

Re-reading Frantz Fanon in the Wake of *Y'en A Marre*

Social Media and Post-Statist Politics in Postcolonial Senegal

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PRESIDENT ABDOULAYE Wade's attempt to amend the Senegalese constitution in 2011, for a third term of office, was going to spark the most popular social uprising in Senegalese history. On 23 June 2011, when PMs were set to vote for the amendment of the constitution—which was going to allow the president another candidacy for the 2012 presidential elections—the Senegalese “people” assembled in front of the National Assembly to protest out loud. *Y'en A Marre* and other youth associations, alongside the leaders of the opposition parties and those of the civil society, coalesced against the ruling party's political manoeuvres: the *M23* movement was born on that very day. Given the popular outcry and the spontaneous protests nationwide, the government had to back down from voting the amendment. This has been seen by many as one of *Y'en A Marre*'s “political victories.” But a year later, when politicians were head-on with the ruling party during the electoral campaign, *Y'en Marre* made a significant shift, distancing itself from the politicians it had allied with the previous year. While political parties and their supporters wanted to topple the incumbent president and pleaded for a political regime change, the *Y'en a marristes* made it clear that they had a different political goal: to change society without taking power. They adopted a different approach to social change, revolutionary in principle, which consisted in theorizing the idea a new Senegalese man—“*un Nouveau Type de Sénégalais*.” A postcolonial reading of social movements like YEM is perhaps fully graspable when using a Fanonian theoretical framework. To what extent is Frantz Fanon relevant in the African social movements studies?

Frantz Fanon and Violence: A Critical Reading

AFTER ITS publication in 1961, Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* was considered the “Bible of decolonization,” as Stuart Hall pointed out. Because of his angst against the atrocities of French colonialism and its psychological consequences on the colonized peoples, Fanon's theorization of violence as a means for decolonization

sparked much controversy. Frantz Fanon's theorization of the cataclysmic decolonial violence has led many critics to partly and not fully grasp what Fanon meant when he argued aloud that "[n]ational liberation, national reawakening, restoration of the nation to the people or Commonwealth, whatever the named used, decolonization is always a violent event" (Fanon 1).

Despising the national bourgeoisie for its unwillingness, if not unpreparedness, to instantiate this violent event, Fanon turned to the peasants for their very receptivity for violent revolutionary actions. This fact, however, misled some critics who consider Fanon a kind of "apostle of violence [if not] a prisoner of hate" (Abadilahi Bulhan, qtd in Sekyi-Otu 3). But what Bulhan—and opponents of Fanon's political thought on violence—fail to consider is the fact that violent decolonization "fundamentally *alters being* ... *It infuses a new rhythm, specific to a new generation of men, with a new language and a new humanity*" (2, emphasis added). In this regard, Micheal Hardt and Antonio Negri would certainly agree with Fanon on this point that the dialectics of colonialism is "[a] boomerang of alterity" (130). Failing to really uncover the colonial contextuality of Fanon's text in critically engaging with Sartre, Marx and Freud, some critics, such as Paul Nursey-Bray, argue that the man has not come up to the challenge in measuring himself with these European master thinkers. What Fanon ended up doing, Nursey-Bray argues, is "an incoherent admixture of existentialism, Marxism, and psychoanalysis" (in Sekyi-Uto 18-19).

Gibson (1999) criticizes this lack of consideration of Fanon's "new humanism" by Postcolonial theorists who label him either as a Manichean thinker, or at best as a critic of Manicheanism; Gibson rather focuses on the double articulation of Fanon's use of the term "ideology." Not only did Fanon emphasize the need to go from a national liberation to a *social revolution*, but he blamed the national bourgeois intellectuals for their lack of any organicity and solidarity with the masses, on the one hand, and on the other, their subjects positioning from within the "Kleptocratic caste." Nigel Gibson, in addition, suggests that Postmodernists, who consider "Fanon's aim for rationality [as an] anathema to post-modernist sensibility," regard Fanon's ideology as a totalizing discourse. What is more, Frantz Fanon's legacies shed light on the necessity of a normative political theory in Postcolonial Studies. Frantz Fanon's overall agenda, actually, was the implementation of ways in which the colonies could gain total liberation from the shackles of neocolonial power. Given the variedness of Fanon's intellectual itinerary, from an identification with French traditional thought to an espousal of "revolutionary socialism," Fanon's relationship with traditional Marxism raised controversial debates because, as some critics argue, Fanon skipped the bourgeois middle-stage capitalism in his theory of political economy (Hanley 1976). In trying to rescue Fanon from harsh criticism, Tony Martin (1999), proffering an argument against Nursey-Bray's abovementioned analysis, considers Fanon as a Marxist, but in the sense of Castro or Mao, in that Fanon "accepted Marx's basic analysis of society as given and proceeded from there to elaborate on that analysis and *modify it* where necessary *to suit his own historical and geographical context*" (Martin 87, emphasis added).

The debate about the link between violence and politics, after Fanon, has been reopened by Hannah Arendt's *On Violence* (1970), while Jean Paul Sartre, in his foreword to Fanon's *The Wretched*, closed the debate between Sorel and Fanon, by not only uncritically

travesty Fanon's politically-charged theory of violence, but also by considering Sorel's theory of violence as mere "fascist chatter" (Renault 147; Fanon xlix). In her essay, Arendt's analytics of violence is cast against the "background of the twentieth century, (...) a century of wars and revolutions (...) the 'apocalyptic' chess game between the super-powers" (Arendt 3). She spoke, additionally, of the "all-pervading unpredictability" of violence. The geopolitical context from which Arendt was speaking is, mainly, that of World Wars and totalitarian political regimes in Europe that killed politics in the noble sense of the term. A geopolitical context of an "arms race," too, where the "Second World War (was) not followed by peace but by a cold war and the establishment of the military-industrial-labor complex," and in which taken-for-granted knowledge considered war "the basic social system, within which other secondary social organizations conflict and conspire" (9).

