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RESEARCH ESSAY

# Negotiating the Subtle Encounters

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When I started writing this article, the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic had not yet hit the world as it has now. However, even if there is evidence that by November of 2019, China had already registered cases of the carnivorous virus, the world was barely prepared to tackle the situation. Now nearly every part of the world is affected, without a cure, the only way to prevent the pandemic is by avoiding contact with other people “social distancing” or home quarantine and isolation. Countries have had to lock down, but in the most impoverished environments, how does one social distance or practice a self-imposed quarantine, when 12 people live in a two-roomed house. How does a community social distance when they are hungry, and there are scarce food products. Social distancing or isolation becomes an illusion in these environments with volatile economies. How do we reflect on this magnitude of an apocalyptic nature? How do we respond, what does Art do?

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## Introduction

In November of the year 2019, Luxembourg art week hosted a seminar titled “The State of the Art in the Time of Collapsing Systems” where I presented my PhD project “*Subtle Encounters*”. *Subtle Encounters* interrogates the relevance of the decolonial thought of Frantz Fanon in “un-colonial” contemporary Norwegian society with the aid of writings of poet, playwright and theorist Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson. Frantz Fanon was a French psychiatrist turned Algerian revolutionary of Martinican origin and one of the most important and controversial thinkers of the post-war period. *Subtle Encounters* explores two trajectories. Firstly, it attempts to examine nuances of Frantz Fanon’s work and humanistic thought in opposition to the goals of feminism and other “otherness” while engaging in the criticism levelled at Fanon by some feminist groups. For instance, while postmodern feminists accuse him of misogyny, their Algerian nationalist counterparts (i.e. feminist groups that took part in the liberation struggle) understand his view on the role of women in the Algerian revolution as naive, effectively mythologising women as equals during the war – a far cry from the regressive position of women in Algeria today. Fanon’s constant positioning of relationships within the heterosexual frame and his homophobic statements in *Black Skin, White Masks* compels to reevaluate his contribution to gender politics and relevance to feminist theory. In her work *Interior Colonies: Frantz Fanon and the Politics of Identification*, lesbian culture theorist Diana Fuss discusses heterosexism and homophobia in Fanon’s body of work. The primary accusation of Frantz Fanon’s misogyny is all contained within his first book *Black Skin, White Masks*, in which his brutal reprimand Mayotte Capécia has been understood as “reflective patriarchal inclination, a desire to police black bodies, and petty sexual jealousy”.<sup>1</sup> T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, in her book *Frantz Fanon, Conflicts and Feminisms*, dedicates the second chapter of the book to deconstruct the critics and myths of Fanon’s reading of Capécia – in which, she sheds light on the complex politics of black identities during a racialised cultural and economic domination of the west.

Following T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting’s two paged segment in the first chapter titled “Fanon as Feminist” of the same book, she argues “that feminism means different things to different feminists which has resulted in schisms, divisions and contemporary feminisms”.<sup>2</sup> She goes on to quote a definition from Sandra Bartky’s *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression*, “to be a feminist one first has to

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<sup>1</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Conflicts and Feminisms*, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1998, page 10.

<sup>2</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Conflicts and Feminisms*, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1998, page 24.

become human”.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, I would like to assert Fanon worked with a strong belief for the emancipation of the oppressed, the colonised men and women. He believed in a revolutionary role for women, as well as evolving them in the struggle, as witnessed in ‘The Pitfall of National Consciousness’ from his book *The Wretched of the Earth*, which articulates national consciousness as an “all-embracing crystallisation of the innermost hopes of the whole people”.<sup>4</sup> He goes on to argue that the new government must “guard against the danger of perpetuating the feudal tradition, which holds sacred the masculine element over the feminine”.<sup>5</sup>

Within Norway, Fanon’s thinking finds a curious and unlikely ally in the poet, playwright and theorist Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson. In reference to the gradual emergence of industrial and urban society in Norway – where the centres of power shifted from the local community and the family unit towards national government – Bjørnson states, “The modern woman, in contrast to the women of earlier times, realises that the fate of her children will chiefly be determined by society as a whole and that her work is aimless and may prove in vain if she is unable to play a part in shaping the conditions of society”.<sup>6</sup> These assertions resonate with Fanon’s own in *A Dying Colonialism*, where he writes about women freedom fighters and the profound transformations they generated. With women reinventing themselves as unveiled revolutionaries, “a new dialectic of the body of the revolutionary Algerian woman and the world [emerged]”.<sup>7</sup> Fanon observed how this new dialectic profoundly affected the Algerian family unit, in which the woman “literally forged a new place for herself by her sheer strength”.<sup>8</sup> Like Bjørnson in the Norwegian context, Fanon manages to capture that moment in which Algerian Society was to become something new – a moment tragically rejected by Algeria’s post-independence leaders. Fanon’s work is a fundamental point of departure for a systematic study of the involvement and position of women within the revolutionary terms of self-determination of the 1960s and their influence on today’s social structures. The similarities between Fanon and Bjørnson’s articulation of women’s/or the oppressed/minority’s role in the process of nation-building – despite their noticeable cultural, time and historical differences – open up new possibilities for intercultural dialogues about feminism in postcolonial and contemporary society. Moreover, it is only fair to situate this project in Norway, given it is one of the earliest sites of emergent feminist politics, but also the fact that it struggles with finding the right tools to address the otherness within its society. I imagine my project as a critical ‘time machine’ that continuously switches and conflates the two thinkers, their ideas and their historical, political, racial and cultural contexts.

