just like me is a mental liberation. Fanon also has in mind the so-called Mau Mau resistance in Kenya, when the rural fighters took up homemade arms against the might of the British Empire. When Fanon calls the French occupation and war against the Algerian people an apocalypse, he is not exaggerating. Colonial violence, terror, torture, and brutality are absolute and he knew from a psychiatric point of view that the traumas would have to be addressed for years to come. His approach is far from one-sided. The first case of "Colonial Wars and Mental Disorders," which "raises the question of responsibility within the revolutionary framework," concerns a man who had planted a bomb and on each anniversary suffered from anxiety and suicidal obsessions. Fanon explains that after independence, the man had befriended nationals from the former colonial power and wondered "whether among the victims of the bomb there had been people like his new acquaintances" (1968, p. 253n).

**Hook:** This is a very sobering point, that such traumas would need to be addressed for years to come. . . It is worth stressing that as a psychiatrist Fanon grasped the extent of the trauma stemming from violence.

**Gibson:** Fanon understands anti-colonial violence as a necessary consequence of settler colonialism and also considers it a problematic as he makes clear in his chapter on Colonial Wars and Mental Disorders. To clarify, when Fanon talks of an “original idea” he is speaking of the liberation and self-determination of those colonized people who are struggling for freedom. In *A Dying Colonialism* he declares in the preface (which was not included in the original edition) that the radical mutations in consciousness—the “form and content of national liberation”—already exists and that because of the new kind of Algerian, Algerian liberation is “no longer in future heaven.” (1965, pp. 28–29). And while he discusses the violence, the brutality, and the horror of colonialism and the million refugees behind barbed wire, he insists that what “we Algerians want is to discover the human behind the colonizer” (1965, p. 32).

This is 1959, 5 years after the armed struggle began. Fourteen years after the French bombed Sétif, Algeria on Victory Europe day, 1945, an assault that killed 40,000 Algerians after a popular demonstration for national liberation became an insurrection. As in other colonized nations, nonviolent reformist organizing in Algeria had led to little change and so the decision to undertake an armed struggle on November 1, 1954 required commitment, clarification, and organization. Writing in 1959, Fanon argued that French colonialism, despite its enormous military presence, had already lost because of the shifts in consciousness brought about by standing up to colonial dehumanization and oppression. These were not random acts of violence but organized and controlled. Still, in *A Dying Colonialism*, he worries about the “physiological brutality that centuries of oppression give rise to and feed” (1965, p. 25) and condemns actions (as he will analyze in “Colonial Wars and Mental Disorders” in *The Wretched*) that repeat this brutality.

**Laubscher:** In the extract that follows, you use a number of key terms that are of particular interest to us. “Self-actualization,” a term from humanistic psychology (often associated with ideas of “becoming all you can be,” “realizing one’s fullest potential,” etc.), appears here to be used in a more revolutionary political sense than is usually the case. It occurs alongside a crucial phrase we often find in your work, namely, a “radical mutation in consciousness,” and both are followed by recourse to “becoming human.” Would you be able to add any further thoughts on how to understand these terms in a properly Fanonian manner, with specific relevance to the political and human challenges facing us today? Once again, we would like to cite a passage from your book *Fanonian Practices in South Africa*, where you state the following:

“*A Dying Colonialism* warns of the exhaustion, indeed brutality, that can result from unreasoning and mindless activism, and the cycle of violence and counter-violence it can perpetuate, it argues that such a situation would end either in self-destruction, or in a reliance on an external force that will destroy the possibility of self-actualization. For Fanon, activity that shuns reflection and critical thought cannot lead to liberation. . . . Fanon is careful to argue that successful action against colonialism (and neocolonialism) depends on developing thoughtful practices and a praxis in which the damned are called upon to think. Successful action, in short, depends on a return to the idea and practice of ‘becoming human’” (2011b, p. 12).

