MODERN LITERATURE

Paper 2: “What is This "Black" in Black Diaspora?”

by Michelle Stephens, Colgate University, Hamilton, NY

Despite the hyper-visibility of black masculinity in American popular culture both at home and exported abroad, gender and sexuality are still neglected categories in current discussions of black cross-culturality. At the same time, as conversations about, and connections between, diasporic and transnational blacknesses emerge in our contemporary, globalizing context, new questions arise concerning the relevance of race and blackness for describing the cultures, experiences, and identities of diasporic populations in both the New and Old Worlds.

In my talk I explore how we might resolve both of these concerns, the absence of gender and sexuality and the hyper-visibility of American conceptions of race in studies of black global literature and culture. I propose that the answer lies in a much more complex account of the racial unconscious, a term which I apply to the subjects of modernity at large, but will delineate in the specific context of the structures of a black male unconscious post-modernity.

The work of Frantz Fanon will be critical to my discussion. Fanon was an author, psychoanalyst, and revolutionary thinker from the Francophone Caribbean, well known across both Europe and the Americas as a central figure in the anti-colonial liberation movements of the 1950s and 1960s. Born on the island of Martinique in 1925, Fanon lived a diasporic life between the Caribbean and the metropolitan capital, before his studies qualified him to practice as a psychiatrist in Algeria during the 1950s. With the outbreak of the Algerian Revolution in 1954 Fanon joined the FLN liberation front. When he was expelled from Algeria in 1957 he continued to play a role in African decolonization, using his experiences as both a psychiatrist and a revolutionary to inform much of his writings.

The Wretched of the Earth, published in 1963 and probably Fanon’s most famous work, is still considered the most important work on decolonization. My talk will refer to his later book, Black Skin, White Masks, a study of the effects of colonial pathology on the black subject’s identity formation. I will focus on a short excerpt from Fanon’s chapter “The Fact of Blackness,” where dynamics of looking and onlooking structure the chapter’s opening scene of a French female child pointing to Fanon and exclaiming, “Look, a Negro!”

In my talk I will explore this moment as an important scene of subjection in the formation of a black male unconscious. As Fanon sees himself in the face of a racialized and gendered gaze, I will demonstrate how the notion of black “triple-consciousness” he describes in this chapter can expand current discussions of race beyond the African American notion of double-consciousness. The term "double-consciousness,” coined by the prominent intellectual W. E. B. Du Bois in 1903, is often used to describe the formation of the black subject in the confrontation with white projections of the black Other. Fanon shows us how a more triangulated description of this process can focus our attention away from bodies (black or white) and toward the interaction occurring in the space between them. Also, I will propose ways in which the recognition of colonial desire can inform our attempts to place gender and sexual identity at the heart of a global blackness.