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Remembering Fanon: Zapatista Women & the Labor of Disalienation

Remembering Fanon is a process of intense discovery and disorientation. Remembering is never quite an act of introspection or retrospection. It is a painful re-membering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present.

Homi Bhabha. "Remembering Fanon: Self, Psyche, and the Colonial Condition."

So writes Homi Bhabha in his 1989 essay on the urgency of reclaiming Frantz Fanon's work for the postcolonial context. In this paper, I draw on Bhabha's recuperation of the work of the Antillean psychoanalyst and revolutionary theorist, connecting his most compelling psychoanalytic concept, dis/alienation, to the current Zapatista movement based in Chiapas, Mexico. Employing Bhabha's formulation of memory as a complex process of rearticulation, a restitching of fragmented elements, as well as his insistence of the urgency of reclaiming Fanon for the postcolonial context, in this paper I aim to demonstrate the significance of connecting Fanon's psychoanalytic theories of liberation to the internal labor of disalienation being carried out by Zapatista women. Since the beginnings of the movement, Zapatista women have been engaging in critical, collectively-based processes of consciousness-raising, or *concientización*, within the network of autonomous indigenous communities in resistance. The goal of such efforts has been to increase women's participation while demanding respect and recognition of women's rights, as a fundamental element of the broader struggle in defense of human rights. Taking cues from Bhabha's interest in Fanon for the postcolonial context, I argue that the psychic processes of the internal labor of *concientización*, initiated by women within Zapatismo, *are* the basis of disalienation, through collective processes of critically re-membering, and re-imagining, cultural identity and consciousness.

Bhabha's essay "Remembering Fanon: Self, Psyche, and the Colonial Condition" reflects Fanon's significant influence in postcolonial studies. Bhabha opens the essay by stating: "The mention of Frantz Fanon in left circles stirs a dim, deceiving echo" (131). The circles Bhabha refers to undoubtedly include feminist and postcolonial intellectuals, both within and outside of the academy, and these two theoretical fields provide much of the framework for my analysis of the role

of women in Zapatismo. What is deceiving about the specter of Fanon? Why does Fanon haunt leftist academia? Much of the complexity of Fanon's influence has to do with the problematic elements that have been highlighted in feminist scholarship: the homophobia he expresses, his harsh treatment of women, and the masculinist normativity of his language. What Bhabha suggests, however, is not that we are haunted by the shortcomings identified in Fanon's theories. Nor are we haunted by an overwhelming presence of Fanon in contemporary scholarship. Rather, I would argue that Bhabha's recognition of Fanon's spectrality has more to do with the continued relevance of his urgent, revolutionary psychoanalytic theory and the need to recuperate his formulations of the colonized psyche for the current postcolonial context. While the question of urgency could be interpreted as evidence of Fanon's theory being outdated, I agree with Bhabha's insistence that, while it is important to recognize the limitations of the specificity of Fanon's context, the issue of urgency can and should be applied to our own realities: an age of increasing migration, neoliberalism, and new forms of resistance.

The Zapatista movement emerged as a response to the impact of neoliberal policy on the lives of the indigenous peoples of Mexico's poorest, southernmost state, Chiapas. Responding to five hundred years of colonialism and neocolonialism, the Zapatistas declared war against the Mexican government on January 1, 1994, bringing attention to their systematic exclusion and exploitation as it was being aggressively extended through the enactment of NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) on the same day. The resistance and rebellion of the Zapatistas is based on collectivity at every level, in contrast to the individualism perpetuated by capitalism and its neoliberal global expansion. By placing NAFTA, and the resulting increase in migration and displacement, within the long history of collective trauma inflicted on the indigenous peoples of Mexico, the relevance of Fanon's psychoanalytic theories of the colonial condition and dis/alienation becomes quite apparent.

