Moments of conceptual potential: Frantz Fanon, the postcolony, and “nonwar communities”

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Moments of conceptual potential: Frantz Fanon, the post colony, and “nonwar communities”

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Frantz Fanon ended his life’s work with the admonition that “we must work out new concepts”. This paper examines “moments of conceptual potential” that have arisen through the politics and actions of communities that, surrounded by violent conflict, chose not to participate. Three accounts from Colombia, Afghanistan, and Rwanda, have been drawn from case studies on nonwar communities summarized in the book Opting Out of War by Mary B. Anderson and Marshall Wallace. These “moments” allow us to rethink both Fanon’s relevance and our conceptions of the “violent” postcolonial world.

Keywords: Frantz Fanon; STEPS project; nonwar communities; violence; postcolony

Introduction: Fanon and the post colony

“One should not,” Frantz Fanon once said, “relate one’s past, but stand as a testimony to it” (Cherki [2000] 2006, 1). Though he invoked the past, it is clear in Fanon’s work that he was principled in standing as testimony to the present, and of working for a future – “Ideally, the present should always contribute to the building of the future,” which “future should be supported by living men [sic]” (Fanon [1952] 1967, 5–6). Perhaps it is the intentional sense of futurity with which Fanon invests his work that has been cause for the question, often repeated since his death, “Is Fanon relevant today?” Apropos this question, the written works of Fanon have been for more than five decades subjected to critique and interpretation, translation, and suppression, sometimes to appropriation and distortion (Cherki [2000] 2006, 187–200; Lazarus 2011). They have had a longer life in the public eye than he. We must conclude that either his ideas are indeed relevant, or that we are bound up in controversy and debate the energy for which would better be spent elsewhere. Let us take the positive view, and resolve that Fanon’s ideas are not only still applicable, but of crucial import, “today.”

The “today” in question is the postcolonial moment, the world which has taken shape since the era of decolonization, mid-twentieth century. The term “postcolonial” as it is used here refers specifically to this historical period since global decolonization, and not directly to the corpus of scholarly work that has come to be referred to as postcolonial (Lazarus 2011, 10), although implicitly this work will join in the latter. Regarding Frantz Fanon, Ato Sekyi-Otu makes the similar distinction between “Fanon of the postcolony” and “the Fanon of ‘postcolonialism’” (2011, 45). My intention is to engage with the former.
We must recognize of the historical postcolonial period that it is also a political period (notably, Mamdani 1996, 2010). The inertia Fanon attributes to colonial history – the “static period begun by colonization” ([1961] 1963, 69): a period seemingly bereft of politics – does not also define the postcolony (most accurately: postcolonies). Superficially, this may appear untrue, as negative cycles of conflict, of impoverishment, of corruption, of discrimination, and of political impasse have evolved in popular (especially Western) discourse from troubles to be engaged to basic truths of the postcolony. A conceptual myopia is as damaging to the postcolonial situation as any of the lived suffering just mentioned. However, within formerly colonized societies, there is evidence of the positive, both conceptually and substantiated in action. This paper will explore, with Fanon as pilot, the politics of certain “nonwar” communities which have shown exceptional innovation in the context of the postcolony, specifically in settings of violent conflict. As we shall see in the experiences of these communities, many of the ideas that Fanon wrote about over 50 years ago are illuminated through action. The “nonwar communities” discussed in this paper afford us an opportunity to look at Fanon’s thinking in a new way, challenging the common reading of his work as an incitement to violence.

First, why the postcolony? As Partha Chatterjee has observed, the population of “most of the world” falls into the category of the formerly colonized (2004, 37). The political circumstances of the postcolonial are those in which an enormous number of people living all over the world find themselves. While we will only be examining the experiences of a few, they nevertheless demonstrate a certain form of politics that can challenge the political agenda that obtain in many formerly colonized societies. Furthermore, in this postcolonial period we are dealing quite explicitly with problematic and incomplete decolonization as Fanon envisaged it; in which the political dispensation in formerly colonized countries has failed to move entirely beyond the politics of colonialism.

And why Fanon? Fanon’s life ended in 1961, just before his adopted nation of Algeria achieved independence from France. It was then the era of decolonization throughout the African continent, and globally. Fanon was thinking and writing on a historical cusp: the few years that form the fulcrum over which tipped the colonial toward the postcolonial. This is a commanding vantage point. Especially in his last book, The Wretched of the Earth, Fanon turns toward the future, to what can happen after independence is won in the anti-colonial struggle, to the potential for creativity and the potential for regression that he sees latent in newly independent societies, examined particularly in his chapter, “The Pitfalls of National Consciousness.” Avoiding the glorifying description of Fanon as “precient,” we can still appreciate the value of his thinking toward understanding what has happened and, more cogently, what can happen in the postcolonial world – what can happen through “renewed openness to untried possibilities” as “what Fanon meant by ‘true decolonization’” (Sekyi-Otu 2011, 54).

If we accept Fanon’s principle that it is humans that “bring society into being” ([1952] 1967, 4), then even in the most dehumanizing of circumstances – and these, racism, colonialism, violence, are the subject of Fanon’s work – the human potential to change societies, to create new societies out of new subjectivities, is ever present. If one imagines Fanon’s oeuvre in its totality, what emerges is an eloquent enjoinder to practice an existential humanism, “preserving … respect for the basic values that constitute a human world”: from his first page – “Towards a new humanism …” – to his last – “… we must work out new concepts” ([1961] 1963, 316, [1952] 1967, 173, 1). What we will engage with here are these: moments of conceptual potential.

