Cosmopolitanism without National Consciousness is not Radical: Creolizing Gordon's Fanon through Du Bois

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Jane Gordon’s *Creolizing Political Theory* is a groundbreaking reading of Jean Jacques Rousseau and Frantz Fanon through the lens of each reflecting the other, which also constructs a capacious method of creolization to inform political theorizing. Gordon offers a crisp conceptualization of creolized readings and makes a convincing case for political theorists to engage in this practice. Gordon’s methodology of creolization makes us aware of how moments of “closure” in one author can lead to “openness” when read alongside a different author or historical time, and of how cases of “sedimentation” in Enlightenment thinking about the other can find “fluidity” when juxtaposed with those addressing the project from below (11). The result is a productive interpretive map that upends canonical preconceptions and engages Fanon and Rousseau in playful dialogues with one another in ways that make their insights work toward addressing pressing contemporary challenges. These dialogues reveal the converging and contrasting modes of theorizing of these two thinkers, their awkward encounters through divergent readings of the “savage” and their distinctive scathing critiques of the social sciences. In the process, the book imparts invaluable interpretive lessons about the impoverishing effects of “authorized ignorance,” that is, the refusal to allow critique of the narrow confines of canonical and mainstream political theory through resources that are external to its purview.

In this essay, I engage with the methodological contributions and original readings of Fanon and Rousseau contained in Jane Gordon’s *Creolizing Political Theory*. I then rely upon one insight in particular—Gordon’s illuminating joint reading of Rousseau’s general will and Fanon’s national consciousness—in order to reflect on Fanon’s ambivalence about Pan-Africanism. In this task, I engage with W. E. B. Du Bois’s transnational thinking in order to parse out the reciprocal relation between national consciousness and transnational or cosmopolitan engagements.

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1 I am thankful for the generous feedback provided by the editor and an anonymous reviewer.
2 Unless otherwise specified, all page citations refer to Gordon’s *Creolizing Political Theory*. 
Creolizing Political Theory starts with an examination of Rousseau as a central figure in the inauguration of the critical method, i.e., the task of “delegitimating decadent inquiry.” In Chapter 1 Gordon notes the central place of the (non-European) “noble savage” in Rousseau’s inquiry. In particular, Rousseau relies on this figure to turn Western philosophy of history upside down by associating the West (and its will) with decadence and directing us to the “savage” for and more promising historical narratives (61). Chapter 2 moves to Fanon, who, located in the creolized Francophone empire, continues Rousseau’s task of “challeng[ing] the ways that reason had been used to advance the singularity of particular political models (63). Where Rousseau criticized the authoritativeness of certain brands of empiricism because of their role in legitimizing despotism, Fanon attacked biologized racism and the “systematic demolition of indigenous systems of reference” that could have otherwise grounded “independent collective orientations” (73, 5). Gordon reminds us that the real effect of the colonial system for Fanon is not “the death of the native culture” but the way in which it “becomes closed, fixed in the colonial status” and “mummified” in the deliberate effort to “confine” through maximal objectification (76). Chapter 3 contains Gordon’s account of Rousseau’s general will, complemented by an examination of Rousseau’s writing on Corsica that she deftly makes newly relevant to postcolonial thinking. Chapter 4 shifts again to Fanon, this time engaging his theorization of national consciousness, which must replace nationalism, an ideology that—while useful for the ouster of colonialism—becomes a zombified form of identity thereafter. Chapter 5 returns to a methodological discussion of the fruitfulness of creolization as a mode of theorization today. Creolization forces us to grapple with the nature of symbolic life as a process that is complex and refracted (174). This is also true about theory, as is evident in her deployment of Rousseauan insights that can only emerge when juxtaposed with Fanon but can nonetheless critically advance the postcolonial theory of the latter. These readings operate by finding those points of refraction and leveraging them for new creative accounts of both authors rather than adhering to traditional scripts of comparison that may emphasize difference and separation.