In the geopolitics of the Cold War, Hannah Arendt was more than right to focus on the then bipolarity of the world. What is more, she was critical of Fanon's "glorification of violence" and of its negative effects on Black students in the United States, who were demanding more inclusive educational policies (Arendt 20). Thus, she considered Fanon's ideas of violence as "nothing but a hodgepodge of all kinds of Marxist leftovers" (ibid.). In addition, Hannah Arendt was critical of the ways in which Fanon's theory of violence reverberated in different social contexts, the bipolar geopolitics or the United States civil rights movements. And no one can object to her argument that, in totalitarian regimes where the atomization of individuals reached its highest efficiency, "violence can destroy power; it is utterly incapable of creating it" (56).

But, was Fanon writing for these contexts? What if we contextualize Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* in its colonial context and decolonial premises? To begin with, Hannah Arendt herself has made a good point, in a footnote of her essay, on Fanon's sensitiveness on the danger of violence "*à l'état pur*." Because "Fanon had an infinitely greater intimacy with the practice of violence than the others (Sorel or Italian Vilfredo Pareto)" (71), she highlighted Fanon's ambivalence towards violence, "which if not combatted, invariably leads to the destruction of the movement itself within a few weeks" (14). But because of her concern with the "unpredictability of violence," Hannah Arendt disentangled violence and politics. Questionably, her approach seemed not to have taken into consideration the violence of day one, the colonial putative violence that triggered the counter-violence of the colonized people. Arguably, the colonial apparatuses of violence were nurtured by a tradition of thinking in Western philosophy wherein "political power is the power to dominate—to dominate a territory and the people and other resources in it" (Frazer and Hutchings 91). Whether Machiavelli's prince, Hobbes' Leviathan or Weber's rational State, politics was always looked at from the point of view of "the political dominator, the state organization" (ibid.). And it is herein that Marx's insistence of the counter-violence of the working class (1978) and Georges Sorel's (1999) distinction between state violence and the violence of the proletariat should be understood. In Fanon, however, the linking of violence to politics is threefold. "In Fanon's theory," according to Frazer and Hutchings:

there are three kinds of politics. First is *politics as domination*, where the capacity to dominate rests on the mechanisms of capitalist and colonial exploitation, their associated modes of oppression, and the imbricated of violence in these. Second is the *corrupt party politics of emerging elites*. This ineffectually tries to ignore the reality of colonial violence and the necessity of revolutionary violence alike for the hope of peaceful settlement. Its practitioners espouse the peacability of the profit maker. Third, there is *the virtuous politics of the people*. In this an ethical use of violence is possible. Further, it models and presages a new form of polity without, a new world for humanity (94).

To fully understand Fanon's theory of violence, therefore, one has to take into consideration Frazer and Hutchings' scales of analysis and layering of colonial politics wherein the people (the proletariat, in Fanon's terms) were the big loser. Fanon's presaging of a "new humanism" is to be understood in a kind of "stage theory" that must go through the first initial important one: whereon colonialism "is violence in its natural state, and will only yield when confronted with greater violence" (Fanon qtd. in Frazer and Hutchings 94). And the full understanding of the historic moment they were facing, coupled with the grasping of the redemptive force of counter-violence, made "the native and the underdeveloped man... political animals in the most universal sense of the world (Fanon qtd. in Frazer and Hutchings 96).

Frantz Fanon's political thought is approachable through the perspective of media and education. Jürgen Habermas is certainly right when he states that "a network for communicating information and points of view" is the interstitial space between state and society (in Manuel Castells 78). In recent years, the strength and potentials of online social media to speak the truth to state power have sparked sociopolitical changes in previously undemocratic regimes. The "Arab Spring" is arguably the best example. Even though youth culture has been key in triggering social revolutions in recorded history, new means of communication are undeniably mighty tools for youth culture to claim the place it deserves in opening up society towards new directions.

It is not to buck this thought that Datus C. Smith Jr. (1968) foresaw the "two simultaneous revolutions (...) in education and in *communication*," in developing countries, in Asia and Africa, whose political consequences could spark unprecedented social transformations on the "basic civic structures of the societies concerned" (758). While education is becoming more universal in terms of access, as claimed by UN-funded agencies and NGOs that are working on the African continent, online social media is the new spotlighted "fieldwork" that some scholars investigate to critically think of the way forward to raise consciousness among youth cultures in postcolonial African countries. This task is of crucial importance for we live in a temporality which is different, in every aspect, from the colonial times when things were clear-cut.

While theorists of global phenomena of race and racism are busying themselves in recuperating Fanon in "the spectacular mainstreaming of black cultures [through] the amputated and epidermalized humanity" (Gilroy 18), I am, first of all, interested in reading Frantz Fanon from the *politics of location*. Building much on Ayo Sekyi-Otu's call for an "African situationist reading of Fanon" (3), I aim to analyze the new Senegalese social move-

ments from a perspectivist standpoint. While the *Ÿ'en A Marre's* ideology might intersect with the *Occupy Wall Street* Movements within global capitalism, the social context of the former is worth highlighting. Is the postcolonial context of Senegal the same as the post-industrial moment in which the *Occupy Wall Street Movement* sprang? How can the racial dimension of the US movements—the questionably small number of people of color and LGBT people among the protesters—be discriminated from the Senegalese case study? In this regard, Sekyi-Otu's reading of Fanon reading needs some clarification.

Though Sekyi-Otu's analysis of the differences of colonial setting and the diversity of its postcolonial cultures is noteworthy, it is important to stress that reading Fanon through the lens of racial power structures in the Senegalese case study would be downright limiting. Rather, a Fanonian reading of *Ÿ'en A Marre* can best be done from his classist perspective. Theoretically speaking, my Fanonian reading of the Senegalese social movements deals with

the economic, political, and utter moral bankruptcy of postcolonial [political] regimes, with their unending train of rapacious and murderous tyrants, chieftains, and cliques, a succession of brutal enigmas which confound our ability to name the social identities of principal individual and collective agents (12).

In addition to Sekyi-Uto's "situational reading" of Fanon, the uprising of *Ÿ'en A Marre* occurred in a global context of circulating ideas, desires and hopes, in what Zygmunt Bauman has called "Times of Interregnum" (2012).