The second trajectory for my research project and one that this essay discusses draws from the above paragraph of my introduction that centres on the comparative methodology. Firstly in positioning my claim, I borrow the definition of feminism the radical notions that women are humans. And therefore, to be feminist, I am becoming fully human, not to say that I was not one but only to prepare myself in actively bringing about humanistic awareness in discussing otherness. We identify based on history, and history has a colonial past, which all human beings share either by the heritage of the colonised or the coloniser or by ethnicity association. Therefore we equally share in a DNA of trauma. As start of this discussion, I would like to claim that, without fully accepting the responsibility of the shared trauma, we should forget any meaningful consideration of otherness. In this essay, I use my situation of living in two different contexts both engraved in colonial history to find solutions or suggest models that would raise awareness, and that would put the needs, desires and interests of those whose histories were epistemologically disenfranchised first.

## Context

When I started writing this article, the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic had not yet hit the world as it has now. However, even if there is evidence that by November 2019, China had already registered cases of the *carnivorous virus*, the world was barely prepared to tackle the situation. Now nearly every part of the world is affected, without a cure, the only way to prevent the pandemic is by avoiding contact with other people in “social distancing” or home quarantine and isolation. Countries have had to lock down, but how does one keep social distance or practice a self-imposed quarantine in the most impoverished environments, where twelve people live in a two-roomed house? How does a community keep social distance when they

<sup>3</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Conflicts and Feminisms*, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1998, page 24.

<sup>4</sup> ‘The Pitfall of National Consciousness’ *The Wretched of the Earth*, 1963, Frantz Fanon.

<sup>5</sup> *The Pitfall of National Consciousness*, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 1963, Frantz Fanon.

<sup>6</sup> *The struggle for women’s suffrage in Norway, 1885–1913*, 2008, Ida Blom.

<sup>7</sup> *A Dying Colonisation*, 1959 Frantz Fanon.

<sup>8</sup> *A Dying Colonisation*, 1959 Frantz Fanon.

are hungry, and there are hardly food products? Social distancing or isolation becomes an illusion in these environments with volatile economies. How do we reflect on this magnitude of an apocalyptic nature? How do we respond, what does **art** do?

For the last five years, I have been living in two places that are incredibly different in terms of climate, governmental structures and ideology, and social structures and economy. The nomadic manoeuvring of these physical places requires a constant shift of the mental state of the mind and a readily open room to negotiate the politics that constitute each space, respectively. Therefore, to reflect on “The State of the Art in the Time of Collapsing Systems” requires a repositioning of oneself within the given unique structures, that of my Norwegian reality and the Zambian one. In this article, I will try to deconstruct the specific “system” in its collapse or symptoms of emanating breakdown in the light of the very different phenomena in which I exist. The realities/facts point to how I have to negotiate on what methodologies I need to use or create in order to best articulate the project so that it functions and produces knowledge within the perimeter of the specific system. The particular geographical position proves very important as it allows a reflection from a local perspective of which – if we were to weave the different examples from localities – we probably could form a global understanding. We will be able to show how inter-linked the social and geopolitical issues faced all over the globe; this also illustrates that the foundation of most global issues is rooted in the local. During the conceptualising period of this text, I travelled to Livingstone my native hometown, and ‘here’ the economy is on a downward depression, there is lack of leadership, rampant corruption and lawlessness, stifling of freedom of speech and a country muddled in debt. If the above notions can support the meaning of ‘collapse’ in the seminar title, then in Zambia the collapse of the system need not be imagined; it is visible on every corner and heard in every conversation. Therefore, we could pose the same questions within our local discourse, “What is the state of the arts in our collapsing localities?”, how do artists respond to this turbulent moment? In Zambia, households and industries have suffered from insufficient electricity that has the economy profoundly affected; it is also important to note that the situation is not unique to Zambia alone. All across the continent, many countries suffer from electrical power deficit causing low production of goods and services that build an economy. The cost of living is high; corruption has become a trend openly practised, making the countries ground for global imperialism.

