ABSTRACT

20th-century debates on decolonization, national independence, and anticolonial thought often center on the role of culture in revolutionary movements. Generally, cultural practices are described by leftist revolutionaries as fecund sites for emancipatory movements, and culture is often seen as a valuable tool for mobilizing against colonial forces. In anticolonial scholarship of the mid-20th century, culture is often defined as a set of practices that both fuel and are fueled by pro-independence/anti-colonial politics. This understanding of culture stands in contrast to later post-colonial approaches, in which culture is deemed valuable in its own right, though perhaps at the cost of casting culture as seemingly apolitical. This article traces these disagreements over how culture is defined in anti-colonial and post-colonial scholarship. It begins with the work of Frantz Fanon and Amilcar Cabral, noting how culture is defined through an explicit political and material program. It then turns to the work of Ashis Nandy, whose evaluation of culture emphasizes the form of practices as inherently political even when lacking a stated anti-colonial content. This article ends by suggesting that this rift in the treatment of culture between anti-colonial and post-colonial thought is indicative of a deeper tension between revolutionary change and cultural expression.
I. INTRODUCTION

This article revisits the role of culture in 20th century debates on decolonization regarding the relationship between culture, national independence, and national consciousness. It examines that connection by comparing culture’s emancipatory potential in both anticolonial scholarship of the post-war independence era and later post-colonial scholarship. In doing so, I identify commonalities and differences between these two eras of decolonial thought concerning culture’s importance for liberatory struggle. Specifically, I contend that nationalist, anticolonial scholarship tends to argue that culture is meaningful only to the degree that it serves as a strategy of national liberation, and its proponents are wary of practices whose content is not explicitly revolutionary. On the other hand, the more culturally-sensitive postcolonial scholarship views cultural practices as implicitly radical by virtue of its very existence; culture is meaningful even absent a liberatory program. I argue that this tension surrounding culture’s relationship to decolonial liberation highlights a deeper tension between material, revolutionary priorities and non-material, cultural acts. In other words, I suggest that possibilities for a radical, cultural politics are foreclosed by a scholarship that privileges national independence as an overriding concern. Conversely, I contend that the cultural politics of the postcolonial/decolonial analytical turn foreclose immediate, material action. I do not attempt to resolve this tension, but seek only to articulate it.

My argument arises from an analysis of the decolonizing paradigms of three key scholars: Frantz Fanon, Amilcar Cabral, and Ashis Nandy. I demonstrate that for each of these scholars, in turn, culture assumes a more generative and central role in the decolonial struggle. As such, Fanon offers the most pessimistic approach to culture, Cabral provides a more generative view, and Nandy describes a full-fledged articulation of culture’s decolonial capacity. This is not to say each scholar is superior than their predecessor in any way save their ability to “get the most out of” culture relative to decolonization. Inversely, I also highlight the fact that Nandy’s productive articulation of culture’s role comes at the cost of material concerns for revolution. I conclude by speculating on whether non-material, cultural politics might be fundamentally at odds with revolutionary urgency.

II. CULTURE AS PRODUCT OF THE NATION—FANON

Fanon’s understanding of culture—that is, how he defines the term, where he locates culture in terms of practitioners and practices, and the role it plays in combatting colonialism—is bound to his understanding of national liberation and consciousness. Indeed, Fanon insists that a people’s culture cannot exist without a nation-state to sanction it, and he specifically criticizes any analytical focus on the culture of a people that does not first incorporate the emancipatory, national politics of decolonization. To understand this position, one must first note Fanon’s criticisms of cultural efforts such as negritude or the Blues of the Mississippi Delta, which occur prior to or separate from, an explicit program of national emancipation. Doing so illuminates how his priorities of national liberation relegate culture, art, ceremony, and traditions to a supporting role in emancipation so long as they lack a national consciousness. That fact allows one to understand why Fanon acidly argued that cultural projects beyond the national sphere (and especially between different peoples) can “do little more than compare coins and sarcophagi” (Fanon 2002: 168).