Frantz Fanon and Postcolonial Wretchedness

UNDERSTANDING THE postcolonial Nigerian modern state and its dealings with the *Boko Haram* uprising is what William W. Hansen and Umma Aliyu Musa have done in their article "Fanon, the Wretched and Boko Haram." They use the concept of "the 'wretched'" to explain the sociogenesis of *Boko Haram* in a postcolonial situation in which the issue of a 'racial foreigner' is completely irrelevant, and in so doing, argue for the "continued relevance of Fanonist thinking" (Hansen and Musa 1). Similar to this caution about the racial dynamics in Fanon's thinking with regards to the political issues of postcolonial African regimes, Sekyi-Uto calls for a more careful reading of Fanon's *The Wretched* when it comes to analyzing postcolonial Africa and the corruption of the elites (16).

Much has been written about fundamentalist religious groups, from the rise of religious fundamentalism with the Protestant conservatives in 1870s America up to the recent years across the world. But among the very similarities and dissimilarities of the definitions and concepts about fundamentalism, Steve Bruce's definition seems to be more in line with the case of *Boko Haram*. He defines fundamentalism as "the rational response of traditionally religious people to social, political, economic changes that downgrade and constrain the role of religion in the public world... Fundamentalists have not exaggerated the extent to which modern cultures threaten what they hold dear" (qtd. in

Emerson and Hartman 131). Therefore, religion, rather than race, *is said to be* the ideological bedrock of fundamentalist groups such as *Boko Haram*.

But this line of thought needs to be pushed further off. “One need not have a racially and geographically bifurcated society in order to see the continued relevance of Fanon’s thought,” Hansen and Musa argue (1). The geographical distance that was attached to Orientalism and the dehumanization of the Other, the scholarly arsenal on which Europe’s self-identity was built, is no longer relevant in Postcolonial theory when it is put face to face with the current African political bankruptcy. “From how far away must the Other (...) originate?” they ask. “Must he come from the oceans, from a different continent, from a different ‘race,’ or *may he originate from down the next street, the next village, the same village?*” (ibid 2). Frantz Fanon analyzed the compartmentalized and bifurcated urban areas in colonial Africa, in which “the colonist’s sector (was) built to last, all stone and steel. (...) The colonist’s sector (being) a sated, sluggish sector, its belly permanently full of good things.” Alongside the colonist’s good things, there was the world of the colonized that “(had) no space, people (...) piled up on the top of the other. (...) the colonized’s sector (was) a famished sector, hungry for bread, meat, shoes, coal, light (...) It (was) a sector of niggers, of towelheads (dirty Arabs in Farrington’s translation of Fanon)” (Fanon in Hansen and Musa 4).

But who, now, inhabits those sated and gated communities in postcolonial African urban areas? Interesting enough is Hansen and Musa’s argument that when you “remove the words ‘colonists and colonized’, remove the words ‘white folks and foreigner,’ and replace them with rich (black) people, you could be—would be—describing any bifurcated post-colonial city in Nigeria and many other places in Africa as well” (Hansen and Musa 5). While Nigeria is being hailed as the continent’s biggest economy and the richest oil producer, it is at the same time the “troubled Giant” because its “civilian-led, supposedly democratic governments have changed very little in the practice of venality on a grand scale that has long characterized Nigerian politics.” Quoting the Human Rights Watch 2011 report, Hansen and Musa argue that “an estimated US dollar 300 billion has been squandered and stolen by the predator class that dominates the Nigerian State ... (in which) corruption is (the state’s) most serious human rights problems” (in Hansen and Musa 5). These internal sociopolitical realities are sometimes ignored or glossed over by critics and commentators, to say the least, when it comes to understanding the socioeconomic causes of the *Boko Haram* insurgency. And the argument that “it is in the heart of the conditions of misery and impoverishment that have led to the rising of anti-systemic groups like Boko Haram” (ibid) is hardly ever heard in international media and specialist analyses.

Another interesting point in Hansen and Musa’s analysis is their periodization of the topical issue of *Boko Haram*. In order to fully grasp the history and emergence of *Boko Haram* as a violent fundamentalist group, one must take into account the year 2009, when the group radically changed its agenda. *What was Boko Haram prior to 2009?* Despite the religious fundamentalism that underpins its ideology, *Boko Haram* was originally a populist political movement. Political in the sense that “it had begun social programs endeavoring actually to help the impoverished, the indigent—something completely foreign to Nigerian public policy” (Hansen and Musa 10). The group was pop-

ulist for it actually pitted the downtrodden “uneducated” and employed masses against the rapacious predatory rich that are embodied by the state officials. One can mention the Borno State governor, Ali Modu Sheriff, who is “widely reviled as a violent, barely literate brute whose manner of dealing with his enemies is having them murdered by a gang of paramilitary goons in his employ called ECOMOG.” In addition to this, *Boko Haram*’s tactics of attacking only state institutions (prior to 2009) is guerrilla-type because not only did the people of Maiduguri originally sympathize with the “pro-poor policies” of the movement, but more unfortunate was the state thoughtless and violent repression of the movement and its leaders. Hansen and Musa argue that police forces “were wont to enter neighborhoods said to be inhabited by civilians sympathetic to *Boko Haram*, cordon it off and begin indiscriminately shooting people, looting their shops and burning down their homes.” What (can be said) about this wounded officer—who was being treated by a doctor at the University Maiduguri Teaching Hospital—who over the phone ordered his men in the field to “kill them all (?) Just shoot everyone” (Hansen and Musa 10)? These facts, I am arguing, need to be brought to the fore by specialists the phenomenon, serious enough to educate people about the sociogenesis of such anti-systemic movements and the reactions of the state.