In trying to acclimatise to the shifts, renegotiate the way of being in both places means that one has to accept first the ‘recognition accorded’ – in that one integrates within a society based on the host cultural norms, you are incorporated by forsaking your background and all its cultural norms. For instance ‘here’ is also my second home in Norway and this is probably true for any immigrant in a foreign land, especially one whose physical appearance or religion can not merely be camouflaged within the new environment. It is essential for these groups of people that within the ‘here’ of their Nordic or any European experience where survival is dependent on the ‘sub existences’ to create several ‘heres’ within the encompassing *HERE*. These sub existences are usually seen as problematic to the idea of integration supported by a host country. Still, without an honest policy that aims to diversify the society fully, sub existences are the only way of being for ‘otherness’. By ‘sub existences’ I mean a fluid system that allows the interaction of communities of representing differences without any host participation. The hardening of right-wing immigration politics and the rise of nationalist parties would render the citizenships of immigrants worthless. Yet, in most successive capitalist economies, the migrant labour is at the core of economic development. Trump’s selective immigration policy which favours migration from wealthy economies like Norway is an apartheid discriminatory thinking. The above is uniform in many policies disguised in different fields including immigration, trade and cultural politics/policies that have resurrected in most of the west, Norway included. As a leading world peace ‘exporter’ Norway has led many to believe it is innocent hence blameless of any discriminatory policy whether abroad or home. This identity perception of ourselves spills into the society creating **1**, a specific idea of entitlement in the citizenship and hence breeding what I refer to it as “*Norwegian exceptionalism*.” **2**. In Norway, we have an inflated imagined notion of equality; thus, we do not engage in difficult subject of otherness or racial imbalance in most of our society.

How do we engage beyond the aura of exceptionalism? How do we address the biases that exist, or how do we talk about difference and show equal representation? Or is the Norwegian society like the very white figures presented in the architectural, urban rendering of Oslo city that Will Bradley describes as “they’re tidy and tame compared to their absinthe-drinking precursors, but still they’re happy doing nothing, happy going nowhere, happy with the important work of just being themselves”<sup>9</sup> in his essay *The Rendering of Modern Life* published in Spring 2019, *Kunstkruttikk*. During the last 3 + years, ‘here’ in the Nordic countries,

<sup>9</sup> The Rendering of Modern Life, *Nordic Art Review*, 03,2019, By Will Bradley.

the term decolonisation and the name of Frantz Fanon have frequently appeared in newspapers, conferences, university talks and dialogues and referred to in a few artworks. In 2019, Paul Gilroy scholar and author of *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness*, was named 2019 Holberg prize laureate. The Norwegian Literature House organised a series of lectures introducing some of the postcolonial thinkers one of which was “Frantz Fanon Dummies” presented by Tore Linné Eriksen. South African based renowned African thinker Achille Mbembe was also one of the limelights of 2019 in the Norwegian Literature House lecture program. The sheer fact of their visit to Norway confirms the truth that there are enough scholarships and interests within the university. Still, how are these thinkers and their work reflected within the broader context of Norwegian reality, or do they only remain as university jargon removed from any societal engagement? Frantz Fanon wrote that “literature increasingly involves itself in its only real task, which is to get society to ‘reflect and mediate’”.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, research and scholarship should activate/influence a way of thinking – raise questions, help pave an inclusive urban re-rendering of Oslo. In today’s world, where Brexit and Trumpian politics have become sounding gongs that our ears are diseased with, how does Frantz Fanon’s work evolve in its real task of mediation? Last year we witnessed protests from Barcelona to Beirut, to Hong Kong, to Chile and Haiti. The spread of the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed some of the worst crimes against black people, the suffering of the disenfranchised in different parts of the world, the killing of black people in the United States, the refugees stuck in various camps. In this canvas of questions, lament and absence of tangible solutions, how do we rethink, break, build, and repair? What can art say, do or translate?

Should the artist continue living in an excluded dream of creativity removed from the reality of her dwellings? How do artists reflect, articulate, and address political and social concerns that challenge the world around them in ways that don’t merely demonstrate the issues but actively engage with them? History has shown that in hard times the artist has found a voice. In an article titled *Do Hard Times Equal Good Art* featured in the BBC news magazine, Jon Kelly opens his article with the quote “Vincent van Gogh, starving as he slaves over his masterpieces.” Johnny Rotten sneering at the wreckage of 1970s Britain. George Orwell finding his voice amid the poverty and despair of the Great Depression”.<sup>11</sup> The romantic narrative that the impoverished or embattled artist produced their most revered work during the time of their tribulation seems to exist only in history. On the African continent, some of the best literature was born out of the brutal colonial experience or the trials caused by civil war and tyrant leaders. But could this be true/happen for our times or for Zambia too? That in this turbulent time, voices of change, of mastership, of craft can be born or is it just a wish of the writer of the article? Or could it be that visual artists have a difficult time in recognising disaster has struck?