**Gibson:** Fanon is not against self-actualization and becoming “all you can be,” if this is understood within, and as a being produced by the reflexive social struggle. In other words, the enlightening potential of human struggles for freedom. Once again, we are back to his critique of the national bourgeoisie who want to be all they can be by taking over from the colonists. Schooled by colonialism, they have imbibed the capitalist ideology that each person is their own isolated subjectivity and “my brother is my purse, my friend is part of my scheme for getting on” (Fanon, 2004, p.11). The liberation struggle creates change in its forms of organization, movement, and vocabulary. Fanon wants an individualism free of colonial imposition which can become an individualism “enabled to open out into the truth of the nation and of the world.” (Fanon, 2004, pp. 140-141). In other words, the development of a truly social individual.

**Hook:** This helps qualify what humanism is for Fanon, not a humanism that emphasizes an insular individualism of self-actualization at the cost of others, but rather a properly social form of humanism which emphasizes that each individual exists only through others. Thus, it raises a question about the relationship of the self to others in the context of ethics. We were struck, to that end, by your comment that “Fanon’s is a practical or ethical humanism, because it is, after all, an issue of life” (2003, p. 181). Can you tell us more about the difference between practical and ethical humanism in Fanon, and perhaps provide examples, also adding thoughts on what a “Fanonian ethics” might be?

**Gibson:** Fanon’s criticism of bourgeois humanism is a continuous theme throughout his writings from *Black Skin, White Masks* (Fanon, 1967a) and “The ‘North African Syndrome’” (Fanon, 1967b) to *The Wretched of the Earth* (Fanon, 2004). In the conclusion to *The Wretched of the Earth*, he writes of the Europeans speaking of humanism while murdering and killing wherever they go. One focus of *Black Skin, White Masks* and “The ‘North African Syndrome,’” is European racism and the objectification, thingification, and medicalization of people of color often based on scientific racism that dominated medical literature. The opening pages of *Black Skin, White Masks* feature Fanon writing critically of liberal humanism:

“Striving for a New Humanism. Understanding Mankind. Our Black Brothers: I believe in you, Man . . . Understanding and Loving. I’m bombarded from all sides with hundreds of lines that try to foist themselves on me” (Fanon, 2008, pp.xi-xii).

The book begins with a quote from Césaire’s 1950 *Discourse on Colonialism*, a work arguing that there was a direct link between Hitler (and the Holocaust of Jews in Europe) with the colonial Holocausts. Césaire called it a boomerang, and Fanon was seeing its immediacy as the French signed the UN declarations of human rights, while simultaneously massacring and torturing in Madagascar, in Vietnam, and in Algeria. To jump to the conclusion of the book, we are confronted with another immediacy, “It is not because the Indo-Chinese discovered a culture of their own that they revolted.” His answer is that it was “Quite simply . . . because it became impossible for them to breathe, in more than one sense of the word” (2008, p. 201). This statement reminds us of the importance of the body as he says in the concluding line of the book, “O my body, always make me a man who questions!” (2008, p. 206)

To speak about Fanonian ethics is always situational. Thus, while he highlights the limits of a politics of resentment, he adds at the same time that we have to sanction

all revolts and “all desperate actions, all those abortive attempts drowned in rivers of blood” (1968, p. 207).

In other words, while Fanon is critical of a politics of reaction, he acknowledges all the desperate actions and argues that the intellectual’s reluctance to do so is a reflection of their disconnected and elitist attitudes. When depicting the growth of shantytowns on the peripheries of the colonizer’s towns, in *The Wretched of the Earth*, he connects it with

“the consecration of the colonized’s *biological decision* to invade the enemy citadel at all costs, and if need be, by the most underground channels” (2004, p. 81, 1968, p. 130, emphasis added).

This biological decision is forced on the colonized by the logic of colonial expropriation and oppression and becomes (and remains) a serious material threat to the “security” of the colonial town. The colonized’s decision to move to the town is simply about survival, to find work or other means to sustain themselves. It is a product of colonialism and at the same time poses an absolute threat to it. In response, the colonizer creates policies of apartheid and segregation, enacts laws, builds walls, and checkpoints to control the population. But this threat to colonialism by moving to the urban area is not a conscious decision to reject the oppressor. Rather, the colonizer plays little role in the decision. The colonizer is screened off and rarely seen, and when present, appears only in the form of the police and military, while the colonized continue their elemental refusal to cooperate. Fanon believes that each desperate action and abortive revolt can be understood, but he is far from saying that the revolution comes simply out of the barrel of a gun. While the colonizers speak in “zoological terms” with constant references to the “bestiary” the colonized know that they are not the animals (2004, p. 7–8) and it is their willingness to disrupt business as usual of the settler state by breaking down the barriers of confinement that indicates how quickly resistance becomes political because it is a life and death struggle.