And things seem to have changed *from 2009 on*. The group made its first public appearance in Kinama, a village in Yobe State, when it was involved in a “dispute” with the local police authorities. Even though it is unclear whether the dispute was due to “repeated military/police harassment,” there were 70 casualties on the side of the “Talibans,” as they were once called (Hansen and Musa 6). The leader of the group, Muhammad Ali, was among the killed. There were several police raids and fighting between 2005 and 2008 during which the group “re-organized and re-grouped.” In late July 2009, it violently irrupted by attacking several police stations in retaliation for the hundreds of its members that had been detained by the NPF—the Nigerian Police Force—without trial. But the Nigerian authorities responded by killing up to 800 people, noncombatants included. According to some sources, the “bullet-riddled” lifeless corpse of Mohammed Yusuf—the leader of *Boko Haram*—was found in the street after he was handed over to police forces in good physical condition. Later, Ba’a Fugu Mohammed, the deceased leader’s father-in-law, “never left police custody alive” after he “turned himself to the Nigerian Police Force when he heard they were looking for him.” What is interesting with these facts is that *Boko Haram*, prior to 2009, was only attacking the Nigerian state’s institutions, mainly the police which, they argued, detained hundreds of its members. “... In fact, “*Boko Haram* under Mohammed Yusuf” Shehu Sani tells us, “was not violent prior to 2009,” when the unprovoked killing of its leaders and continuous jailing of its members caused violent retaliation. Instead of organizing a fair trial for the movement’s leaders and set a venue for political negotiations, the Nigerian state opted for a repressive response in not only killing people in custody, but also those civilians said to be sympathetic to the movement. Consequently, in recent years, the movement has appeared as a nightmare in the Nigerian national consciousness. The movement has evolved from a guerrilla one with the alleged support of the local populations to a “full-fledged, well-organized, anti-systemic terrorist organization prepared to go to extreme lengths to bring down the state” (Hansen and Musa 11).

A better understanding of the sociogenesis of *Boko Haram* could help the international community to act. The complexity of this conflict requires a cautionary reading of what is being reported here and there in the media, both local and international. The media's only mission in this issue, it seems to me, is to focus on the casualties and violence that these terrorist groups are committing. Few are those media that do serious investigative reporting, daring to showcase and bring to the fore the unsaid and hidden realities of such conflicts.

Patricia Asfura-Heim and Julia McQuaid's 2015 report on the issue is very interesting. Even though the report is aimed at, if not probably commissioned by, the US government, with its eagerness to efficiently tackle the issue of (global) terrorism, the findings of the report are quite objective and noteworthy. The authors agree that "the conflict in Northeast Nigeria is complex. It is driven by a mix of historical, political, economic, and ethnic antagonisms." Their findings are: a) *Boko Haram* is caused by "grievances resulting from decades of poor governance, elite delinquency, and extreme economic inequality," b) "Since 2009, *Boko Haram* has transformed itself from a cult-like religious movement into a revolutionary insurgent organization," c) "the group uses guerilla tactics in the Northeast and terrorism in the South in the hope of fomenting instability and to showcase the government's powerlessness and inability to protect the population" (iv). The latter finding is really telling in that it clearly shows that *Boko Haram* does not want, or clearly avoids, to harm the Northeastern Nigerian people, while indiscriminately targeting civilians in the South which, in their anti-Western rhetoric, is populated by Nigerians who have embraced Western lifestyles.

***Y'en A Marre's* Ideological Battlefield**

Y'EN A Marre's outcry, which embodied a general contempt for Wade's political regime, can be understood through the prism of a "Scream." A popular scream that did not stem from a vacuum. Rather, social discontents in Senegal had sedimented and exploded in a particular time: a time of "interregnum" as Bauman would say, of political uncertainty when "rulers no longer *can* rule and the ruled no longer *wish* to be ruled" (51). My contention is that *Y'en A Marre's* blatant call for a socio-political change is perhaps best graspable through the revolutionary praxis of trying to change society without taking power. Even though *Y'en A Marre* and the political opposition leaders joined forces to challenge the incumbent president at the onset, the *Y'en A Marristes* made it clear that they were not driving at winning state power. Instead of the traditional framework in which political parties envision to change society—say, winning state power—*Y'en A Marre* can be viewed as those revolutionary movements which approach things very differently. For social movements like *Y'en A Marre*, the scream begins with a "dissonance [that] comes from [a particular] experience" (Holloway 1). This specific experience, John Holloway argues, is that of "flies caught in a spider's web... flies caught in a web of social relations beyond [their] control" (5). Therefore, the main line of demarcation between *Y'en A Marre* and the M23 political leaders lies in the strategies of social changes: win state power through political leadership or go beyond the frame of

the state and emphasize the role of the people to trigger change. The rationale behind changing the world outside the channels of state power is best described by Holloway when he states:

Changing the world without taking power gave voice to an idea that was central to the alter-globalization movement, to the Zapatista uprising in Mexico, to at least part of the great upheaval in Bolivia in those years and to the everyday practice of so many groups throughout the world, struggling to find a way forward, a different way of changing society, clear in their reputation of the old state-centered politics and all it involves in terms of corruption and boredom and using people as means to an end (xi).

In the Senegalese context, *Y'en A Marre* has envisioned, though in a sort of embryonic phase, to implement this radical theory of social change. Its blatant outcry, arguably, goes beyond M23's ideology of changing society through state power. Because of their tiredness of traditional politics, *Y'en A Marre* had greater appeal in the eyes of the disillusioned Senegalese "people" than the professional politicians. Perhaps at this point it would be interesting to remind the reader that some years ago the political leaders who compose M23 organized the *Assises Nationales*, a national conference and discussions about the socio-economic crises of Senegal. Though the intention was praiseworthy, it is at the same time questionable in that young people were not part of the *Assises*. What we had instead was a conglomeration of politicians, members of the civil society among elites, who closed themselves in conference rooms in the most beautiful hotel in Dakar, *Le Meridien President*. Not only were young people not active in the debates of the *Assises*, but the proposals that came out of it went ignored by Wade's government. To a certain extent, the *Assises Nationales* turned to be an elite's club wrapped in a rhetoric of politics. Instead of the traditional approach of politics that channels social changes through winning state power by elite intellectuals, *Y'en A Marre's* rationale in hailing a New Man (sic) cuts across Holloway's "critical-revolutionary subject" (140).

