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TURNING OVER A NEW LEAF

Fanonian humanism and environmental justice

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Humanism ... must excavate the silences, the world of memory, of itinerant, barely surviving groups, the places of exclusion and invisibility, the kind of testimony that doesn't make it onto the reports but which more and more is about whether an overexploited environment, sustainable small economies and small nations, and marginalized peoples outside as well as inside the maw of the metropolitan center can survive the grinding down and flattening out and displacement that are such prominent features of globalization.

—Edward Said, Humanism and Democratic Criticism

Humanism is just a way of saying that everybody's right to self-creation matters.

—Richard Pithouse, “That the Tool Never Possess the Man”

The emergence of the environmental humanities is at once exciting and perplexing: exciting for its intellectual dynamism and renewed sense of urgency and relevance; perplexing for its re-mobilization of concepts that have come under pressure or erasure, most notably the human itself. In other words, “environmental humanities” is something of an oxymoron, as the recent posthuman turn runs up against the etymological anthropocentrism of the humanities and the genealogies of humanism that are their epistemological foundation. These contradictions—between traditions of thinking the human and the proliferating interest in the more-than or other-than human—are too deep and disruptive to be resolved merely by affixing a post-.

From the Sputnik panic of the mid-twentieth century to the STEM fever of today, talk of the diminishment of the humanities in academic institutions and public life is nothing new. What is new—and newly paradoxical—is the disjuncture between the various external pressures to scale back the humanities and the call to scale up our understanding of humans as a species, increasingly seen as having altered the physical processes of the planet. Yet to many ears, Anthropocene species talk is a troubling new universalism that disregards the highly uneven roles that different groups of humans have played in the transformation of the planet, and the uneven distribution of risk and resilience in confronting this human-made world. Newfound interest in geological stratification threatens to displace attention to social stratification.
Debate over the universalizing thrust of Anthropocene discourse is the most recent example of a recurrent tension within environmentalism about the role of intra-human conflict in the relationship between humans and nonhuman nature. Mainstream environmental movements in the northern hemisphere have assumed a normative status that tends to discount other versions of environmental concern, including the “environmentalism of the poor,” “popular environmentalism,” movements for “environmental justice,” or “livelihood” or “liberation ecology.” Taken together, these environmentalisms insist upon the indivisibility of the social and the ecological: social inequality inflects relationships between humans and the environment. Running counter to mainstream assumptions that poor people do not care about the environment, these approaches—often in the form of social movements defending life and livelihood—recognize that “the poor sell [their health or natural resources] cheap, not out of choice but out of lack of power” (Martínez-Alier 30). They recognize that the socially marginalized (the poor, the racialized, the colonized) tend to end up on the losing end of conflicts over environmental benefits and burdens: “the unequal incidence of environmental harm gives birth to environmental movements of the poor” (54). These environmentalisms “demand contemporary social justice among humans” (11). Recognizing the many kinds of struggles theorized as environmentalisms of the poor, Joan Martínez-Alier has written that “The world environmental justice movement started long ago on a hundred dates and in a hundred places all over the world” (172).

One time and place for the emergence of this environmentalism-from-below is Frantz Fanon’s Les damnés de la terre (1961), translated as The Wretched of the Earth (1963). In what follows, I show how Fanon’s anatomy of the struggle for Third World national liberation is an instructive text for thinking about the relationship between the environmentalism of the poor and the environmental humanities, precisely because it is concerned equally with the roles of nature and humanism under colonialism and the roles they might play in an emancipated future. In Fanon’s view, nature was a crucial terrain for material exploitation and psychic subjugation, and humanism was the handmaiden of a false universalism whose actual constituents were a lucky few on good days in Europe. But Fanon’s dialectic of decolonization shows how nature and humanism can also be the terrain and telos of liberation; The Wretched of the Earth suggests that the environmentalism of the poor is also a humanism of the poor.