The STEPS project

These moments of conceptual potential are gleaned from case studies collected by CDA Collaborative Learning Projects, a non-profit research organization based in Cambridge,
Massachusetts. In a study conducted between 2002 and 2006, research was undertaken into the experiences of “nonwar communities” living through violent conflicts in 13 different countries. The project, called Steps Toward Conflict Prevention (STEPS), sought insight into the ways in which each of the 13 communities in question “as a group, decided not to fight and instead developed strategies for exempting themselves from war,” in spite of the fact that these were people “living in circumstances where all the forces and incentives that surrounded them seemingly should have pushed them into conflict” (Anderson and Wallace 2013, 3). The results of the STEPS project have been published as the book, Opting Out of War (Anderson and Wallace 2013).

The focus of STEPS was on strategies of community-based conflict prevention. It is a fascinating study in that regard. However, conflict prevention as such will not be the focus here, nor will peace studies more generally. Rather, I will emphasize the special sort of politics and action developed and practiced by these communities during periods of violent conflict, and the clearly Fanonian character of some of their actions.

The 13 case studies that inform Opting Out of War were compiled from communities in Africa, Asia, Europe, and South America. All 13 of the countries in question have historically experienced imperialism or direct colonialism. Therefore, their histories and experiences are among those that form the broad category of the postcolonial. All 13 provide valuable insights, and the commonalities identified by the authors of Opting Out of War are also particularly useful in this enquiry through Fanon. However, we will emphasize only three of the cases here, the details of which will be summarized below: the example of “peace communities” during civil war in Colombia in the late 1990s and early 2000s; of a community in the Jaghori region of Afghanistan during the same period; and the experience of the Muslim community in Rwanda during the genocide in 1994. (That Fanon wrote about and worked for decolonization in Africa specifically should not proscribe the context in which he is relevant. A living Fanon would, I am sure, be infuriated by such geographical determination. “I believe,” says Fanon, “that the individual should tend to take on the universality inherent in the human condition” ([1952] 1967, 3)).

Of course, whether these groups have been exposed to Fanon’s ideas is unknown and also unlikely. These people did not choose to act as they did because of Fanon, so the purpose here is not to explain their actions through Fanon, but rather to explore, through their experiences, ways in which Fanon’s thought can have significance today, and instances in which his explanations of the human experiences after decolonization are performed practically. The actions of these communities serve as experiential examples of how Fanon’s farsighted politics and particular style of existential humanism can be relevant in the realm of the postcolonial.

**Fanon and (post)colonial violence**

Before entertaining the “dialog” between Fanon and these nonwar communities, I am obliged to interject with a discussion of Fanon’s philosophical relationship to violence. This is for three reasons. First, since these communities are found in settings of violent conflict and the case studies concern their responses to the violence surrounding them, it makes practical sense to handle the topic of violence directly. Second, Fanon’s ideas on violence are among his most misunderstood but most frequently invoked; and yet – and this provides the third reason – in spite of its frequent misuse, Fanon’s understanding of violence does translate from the colonial to the postcolonial context, and there furnishes important insights. Nevertheless, it must be remembered that, though the discussion of violence is necessary, and violence is a central facet of the topic at hand, Fanon’s ideas about violence are not the most important aspect of his philosophy; rather, it is his “metamorphic thought,” in Mbembe’s (2012, 26) phrase, which recommends his continued relevance.
The longstanding debate around Fanon and violence begins with Jean-Paul Sartre’s preface to *The Wretched of the Earth*, a preface which perhaps could be best described, in this respect, as lazy. “For violence,” preaches Sartre in his long, introductory sermon, “like Achilles’ lance, can heal the wounds that it has inflicted” ([1961] 1963, 30). Henceforward, Fanon’s apparent espousal of violence could be nonchalantly asserted without qualification. However, Fanon, living in the midst of the cruel anti-colonial war in Algeria, who saw violence as inescapable in the process of decolonization, did not consider it the end of the process nor, ultimately, regenerative in the sense that Sartre expressed it. The final chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth*, “Colonial War and Mental Disorders,” reveals through case notes of psychiatric patients seen during the war Fanon’s recognition of the traumatic and pathologizing effects violence had on Algerian society ([1961] 1963, 249–310). Violence, in the end, and contrary to Sartre, is fundamentally inglorious.

Sekyi-Otu (1996) reads Fanon dramaturgically, cautioning us, “We need to read these texts and scenes within texts *dialectically* rather than *sequentially* or as discrete entities” (22, emphasis in original). And later, “The result of this dramaturgical procedure is that the finality of propositions made in various scenes is rendered suspect” (35). Violence, in such a reading, represents one strand in the dialectic of decolonization, one which does not endure preeminent throughout the course of Fanon’s analysis. The Fanon who says that colonial society “can only be called in question by absolute violence” can also ask, “What is the real nature of this violence?” and answer that it is “the intuition of the colonized masses that their liberation must, and can only be achieved by force” ([1961] 1963, 37, 73, emphasis added). Fanon, introducing a new act in this drama, writes “those lightning flashes of consciousness … where by sheer inertia my death calls for the death of the other – that intense emotion of the first few hours falls to pieces if it is left to feed on its own substance” ([1961] 1963, 139).