To be clear, Fanon did not find culture and past traditions worthless. He began his chapter “On National Culture” by explaining how “Reclaiming the past does not only rehabilitate or justify the promise of a national culture. It triggers a change of fundamental importance in the colonized’s psycho-affective equilibrium” (Fanon 2002: 148). This significance stems from the fact that reclaiming a people’s past counteracts one of the most powerful psychic effects of colonialism: its degradation of the colonized by associating traditional life with barbarism and savagery. Fanon observed that, “the final aim of colonization was to convince the Indigenous population it would

save them from darkness. The result was to hammer into the heads of the indigenous population that if the colonist were to leave they would regress into barbarism, degradation, and bestiality” (Fanon 2002: 149). This process results in the fundamental infantilization of a people, arguing that indigenous development hinges on the abandonment of traditional ways of life that are associated with the past and with savagery. One can find this description of colonialism not only in Fanon’s works, but also in the self-congratulatory tracts of European defenses of colonialism. Thus, at the start of his analysis of culture, Fanon appeared to endorse the goal of many colonized intellectuals “to renew contact with their people’s oldest, inner essence, the farthest removed from colonial times” (Fanon 2002: 148). For Fanon, a reclaiming of the past and an affirmation of culture via the colonized elite represented a crucial first step in building the esteem of the people necessary for any revolution.

Nevertheless, although Fanon at first seemed sympathetic to cultural efforts to rehabilitate the past, he quickly turned to a criticism of such efforts. He warned in particular of “serious ambiguities” that arise when cultural analysis precedes emancipatory struggle, namely: “a glorification of cultural phenomena that become continental instead of national, and singularly racialized” (Fanon 2002: 154). For Fanon, the celebration of indigenous culture that stems from the bourgeois elite risks overly homogenizing cultures on European premises of geography and race, reifying cultures as African and/or Black. This tendency is the natural result of colonialism’s condemnation of indigenous culture which is “continental in scale” and “refers to the entire continent of Africa” (Fanon 2002: 150). Fanon noted that artistic movements such as negritude respond to this condemnation in like terms, referring to culture as belonging to racialized “Negro” culture or continental African culture. As such, Fanon explained, “following the unconditional affirmation of European culture came the unconditional affirmation of African culture” (Fanon 2002: 151). For Fanon, this approach to culture—although in direct opposition to the insults of European colonialism—is nonetheless problematic not only because it takes an uncritical stance on Native culture but also because it adopts the continental, racial framework of the colonizers. Fanon argued that approach was “cut off from reality” and politically impotent; first, because it lumped together struggles against whites that have little in common and, second, because it bypassed the creation of a national culture by focusing on symbolic celebrations of a past that no longer existed (Fanon 2002: 154).

On the former criticism of homogenizing unlike struggles, Fanon used the example of conflating African decolonization with the struggles of African Americans, “the problems for which Richard Wright or Langston Hughes had to be on alert were fundamentally different from those faced by Léopold Senghor or Jomo Kenyatta” (Fanon 2002: 154). More explicitly, Fanon contended, not without a hint of derision toward the American Civil Rights movement, that “The principle and purpose of the freedom rides whereby black and white Americans endeavor to combat racial discrimination have little in common with the heroic struggle of the Angolan people against the iniquity of Portuguese colonialism” (Fanon 2002: 153–54). Fanon does not explore the contours of the fundamental differences between these struggles in Wretched of the Earth, although readers can sense in his freedom rides/Angolan independence comparison a difference of scale—the “heroic” war for independence seems to Fanon grander than bus rides to highlight and combat discrimination. For Fanon, what was key were not the differences themselves but how conflating the two movements depicted those struggles as anti-white rather than pro-nationhood: “The only common denominator between the blacks from Chicago and the Nigerians or Tanganyikans was that they all defined themselves in relation to the whites”—an unsatisfactory framework in his view for developing a people’s singular identity and national consciousness (Fanon 2002: 153). This search for cultural and political similarities appeared to Fanon as idealistic, “cut off from reality”, in that he saw no primary need in such a project for the political and economic imperatives of decolonization. This is especially the case when, for Fanon, such cultural projects focus on the past. Fanon demonstrated this idea by pointing to what he saw as the success of contemporary