In the rest of this essay I engage with Gordon’s twin readings of the concepts of general will and national consciousness. My goal is to consider how a tripartite engagement, with Rousseau and Fanon, via Gordon and my own work on Du Bois, can illuminate the role that national consciousness and cosmopolitanism play with respect to each other both generally, i.e., conceptually, and in particular in Fanon’s critique of ruling elites.

Crafting a General Will/National Consciousness after Colonialism

Gordon’s creolized reading rescues Rousseau’s less well-known critiques of colonial encounters and helps us re-envision his writings on Corsica as a discussion that can be usefully juxtaposed with Fanon’s theorization of nationalism and national consciousness in the (post)colony. In particular, Gordon brings to the center the postcolonial lessons of Rousseau’s examination of Corsica, a former colony of the Moors and the Genoese. The question Rousseau tackles, she argues, is “how the island could aim to become a genuinely postcolonial state: how to move it out from conditions of economic dependence and poverty” (117).
As Gordon notes, Rousseau’s engagement with Corsica involves rescuing this site as a promising place to, first, consider how an uncorrupted general will can be produced; and, second,—in a reading that emerges particularly clearly alongside Fanon—to explore what forms of detachment and construction are required to shed traces of Corsica’s former colonial subjection (117). In particular, Rousseau proposes to redirect “a strategy that had been devised to subdue the Corsicans” toward, instead, the enlargement of their equity and freedom (118-9). In particular, colonial powers had “turn[ed] [Corsicans] away from commerce, the arts, from all the lucrative professions” and turned them into “a heap of base peasants living in the most deplorable misery” (CWII, 137, cited in Gordon 118). They had also remapped counties and jurisdictions and destroyed the local nobility (119). Rousseau found these conditions ideal for the creation of a society in which a civil power grounded in legitimate authority could emerge. This would be a society in which the ability of the wealthy to purchase—and thus delegitimize—authority could be preempted (120). A project that privileged peasants over commercial classes, linked political privileges to labor rather than wealth, and prioritized the health of democracy rather than its efficiency, seemed much more attainable in the Corsica that colonialism had produced than in the already corrupt European societies that Rousseau criticized (118-9).

What is notable about this reading, beyond uncovering previously unremarked meanings and uses of Rousseau’s writing on Corsica, is that the proposed reading can only emerge because Gordon reads Rousseau with Fanon. Reading with, in this case, means a number of things. First, it means directly engaging them in conversation; such as when Rousseau’s writings on Corsica are productively juxtaposed with Fanon’s political thinking (and action). However, it can also mean a simpler exercise; that of reading Rousseau while keeping Fanon—and his concerns—in mind. This orientation highlights different dimensions of Rousseau’s text in our eyes; it makes particular reflections, which would not have stood out, suddenly emerge. This reading is distinct from both an exegetical exercise that attempts to get Rousseau “right,” and a reading that simply contrasts the authors in terms of their insights on the topic. Instead, it becomes a creative anachronistic project that locates the productivity and authority of a reading in its ability to illuminate our contemporary condition, with particular focus on the question of postcolonialism.

Gordon productively interprets and unpacks the many parallels between Rousseau’s discussion of the general will in Corsica and Fanon’s consideration of the question of national consciousness in postcolonial societies. About the latter, Gordon notes that the nationalism that is central to the struggle for independence needs “supplementing, broadening, and reconstructing” in areas of politics, economics, and culture (131, 85). Regarding politics, “radically democratic participation” is necessary in order to nurture the humanity of the people and expand their “eyes and ears.” Economically, “governmental institutions … [had to] connect[ ] one part of the nation to others through resource and infrastructural provision” (131, 50). Finally, the work of culture required not only an affirmation of their cultural past but the development of a dynamic “living culture” that could support the present work of forging a shared political world” (131). This work is required because, as Gordon reminds us, progress cannot be sustained by hatred alone, and there is a risk that the native, “so starved for anything, anything at all
that will turn him into a human being,” may settle simply for scraps of charity (145; Fanon 1963, 140). Just as Rousseau celebrated the lack of elites in Malta, Fanon fears in particular the way in which the “economically and socially bankrupt” colonial elite “can only think to imitate and so repeat, in exaggerated form, the insults of former colonizers” (146). Adding to this complexity, Fanon notes that postcolonial democracies must grow out of the dominant political stances of revolutions, characterized by “brutality of thought and mistrust of subtlety,” and replace them with “nurturing understanding and reflection” and the creation of “politically legitimate” relations (147; Fanon 1963, 147).