However, most appropriate to our exploration of “new concepts” is Nigel Gibson’s interpretation of the otherwise taken-for-granted “Fanonian violence.” Gibson, in excerpt:

… a new humanism cannot develop out of violent acts alone but requires the nurturing of creative, inventive, and thoughtful activity. Prefigured in the struggle for freedom, it must also be nurtured in the period after liberation…. Violence alone cannot win the revolution. It is not enough to move the protagonist from reaction to becoming a thinking, actional being. Action is, of course, the key to reaction, but reaction is still an action determined by the Other. Only “enlightened action” (which cannot be furnished by violence alone) proves once and for all the native no longer exists within the Manichean world developed by colonialism. (2003, 123)

With this, we follow Fanon from the colonial into the postcolonial; from decolonization to the uncertain, potentially hazardous period of independence. We also encounter the “actional” person (Fanon [1952] 1967, 173), the “protagonist” upon which Fanonian thought is based and through which it achieves praxis. (Shortly, we will turn, with this praxis in mind, to the experiences of the Colombian, Afghan, and Rwandan communities mentioned at the outset.)

Since the decades of decolonization in the mid-twentieth century, a pandemic of internal conflicts – some seemingly interminable, some becoming genocide – has pocked the formerly colonized world, often where violence has “disgracefully,” in Fanon’s word, formed “the slogan of a political party” ([1961] 1963, 73). In this postcolonial present, “The Manichean morality of an eye for an eye, of unequivocal notions of justice and injustice, remains a dominant term of world politics” (2003, 1), writes Gibson, acknowledging the binary trope which is commonly projected onto the politics of formerly colonized peoples. In many places, Fanon’s prediction, inferred from the rust he saw ready to form on the bright and newly smithed independent states of his day, has become lived reality:
National consciousness, instead of being the all-embracing crystallization of the innermost hopes of
the whole people, instead of being the immediate and most obvious result of the mobilization of the
people, will be in any case only an empty shell, a crude and fragile travesty of what it might have been.
([1952] 1967, 148, 156)

With this mode of politics, in many places, has come the return of violent conflict. The “pitfalls,” or
“mésaventures,” of national conscious, as Fanon referred to this regression, will not be the subject
of analysis in this study, which, accepting these pitfalls as historical and present reality in many
places, looks instead to the political action of the nonwar communities described in the STEPS
project for a critique of the obdurate and “inherent” violence of the postcolonial world. According,
again, to Gibson, Fanon’s “theoretical contribution was to problematize the Manichean certainties
and at the same time try to develop new concepts out of this problem” (2003, 7).

To regain a measure of optimism after the discussion of violence: the groups we will examine
have initiated political projects which implicitly express through action and experience the posi-
tive side of Fanon’s revolutionary thought not simply in the postcolony but in settings of violence
in the postcolony. These groups afford an opportunity to revisit Fanon in a new context. We will
now look at the specific case studies from Colombia, Afghanistan, and Rwanda.

STEPS case studies: Colombia, Afghanistan, and Rwanda

“Society,” Fanon tells us, “unlike biochemical processes, cannot escape human influences”
([1952] 1967, 4). These examples do not represent utopias, models, or even unique events.
This is the stance of the authors of Opting Out of War, and also of the people of the communities
themselves (Anderson and Wallace 2013, 12). I too am not writing to romanticize them, but to
attempt a new application of Fanon’s thought. What these groups do represent are specific
examples of communities who worked out new concepts in the midst of circumstances that super-
ficially offered no alternatives.

The communities in question have been chosen because of their characteristics which serve to
bring out Fanon’s thinking. This study does not afford the space to provide or examine all the
details of even these three nonwar communities. The case studies and the book based on them
should be widely read. While much has been left out here, it is not in an effort to obscure con-
tradictions. Some, like the way “traditional” leaders are employed by these communities, will be dis-
cussed in this paper; some, like the involvement of external groups in the peace communities of
Colombia, will not be. Between the ideas of a society and its actions there will always be contra-
diction and tension. It is fundamental to Fanon’s thinking that in this tension new ideas can be
fashioned, a new thought developed, and that this is necessary – “il faut … développer une
pensée neuve” (Fanon [1961] 2002, 305).

Colombia

Colombia achieved independence from Spain in the 1820s, but has been the space of colonial-
style internal social stratifications evidenced by an exploited indigenous and Afro-Colombian
population; and the object of external imperial ambitions of the United States which created,
among other things, the country of Panama with its Canal out of once-Colombian territory
(Galeano [1973] 1997, 48, 107–108). In 1948, civil war marked the advent of a period known as La Violencia, which began “a repeating cycle of civil war and repression that has gone on con-
tinuously” ever since, with exploitable land and access to resources as a major point of contesta-
tion between guerillas and the state armed forces and state-backed paramilitaries (Mahony and
Eguren 2004, 3).
In the late 1990s, during a crescendo of violence between state paramilitary forces and guerrillas in which civilians were abused by both sides, several parts of the country saw the emergence of “peace communities” or, as some preferred, “communities in resistance” (Mahony and Eguren 2004). One of these, San José de Apartadó, was formed in 1996 in collaboration between community members (San José had about 3000 people living in 32 different villages) and local nongovernmental organizations with the goals of “achieving a higher level of respect for a civilian population committed to non-collaboration with all armed actors” and of gaining external support for their peace endeavor (19).