In this chapter I take the lexical root human, common to humanism, the environmental humanities, and the Anthropocene, as a rubric for teasing out what this environmentalism-and-humanism of the poor means for the environmental humanities.1 Both environmentalism and humanism have been criticized, from different angles and with different emphases, for being ethnocentric and anthropocentric. Although challenges to cultural universalism or species exceptionalism reveal contests over what it means to be human, the referent of human may not be the same. Humanism’s human ideal (and the forms of life excluded from it) may not be the same thing as the human perspective decentered by a multispecies approach. While some communities struggle not to be folded into “nature” (i.e., they are not quite recognized as human), others seek to dissolve the destructive privileging of the human in a more-than-human world. Thinking through these contradictions, and the forms of recognition, privilege, and exclusion at work in them, might mean that instead of just one more occasion to apologize for ethnocentrism and anthropocentrism, our efforts could be an opportunity to forge what Aimé Césaire called in Discourse on Colonialism a “true humanism – a humanism made to the measure of the world”; and, we might say, an environmental humanities made to the measure of the planet (56).
The first aspect of Fanon’s analysis that merits attention is his description of colonialism as the imposition of a species divide. This act of violence, in which the native is made other (and less) than human, is most legible in *The Wretched of the Earth* not in the moment of dehumanization but in the self-liberating rejection of it (which, I show later, amounts to a radical humanism). As he announces in his first paragraph, Fanon sees decolonization as “quite simply the replacing of a certain ‘species’ of men by another ‘species’ of men” (in French, “espèce”). Decolonization is the moment when the native refuses the “allusion to the animal world” in the colonizer’s account of him, “for he knows that he is not an animal; and it is precisely at the moment he realizes his humanity that he begins to sharpen the weapons with which he will secure its victory” (35, 42). In his anxious preface to Fanon’s text, Jean-Paul Sartre refines Fanon’s notion of colonialism as dehumanization or bestialization by adding a third term between the human/animal divide. In the first sentence of the book, we read: “Not so very long ago, the earth numbered two thousand million inhabitants: five hundred million men, and one thousand five hundred million natives” (7). Sartre posits the native as a colonial creation, neither human nor nonhuman animal. This liminal species is not hybrid or chimera, but instead half-degraded: no longer human but not quite reduced to beast; the careful result of economic cunning. Sartre explains: “For when you domesticate a member of our own species, you reduce his output, and however little you may give him, a farmyard man finishes by costing more than he brings in. For this reason, the settlers are obliged to stop the breaking-in halfway: the result, neither man nor animal, is the native” (16).

The obvious objection to this metaphorics of colonial bestialization (even its half-measures) is its a priori diminishment of the category of animal as the devalued Other of the human. How could such thinking serve as a foundation for environmentalism of any stripe? Even as Fanon and Sartre rail against the armed ethnocentrism of colonialism, they reify man’s subjugation of beast and the specious sense of superiority that underwrites it. But for me, this is precisely the point. (Their humanist language is also stubbornly masculinist—as Fanon says about Europe, he and Sartre “are never done talking of Man”—a fact I want to register historically and move beyond, in their own dialectical spirit.) Fanon’s emphasis on the native recognizing himself as a nonanimal human might imply a troubling anthropocentrism, but I would argue that Fanon’s vivid account of colonization-as-bestialization offers a prescient reminder of how a species divide has been deployed historically to cast some humans as sub- (rather than non-) human:

serious consideration of the status of animal seems to be fundamentally compromised by the human, often western, deployment of animals and the animalistic to destroy or marginalize other human societies. … Human individuals and cultures at various times have been and are treated “like animals” by dominant groups. … The history of human oppression of other humans is replete with instances of animal metaphors and animal categorizations frequently deployed to justify exploitation and objectification, slaughter and enslavement.

(Huggan and Tiffin 135)

If *The Wretched of the Earth* is a manifesto for decolonization, one could say that Fanon puts the question of the human on its agenda from the outset, and in so doing reveals the dark intersections between ethnocentrism and anthropocentrism.