Gordon’s reconstruction reminds us that different political processes require particular forms of political agency and imagined communities that may have to be transformed as societies navigate different political challenges. Moreover, Gordon’s engagement illustrates the interpretive gains of creolization, the way in which the question of founding is unpacked and made more complex when we consider it as a postcolonial question and do so via both Rousseau and Fanon. In particular, Rousseau encourages Corsica to move away from Western European models of general will and expand the rustic modes of life associated with agriculture. This model, along with a temporary isolationism, Rousseau thought, provided the best fit with democracy (119). In contrast, Fanon is more interested in a politics of the future and differentiates two forms of general will (a nationalist one, and one based on “national consciousness”) that are sequentially necessary in a transition away from colonialism. Moreover, Fanon presses against Rousseau’s preference for isolationism by contending that collective self-definition is not the work of the colonized alone, but requires a consideration of the restitution owed (158). But how does a project of restitution look like? Can postcolonial nations pursue it independently of each other? Gordon does not follow up on this, perhaps because at this point Fanon must abandon Rousseau in order to assess the world-spanning character of the modern phenomenon of colonialism and the role of race in this project—two aspects that do not concern Rousseau in his analysis of Malta.

We can certainly not expect such a project of restitution to be pursued by the postcolonial national bourgeoisie, which Fanon views as an obstacle to the political, economic, and cultural development of the people that he envisions. For Fanon, the bourgeoisie imitates and repeats in exaggerated form the situation of colonialism. As Gordon notes, they maintain the omnipresence of police and army, this time “in African uniforms” (146, 52). Moreover, when the bourgeoisie relates to former colonials, they establish the wrong kind of outward orientation, a fault that Fanon also finds in the “profound cosmopolitan mold” of the national middle class (Fanon 1963, 149-50).

But is there, for Fanon, a “right” kind of outward orientation? His criticism of destructive forms of outward connection and middle class cosmopolitanism could in principle seem continuous with his well-known criticism of Negritude and African unity. Yet we also find in Fanon a certain trust in the capacity of “African peoples” to overcome together the corruption of their elites and a notion of Third World comradeship. In the rest of this essay I further press Fanon on this ambivalence by combining resources in Gordon’s account of Fanon, additional resources gleaned from The Wretched of the Earth, and my own work on W. E. B. Du Bois (Valdez 2017).
What is Wrong with Cosmopolitanism?

In principle, it seems futile to attempt to extract a cosmopolitan orientation from Fanon. In *The Wretched of the Earth* Fanon charges against Pan-Africanism and even Negritude. Despite this, there are signs that Fanon does not fully close the door to a more nuanced notion of anti-colonial and postcolonial transnationalism. This is clear, for example, when he claims that:

> The peoples of Africa have only recently come to know themselves. They have decided, in the name of the whole continent, to weigh in strongly against the colonial regime. … the nationalist bourgeoisies, … in region after region hasten to make their own fortunes and to set up a national system of exploitation,… This is why we must understand that African unity can only be achieved through the upward thrust of the people, and under the leadership of the people, that is to say, in defiance of the interests of the bourgeoisie (Fanon 1963, 164).

Fanon’s reference to “the peoples” suggests that we should read the types of unity that he values normatively through his account of national consciousness. This seems to be confirmed in the optimistic statement with which Fanon concluded his intervention at the 1959 Congress of Black Writers and Artists:

> It is at the heart of national consciousness that international consciousness lives and grows. And this two-fold emerging is ultimately only the source of all culture (Fanon 1963, 247-8).