Their principle of non-collaboration was aimed at both guerrillas and the Colombian Army, and they practiced “absolutely equivalent approaches to each armed group” (Mahony and Eguren 2004, 21). Their program required strict internal rules to be effective, and these included prohibiting community members from owning or carrying arms and ammunition, participating in military operations, supporting armed groups, or providing intelligence to them (Anderson and Wallace 2013, 135).

Non-collaboration was an unpopular stance with all of the armed actors in the region, and it was only five days after San José was declared a peace community that it suffered its first attack. Attacks by paramilitaries left community members and leaders dead, and later, after international denunciation, were limited to destruction of property including burning houses. The paramilitaries also established roadblocks around San José, sometimes killing drivers trying to get into the town (Anderson and Wallace 2013, 138–139). The blockade caused economic hardship in San José, which led the community to plan to “march en masse” into a larger town to buy goods; the plan was aborted when the roadblocks were lifted (Mahony and Eguren 2004, 25).

One community initiative in San José involved an alarm bell to be rung in the event of an armed group entering the designated peace zone, signaling for the “entire population to congregate in the plaza and confront the incursion with the moral force of numbers.” Sometimes the alarm system failed, and after many deaths caused by commando attacks, the function of the bell became a signal to everyone to “flee the town center [and] hide in the hills until the attackers left” (Mahony and Eguren 2004, 26).

In spite of the suffering caused by attacks, the community continued its program of non-collaboration. They prohibited access to the town region by armed groups, including the Colombian Army, or by suspected informers, although this could not be enforced through much of the extended area. They erected “a small fence along the perimeter of the territory” for this purpose, acknowledging that it was “entirely symbolic,” and sent delegations to request that soldiers who had crossed the fence should leave. In 2002, under pressure, the people of San José negotiated an agreement with the army that “allowed [it] to pass through the community so long as it did not stay … even though the passage might be for the purpose of carrying out military operations.” In addition, the entire population of San José and a neighboring village agreed that if the army did stay, the community would “immediately displace itself” on the principle that “If they want the town, they get the whole thing, but without us” (Anderson and Wallace 2013, 135–137).

For the duration of the violence, the peace community at San José was able to maintain a principled and consistent mode of interacting with the military and paramilitary groups they encountered, though this was not reciprocated. In the face of violence directed at its civilian members, the community developed new systems, sometimes giving ground to the armed groups, but still working within its principles. As seen in their willingness to challenge the combatants as a whole population (as in the planned march to defy the blockade), the “peace community” was not a simply pacifistic project but an active movement with political will.
Afghanistan

Afghanistan has experienced a many-phased civil war since 1978. In the mid-1990s, an armed and politicized movement, the Taliban, began taking control of the provinces, finally seizing the capital, Kabul, and power in 1996. In 1997, they were nearing the Jaghori district of the central highland region known as the Hazarajat.

The Jaghori district of Afghanistan is home to approximately 200,000 Hazara people, all ethnic Hazaras and Shia Muslims, who have, on account of both these identities, a history of discrimination in Afghanistan (Suleman and Williams 2003, 5). Theirs was one of the last districts to fall under Taliban control, and the leaders of the district determined that when the Taliban finally did arrive, they would negotiate a surrender, based on the Taliban commitment not to punish those who surrendered. This decision was taken by a meeting of a shura, “the basic local structure for discussing and deciding issues,” involving 200 people over 10 days (Anderson and Wallace 2013, 104–105). The STEPS researchers note that “They negotiated not as defeated people but as equals.” The populace would disarm and preserve peace if the Taliban did not “commit atrocities or interfere in cultural affairs,” a pact which the Taliban did not honor in the end (105–106).

Two facets of the Jaghori experience are particularly interesting here: an inclusive style of leadership and a commitment to women’s education and security. In the first case, the STEPS authors observe:

> The people of Jaghori often talked about patterns of leadership rather than individual leaders…. Everyone agreed that the quality of the Jaghori leadership in general depended on the awareness and participation of the entire population. Those who aspired to be leaders depended on the consent of the people. (Anderson and Wallace 2013, 112)

Regarding women, there was a clear difference between the policies of the Taliban and the beliefs of the people of Jaghori. On the one hand, the Taliban were known for “imposing restrictions on women,” including bans on female education and employment and the institution of purdah, which forbids women from being seen without a male relative (Suleman and Williams 2003, 11). The people of Jaghori, on the other hand, had a strong commitment to women’s education, and insisted on the importance of education for girls and women during their negotiations with the Taliban (7). Education was limited to religious study by the Taliban, for both boys and girls, but the people of Jaghori protested to the local Taliban education officer who was eventually persuaded (by professions of local commitment to education, a promise not to kill him if schools could be kept open, and help in building his house) to let schools function as long as they closed when Taliban delegations were in the area (Anderson and Wallace 2013, 108). “He also allowed women to be employed as teachers at a time when all education ceased in some districts because women were not allowed to teach” and sometimes schools were kept open even when Taliban officials were present; residents denied the existence of girls’ schools.