In an essay that later appeared in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Rob Nixon identified four oppositions that obstruct conversations between postcolonialism
and mainstream American environmental thought: hybridity vs. purity, displacement vs. place, transnational vs. national frames of analysis, and history vs. timeless transcendence ("Environmentalism and Postcolonialism"). I would argue that Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* reveals an additional schism to add to Nixon’s list: that between postcolonialism’s attention to histories of dehumanization, on the one hand, and environmentalism’s critique of anthropocentrism and its conception of humans-as-animals in a more-than-human world, on the other. The category of the human has been wielded as a double-edged sword against those included in Sartre’s census of “natives.” As we have seen, in one stroke of the sword *les damnés de la terre* are excluded from the Sartrean brotherhood of man, their subjugation and enslavement justified in the name of a species divide: “since none may enslave, rob, or kill his fellow man without committing a crime,” Sartre writes, colonial occupiers “lay down the principle that the native is not one of our fellow men” (15). Yet that sword cuts just as deeply when wielded in the opposite direction by an equally ethnocentric “anthihuman environmentalism” (Nixon, *Slow Violence* 5), often in the form of national parks or nature preserves, that narrowly defends the interests of charismatic non-human animal species against the needs of marginalized humans (often formerly Sartre’s “natives”) who share their habitats and whose lives and livelihoods also depend upon access to them. In a very literal sense, the environmentalism of the poor must also be a humanism of the poor, a movement that reclaims the category of the human and demonstrates the ethnocentrism sometimes lurking behind pious rejections of anthropocentrism.

Fanon’s second contribution to the environmentalism of the poor is his account of colonialism as the capture of natural resources. We might say that the species divide is the ideological fiction that colonialism uses to justify the material expropriation of the natural wealth of the colonized world, including enslaved human labor. This process entails a massive ecological debt. Behind the veneer of European affluence, Fanon finds a history of theft and an explanation for the Third World’s “geography of hunger”:

This European opulence is literally scandalous, for it has been founded on slavery, it has been nourished with the blood of slaves and it comes directly from the soil and from the subsoil of that underdeveloped world. … Colonialism and imperialism have not paid their score when they withdraw their flags and their police forces from our territories. … The wealth of the imperial countries is our wealth too. … Europe has stuffed herself inordinately with the gold and raw materials of the colonial countries. … From all these continents … there has flowed out for centuries toward that same Europe diamonds and oil, silk and cotton, wood and exotic products. Europe is literally the creation of the Third World.

(96, 101–102)

Fanon tallies the European theft of nature and charts the cartography of underdevelopment: the natural wealth of the Third World made possible the development of Europe. Drawing a link between captive labor and expropriated natural resources as twinned objects of colonial exploitation, Fanon identifies a continuing structural inequality in what Fernando Coronil called the “international division of nature,” an understudied corollary to the Marxian international division of labor (29).

As with colonialism’s imposition of a species divide, Fanon theorizes decolonization as a dialectical reversal through which formerly colonized peoples forge newly sovereign nation-states and assert resource sovereignty: the right to dispose freely of the natural resources
within their national territories.² Here too, one might question whether Fanon’s account of underdevelopment, resource theft, and the decolonizing assertion of resource sovereignty can underwrite a properly environmental analysis, since Fanon’s thinking about “the soil and mineral resources, the rivers” (100) remains firmly enmeshed within a resource logic, in which nature is understood as natural resource, disposed for human use and subject to human control. For Fanon, the question in resource sovereignty is which humans have the right to dispose over nature, rather than the “sovereignty” of nature itself. Thus, in Fanon’s vision of national liberation, nature remains (in one crucial sense) colonized: subject to epistemological capture as the Other of the human.

On both of these questions, species divides and nature-as-resource, I would argue that Fanon’s attention to the history of colonialism helps to limn faultlines within environmentalism. Fanon shows who repeatedly ends up on the losing end of European conceptions of humans and nature, who pays for the “externalities” of these categories and their mobilization. He demonstrates the necessity of the perspective that we now call the “environmentalism of the poor,” attentive to the role of political power and social inequality in the disposition (conceptual and material) of nature. And he epitomizes what Joan Martínez-Alier observes: that many marginalized peoples’ struggles over nature, for justice, have been waged in an idiom that is not explicitly environmental but nonetheless engages the concerns of environmentalism (viii, 54, 62).