To uncover precisely how national and international consciousness meet and operate productively, I propose a close reading of Gordon, Fanon, and Du Bois that focuses on the particular reasons that Fanon finds African unity or identity objectionable, which can then make sense of Fanon’s moments of openness toward the world. I read these moments in Fanon through notions of transnational consciousness and transnationalism extracted from W. E. B. Du Bois.

Let us first examine the particularities of Fanon’s objections to Pan-Africanism, which are based on three related but distinct grounds. First, in his discussion of the African Society of Culture, Fanon claims that the aim of this society was to detail nation by nation the existence of “an African culture” and to expose its inner dynamism. This aim, however, was at the same time an effort to position itself alongside the “European Society for Culture” and carried with it the threat of establishing a “Universal Society for Culture” (Fanon 1963, 214-5). In this sense, the actions on behalf of African unity are mere window-dressing devoted to prove the existence of African culture in order to measure up against the narcissism and ostentation of Europeans (Fanon 1963, 215). Thus, rather than a radical intervention against the tenets of colonialism, Fanon saw certain
strands of Pan-Africanism as a mimetic effort that did not put in question the very principles that animated empire.\(^3\)

Second, Fanon feared that an effort to define a common black culture would simply follow from whites’ example of “putting all ‘Negroes’ in the same bag,” even while the “essential problems” of black Americans differed from those of their fellow Africans (Fanon 1963, 215-6). Somewhat hyperbolically, Fanon argued that Africans “only resemble each other … insofar as they were all defined in relation to the whites” (Fanon 1963, 216). Third, in addition to criticizing forms of Pan-African identity because of their assimilationist impulse or spurious quality, Fanon noted that, ultimately, once men were historicized, it turned out that there was no such thing as “Negro” or “Negro-African” culture, because “every culture is first and foremost national.” In this vein, he argued that the problems for which Richard Wright or Langston Hughes had to be on the alert were fundamentally different from those faced by Léopold Senghor or Jomo Kenyatta” (Fanon 1963, 216).

Thus when Fanon argues that “no two cultures that are completely identical” he is pushing against identity formations that depend on European constructions of Africa/ns, which he sees as disappearing with the demise of European economic and cultural supremacy (Fanon 1963, 234). Yet Fanon’s latter claim is more aspirational than descriptive. As Fanon himself acknowledges elsewhere, the end of Western hegemony is not a given with the end of colonialism, but rather a political project that depends on joint action by the Third World, which should stop attempting to catch up with, fearing, and envying Europe (Fanon 1963, 314). This requires a transnational orientation with which Third World subjects “go forward … in the company of Man, in the company of all men” and “set afoot a new man” (Fanon 1963, 314-5).

Moreover, Fanon’s own notion of culture, anti-colonial struggle, and national consciousness can be enlisted to relativize these statements. The struggle that is needed to shed the identities and cultures imposed by the colonizer and to craft a democratic national consciousness in its place are part of a broader project that cannot be accomplished in isolation. This is what Adom Getachew terms “worldmaking,” i.e., the project of creating “the international conditions in which self-government could be exercised within postcolonial states” (Getachew forthcoming).

If it is through culture that the transformation in consciousness away from that imposed by the colonizer ensues, the formation of national culture must itself be tightly connected to the organized struggle against colonialism in cultural, political, and economic terms, which Fanon acknowledges when he notes that common fate between peoples colonized by the same European power exists (Fanon 1963, 234). This struggle

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\(^3\) As I address below, a similar concern with mimetism animated Du Bois’s aesthetic turn in the 1920s. In that juncture, rather than trying to partake of the “flamboyant” American ideals of “strength and accomplishment,” he enjoined African Americans to construct a political imagination that can replace them (Du Bois 1996 [1926], 325).
involves nurturing capacities and orientations so that they can deal with public business democratically and through national political identities that mediate “differences of class, region, ethnicity, and race” (149). This movement toward an enlivened national consciousness/general will is, for Fanon, “the most elaborate form of culture” (148-9; Fanon 1963, 247). Yet, however national, this enlivened general will can only reconstruct society and redirect it to national democratic projects, if it becomes part of a broader transnational constellation that facilitates the democratic autarchy by jointly attacking the neocolonial elements of world society.