In a 2014 article titled ‘A defence of art in troubled times’, Teju Cole begins his argument by quoting the first line of Maurice Blanchot’s *The Writing of the Disaster*, “The disaster ruins everything, all the while leaving everything intact”.<sup>12</sup> Cole goes on to write adapting William Gibson’s analogy about the future “far from any notion that the real disaster is yet to come, we should recognise that the disaster is totally here, simply not evenly distributed”.<sup>13</sup> In his article, Cole raises the questions that would help to recognise the disaster. “Is it that things could become terrible, or is it that things are already terrible? Is the current situation terrible, or is it already unspeakable? The question that contains the answer is: “For whom?”.<sup>14</sup> For a family of 5 in Ngwenya (a local slum in Livingstone) that has to share a meal from a 200 grams’ Pameela’ because they are unable to afford 10 US\$ for bag mealie meal, disaster is already here. For an examination year child who has no access to electricity and is unable to study, disaster has already struck. For the citizens that have no roof over their heads and are cramped in slums without sanitation, disaster for them is reality.

Within the Norwegian reality, are the artists just “happy with the important work of just being themselves?”<sup>15</sup> as Will Bradley has observed or is the Norwegian saying ‘*Først meg selv, så min neste hvis det er til mitt eget beste*’ (first myself, and the next things that concern me, or my surrounding) the law? That we are unable to reflect on the idea of diversity to represent the society? Maurice Blanchot’s phrase resonates our local situation; fogged within our *Norwegian exceptionalism* we are unable to acknowledge an emanate disaster. Therefore, we do not recognise the vices perpetrated by the powerful kleptocracy in which we live, as it is

<sup>10</sup> *The Wretched of the Earth*, 1963, Frantz Fanon.

<sup>11</sup> *Do Hard Times Equal Good Art*, featured in the BBC news magazine, 2010.

<sup>12</sup> *The Writing of the Disaster*, Maurice Blanchot, 1980 (English translation 1995).

<sup>13</sup> A defence of art in troubled times, essay by Teju Cole, Art Basel/Year 48 Book.

<sup>14</sup> A defence of art in troubled times, essay by Teju Cole, Art Basel/Year 48 Book.

<sup>15</sup> *The Rendering of Modern Life*, Nordic Art Review, 03,2019, By Will Bradley.

very far removed from the everyday Nordic experience. How then do we undo our way of being? Teju Cole further writes “In response to the alarm of seismic change, we are pressured not only to rethink fundamentals, but to exile from ourselves whatever is not deemed fundamental and immediate. In our hysteria, everything is jeopardised. What is lost is whatever we were hoping to save from the disaster; what we were hoping would outlast the fire”.<sup>16</sup> Art is the critical area that requires our vigilance and defence; Cole illustrates his thought by giving two examples from history: Olivier Messiaen, author of “The Quartet for the End of Time” in a German prisoner-of-war camp in 1941. And Dutch curator and typographer Willem Sandberg whose “Experimenta Typographica” project helped him to survive the terror and threat of war. These two figures of history’s works serve as examples of remarkable and engaging artworks created during societal eclipses. We can only hope that if they made art responsive to the miserable condition of their times, so we can.

Therefore, if we are to think of the Norwegian Literature House and university activities in introducing topics on decoloniality as a process of bringing about awareness of an emanate disaster, what tools are available to us in breaking through the fog of denial or blindness to an emanate collapse or disaster? In this concluding paragraph of my essay, I would like to claim that before we pose the question *What is the State of Art in Times of Collapsing Systems?* we have to ask instead whether society understands or is aware of an emanate collapse. In a country with tons of oil reserve, an emanate collapse felt a million miles away is not an issue to most Norwegians, therefore how does one engage the society, how does the vibrate discourse in the university or the Norwegian Literature House reflect and mediate within the society? In Zambia with a volatile economy and depreciating currency, where the inhabitants of Ngwenya slum are already experiencing the disintegration of their livelihood, their children’s education – the artist is dependent on the expatriate to sell work the price of which is very low.

I have already illustrated through references above how through history we can ask other questions with the help of situations that have already occurred to understand today’s disintegration. In engaging with the question of collapse within the Nordic experience and a possibility to think of disintegration in situations physically removed from our geographical context, we have to evoke similar local histories as a remainder of the trauma within the Norwegian collective memory. This introduces a process of relearning and unlearning linking to the idea of decoloniality, which my research project anchors on. At this point, I would like to borrow recently demised scholar and poet Harry Garuba’s definition *Decoloniality* or Decolonialism as “putting the needs and interests of the epistemologically disenfranchised at the forefront of knowledge production”.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, I think the *State of Art in Times of Collapsing Systems* is married to the politics that inform society and what the individuals play.

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

<sup>16</sup> A defence of art in troubled times, essay by Teju Cole, Art Basel/Year 48 Book.

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tYa5pilH3N8>.

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