Within the rhetorical and dramatic arc of The Wretched of the Earth, humanism and nature play similar roles: each is each weaponized under colonialism, and then reclaimed and reconfigured through the dialectical reversal of decolonization. Admittedly, one might say that within Fanon’s logic, this process holds true for everything under (and including) the sun: whatever colonialism uses for its own ends, “natives” decolonizing themselves must seize, invert, and make their own. But nature and humanism are not just any old things in Fanon’s account of colonialism: they bear a shadow interrelationship in which ethnocentrism and anthropocentrism are unpredictably intertwined. Untangling these relationships is one task of the environmental humanities, from whose perspective Fanon’s drama of decolonization appears incomplete: further dialectical turns are necessary to reckon with the persistent anthropocentrism (and masculinism) of Fanonian humanism and the persistent ethnocentrism of mainstream environmentalism. The environmentalism of the poor shows why this should be so, and how the environmental humanities might avoid replicating the kinds of colonizing moves (involving both nature and humanism) that Fanon so excoriated. Picking up the mantle of Fanonian humanism, Edward W. Said named this relation critique—the critical embrace and emancipatory emendation of an imperfect inheritance, a task and an orientation that the environmental humanities might do well to adopt.

Fanon’s scathing indictment of European humanism is justly famous. In the searing conclusion to The Wretched of the Earth, Fanon exhorts:

Come then, comrades. … Let us … [l]eave this Europe where they are never done talking of Man, yet murder men everywhere they find them, at the corner of every one of their own streets, in all the corners of the globe. For centuries they have stifled almost the whole of humanity in the name of a so-called spiritual experience. … today we know with what sufferings humanity has paid for every one of their triumphs of the mind.

(311–312)
For Fanon, the European humanist tradition amounts to little more than an alibi for genocide, “a succession of negations of Man, and an avalanche of murders” (312). It is for this reason that Fanon remarks, “when the native hears a speech about Western culture he pulls out his knife—or at least he makes sure it is within reach” (43).

This indictment of European humanism (putatively universal, but in Fanon’s account murderously ethnocentric) is relevant to the environmental humanities for two reasons. First, I would argue that Fanon builds his case against the hollowness of European humanism in part through his analysis of colonialism and nature that I discussed above: the ideological exclusion of the native from the category Man and the material effects of that exclusion (the “geography of hunger,” the theft of nature). European humanism is propped up by concepts of nature that mask the dehumanization of les damnés and the ravagement of ecosystems and lifeworlds. As Sartre writes in his preface, “With us there is nothing more consistent than a racist humanism since the European has only been able to become a man through creating slaves and monsters” (26). While Sartre (prefatorily) echoes Fanon—peering at the lies and violence that lie beneath the “strip tease of our humanism,” and acknowledging of the native-recreating-himself-as-man that “we were men at his expense” (24)—Fanon tallies up the bill, enumerating the costs of European humanism paid in deaths, dehumanization, and the theft of nature.

But the second reason to linger over Fanon’s indictment of humanism—introduced in his first chapter, reprised in his conclusion—is to mark its dialectical reversal in the name of something truly remarkable, a newly and truly universal humanism. The conclusion of The Wretched of the Earth is searing but also soaring, as in the book’s final lines: “For Europe, for ourselves and for humanity, comrades, we must turn over a new leaf, we must work out new concepts, and try to set afoot a new man” (315–316). This is not the Fanon of apocalyptic, even genocidal anticolonial violence, nor even the Fanon who places his faith in the nation and nationalism, but instead the visionary of a new, and newly universal, humanism. Ato Sekyi-Otu has argued that The Wretched of the Earth must be read as a dramatic arc: the narrative transformations within the text perform diegetically the dialectic of decolonization that Fanon is theorizing. This approach can make sense of the trajectory of humanism in the text. Fanon opens by describing decolonization as genocide and by disavowing Europe’s fraudulent universalism; he closes with a universalizing gesture to forge a new humanism “for Europe, for ourselves and for humanity.” I have discussed Fanon’s account of the species divide and natural resources in similar terms, with decolonization as dialectical reversal. These smaller reversals take their place within the overarching framework of a Fanonian humanism that radically expands the constituency of the “universal.” This humanism is a kind of telos within and toward which the dialectic of decolonization unfolds. This is another way of saying that Fanon’s environmentalism of the poor is also a humanism of the poor.