Rather than the intellectual-man-of-providence to lead the masses or the conventional thinker's "reasoned-sitting-back-and-reflection-on-the-miseries-of-existence" to tell them how to proceed, *Y'en A Marre's* New Senegalese Man (sic) is the one who critically engages in the dialectic of experience, the one who really understands that at stake are "people whose subjectivity is part of the mire of society in which we live, flies caught in a web" (ibid.). It is on this fundamental break from transcendentalism that the movement posits its ideology. In stepping out from the binary antagonism between ruling party and opposition politicians, *Y'en A Marre* has probably understood that the most important thing is not a them vs. us sort of approach to politics. This narrow sense of political class consciousness is what mostly defines the political scene in Senegal. Whenever politicians reach out to the population, it means that elections are closing in, and they try their utmost to gain the people's vote to reach state power. In a country of 12 million people, it is quite amazing to see that there are more than a hundred political parties. In such a context, what matters is not political ideology, but the political manoeuvres and know-how likely to secure a political victory. Perhaps Frantz Fanon

was right when he argued that “the formation of nationalist parties in the colonized countries is contemporary with the birth of the intellectual and business elite” (Fanon 63). Though this assertion is to be contextualized, I think it bears some historical continuity in today’s politics of Senegal, in the sense that the political leader is mostly seen as a providential man, always addressing the masses from atop the hills.

From Cheap Amusements¹ to Online Political Activism

I APPROACH online media as a tool of modernity “brought into” the postcolony. In *A Dying Colonialism* (1967), Frantz Fanon discussed the importance of some of the colonialist’s modern tools—Medicine and the Radio—which initially were aimed at enforcing colonial power and authority. In his article “Beyond Manichaeism: Dialectics in the Thought of Frantz Fanon” (1999), Nigel Gibson analyzes the way in which science and technology were tools of the French colonization in Algeria. Due to the imperialist character of science and technology and in reaction to it, the colonized Algerian people adopted a “defense mechanism.” In fact, as Nigel Gibson puts it, the Algerian reluctance to use science and technology “represent[ed] an obstinate allegiance to tradition, not because of any inherent value of tradition but because tradition has offered a refuge from colonial predations—a form of repudiation of, or resistance to, the colonizer who has been bent on destroying those traditions” (Gibson 344). During the revolutionary struggle in Algeria, however, Medicine and the Radio as tools of the colonizer came to lose their colonialist signifiers. Because they could be used for the struggle, Algerians “took over” science and technology for a better articulation and meaning of the struggle. “By stripping them of their superstitions,” the re-appropriation of the radio for example, “provide[d] the space in which a liberatory ideology [could] be developed and articulated” (343). Because the struggle took part everywhere in the country, the radio could participate in disseminating the propagandist ideas of the revolutionaries for better purposes. In the heat of the Algerian war of independence, “having a radio meant seriously going to war (...) it was hearing the first words of the nation (...) the identification of the voice of the Revolution with the fundamental truth of the nation has opened up limitless horizons” (Gordon *et al.* 276). At a crucial moment in the process of revolution, there is always a subversive use of the “master’s tools” for the purposes of social revolution.

The use of new social media, especially Facebook, developed in a somewhat similar way in Senegal. Previously seen a “Western thing” to which a few privileged people could have access, the number of Facebook users has exploded exponentially in the country in recent times. At the outset, most people in Senegal were reluctant to sign up for an online media web page like Facebook, probably not only because of its newness, but of the privacy issue of the Internet itself. For example, in 2008 when I created my Facebook page, most the people on my friend list were outside the country, mostly not Senegalese. But in 2012, it was different. I would not argue that this rise of Facebook users in Senegal is due to the echoes of the Arab Spring. People in Senegal began to be more familiar with online media like Facebook and YouTube years before the events in Tunisia or Egypt.

It is interesting to mention, however, that social networks like Facebook was merely for amusement. Making friends and socializing with people from all around the world was the main rationale. However, with the exponential development of mobile and wireless technology, and despite the entertainment and enjoyment of new social media—in which people construct performative identities for various reasons—online communities rapidly became a “safety net” that enables people to “discover” their *political capital*. With some caveats, though, social media users have been in the process of learning and dealing with a horizontal sort of intersubjective relationality to trigger democratic and open-ended ways of *talking about* and *doing politics*.

Constructing Digital Citizenship in Senegal: Difficulties and Hopes

THE POLITICAL crisis of Abdoulaye Wade’s political regime was but a local phase of a global problem in which people are “experiencing a contemporary *crisis* of voice, across political, economic, and cultural domains, that has been growing for at least three decades” (Couldry 1). Nick Couldry analyzes the “value” of (human) voice and foregrounds it in an Aristotelian philosophy which discriminates the sonic from the “logos” dimension of people’s ability to voice social matters (3). Alongside what he calls “religion-fueled utopianism” or “neo-conservatism,” Couldry contextualizes the crisis of voice within American and British “neoliberal democracies” which, given their reduction of the social world into “markets [and] spaces of potential competitions,” speak a language of “hegemonic rationality” (5-6). Neoliberal rationality is deemed hegemonic because, by “blocking other narratives from view” (6), and working “through the internalization” of its core principles into social consciousness, “extend[s] and disseminat[es] market values to all institutions and social action.” Like the Subaltern’s inability to speak within hegemonic discourses, the people’s voice in neoliberal rationality can be liberated, potentially, through what Wendy Brown calls “a counter-rationality—a different figuration of human beings, citizenship, economic life, and the political” (Brown qtd. in Couldry 12). Similarly—though not the outcome of an overnight phenomenon—, Senegalese people at large have come to deeply catechize the rationality of Wade’s regime with regards to the socio-economic problems of the country that are believed to peak under his regime.

The Senegalese social movements’ reaction to Abdoulaye Wade’s regime can be registered in this broad continental, if not global sense. First, as Penda Mbow (2008) has fleshed out in her article, theirs is triggered by Wade’s monarchical political devolution which seeks to wipe out any political counter-response to his “return to personalism” and his Senghorian sort of politics. Frantz Fanon critiqued, some fifty years ago, this elite ruling in relation to bourgeois class consciousness. Being basically different from the Western “dynamic, educated, and secular bourgeoisie [that] fully succeeded in its undertaking of capital accumulation and endowed the nation with a minimum of prosperity,” the national bourgeoisie in underdeveloped African countries is merely “acquisitive, vora-

cious, (...) dominated by a small-time racketeer mentality content with the dividends paid by former colonial power” (Fanon 119). The ruling elite of Abdoulaye Wade’s political regime are said to be well-known in their commission-dividend mentality with multinational corporations and global capital investment contracts. Given its mere dependency on international capital investment through what Nick Couldry calls “hegemonic [neoliberal] rationality” (6), Fanon argued aloud that “the bourgeois phase in the underdeveloped countries is only justified if the national bourgeois is sufficiently powerful, economically and technically, to build a bourgeois society, to create the conditions for developing a sizeable proletariat, to mechanize agriculture, and finally pave the way for a genuine national culture” (Fanon 119).