Some villages offered both primary and high school education, and the residents of these villages would insist that the young girls were students [primary education was allowed for girls] and that the older girls were teachers … This depended entirely on full community solidarity. (Anderson and Wallace 2013, 108)

As for purdah, women in Jaghori also continued to be employed during the Taliban occupation, some at schools and medical centers, and continued to move about freely except when Taliban officials were in the area. More overt resistance was made by the community leaders who “repeatedly emphasize[d] to the Taliban that the local culture of Jaghori … had no tradition of restricting women” (Anderson and Wallace 2013, 108–109).
In all, the people of Jaghori showed an ability to interact politically with the Taliban in order to preserve ways of life important to them and to avoid violence (although some abuses did occur [Anderson and Wallace 2013, 111]). The durability of their project was occasioned by maintaining communication, both internally and with Taliban officials, and on community solidarity – “ordinary people as well as leaders were aware of the community’s priorities and were able to articulate and defend them” (115). Through negotiation and some mechanisms of deception, they were able to preserve rights (particularly of women) that were denied elsewhere in the country during the Taliban government. It was “an example of pragmatism as well as principle” (114).

**Rwanda: “We are all simply human beings.”**

During the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, approximately 800,000 people were killed over 100 days by militias connected with the state power structures (Doughty and Ntambara 2005, 6; Newbury 1995, 12). There are many explanations for the violence, but a persuasive one is provided by Catharine Newbury, who writes that the genocide occurred “in a context of escalating political, social, economic, and social tensions within civilian society, at a time of massive popular withdrawal from the political process,” of civil war, and of power struggles all simultaneously occurring “in a country where leaders could (and did) manipulate ethnic rivalries and fears which had strong historical resonance” (Newbury 1995, 16). The population of Rwanda is usually divided into three ethnic groups: Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa (12). Those killed during the violence in 1994 were largely Tutsi and politically moderate Hutu (13). Rwandan Muslims, about 10% of the population in the 1990s, as a group did not participate in the killing, and also actively defied those people who did participate.

The researchers for the STEPS case study in Rwanda observed several specific ways in which Muslims refused to participate in the genocide but rather “acted positively,” action which has a “wide recognition among both Muslims and non-Muslims in Rwanda” and holds true, (with only a few individual exceptions denounced by other Muslims), in all the Muslim communities (Doughty and Ntambara 2005, 7, 24). Muslims were active in hiding people pursued by killers – “ Whoever managed to arrive in our quarter was hidden and protected and survived” – both in their homes and in mosques. Hutu Muslims, who could go out more safely, also brought provisions and medicine to people in hiding (Anderson and Wallace 2013, 161–162; Doughty and Ntambara 2005, 12). Frequently, Muslims directly confronted the militias by refusing to hand people over to be killed, though sometimes this lead to members of the Muslim community being killed themselves (Doughty and Ntambara 2005, 14). Sometimes trickery was used: communities organized “mass burials” of banana trees to “prove” their participation to the militias; others spied and informed on the militia groups (Anderson and Wallace 2013, 163).

In one notable episode at a mosque in Kigali, “when the Interahamwe militia tried to take the Tutsis, everyone there told them, ‘There is no Hutu, no Tutsi. We are all simply human beings.’” Three days later, the presidential guards came in and demanded that the Hutus separate themselves from the Tutsis. Again everyone refused. They told the militia, “We know that you came here to kill. If that is what you want, please kill all of us but not a section of the community.”

Many people were indeed killed, irrespective of ethnicity (Anderson and Wallace 2013, 163).

In Mabare, Muslims rescued people left to drown in a lake and hid them in the local mosque, which drew numerous others seeking safety. When Interahamwe arrived, and the Muslims refused to hand the people over, the Muslim leader was killed, beginning a three-day battle in which the
people inside the mosque fought with bows and arrows and stones, but were overpowered by the militia’s modern weaponry (Doughty and Ntambara 2005, 13).

The STEPS researchers point out some reasons that Muslims responded differently to the genocide and were able to maintain group cohesion throughout the violence, in spite of the terrible circumstances surrounding them. One is the role of the Muslim leadership, which before the genocide was outspoken in counseling non-violence to its community (and to others, as well), a position they continued to affirm during the genocide (Doughty and Ntambara 2005, 11–13). In particular, they emphasized the tenets of Islam as guiding them not to participate, and Islam was often cited by Muslims as a reason they did not participate (17).

Rwandan Muslims also strongly linked their group history and place in society with their actions. That history has been one of “separation” (Doughty and Ntambara 2005, 16). The Muslim community in Rwanda has lived a history of discrimination, institutionalized during the colonial administration by their confinement to settlement areas called “Swahili camps”; a ban on their owning land, farming, or raising livestock; and the requirement for Muslims to carry residence and travel permits – in effect, a small-scale apartheid. Consistent with colonial systems of indirect rule elsewhere, Rwandan Muslims had their own leaders and courts (Doughty and Ntambara 2005, 4–5). They were, however, considered “non-tribal,” even though Muslims in Rwanda are also Hutu and Tutsi (2). Even with independence in Rwanda in 1962, this separation persisted: the former settlement areas were still largely Muslim and, wherever they lived, Muslims still predominantly lived among other Muslims (5). “Muslims described themselves as a historically marginalized community, across multiple dimensions: political, physical, social, educational, and economic” which led them to “identify with the plight of the Tutsis when the genocide began, as another community being persecuted unfairly [by the government]” (16).

The Muslim community in Rwanda generally thought and acted a humanist politics during the genocide. They overtly defied a politics of “ethnic” divisions and the violence derived from those politics.