The radical intellectual’s ethical challenge, then, to sanction all revolts reminds me of Fanon’s statement in his essay on “Medicine and Colonialism” that “every time we do not understand, we must tell ourselves that we are at the heart of the drama.” (1965, p. 125). The lack of understanding is grounded in the quick judgment that the other’s actions are absolutely unreasonable (and the words, terrorist, barbarian, and inhuman are automatically applied) and absolutely immoral. The action is dismissed as horrendous and beyond the bounds of morality. This is the situation for many intellectuals. As I discussed earlier, the militant who all too quickly found an answer to a problem Fanon similarly considers this at the “heart of the drama.” In an article addressing French liberals and left in *El Moudjahid* he calls this “doctrinal simplification” and “mechanization of thinking” undialectical. We saw it in the quick automatic and Manichean thinking in reaction to October 7<sup>th</sup>. Which is why I felt compelled to write the preface to *Combat Breathing*, posing the question “What would Fanon think?”

**Laubscher:** That the revolution does not simply come from the barrel of a gun, or how an act born from survival and everyday life quickly becomes political, might be exemplified by Rosa Parks simply needing to get to work on a full bus. But then it is also true that Ms. Parks was already a member of the NAACP when she got on that bus.

Thus, it is intriguing to ask whether there is a type of *declarative* humanism that pre-emptly “really existing” new humanism. Likewise interesting is the prospect that there might be another emergent form of humanism—a kind of lived revolutionary humanism-as-praxis that is always still coming into being—that comes between these two forms. We take this idea from the following quote from your more recent work, *Combat Breathing*:

“it was clear to Fanon that neither the military nor external leadership, but only the revolutionary struggle and the radical mutations in popular consciousness, could truly liberate the nation. What was at stake, therefore, was articulating the new humanism that had to be born, self-reflexively, out of the revolutionary process itself, and in a revolutionary program” (Gibson, 2024, p. 220).

**Gibson:** Fanon speaks about this directly in the chapter on Colonial Wars and Mental Disorders in *The Wretched of the Earth* as a “major theoretical problem”:

“There must be no waiting until the nation has produced new people; there must be no waiting until people are imperceptibly transformed by revolutionary processes in perpetual renewal. It is quite true that these two processes are essential, but consciousness must be helped” (Fanon, 1968, p. 304).

Almost returning us to the analytic self-criticism of the consulting room in *Black Skin, White Masks*, he quickly adds that this help also has an internal focus and includes us; “it is necessary at all times and in all places to make explicit, to de-mystify, and to harry the insult to humankind that exists in oneself” (1968, p. 303). Fanon consistently emphasizes this point. As much of individual liberation cannot be achieved without social praxis and changing the world, “an authentic national liberation” can only exist “on the precise degree to which *the individual* has irreversibly begun their own liberation” (1967b, p. 103). So, revolution does create changes in consciousness as he explained in *A Dying Colonialism*, but we also cannot wait. Consciousness needs help. But how do we do that? Again, we return to his critique of political education and the need self-critique; we have to continually “de-mystify, and to harry the insult to humankind that exists in oneself.”