How about the role of new social media in the *Y’en A Marre* social protests unfolding during the last years or months, if not days, of Abdoulaye Wade’s political regime? It is quite arguable that *Y’en A Marre*’s mobilizing and networking was made possible by what Nick Couldry calls “new technologies of voice ... of so called Web 2.0 (Facebook, YouTube and Twitter), the vastly increased opportunities (that are) enabled by the digitalization for exchanging images, narratives, information and ways of managing data” (140). Our “digital condition” has something to with it too, our contemporaneous social conditions that enable sociability, the immediacy and circularity of knowledge and meaning (Fogel and Patino 18). Even though Fogel and Patino put more emphasis on the consequences of the Internet on our lives individually, and the ways in which the individual is constructing his/her identity in the digital world, their analysis of the impact of our digital (postmodern) condition at least redraws our cognitive and social mappings, allowing us, eventually, to enter a completely different era.

There is a somewhat polarized kind of good vs. evil debate about the Internet. The proponents of the Internet champion the easy access to information and data that people can manage daily, for different and personal reasons (Serres 2012). In opposition to this enthusiastic appraisal of the Internet, some are more concerned with the crumbling human relations, the dangers of video game addiction and the issue of Big Data (Biagini 2012). In addition, utopian literature has depicted the advent of an information era and state control that would endanger the freedom and rights of individuals. Critics are quite familiar with “Big Brother” in *A Brave New World* (1932) by Aldous Huxley, but particularly in George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). Whether seen in the positive perspective of a world of opulence and pleasure (Huxley) or a world of destitution and scarcity (Orwell), both dystopian novels at least share the commonality of a “tightly controlled world,” planned to be divided into “managers and managed, designers and followers of designs” (Bauman 2000, 53-54). In addition, and despite pitting Huxley and Orwell against each other as Neil Postman did, they, too, share the idea that ignorance is a political tool that the elite use towards the managed, “enforced through surveillance and the banning of books, dissent and critical thought itself” (Giroux 2015). Recently, Dugain and Labbé (2016) have investigated the complicity of governments, intelligence agencies and the GAFA (Google, Apple, Facebook and Amazon) in our difficult times of global terrorism which, from the perspective of governments, needs to be fought against by using Big Data. Not only is the rationale behind this complicity an economic one—because the GAFA’s want to turn every Internet user into a poten-

tial consumer (78), but more worrying is the “unclothing of Man” by the digital invisible dictatorship—“*la dictature invisible du numérique*”—the very subtitle of Dugain and Labbé’s book.

But there are always lines of flight amidst this dreadful depiction. When taken from a political perspective, the question worth asking is whether the *Web 2.0* technologies are advantageous or disadvantageous to democracy. In Senegal for example, people tend to forget the role of Senegalese online communities in the unfolding of the then *Y’en A Marre* streets protests. Not only were they a primary source of information, especially of the diasporic Senegalese people, but the Facebook discussions groups greatly helped the protestors exchanges ideas and information. In this particular case, street protestors became “*des producteurs d’information ... grâce à la décentralisation de la production d’information*” (Fogel and Patino 78). When traditional TV channels are no longer the main news providers, there comes a new situation characterized by a “fundamental (asset, which was) a deficit in neoliberal democracies (in setting afoot new) ways of valuing voice, of putting voice to work within a process of social cooperation” (Couldry 144). In addition to decentralizing the production of news and data, the online communities are spaces where the verticality of power structures is being harshly criticized. The extraordinary thing that most people tend not to be aware of is the idea of a horizontal relationality being constructed in the everydayness of people’s interaction. In these digital communities, people from different socio-professional backgrounds, political leaders and members of the Civil Society are basically face to face, “*par écrans interposés,*” with young people and students alongside members of political activists. At the end, we are moving towards a ceaselessly renewed public communication in which the verticality of power is being flattened out, the idea of knowledge being more and more fragmented. This, as Rémy Rieffel argues, is the basic social setting that allows a digital revolution and a new participatory and citizen culture. This new digital citizenship is described by Rieffel as follows:

Ce qui s’invente sur le web militant, c’est donc une sorte d’arène numérique ou s’élaborent collectivement des discours alternatifs aux média dominants et ou se dessinent des formes d’engagement qui ne reposent sur l’adhésion (à un parti politique ou un groupement préexistant) mais sur l’agrégation progressive d’individus aux origines et aux profils hétérogènes (253).

One can easily disagree with Reiffel when he states that there is no political affiliation in the digital arena of clashing ideas and interests. More often than not, social media networkers do replicate their partisanship, if not interested in some forums or “Facebooks group discussions” that are in favor of a political agenda. The collective construction of alternative discourses is definitely not immune from the influence of political agendas. On the individual as well as the collective level, social media has been of incredible importance and help. The very vertical relationality of people has come under harsh criticism in the online meeting ground. As Guillaume Cazeaux (2014) puts it, “...*le Net rendrait de plus en plus obsolète un régime fondé sur la division social du travail entre une poignée d’orateurs et une masse d’auditeurs – avec une verticalité des relations*” (57). Undeniably, our

digital culture constantly redefines the very notions of democracy and communication, now widely open and accessible to those whose voices have been marginalized for so long.