Fanonian thought and the nonwar communities

These three local experiences have been summarized in order to provide a clearer notion of the nonwar communities studied during the STEPS project. The three examples combined with the generalizations of the STEPS research presented in Opting Out of War will supply the substance of the dialog between the nonwar communities and Frantz Fanon. The experiences of these communities relate to Fanon’s era of decolonization in that they represent the continuation of the narrative of national consciousness after the climax of national independence, or, like in Afghanistan, where national consciousness has yet to truly coalesce. Many people in such a context are faced with new, unresolved conflicts that are, if not originated in the postcolonial period, then encountered in a new form during it. Obviously, without transcending the political conflicts that marked decolonization, no dénouement in the “-colonial” storyline can be averred. Yet, we cannot allow thought to be delimited by the colonial root inherent in the expression “postcolony.” Quoting Fanon, Sekyi-Otu tells us, “‘The lie of the colonial situation’ is the discourse of radical antimony, the antidialectic of a world founded on an absolute ‘social dichotomy’” (1996, 186). The communities just described and now exposed to analysis reinsert politics into ostensibly antimonal situations, acknowledge a dialectic, engage in dialog and action.

Briefly outlined, the conclusions of STEPS show that the people that became nonwar communities first predicted war, then determined based on collective interests that they would not participate, and to that purpose conceived of themselves through a specific identity and worked out strategies of cohesion, leadership, and engagement with armed groups to guide their action.
throughout the course of violent conflict (Anderson and Wallace 2013). As has been mentioned, the focus of this paper is not conflict prevention as in STEPS, but rather the philosophical and political insights which the people whose lives informed that project have provided. The discussion will emphasize the consciousness of these groups: their conception of themselves and how this transcended simple conception and became action, with the argument that “peace” action is a hitherto neglected context in which Fanon’s work is relevant.

In *A Dying Colonialism* ([1959] 1965), Fanon studied Algerian society during the Algerian war for independence in the 1950s. In this, his second book, Fanon supports “[t]he thesis that men [sic] change at the same time that they change the world” (30), renewing and developing dialectically his assertion in *Black Skin, White Masks* that it is people who “bring society into being.” As history shows us, the Algerian people of Fanon’s day pursued their new society through anti-colonial war. (Fanon makes the realistic argument that a violent method of struggle was imposed upon Algerians by a recalcitrant French colonialism – “We know for sure today that in Algeria the test of force was inevitable” ([1961] 1963, 193).) While in Fanon’s Algerian experience, it was through war, Fanon still allows, “It is clear that other peoples have come to the same conclusion [i.e. consciousness] in different ways” ([1961] 1963, 193).

In the communities that inform the STEPS project, that people chose alternative routes to consciousness is clear: people “consciously took into account a range of options, including joining the violence” (Anderson and Wallace 2013, 48), but decided together that war was not in their best interest (18). “These thirteen communities were neither pacifists nor antiwar activists … in these cases, they simply calculated that the present war made no sense to them. Therefore, it was not a conflict in which they would participate” (10–11). They were pragmatic and undogmatic (23). The fundamental difference between the nonwar communities and other groups who felt helpless in the face of violent conflict was a consciousness of choice, of “efficacy” (33): if rendered philosophical, an existential openness to alternatives that belied through praxis the “antidialectic” of war. Of course no human social experience, even the supremely asocial experience of war, is without complexity – political, social, dialogical – but perception, that imposed stasis Fanon identifies in the colonial period and which exogenously finds its way into the postcolonial discourse, is powerful. Significantly, not only could the nonwar communities defy the logic of “the agenda of war” (Anderson and Wallace 2013, 18), but they also proved an “ability to sustain and even invent new structures and systems by which to consult broadly and decide issues together” (Anderson and Wallace 2013, 33).

Even during the Algerian war, these different ways are visible. Rethinking society midstream – if like Fanon we accept society as in motion – was an essential feature of the struggle in Algeria. It was sometimes dictated perforce by changing circumstances, but nevertheless the society adapted. In the four essays that form *A Dying Colonialism*, Fanon illustrates the re-contouring of Algerian society during the struggle; through changing attitudes toward the veil, toward the radio and medical technology, within the family structure, and among the different segments of Algerian society. The case studies summarized above show similarities to what Fanon witnessed regarding the ability of a society to adapt mid-motion; for instance, in the case of the Colombian peace community of San José.

But the observation is made (and here we see some of the contradictions mentioned at the outset) that clearly conservative elements were found to motivate people in the STEPS case studies. Group “interest” was decisive in the decisions taken (Anderson and Wallace 2013, 18). The communities placed emphasis on a group identity (Anderson and Wallace 2013, 27), on “normalcy” (41–42), on the importance of already existing structures and skills (Suleman and Williams 2003, 23), and on “culturally embedded” leadership “based in traditional local mechanisms” (Anderson and Wallace 2013, 49–50): religious leaders, town mayors, and elders, for example. “In many cases,” observes Gibson via Fanon, “harking back to ‘traditions’
became part of an ideology used to mask new divisions between leaders and masses, and put an end to dialogue, discussion, and the ‘free exchange of ideas’” (2003, 188). However, to describe the actions of these groups as simply self-interest is reductive: the people of San José risked their lives and livelihoods in defending their principles; people in Jaghori were active in protecting education for women; Rwandan Muslims proactively and at risk of death saved potential victims or defied the militias. Preservation did not privilege individuals or property of the community, but extended by an inclusive and principled definition of humanity that encompassed non-community members and even combatants. Tradition and identity were employed by the people and the leaders investigated by STEPS in positive ways. While the “direction of collective motion and mutation” was “worked out in concrete situations,” “certain axioms for thought and practice [to which Fanon is committed] that are rooted in a set of ontological ideas about what it means to be human and which, therefore, hold true across time and space” can be seen in the actions of these communities (Pithouse 2011, 226).