In the US academy, Edward W. Said has been the most influential proponent of a humanism recognizable as Fanonian. Fanon and Said articulate an epistemological critique of European ethnocentrism and of colonialism’s nexus of knowledge, power, and violence, yet they seek to forge, as if for the first time, a humanism worthy of the name. In his last book, Humanism and Democratic Criticism, Said holds humanism to account for having been instrumentalized by identitarian programs and murderous pogroms (77). Yet for Said (as for Fanon), humanism still might be something other than the pillage committed in its name. “It is possible to be critical of humanism in the name of humanism,” Said writes; “schooled in its abuses by the experience of Eurocentrism and empire, one could fashion
a different kind of humanism” (10–11). Rejecting notions of humanism as the purview of a priestly elite, Said affirms the democratic possibilities of humanist self-knowledge and self-critique: “to understand humanism at all, for us as citizens of this particular republic, is to understand it as democratic, open to all classes and backgrounds” (21). Said’s is a humanism-against-hierarchy: a practice of reading and a practice of citizenship. Said’s ramification of Fanonian humanism is well suited to the commitment of the environmental humanities to speak to contemporary crises and injustices at multiple scales, and to engage and mobilize broader publics.

The double gesture I have identified in Fanon and Said—bringing murderous exclusions into view, while reaching toward a newly inclusive universality—can provide a model for the environmental humanities in the Anthropocene as it considers both its humanist inheritance and the claims made by the environmentalism of the poor. The process of opening-out entailed in Fanon’s dialectic of decolonization finds its counterpart in Said’s articulation of critique, which lies “at the very heart of humanism … as a form of democratic freedom and as a continuous practice of questioning … open to, rather than in denial of, the constituent historical realities” of colonialism and globalization (48). Calling to account the abuses of humanism—in the colonies or in the Pentagon—is part of the ever-unfolding realization of humanism. “Come, then, comrades,” Fanon urges, let us “set afoot a new man” (316); Said, too, calls us to humanism as a “process of unending disclosure, discovery, self-criticism, and liberation” (21).

This process, I argue, can allow the environmental humanities to confront even Fanon’s and Said’s own blindesses and to grapple further still with the problem of the human in relation to several distinct versions of otherness. Richard Pithouse argues that Fanon’s “reverence and respect for human (self and world making) creativity … has an extraordinarily persuasive power … [that] can create, in the reader, the subjectivities that generate an emotional identification with what is human … [and can] inspire action aimed at realizing a more human world” (127). We, in turn, might consider what it would mean to radically expand this identification, to realize a more more-than-human world.

There is more than a passing resemblance between humanism as I have described it here and Joan Martínez-Alier’s account of the environmentalism of the poor. His analysis is grounded in the social science disciplines of environmental economics and political ecology, which are concerned with ecological distribution conflicts, that is, conflicts over the “social, spatial, and intertemporal patterns of access to the benefits obtainable from natural resources and from the environment as a life support system, including its ‘cleaning up’ properties,” and over the unevenly distributed burdens of environmental risk and harm (73).

Crucial to the environmental humanities is the implication that the ecological distribution conflicts that give rise to the environmentalisms of the poor are also conflicts of ecological valuation: contests over language, ideology, and frameworks of interpretation. These questions recur throughout The Environmentalism of the Poor: “Who has the power to impose particular languages of valuation … Who has the capacity to simplify complexity, ruling some points of view out of order? … Who has the power to privilege one analytical point of view (the economic, the social, the environmental) on a chosen time-space scale?” (viii, ix,161; emphasis in original). In any environmental conflict, multiple temporalities and logics and languages of value are at stake (money and the market being only one among them). The question is always who has the power to make their language stick; the answer is usually those with the money. These questions of values, representation, and interpretation are ones that humanists are well suited to consider.
I want to close by invoking Fanonian/Saidian humanism as a method and interpretive stance from which to offer two provocations. First, I certainly would not want to erase the insurgent histories of specific social movements for environmental justice, or to disregard the importance of power and perspective. Still, I also dream of a world where the “environmentalism of the poor” would be known simply as environmentalism. The point is perhaps more legible if I say that I dream of a humanism of the poor that is known simply as humanism. That is to say, at work in such movements are a fundamental materialist realism (attention to flows of matter, energy, and waste, at multiple spatial and temporal scales) and an eye toward the workings of power and injustice that would be salutary for the environmentalism of everyone, not just the poor.