The next section further parses out the ambivalence between national consciousness and culture and transnational orientation in Fanon, partly by enlisting Du Bois’s transnational thinking.

“National” Consciousness?

The previous section reconstructs Fanon’s critique of the unity of African culture and his notion of national culture. The latter, he argues, is formed through political struggle, the creation of a political identity that bypasses difference, and habituation to particular forms of political participation. Yet, this definition of national culture gives us reasons to be more optimistic about progressive forms of transnational affinities. In particular, if changing forms of political action underlie changing national cultures and identities, it is somewhat premature to restrict cultures to the national without considering the possibilities of political action exceeding the domestic realm and encompassing other collectives. Fanon himself recognizes the ties that bind underdeveloped countries and colonial and semi-colonial subjects:

On the level of underdeveloped humanity there is a kind of collective effort, a sort of common destiny. The news which interests the Third World does not deal with King Baudouin's marriage nor the scandals of the Italian ruling class. What we want to hear about are the experiments carried out by the Argentinians or the Burmese in their efforts to overcome illiteracy or the dictatorial tendencies of their leaders. It is these things which strengthen us, teach us, and increase our efficiency ten times over (Fanon 1963, 203).

Moreover, when Fanon discusses the factors that “drive the native … to open, organized rebellion” he includes “[c]olonial exploitation, poverty, and endemic famine” but also acknowledges that “[i]nternational events, the collapse of whole sections of colonial empires and the contradictions inherent in the colonial system stimulate and strengthen and uphold the native’s combativity while promoting and giving support to national consciousness” (Fanon 1963, 238).

I make sense of this ambivalence by suggesting that, for Fanon, the promise of forms of unity beyond the nation depends on the particular form of national consciousness (and thus culture) on which these engagements are predicated, and the particular forms of intellectual and economic exchange that they foster. In this sense, an uncritical association of the national bourgeoisie with former colonial powers, which maintains the colonial terms of exchange, is likely to simply “take over unchanged the legacy of the
economy, the thought, and the institutions left by the colonialists,” and the same can be said of cosmopolitan intellectuals that have “assimilated to the culture of the occupying power” (Fanon 1963, 176, 222). By contrast, engagements with the transnational that foster and expand political struggle against colonial forms of entanglement that remain after independence and leave the colonizer’s misrecognition behind may be conducive to national consciousness and should be welcome. Importantly, this may even imply relying on subverted Western knowledge schemes. As Gordon reminds us, Fanon expects an authentic middle class to “put itself to school with the people… to put at the people’s disposal the intellectual and technical capital that it has snatched when going through the colonial universities” (151; Fanon 1963, 150).

Thus, a critical cosmopolitanism must explore the way in which transnational forms of exchange, communication, and coalition-making contribute—or not—to the formation of national consciousness and the development of culture and political action in ways that Fanon values. At this point, it is useful to draw some parallels between Fanon’s conceptualization of national consciousness and Du Bois’s project of self-definition, which he developed in his writings on segregation in the 1930s and alongside his transnationalism (Valdez 2017, Chapter 4).