Fanon’s essay on the veil – the haïk – recounted in A Dying Colonialism in his chapter, “Algeria Unveiled,” suits the question of the interplay of tradition, identity, and change: the customs and methods through which a society can form themselves and on which they can base their actions. Fanon proves that tradition itself is not static. Tradition can take on new meanings in the employ of a liberational project and in resistance to the status quo – not merely the status quo, but the political culture of violence that was colonialism or has been the lived reality of people in places like Colombia, Afghanistan, or Rwanda. In A Dying Colonialism, Fanon summarizes the “manipulation” of the veil as “a means of struggle” ([1959] 1965, 61):

There is a … historic dynamism of the veil that is very concretely perceptible in the development of colonization in Algeria. In the beginning, the veil was a mechanism of resistance, but its value for the social group remained very strong. The veil was worn because tradition demanded a rigid separation of the sexes, but also because the occupier was bent on unveiling Algeria. In a second phase, the mutation occurred in connection with the Revolution and under special circumstances. The veil was abandoned in the course of revolutionary action. What had been used to block the psychological or political offensives of the occupier became a means, an instrument. The veil helped the Algerian woman to meet the new problems created by the struggle. ([1959] 1965, 63, emphasis in original)

Religion and religious custom (purely by coincidence is Islam common to these two cases: Algeria in the 1950s and Rwanda in 1994) can be a profoundly conservative institution. Nonetheless, in both these instances it proved to be a central facet of revolutionary thought and action. For Muslims in Rwanda, their particular identity as Muslim, while invoked as a differentiating characteristic of their community from the larger Rwandan polity, allowed for action that defied perceived historical truths of difference: the “dichotomy which [colonialism] imposes upon the whole people” (Fanon [1961] 1963, 45), the certainty of Hutu and of Tutsi. The essential difference apparent in all three communities is a mode of thinking, which, like Fanonian thought, is moved by an unbracketed ontology and which is not prescriptive and reactive but reflective and active.

Also significant was “traditional” leadership. In these cases, however, contrary to the connotation of “traditional,” leadership was at least partially democratic, as has been seen in the study of the Jaghori district. Broadly, “leadership styles were inclusive, nonhierarchical, communicative, responsive, receptive, and respectful” (Anderson and Wallace 2013, 57, emphasis added). Anderson and Wallace synopsize the varied experiences of leadership this way:

In their ability to connect their community’s past and its current nonwar stance by referring to traditional bylaws, the authority of the Quran, local laws, or significant ancestors, these leaders [of nonwar communities] were able to guide nontraditional actions. They called on the past to encourage
and promote consideration of new options, both leading their community and reflecting its collective readiness to create options to engagement in the war. (2013, 55)

It is a conspicuous divergence from the aloof and self-interested “national bourgeoisie” depicted by Fanon, the dissipated elite who constitute themselves through an empty identity, a “narrow nationalism,” who, in their rush to occupy the newly empty-halled colonial institutions, leave behind the actual fact of the nation – the people ([1961] 1963, 163). When national consciousness falls to the level of nationalism (Fanon makes the distinction ([1961] 1963, 247]), and then comes to mean only the national party, determining society from the top down, “[t]here no longer exists the fruitful give-and-take from the bottom to the top which creates and guarantees democracy in a party” (Fanon [1961] 1963, 170). This can be contrasted with Fanon’s declaration that “the proof of success lies in a whole social structure being changed from the bottom up” ([1961] 1963, 33).

For nationalism is an identity like any, and while it professes to inclusivity, it may be and has often been performed regressively to promote exclusion. That, whittled to the pith, is the “pitfall” of the national consciousness. The violent conflicts in Rwanda, Colombia, and Afghanistan and elsewhere in the formerly colonized or occupied world have in many ways arisen out of such a process of narrowing and exclusion. What Fanon would want, of which the actions of the nonwar communities are small examples, is a society that, whatever its symbols – Algeria, Islam, Peace, Socialism, Pan-Africanism, Democracy – is constituted on dialog; on dynamism of thought and of action with the human as apotheosis. “The consciousness of self is not the closing of a door to communication” (Fanon [1961] 1963, 247).

The human re-enters the conversation. Recall the avowal of the Muslims in Kigali: “There is no Hutu, no Tutsi. We are all simply human beings.” Fanon, who repudiated determination from without, predestination based on racial (or ethnic) historical imaginings, might have made a similar declaration in those straits. He wrote, “I do not have the right to allow myself to be mired in what the past has determined” ([1952] 1967, 179). Not, “I should not,” or even, “I must not,” but, “I do not have the right.” Fanon shows how, in the course of the Algerian war, the Algerian people (and he, we presume) learn that the settler–native paradigm was fictitious, the foundational “lie of the colonial situation” (Fanon [1959] 1965, 128); Algerian revolutionaries learn, for instance, that “Algeria’s European minority is far from being the monolithic block that one imagines” (148). He turns to this European in Algeria who, like Hutu Muslims in Rwanda,

learns the laws of revolutionary action. And when those that he [sic] used to receive in his home tell him to give shelter to a friend, to find medications, to transport a parcel, there is as a rule no difficulty. (151)

All of this prefigures perhaps the most arresting passage in A Dying Colonialism, the point where politics of identity are denied in place of a revolutionary politics of universalism:

[1]In the new society that is being built, there are only Algerians. From the outset, therefore, every individual living in Algeria is an Algerian. In tomorrow’s independent Algeria it will be up to every Algerian to assume Algerian citizenship or to reject it in favor of another. ([1959] 1965, 152, emphasis in original)

For Fanon, society does not – we the inventors of society do not – have “the right” to function by objective determinations but only to recognize the subjectivity of every person or people.