**Hook:** There are many moments in your work where you link Fanon’s ideas of a new humanism to the concept of national consciousness. This makes a lot of sense in Fanon’s historical (anti-colonial) context, but it poses the question for us today in a territory like that of the United States—which of course is now in a second Trump era—what is the equivalent of “national consciousness” at this historical juncture? Here is a relevant extract drawn from your book *Combat Breathing*:

“This is Fanon’s revolutionary humanism in practice. As he concludes, national consciousness needs to be explained, enriched, and deepened. It cannot be allowed to become a sterile formalism which quickly degenerates into chauvinism and racism. If national consciousness does not very quickly turn into a social and political consciousness, into humanism, it leads to a dead end. In contrast, “only the massive commitment by men and women to judicious and productive tasks gives form and substance to this consciousness” (Fanon 2004, p. 144). The nation exists and becomes a living expression, says Fanon, with “the collective consciousness in motion of the

entire people . . . the enlightened and coherent praxis of the men and women” (Fanon, 2004, p. 144)” (Gibson, 2024, p. 278).

One prospective answer from your work to the above question (about what one version of “national consciousness” might be today) is as follows:

“There is an implicit radical humanism to the Black Lives Matter movement as new subjectivities and voices emerge that want to discuss and understand and plan for the future” (Gibson, 2024, p. 298).

**Gibson:** I was just watching *Soundtrack to a Coup d’etat* (Grimonprez, 2024), which expresses the internationalism of the Black struggle in the United States. Black America and the struggle against American racism were always part of Fanon’s consciousness, from the novelists he discusses in *Black Skin, White Masks*, including Richard Wright, to his discussions of negritude and Bebop in *The Wretched of the Earth*. The Freedom movement and its growing militancy are expressed in *Soundtrack of a Coup d’etat*. By 1960, the two-way exchange of news and ideas about Black liberation had been rekindled and Black Americans were aware of African decolonization and its leaders. At the time, the Freedom movement (or civil rights movement) was considered by mainstream leaders, such as A. Philip Randolph, to be “America’s unfinished revolution.”

This Trumpian moment can be considered a counterrevolution rooted in an anti-humanist White nationalist settler-colonialist consciousness. Trump is not unique. He is the kind of bourgeois hucksterer–showman that Fanon warns about in *The Wretched of the Earth*. When Fanon makes his critique of the national bourgeoisie, he argues that they are not productive but rather like gangsters looking for payoffs. Let’s not forget that the reemergence of the Black Lives Movement, following George Floyd’s murder, occurred during Trump’s first term. Trump has a long history of being a racist, and his first reaction in 2020 was to call for the army to crush the movement. But the movement became immediately popular, and also gained liberal support, as it spread across the nation, raising the humanist slogan to abolish the police. Expressed in slogans from “Hand-up, don’t shoot” to “I can’t breathe,” it connected with a placard which was made famous during the 1968 Memphis Sanitation strike, “I am A Man”. Trump’s racism is nothing but the foundational lie of America’s civilization, and Black mass movements in the United States always have essentially revolutionary humanist dimensions.

**Laubscher:** You also speak of new humanism being educational, which is an intriguing idea, but if we are, once again, to bring this idea to bear on our current political situation where there is a massive swing toward the right, to Christian White nationalism, how can we hope for an educational humanism to realistically bear fruit when it seems to be increasingly marginalized, demonized even outlawed (as in the case of Critical Race Theory or DEI offices and initiatives)? Here, once again, is a quotation from your work:

“Politics, in short, is the practice of the impoverished masses becoming political subjects. And national consciousness must therefore “humaniz[e]” the people, and “elevat[e] their minds.” This new humanism is educational, primarily concerned with restoring the dignity to citizens, to “furnish their minds, fill their eyes with human things and develop a human landscape for the sake of its enlightened and sovereign

inhabitants” (Fanon 2004, p. 144). Political education means connecting practical work of administration with “opening minds” so that all can become responsible for creating a new society” (Gibson, 2024, p. 279).

**Gibson:** That’s a lovely quote drawn from Fanon, “furnish their minds, fill their eyes with human things and develop a human landscape for the sake of its enlightened and sovereign inhabitants.” It is genuinely open and creative. It is an expression of individualism that is genuinely social and free, manifested in culture, in life, and in society.