Fanon's insistence on the need to examine the social, particularly through consideration of collective psychic processes that result from colonization, is central to my interest in connecting his theory to the context of the Zapatista movement and the formation of gendered revolutionary subjectivities. The question of alienation, and the necessary process of disalienation, emerges in the first pages of Fanon's introduction to *Black Skin, White Masks*, as the central element of concern for the unraveling of the psyche of the colonized. Fanon articulates disalienation as helping "the black man to free himself of the arsenal of complexes that has been developed by the colonial environment" (*Black Skin* 30). This accumulation of psychic processes, reflective of the colonial condition as constructed by language, education, and economics, is precisely what Fanon seeks to understand, as an essential phase of the anticolonialist struggle for liberation. For Fanon, disalienation, as an integral aspect of decolonization, does not entail a return to a precolonial subjectivity because, as is made evident through his extensive discussion of the various aforementioned factors, this is not only impossible but also entirely beside the point.

For Fanon, this process of liberation from oneself is achieved through the dismantling of the internalized complexes of colonization, which produce an alienated subject, at once within and outside of the self. Fanon's notion of a "colonial condition" as the product of the systems of subjugation and assimilation advanced through the imposition of language and education is central to his "socializing"¹ of Freudian psychoanalysis. The dominant model imposed by the colonizer, creates the inferiority complex internalized by the colonized. This colonial condition can be understood as a result of the collective trauma of colonization. The central demands of the Zapatistas reflect an analysis of the effects of this process, and the development of a collective response, through which the men and women of the movement are engaging in an effort to reclaim all that is stripped and denied by colonialism and neocolonialism.

¹ Kelly Oliver uses this term to refer to a "psychoanalytic social theory that develops concepts between the psyche and the social" (xvii).

As expressed in their communiqués, the Zapatista movement is about opening up spaces for dialogue, for inclusion, for recognition, and for dignity. The creation of Mágara Millán describes as “. . . new spaces of identity, where Indigenous men and women are changing their forms and cultures. . .” has been central to the organization of the Zapatista women around gender issues (Millán *Zapatista!* 66). The purpose of the women’s organizing differs from that of the general Zapatista agenda because it is more about consciousness-raising and community-building *within* the autonomous Chiapan communities, whereas the overall movement is very much about the creation of national and international solidarity networks and dialogue between the Zapatistas and the federal government. The collectively-based internal psychic processes articulated by the Zapatistas as *concientización* are fundamental to my interest in connecting Fanonian theory to the Chiapas context because I perceive them as embodying the concept of disalienation. Over the past year, three international gatherings or *encuentros* were held in Zapatista territory, with the most recent event exclusively devoted to women. Through the voices of Zapatista women of all ages, the Encuentro participants heard the testimony of Zapatista women reflecting on the processes of “dejando el miedo y la vergüenza,” or “freeing themselves from shame and fear,” and “contruyendo una nueva historia,” or “constructing a new history.” While these statements represent a minuscule fraction of the words shared by the women, I selected them because they reflect the continued attention to disalienation, through collective work which serves as the basis of *concientización*. My point in presenting this is to affirm that the internal labor of disalienation initiated by the Zapatista women in the early days of the rebellion continues and grows today, fourteen years later.

In affirming the significance of Fanon’s theories of dis/alienation for the examination and understanding of how oppression functions, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting cites Audre Lorde: “. . . it is easier to deal with external manifestations of racism and sexism than it is to deal with the results of those distortions internalized within our consciousness of ourselves and one another” (Lorde cited in

Sharpley-Whiting 49). Like other contemporary feminist scholars, Sharpley-Whiting insists on the need to move beyond the analysis of how racism and sexism are manifested, to understand the psychic impact of such processes and the cyclical reproduction that results from the internalization of the complexes associated with oppressive structures. While I perceive the general Zapatista movement to be directly confronting the external manifestations of racism and sexism as perpetuated by (neo)colonialism, I want to insist that the specific gendered agenda of the Zapatista women engages precisely in the examination of the internalization of these issues that Lorde references in this statement. An example of the formal consideration of this issue is the document known as the Zapatista Revolutionary Women's Law, which was passed through community-based consultation on March 8, 1993. Often called the "revolution before the revolution," the Law puts into practice the negotiation of multiple identities as well as the right to question "tradition" (Forbis 238). Márgara Millán writes: "Muestra un ejercicio de afirmación de la identidad indígena (permanencia) al tiempo que pone a prueba radicalmente la democracia comunitaria (cambio)" [It shows an exercise of affirmation of indigenous identity (permanence) while also radically testing the community democracy (change)] (my translation, Millán *Revista Chiapas* 4). While their assertion of the *permanence* of indigenous culture reflects an externally directed message, the affirmation of the right to *change* their cultural traditions represents an internal transformation. The right to reconceptualize cultural practices, rejecting those which are in fact perpetuating oppressive structures, reflects a process of critical re-membering, to return to Bhabha's formulation, as it is both a reflection on the past and a contemplation of its impact on the present and future.