However, Fanon did not write about, and certainly did not live in terms of, a passive moral universal humanism, but rather of a political universal humanism that requires action. Nigel Gibson leads us to Fanon’s notion of a “fighting culture” which “mediates between organization
and mass activity and, at the same time, suggests how subjectivity might be constructed positively,” where “the fact of violent action” is insignificant compared with the “cultural context in which it occurs” (2003, 128). Contrast the ethnic violence of the besieging Interahamwe with the revolutionary (in the context of the genocide) violence of the defenders of the Marabe mosque fighting with arrows and rocks: the former, dehumanizing; the latter, rehumanizing. Continuing with Gibson’s interpretation, “With decolonization there is an opportunity for radically new behavior in public and private life,” and, he quotes Fanon, “[i]n a fighting culture ‘everything is possible’” (2003, 132–133). Revolutionary action – even if it is action for peace – is that which inaugurates new concepts of political action and of the human.

**Conclusion: toward new concepts**

Ato Sekyi-Otu accomplishes an elegant summary of Fanon’s work, that is, humanity as a “self-revising act” (1996, 5) – as “motion toward the world and toward [its] like,” in Fanon’s phrase ([1952] 1967, 28). Human being as action must exist in experience, and cannot, as active, be still. Sekyi-Otu calls “Fanon’s account of this movement … a dialectic of experience. Dialectic because it narrates the generation of relations infinitely more complex than the ‘simplifying’ logic of the colonizer-colonized opposition” (1996, 26), of the “petrified world” (76) and “static period begun by colonization” (Fanon [1961] 1963, 69). It is that simplified logic which Fanon challenges, which he admonishes us to repudiate, and which the STEPS communities begin to transcend. Their actions prove the relevance of Fanon’s thinking today, in the postcolonial period. Hopefully, that has emerged over the course of this juxtaposition of their action and Fanon’s thought.

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon writes that people must “become aware of the potentials they have forbidden themselves,” that their passivity must be abandoned, that they must “interrupt if necessary the rhythm of the world … and most assuredly, stand up to the world” ([1952] 1967, 57, emphasis in original). We have seen the experiences of communities that have interrupted the rhythm that moved their environment, becoming actional as groups and as individuals, thinking “in excess’ of social relations” in the expression of Neocosmos (2011, 198): transcending a dead for a living politics. The people whose experiences are the impetus for this reflection are, in their contexts, thinking and living revolutionaries. They confronted hegemonic and dehumanizing cultures of violence which were not interred with the official end of colonialism or with the inception of the nation but rather have taken new shape in the postcolony. Of course, their successes are limited and their experiences sometimes contradictory, but Fanon does not preclude contradictions: one thesis of *Wretched of the Earth* is that struggle (politics) will always need to face these contradictions inherent in itself.

Frequently, history has been employed in the postcolonial period to justify the exclusion of some groups from the nation, from resources and structures of power, and even from their humanity. The gerrymandering of histories and identities has bred false presents, in which the manipulation of “historic” identity constructs a scaffolding of justifications for hatred and violence. Fanon’s countering political project, “everyone living in Algeria is Algerian,” has not been borne out through nationalism. Exclusionary habit becomes natural, and nature, which does not need logic or justification, allows action to be steered by passion (Sartre [1944] 1948, 8). In all three instances encountered here, such a scaffold braced the state institutions of power – violence was conspicuously the politics of the state, not of the people. In all three cases, violence was justified, propagandized, and naturalized by supposed “histories,” illustrating the possible outcomes of choosing an exclusive understanding of history fused with passion. By contradicting the “historicity” of violence with consciousness and action, people were able – in Colombia, in Afghanistan, in Rwanda, and other places – to expose the falsehood of its hegemony; they
chose instead, in active testimony to a different history, to act for the present and for a future. We are obliged to consider the postcolonial period – most importantly, the postcolonial future – with a divergent eye.

The commitment to action in these communities – action that was collective, to a degree democratic, and, significantly, political – action as opposed to passivity and combined with a liberating philosophy, is truly in the spirit of Fanon’s humanism of praxis. In spite of whatever mistakes and failures they may have experienced, these communities show that alternatives to the basic understandings of the abstract, violent postcolonial world exist in the living postcolonial world. An effort must be made in scholarship and through politics to discover ways in which new concepts – not wholly new, but largely ignored – can be translated to a broad scale and not only constitute isolated examples of human political imagination. Fanon, largely relegated to being a philosopher of violence can, as we have seen, be useful in this regard. As the STEPS project researchers reflect in regard to international conflict prevention efforts, “Largely missing … is acknowledgment that systems and skills to prevent overt violence between groups already exist in every society” (Anderson and Wallace 2013, 2). Conceptual potential is innate in even the most distressed societies, even in those societies where historically a human potential has been denied. Fanon wanted for “the world to recognize, with [him], the open door of every consciousness” ([1952] 1967, 181).

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Note
1. The complete list of countries: Afghanistan, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Burkina Faso, Colombia, Fiji, India, Kosovo, Mozambique, Nigeria, Philippines, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, and Sri Lanka.

References