Concretely, Fanon is arguing that for the anticolonial revolt to be successful a new society has to be created. In other words, it is a double motion—breaking down of the colonial society and creating a new decolonizing society. In the first chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth*, the process seems to be presented seamlessly:

“Decolonization never takes place unnoticed, for it influences individuals and modifies them fundamentally. It transforms spectators crushed with their inessentiality into privileged actors, with the grandiose glare of history’s floodlights upon them. It brings a natural rhythm into existence, introduced by new people, and with it a new language and a new humanity. Decolonization is the veritable creation of new people. The ‘thing’ which has been colonized becomes human during the same process by which it frees itself” (Fanon, 1968, p. 36).

Quite simply, the dehumanized colonized is humanized and freed by the revolutionary struggle. But Fanon warns that this is not seamless, as I have been arguing; nonetheless, it begins with those who have been locked in, constantly repressed, surveilled, and denied freedom of movement. Those whose every breath is a breath of combat.

**Hook:** In *Living Fanon* (2011b), you speak of the role of negativity in Fanon’s approach to humanism in the following terms:

[T]here is the concept of negative as purely detrimental and repressive, and there is both a negativity that is reactionary and a negativity that is actional. In *Black Skin*, Fanon writes that his humanism “is a no”: a no against exploitation and the butchery of what is most human, namely freedom (1967a, p. 222) . . . Fanon understood that it is from that negativity, namely struggles for freedom, that the concrete human “yes” emerges (Gibson, 2011, pp. 8-9).

We might say then that Fanon’s humanism requires a kind of pronounced “work of the negative,” perhaps even an enlargement of the negative, before we move to advance a positive. A certain, some would say banal, version of humanistic psychology contends an essential goodness, an inherent “yes” in some psychic interior, which it is the therapist’s task to activate by their own actualized presence and therapeutic skill. Consideration of a “No,” no less fundamental, and to be voiced by both therapist and client, seems an important challenge and consideration! Do you have any further thoughts on the role of negativity in Fanon’s humanism?

**Gibson:** I have no problem thinking of Fanon thinking dialectically. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, he references the dialectic of being and having (2008, p. 27). And yet the

moving principle, the dialectic in practice—of making subjectivity objective—is the *negation* of the non-being and non-having out of which, to put it in Marx’s terms, we can begin to think of a positive humanism beginning from itself.

In addition, let’s remember how Fanon puts it in *Black Skin, White Masks*, that “man” is a yes *and* a no, and clearly articulates his principle of human freedom:

“We shall never stop repeating it. Yes to life. Yes to love. Yes to generosity. But man is also a negation. No to man's contempt. No to the indignity of man. To the exploitation of man. To the massacre of what is most human in man: freedom” (Fanon, 1967a, p. 222).

**Laubscher:** In the closing sections of your recent book on Fanon (*Combat Breathing*, 2024), you invoke Fanon’s notion of a new or even an African humanism and do so in a number of fascinating ways:

“Fanon began *Les Damnés* by arguing that the liberation struggle of the damned of the earth is “an original idea propounded as an absolute”; he ends the book with the absolute as a “new humanism” being developed at the nodal point of the African revolution and threatened by the counter-revolution. Thinking about a “new humanism,” Fanon was not a romantic. Rather, he understood the necessity to keep fighting for human freedom against all odds; engaging with the trials and tribulations of national consciousness at that moment therefore amounted to an analysis of the tragedy of the African revolutions—and also the tragedy of Fanon himself, consumed by the very struggle for a new life for the damned of the earth that he worked tirelessly to bring about” (Gibson, 2024, pp. 290-291).

There are several interesting implications here, humanism needs to be constantly extended and developed, toward the varying ends of human freedom, as it is itself contingent on different forms of oppression and objectification. Anything you have to offer on these ideas would be much valued.

**Gibson:** First, I think that the quote you highlighted from *Combat Breathing* is spot on. It indicates the principle and the method and also the tragedy of Fanon, informing our humanism. Fanon experienced the tragedy from the inside and still fought till his dying day for human liberation. We thus build on Fanon. He left us an important body of work. The totality of his work speaks to us perhaps more loudly than before in this period of crisis: fascism, racism, capitalist climate extinction, and genocide. But we also have to recreate Fanon’s dialectic, re-enliven it with our experiences and questions, and thereby deepen our own notion of a new humanism based on new dialogues and discussions in and outside the psychological community, the university, and the communities where we are.