The use of mobile and wireless technology during the peak of protests during *Y'en A Marre's* social uprising is of great interest for researchers in what are now called the *digital humanities*. Today, as many would argue, the terrain of scholarship regarding social movements has shifted. This turning point, arguably, is parallel to the shifting ground of political power itself. Arguably, we are living in a political era in which power has a kind of "exterritoriality." No longer a panoptical, but a "post-panoptical era, characterized by the fluidity, circulation and exchange of ideas and technologies through the porosity of borders" (Bauman, 2000:10-11). The end-result of this "liquid modernity," as Bauman calls it, is that "power sails away from parliament and assembly halls and beyond the citizen's controls (into) *the exterritoriality of electronic networks*" (40, emphasis is added). The role of social media in the rise of *Y'en A Marre* in Senegal has been under-investigated. The modest critical research on the social movement focused on its theoretical and political agenda.²

Rap music has been central to the emergence of *Y'en A Marre* as a social force onto the political arena of Senegal. In a synchronic perspective, Marame Gueye (2013) has done a very insightful analysis of rap music and how its legacy impacted on the very structure of the movement. Most of *Y'en A Marre's* leaders are rap musicians whose lyrics were very controversial, and consequently some of them were jailed during the former socialist political regime. She termed *Y'en Marre's* rap music, "Urban Guerilla Poetry ... a recital of short poems where the audience is often unprepared for the content of the text" (27). In her article, Gueye focuses mainly on three of the soundtracks "*Faux! Pas forcé*" (Don't Push), "*Daans Fanaanal*" (Sharpening one's weapon the night before), and "*Doggali*" (Finishing up a killing) (...) manifestos that employ a culturally grounded oral narrative, in order to wage a war against President Abdoulaye Wade and reclaim the nation" (23). As such, the songs performed a truly virulent lyricism against the incumbent president's political manoeuvres, the most controversial of which was the attempt to amend the country's constitution. What is more,

the songs were released at different stages of the election period and constitute responses as well as strategies within the general fight to oust President Wade and reclaim the nation. "*Faux! Pas Forcé*" was a reaction to the events of June, 23, 2011. It frames Wade as the nation's common enemy and exhibits the youth's resolve to get rid of him. As propaganda, "*Daas Fanaanal*" exhorts masses to vote against Wade after he was declared eligible for a third term, and "*Doggali*" turns him into an agonizing enemy who must be finally eliminated during the run-off (24).

Gueye's main contribution to the little scholarship about *Y'en A Marre* is that rappers, who were marginal not only in terms popularity, but also of the appreciation of their music by the Senegalese in general, have successfully entered the sociopolitical arena of Senegal, and thus become important cultural actors.

Y'en A Marre can also be approached in a diachronic perspective. David Bryson (2014) goes beyond rap music and foregrounds the ideology of *Y'en A Marre* in a socio-historical development at the intersections between tradition and modernity, the local and the global, youths and the elderly. From a historicist standpoint, Bryson argues that Leopold Sédar Senghor's arts and cultural policies, from the independences on, is in a continuum with *Y'en A Marre's* articulation of the "New Type of Senegalese" (NTS). *Y'en A Marre*, he argues, draws on the "collective, for all of its calls for the 'new type of Senegalese,' its use of contemporary media, and its foundation in hip hop culture, equally draws upon cultural ideology, model and trends that can be traced back to Léopold Sédar Senghor and that have endured in Senegal since his presidency" (35). Bryson's invocation of the "new" in *Y'en A Marre's* ideology cuts across my contention that *Y'en A Marre's* "new type of Senegalese" is reminiscent of Frantz Fanon's idea of the yet-to-be-born postcolonial "new humanism." "As journalists and academics rushed in to capture the movement's effervescence and reflect the group's own articulation of the "new," Bryson argues, "they have neglected the essential Senegalese historical progression that *Y'en A Marre* is part of" (36). However, though Bryson's approach is interesting, Senghor's arts and cultural policies were elitist and global-oriented in terms of exportation and audience. Therefore, they are at odds with the popular and avant-garde musical lyricism of *Keur Gui*, the rap musician members of the movement. While Senghor was more concerned about the cultural image of Senegal abroad, the arts and music of *Y'en A Marre's* cultural content are more political, and more focused in terms of locality. Therein lies the weakness of Bryson's arguments, who even acknowledges the authoritarian policies of Senghor towards radical artists of his time.

The only work that partly focuses on the importance of the political potentials of social media in Senegal is the documented film, *Boy Saloum: La révolte des Y'en A Marre* by Audrey Gallet (2013). The film tells an interesting history, if not a "herstory," given that the film is narrated by Sophia Dénise Sow, one of the most outstanding, but invisibilized, female figures of the movement. The film is but the historical trajectory of those who founded *Y'en A Marre*, from the *Keur Gui* rappers in early years in their city of Kaolack up to their moment of glory in Dakar, when they helped oust President Wade from power. The film starts with Frantz Fanon most cited sentence, that "each generation must discover its mission, fulfill it or betray it, in relative opacity" (145). While *Thiaat*—one of *Y'en A Marre* rappers—sits in a dark candle-lit room writing his lyrical songs, there is lightning and thunderstorms outside. This atmospheric happening of things foretells, metaphorically, the coming of chaos after years of social lethargy. While *Thiaat* keeps writing, Dénise Sow's voice can be heard in the background, remembering her childhood memories of her grandmother in her native city of Kaolack. In addition, the first scenes of the film also feature *Keur Gui's* rap concerts in Kaolack where they faced police brutality, imprisonment while they were under age, and in Pikine, one of Dakar's populous suburbs, raising youth consciousness and political awareness, key in fighting President Wade's regime.

Compared with the rest of West African countries, Senegal is always hailed by political analysts as a socio-politically stable country, especially thanks to its political alternations and peaceful electoral procedures. Apart from the secessionist rebellion of the

MDFC in the southern part of the country in the early '80s—a rebellious movement that has been smashed by state forces and is quite dormant—there is no record of civil war or violent interethnic conflicts. Yet, there is a rich history of social and political movements from the independences on. As a former French colony, there was a replication, if not a contamination by Mai 68, on Senegalese university campuses. In a nutshell, *Y'en A Marre* can be understood within this long history of social movements in Senegal.