Despite Fanon’s doubts about the affinity between the existential questions that African Americans and Africans faced, Du Bois’s post-First World War pessimism about American democracy echoes Fanon’s own reflections on the limited forms of consciousness imposed by colonialism and his critique of Westernized intellectuals, even if in Du Bois this period is also characterized by a decisive transnational orientation that emerges in the 1920s. By focusing on the less explored transnational consciousness that Du Bois develops in the 1920s and 1930s, juxtaposing Fanon and Du Bois further creolizes Fanon by preventing Fanon from exaggerating cultural distinctiveness to the point of mutual untranslatability (185). In particular, like Fanon, Du Bois feared the assimilation of educated African Americans into mainstream American society and the separation of these subjects from the masses of African Americans and their struggle. African Americans in mainstream spaces, he noted, “are still ashamed of [them]selves” and do not raise objections “when white folks are ashamed to call us human” (Du Bois 1996 [1933], 73). This form of assimilation integrates a new group into an old nation that still “despises their color.”

Moreover, akin to Fanon’s concerns with destructive forms of misrecognition (see also Coulthard 2014), Du Bois’s advocacy of segregation followed from his assessment that integration within institutions that still upheld white supremacy was sure to have a destructive effect over African American souls:

[R]ace prejudice in the United States today is such that most Negroes today cannot receive proper education in white institutions. If the public schools of Atlanta, Nashville, New Orleans and Jacksonville were thrown open to all races tomorrow, the education that colored children would get in them would be worse than pitiable. It would not be education (Du Bois 1935a).
Even in the Northern public school systems that “admitted and tolerated” African Americans, Du Bois asserted that rather than being educated, pupils were “crucified” (Du Bois 1935a). In response to this situation Du Bois advocates creating spaces that can nurture a form of consciousness that is free from the self-pity and self-hatred that the mainstream American public instills in African Americans. These sites include black churches, schools, and other community spaces. This quest for self-definition, which characterizes Du Bois’s writings in the 1920s and 1930s, is not out of place alongside Fanon’s writings on national culture. As Gordon notes, Fanon posits that “cultivat[ing] indigenous agency and skill” should take priority over national prestige. His goal is to return “dignity to all citizens, fill[ing] their minds and fest[ing] their eyes with human things, and creat[ing] a prospect that is human because conscious and sovereign men dwell therein” (Fanon 1963, 205; cited in Gordon 149). Citizens’ participation in political parties and public businesses were, for Fanon, “privileged occasions given to a human being to listen and to speak… [where] the brain increases its means of participation and the eye discovers a landscape more and more in keeping with human dignity” (Fanon 1963, 195; cited in Gordon 148). This view echoes the role that Du Bois expected segregated spaces to play in an era of white supremacy: “Race consciousness,” he argued, could only develop in segregated spaces, and this was necessary until African Americans garnered enough power to force compliance with egalitarian ideals in mainstream institutions such as “Church, State, industry or art” (Du Bois 1996 [1933], 75; see also 1935b, 266, 1935a, 328).

Yet Du Bois’s focus on self-definition operates alongside and even requires a transnational orientation, because this project also counters narratives of American exceptionalism and methodological nationalism as two central controlling images that must be engaged critically. A new transnational consciousness and the identification with subjects of empire makes African American subjects no longer an anomaly, and opens the door to a subjectivity that can foster freeing projects of political emancipation.

Ultimately, the quest for self-consciousness escapes the boundaries of the state and allows for a more radical notion of emancipation to emerge. Du Bois’s sober political assessment of the post-First World War world reveals that his earlier project of jointly transforming the American notion of peoplehood and the subjectivity of white and African Americans (Balfour 2003; Du Bois 1997 [1903]; Rogers 2012) is limited, and that freedom and self-assertion must be sought in two spaces: the nation within the nation, and the imagined transnational community composed of racialized subjects brought to life in fora that are free of mythical stories of Western freedom and superiority.

Just as Du Bois found the white public sphere unwelcoming of the kind of practices that would contribute to the self-definition of African Americans and found instead that

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4 On this, see also Collins’s discussion of Black feminism in a transnational context (Collins 2000, Chapter 10, especially 232-3).