**Hook:** In *Combat Breathing* (2024), you draw attention to how Fanon thinks about the humanizing potentiality of certain modes of time, particularly in relation to climate extinction. Could you elaborate upon what such a humanizing form of time might be and offer some thoughts on how we might think about temporality in a particularly Fanonian way? Here is the passage from *Combat Breathing*:

“Fanon offers [a notion of time]. . . that is urgent in this moment of capitalist climate extinction. It is a notion of time that is liberated from the colonial foreclosure of possibility and also from capitalist time. Time, instead, is connected with life, self-determination, and the development of human subjectivities. . . . Fanon's notion of time is also extremely sensitive to the psychological situation that people find themselves in, including the weight of individual and collective trauma and prospects for future health that only time, he says, will fully reveal. . . [T]here are no guarantees of recovery, but time, of course, has to become consciously human time. It has to become the time for health and the recovery of those knowingly and unknowingly broken down by racism, colonialism, and capitalism. Fanon is aware that the process of creating liberated people might take time, insisting that there is no magical process, no leader, no other who will do it for us” (Gibson, 2024, p. 297).

**Gibson:** Your reference to time and health and Fanon’s lack of surety reminds me of the case in the chapter ‘Colonial Wars and Mental Disorders’ (in *The Wretched of the Earth*) where he concludes, “Though it may appear unscientific, in our opinion time alone can bring some improvement to the disrupted personality of this young man” (1968, p. 264). The idea of time and the rest of the world is certainly important as the clock clicks down with the capitalist-imposed climate crisis. But in addition, he wants us to open up our minds to a different concept of time, of human time, it can no longer be, he says, “that of the moment or up till the next harvest, but must become that of the rest of the world” (1968, pp. 193-194). It requires consciousness, and which is why he immediately talks about the spirit of discouragement and brings us back to the work to “fill their minds and feast their eyes with human things” (1968, p. 194).

As Marx argues in the *Communist Manifesto*, you have to fight your own bourgeoisie, but the perspective is also international. The same can be said of the anti-colonial national liberation struggles of Fanon’s time, which were associated with a new world, the Third World. As a newly liberated nation in a hostile bipolar world, Fanon wanted to build new networks of solidarity and connectivity. A living Pan-Africanism. The perspective on the future, then, is international *and* from the bottom up, recognizing the specificity of lived culture and ways of being. The colonized’s combat breathing under colonialism, where every breath is monitored and breathing is itself a struggle, can become a new collective breathing of the emergent nation’s struggle for human liberation. Let me give you one example from Fanon’s praxis of institutional or sociopsychotherapy at Blida-Joinville Psychiatric Hospital, creating a football field and a football team. It became a collective decision, collective labor, and collective discussion about creating the field, marking it out as well as playing the game. The game itself, running, passing, body movement in time and space, is joyful. Fanon had played with his brothers on a team in Martinique. But how to create a team in a psychiatric hospital? A team where the players might walk off and certainly might express their emotions and have arguments? Of course, it was a process and practice. Players might get angry, they might feel left out, and so on. So, it became a constant source of group therapy. But how to officiate? How to referee the game? How to control the passions of the moment and, indeed, of the result? Fanon discussed all this, especially as the “team” played other teams outside the hospital. Additionally, within the hospital, attitudes toward language and culture became essential and critical for the staff to address and understand. And moreover, it became clear, whatever disalienation was achieved that it was colonial society itself that was the structure reproducing it. As he puts it in *Black Skin, White Masks*, “As a psychoanalyst I must help my patient to ‘consciousnessize’ their unconscious . . . but also to act along the lines of a change in

social structure” (2008, p. 80). The final chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth* includes detailed case notes of a discussion between Fanon and one of his patients, B. It concludes with B saying, “If it doesn't work out, I'll come and see you again in Algiers.” Fanon wanted to be part of that discussion after independence, understanding that while the revolution created changes in consciousness, it was consciousness that continued to need help.

**Laubscher and Hook:** Nigel, we sincerely thank you for your scholarship, and for sharing your insights and time with us.

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