Failing that—still awaiting an imagined future turn of the dialectic when a new human has been indelibly inscribed on the new leaf that Fanon urges—my second provocation would be to resolve the terminological debates about the relationship between the environmentalism of the poor (a rubric which generally refers to movements in the Global South, focused on class stratification and the disempowerment of a majority population) and the Environmental Justice movement in the United States (which grew out of the civil rights movement and is concerned primarily with environmental racism and the toxic burdens borne unevenly by racialized minorities). Again, there is analytical and strategic value in not losing sight of specific histories of marginalization and terrains of struggle by collapsing different kinds of movements into each other. Nonetheless, what if we decided to recognize such movements as shared struggles under the banner of environmental justice, in a generic, lower-case sense? Beyond expanding the human constituency of solidarity, another advantage is that such an approach could facilitate the further dialectical turn against anthropocentrism that I describe above. This version of environmental justice could account for a more-than-human world inextricably bound up in struggles among differently empowered humans: materially, epistemologically, and politically. That is to say, as Martínez-Alier acknowledges, “environmental justice” signifies both the US tradition of social movements against environmental racism, as well as Rawlsian philosophical and ethical inquiry into “the allocation of environmental benefits among people including future generations, and between people and other sentient beings” (168). Inspired by Fanon and Said, I am dreaming of an approach to environmental justice—and environmental humanities—that calibrates these different strands, bringing not only Sartre’s “natives,” but also nonhumans and the future, into the fold of the most universal universalism yet. An environmentalism-and-humanism of the poor, along the lines of buen vivir, or the “tree of tomorrow” imagined by Zapatista leader Subcommandante Marcos. Perhaps that constituency will go by the name of the posthuman, including, in a literal sense, those who come after us in the future world we humans (and others) will have made—a Saidian notion. Yet a painstaking conceptual and political working-through of the stakes of recognizing fellow creatures would be necessary to forge that constituency: it is no mere matter of affixing yet another post- and continuing with business as usual.

Notes

1 One might discuss similar issues around the rubric of cosmopolitanism, but I am interested in how the concept of the human links and troubles these discourses.
2 See Wenzel, “Reading Fanon Reading Nature” for further discussion of Fanon’s engagement with the mid-twentieth century effort to assert in international law the principle of Permanent
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Sovereignty over Natural Resources, and the discrepant economic and ecological implications of that endeavor.

3 Other frameworks of valuation include “the ecological value of ecosystems, the respect for sacredness, the urgency of livelihood, the dignity of human life, the demand for environmental security, the need for food security, the defence of cultural identity, of old languages and of indigenous territorial rights, the aesthetic value of landscapes, the injustice of exceeding one’s own environmental space, the challenge to the caste system, and the value of human rights” (Martínez-Alier 149).

4 To say a bit more about materialist realism, the environmentalism of the poor, in Martínez-Alier’s account, recognizes that “economic growth unfortunately means increased environmental impacts, and it emphasizes geographical displacement of sources [of natural wealth] and sinks [for waste]” (10). Why should it take the environmentalism of the poor to establish in economic analysis the notion that the poor “sell cheaply” their health and their resources not because they want to, as free agents in the marketplace, but because they have little choice?

5 Marcos describes a “Fourth World War” between neoliberalism and humanity. In the face of this war, Marcos envisions the somewhat quixotic planting of a slow-growing “tree of tomorrow,” which will become “a place with democracy, liberty, and justice” (“Marcos on Memory and Reality” 293).

References