5 Du Bois is careful to pair the transnational with a process of self-definition at the group level. This just as Fanon who warned against the danger of “skip[ping] the national period” when considering projects beyond the nation (Fanon 1963, 246-7)
both black spaces and transnational coalition were promising realms for this task, Fanon faces the problem of countering the influence of the national bourgeoisies in postcolonial states in order to re-make democratic politics and economic development into a project led by and catered to the people. Yet such a move involves delinking or radically changing the terms of exchange with former colonial countries, and thus requires a form of embedded autarchy that cannot possibly be accomplished by any one postcolonial country on its own. It is at this point that the Duboisian account of transnational consciousness helps us distinguish normatively between bourgeois cosmopolitanisms and those transnational alliances that can aid in the struggle against colonial clients domestically and against Western economic dominance abroad. By making this juxtaposition I do not mean to equalize the US white majority with the co-opted national bourgeoisies of postcolonial countries, but claim that transnationalism can capture the way in which oppressed groups may have to skip elites and/or states and tie their fates to groups located elsewhere. In this sense, the unity of African peoples—rather than states—and other transnational coalitions can be the sites where alternative models racial justice, democracy, and development are imagined and the conditions of their feasibility worked out jointly. Thus transnational cosmopolitanism so understood in fact requires the form of radically democratic political participation that Gordon reconstructs as necessary for national consciousness as an input to transnational coalition-making. These linkages, in turn, serve to cultivate indigenous agency and skill by providing information about experiences in other dependent countries and by offering possibilities of cooperation toward the common goal of overcoming neo-colonial terms of exchange with Western countries. The transnational formation that emerges is not solely Duboisian, however. In fact, Du Bois commitment to Pan-Africanism and international alliances did not contain the nuanced critiques of national bourgeoisies that Fanon puts forward. Du Bois undertheorized this aspect, perhaps because he overestimated either the commitment or the capacity of national bourgeoisies to overcome colonial arrangements, or both. Yet a creolization of these two thinkers allow us to correct both Du Bois’s optimism regarding the emerging postcolonial states and Fanon’s distrust of cosmopolitanism to consider instead a critical transnational form of encounter among oppressed peoples in the West and non-West (Valdez 2017).

Conclusion

This essay engages with Jane Gordon’s Creolizing Political Theory, her method of creolization, and her theorization of the general will and national consciousness in Rousseau and Fanon. Building upon this foundation, the essay considers further—via W. E. B. Du Bois—Fanon’s twin critiques of African culture and bourgeois cosmopolitanism as both insufficiently radical forms of cosmopolitanism. Fanon’s former objections have to do with the lack of original or radical content in movements that either want to mimic European culture or are built solely upon the opposition to colonialism. His latter objections, in turn, involve the particular forms of engagement established between the national bourgeoisie and former colonial masters and the uncritical assimilation of Westernized intellectuals that then encase African culture within Western framings. Via Du Bois, we are able to single out the varieties of transnational connection that fuel the kind of radically democratic participation and cultural dynamism that characterizes the construction of national consciousness that Fanon valued.
The creolized reading proposed shows that Du Bois’s transnationalism helps us recover forms of cosmopolitan engagement that can work with—rather than against—self-definition in Du Bois and national consciousness in Fanon. Fanon, in turn, provides a more nuanced understanding of the way in which colonial power remains in the postcolony, this time enacted by national bourgeoises that need to be combated before a democratic national consciousness and its attendant socio-economic transformations can flourish.

The creolized reading presented is indebted to Gordon’s encouragement to exercise freedom; to reconsider the way in which we engage scholars, to read them anew alongside unexpected partners and in light of unusual preoccupations. This permissive, creative anachronism allows our present concerns to take precedence over the effort to canonize, defend, and read coherence into thinkers that sometimes characterizes political theory. A creolized political theory suggests that—no matter how canonical the thinker or within which tradition s/he is located—grappling with heterogeneity and mixture is inevitable, for such traits are not “discrete pockets of a fractured world” but constitutive aspects of the world that political theory is supposed to illuminate (197-8). For this, we are in Gordon’s debt.

References