The movement is also narrated in nationalist terms, because the *y'en a marristes* seem to be inspired by the historical figure of Valdiodio Ndiaye. Valdiodio was a native of Kaolack who, among other political figures, challenged General De Gaulle's controversial touring of colonized French-speaking countries during the decolonization era. In such a narrative, the city of Kaolack is dubbed "*ville de contestation, le lieu des vrais révolutionnaires,*" such figures like Valdiodio gain significance in Senegal's national imaginary. In fact, *Keur Gui's* rap music was radically different from the other rap musicians in their native land of Kaolack. In a socialist political regime, where former President Diouf was "disconnected from the life realities and miseries of the Senegalese people—these are *Thiaat's* words—, *Keur Gui* rappers found it unacceptable for youngsters to cheer hedonist rap music. They had to wake up for political awareness. At this level, *Y'en A Marre's* chauvinistic narrative of origin might echo the Zapatistas' indigeneity which, in most cases, is said to epitomize integrity and dignity in contrast to city dwellers who are alienated, if not corrupted, by modernity and urbanity.³ The incorruptibility that the idea of indigeneity is said to echo goes against *Y'en A Marre* and their alleged relationship to controversial transnational funds.⁴

Dénise Sophia Sow, a major female leader of the movement, played an important and pivotal role. As we are told, Dénise Sow has a Bachelor Degree in computer science and was in charge of the social media propaganda of the movement while men were facing police crackdown in the streets of Dakar and other major cities of Senegal in 2011 and 2012. She was coordinating the uploading of pictures and videos sent by protesters on the ground. While her male comrades faced physical violence and police brutality, Dénise, thanks to her digital literacy, was making the revolution viral. In addition to Denise, we have other female members but no interviews are given by them in the film. Even though Denise herself is the one who narrates the history of the movement, how it evolved from the hinterland city of Kaolack and migrated to the Capital city, she is always alone with the camera. There is no footage of her discussing critically with her male comrades, while the latter are always spotlighted in the film, discussing and quarreling about how to proceed and what strategies to adopt amid crucial moments of the protests. Denise and other women are always behind these masculine "battles."

There is a lot to say about the heated internal debates and the seemingly fragile leadership of *Y'en A Marre*. At the height of the streets protests and police breakdown, there was no unanimity about how to proceed. While Fadel Barro, the mastermind of the movement, opted for a more republican kind of lawful procedures—when President Wade's controversial candidacy was approved by the country's supreme judges of the constitutional council—others, like *Thiaat* for instance, urged his comrades to return to the streets for occupation. These divergent strategies created a huge fracture in the

leadership of the movement. The movement was on the verge of collapse. Thiaat and Fadel were in a heated debate, almost destroying each other's plans. But what is striking in the masculinist performance of leadership is Sophia's absence from the talks. She never participates in these. All she does is narrate the film and sometimes her story in a lonely and dark setting. Whether *Keur Gui* and rap music or Fadel and his thoughtful leadership, the film is almost dominated by male figures. But one could ask this question: what would the whole movement become without Sophia Dénise Sow and her expert literacy in social media and computer science?

But any critical viewer of the film cannot lose sight of its striking happy ending. Even though the teleology of the movement was to change the Senegalese society by the advent of a "*Nouveau Type de Sénégalais*," the film ends with President Macky Sall's victory over Wade and his historic election. The *y'en a marristes* were cheering for such a "democratic alternation." So was the whole country. But, while aloof from cheerful comrades, *Thiaat* seemed to be less enthusiastic, though Wade was defeated. He was more aware of the sober business that was to come, the long-term social business of creating lasting democratic social institutions from the grassroots level. Though he is the most virulent and most radical among his peers, *Thiaat*—whose name means the youngest son of a family—is very thoughtful and perspicacious. This last shrewd comment in the film about the most difficult times ahead echoes Anthropologist David Graeber's insight about the "shock of victory" that "a revolutionary uprising begins with battles in the streets, and if successful, proceeds to outpourings of popular effervescence and creativity. There follows the sober business of creating new institutions, councils, decision-making processes, and *ultimately the reinvention of everyday life*" (63). There is certainly a long way ahead, between hailing "the New Type of Senegalese" and its social implementation.



Notes

1. The concept is from Katy Peiss' seminal book, *Cheap Amusement: Working Women and Leisure in the Turn-of-century New York* (1986). It stresses the influence of leisure and how it allowed working women to gain autonomy and redefine their self-identity in a homosocial American mainstream culture.
2. *Y'en A Marre : Radioscopie d'une jeunesse insurgée au Sénégal* (2012) by Vieux Sané et Makebe Sarr (both journalists) is a critical journalistic work on *Y'en A Marre*. During the book release presentation, which I attended in Dakar in 2013, there were heated debates between the journalists/authors of the book and Fadel Barro, journalist and mastermind of the movement. The latter was accusing the authors' lack of intellectual rigor because, he argued, there are so many flaws in the book's methodology.
3. In a different paper, "*Y'en A Marre vu par les Gender Studies: Une étude comparative avec le Zapatisme au Mexique*" (that has been accepted for publication) I am trying to have a critical approach, especially a gender-oriented one, to the issue, among others, of the masculine dynamics of the movement's leadership and the invisibilization of the women members by the media.

4. Recently, there has been a scandal concerning the laundering of money that Lamine Diack, a Senegalese national and former Chief Executive of IAAF (The international Association of Athletics Federations), is suspected to have received from Russian officials, and the money with which he funded some opposition politicians during the 2012 Senegalese elections and some youth organizations, including *Y'en A Marre*. The prosecution is still pending.

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Abstract

Re-reading Frantz Fanon in the Wake of *Y'en A Marre*: Social Media and Post-Statist Politics in Postcolonial Senegal.

This paper aims to re-read Frantz Fanon's political thought on African postcolonial contemporaneity with regards to the télos of African social movements and youth rebelliousness against state politics and globalization. The *Y'en A Marre* social movement that spoke truth to the political power in recent years in Senegal is, as I proffer, a historic attempt to rethink what culture and politics mean 50 years after independence in the postcolony. The fundamentalist group *Bokom Haram* in Nigeria is a relevant case of postcolonial wretchedness. In addition to retrieving Frantz Fanon's legacies from the dead-ends of racial theory and nationalist postcolonial discourses, I will argue, at least theoretically speaking, that not only does Frantz Fanon's theory of a "new humanism" cut across *Y'en A Marre's* idea of a "*Nouveau Type de Sénégalais*" (NTS), but and more important is Frantz Fanon's relevance in African Humanities Studies. Finally, the paper addresses the lack of consideration of the role of social media in the uprising of *Y'en A Marre*.

Keywords

Fanon, Y'en A Marre, social media, violence, Boko Haram, Wretchedness