The very title of Fanon's first book is a reference to the psychic process of fragmentation through which the self is split into distinct, at times competing, identities. *Black Skin, White Masks* is a clear allusion to the internalization of colonial domination, whereby the colonized subject experiences alienation, or self-estrangement, through a forced, multivalent identification with the

colonizer. The experience of fragmented, multiple identities, or “split consciousness,” is a central concern of feminist and postcolonial scholarship, particularly in the theorization of the intersection of the two fields. I would argue that this intersection is perhaps the most significant theoretical framework for the analysis of women and Zapatismo, because of their gendered engagement with notions of decolonization.

The phenomenon referred to as “triple marginalization” is often raised in discussions of indigenous women’s struggles. EZLN Comandantas Esther and Ramona both identify this in interviews as they state that indigenous women suffer the most; first, because they are women; second, because they are indigenous and have been systematically deprived of their human rights since the invasion of Mexico; third, they suffer disproportionately because they are poor (Esther 1994). Linda Tuhiwai Smith identifies how the multiplicity of indigenous women’s identities requires a distinct approach to feminist discourse: “. . . Indigenous women hold an analysis of colonialism as a central tenet of an Indigenous feminism” (Smith 152). The merging of feminism and decolonization theory is the basis of the negotiation of what Millán describes as “una compleja intersección de identidades sociales” [a complex intersection of social identities] which is at the center of the Zapatista women’s agenda and socio-political protagonism (my translation, Millán *Revista Chiapas* 3). The application of Fanonian psychoanalysis to the question of plural identities and subsequent subjectivities is particularly relevant as it aides in examining the sources of those internalized marginalities, and their production through colonial and neocolonial processes.

In the elaboration of a critique of the complicity of internal forms of oppression with the dominance of neoliberal capitalism, Zapatista women use their interstitial position, as women and as revolutionaries, to strategically articulate an anti-capitalist, anti-patriarchal agenda. In her 2000 book, *Methodology of the Oppressed*, Chicana feminist scholar Chela Sandoval directly engages Fanon as she writes of the “border between skin and mask” as an “interstitial site out of which new,

undecidable forms of being and original theories and practices for emancipation, are produced” (85). The possibility she signals for the elaboration of liberatory praxis from the very interstices of fragmented identity is predicated on the understanding of the psychic processes that produce this condition. Fanon articulates this necessary awareness as disalienation. Because of the contradictions inherent in the way colonized subjects, as well as subjects of patriarchal domination, are constructed, the negotiation of multiple subjectivities has occupied a significant place in the liberatory theories formulated by feminist and postcolonial scholars. Posited as a theory of methodology, not only for the academy, but also for political praxis outside of it, Chela Sandoval’s text presents an approach to Fanon’s theory that has applications in the elaboration of strategies of investigation and action, as well as substantial relevance to intellectual engagement with Zapatismo.

In conclusion.... I’d like to pose a few questions: Why connect Fanon to the context of Zapatista women? Why do we *need* Fanon, as Bhabha insists, to understand the processes of disalienation being developed from a gendered perspective in the autonomous communities of Chiapas? I am certainly not arguing that Zapatista women need Fanon to better understand themselves, nor am I suggesting that Fanon’s work be used as a *model*. Rather, my aim with this project is to develop an analysis of the relationship between the internal psychic processes being carried out by Zapatista women and the revolutionary psychoanalytic theories posited by Fanon nearly fifty years ago in his groundbreaking works, to complement broader discussions of the ways Zapatismo extends beyond Chiapas, as an influence and inspiration for struggles with shared goals in other spaces.

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