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2 Kipling’s White Man’s Burden comes to mind, as does Jefferson’s Notes on the State of Virginia. For a more thorough accounting of the ways European political theory (and in particular classical political economy) ground themselves in relating other, contemporary cultures to a savage past, see Inayatullah’s and Blaney’s Savage Economics: Wealth, Poverty, and the Temporal Walls of Capitalism (2010).
Arab states that realized “their geographic position and their region’s economic interdependence were more important than the revival of their past” (Fanon 2002: 154). Whereas Fanon seemed at first to endorse a revival of the past, here and in later portions of the text he clarified that his endorsement was contingent on the past serving the nationalist cause. The goal for Fanon was not an (impossible) return to a mythologized Golden Age, but rather the memorialization of such an age to produce a national consciousness and thus a new national culture; i.e., a culture that explicitly reflected revolutionary politics. When culture is “not specifically national” and fixated solely on the past, Fanon concluded, “it finds safe haven in a refuge of smouldering emotions and has difficulty cutting a straightforward path that would, nevertheless, be the only one likely to endow it with productiveness, homogeneity, and substance” (Fanon 2002: 154–55). In other words, prioritizing culture as an end for Fanon, led to a problematic homogenization of disparate struggles and a glorification of the past, neither of which contributed to national liberation or the well-being of the masses.

Considering Fanon’s criticisms of cultural movements such as negritude as constituting racial and continental frameworks fixated on a nostalgic past, clarifies his rationale for defining culture in terms of national emancipation. “Colonialism,” Fanon wrote, “will never be put to shame by exhibiting unknown cultural treasures under its nose” (Fanon 2002: 159). Without a national struggle, such cultural artifacts and reflections on the past are toothless, unable to bring about the revolutionary change necessary to secure cultural autonomy and dignity. In Fanon’s assessment, it is the struggle for national liberation that produces culture and indigenous dignity, not the other way around. This sequence, from revolution to cultural self-worth, was clear when he considered various art forms—visual arts, poetry, sculpture, etc. He focused particularly on Keita Fodeba’s poem “African Dawn” as a paradigm for national culture, writing that such work is “a genuine invitation for us to reflect on demystification and combat” (Fanon 2002: 163). For Fanon, the “pedagogical value” of the poem lay not in its existence as a cultural artifact, but in its content, which reflected Fodeba’s “revolutionary perspective” as the Republic of Guinea’s minister for internal affairs (Fanon 2002: 168, 163). The poem focused on a village’s mourning of Naman, a popular figure forcibly conscripted by colonial powers to fight and die in a foreign war. For Fanon, the poem demonstrated how cultural artifacts can influence the present, as “all the ‘filthy Arabs’ who fought to defend France’s liberty or British civilization will recognize themselves in this poem” (Fanon 2002: 167). Moreover, the poem captured French practice of using native veterans to suppress their own people, giving the work contemporary significance. Fanon summarized his analysis with the following lesson: “in order to give it [cultural expression] substance, he [the artist] must take part in the action and commit himself body and soul to the national struggle” (Fanon 2002: 167). Given this example, it is not surprising that Fanon defined culture as “first and foremost national” and specified later that such a culture “is the collective thought process of a people to describe, justify, and extol the actions whereby they have joined forces and remained strong” (Fanon 2002: 154, 168). Notably, his definition was not tied to any specific forms of art or expression. Rather, what mattered for Fanon is that cultural expressions embody and reflect on the struggle for national freedom.

Fanon offered a rather specific definition of culture. It is “no folklore where an abstract populism is convinced it has uncovered a popular truth” nor is it “some congealed mass of noble gestures, in other words less and less connected with the reality of the people” (Fanon 2002: 168). Instead, culture is the artistic and popular expressions of a united people, of a united nation. Although he equivocated that “culture eminently eludes any form of simplification” his view that culture could emerge only as the result of armed, national resistance was clear (Fanon 2002: 160). This linear trajectory was reflected in his effort to distinguish among culture, traditions, and customs: “Seeking to stick to tradition or reviving neglected traditions is not only going against history, but against one’s people. When a people support an armed or even political struggle against a merciless
colonialism, tradition changes meaning” and goes from being a source of “passive resistance” to a source of stagnation (Fanon 2002: 160). Similarly, on the same page Fanon observed that customs pre-revolution “signify... negation, obsolescence, and fabrication” and thus are a far cry from the combat literature he celebrated in Fodeba. For Fanon, culture must be charged with revolutionary fervor and serve the cause of political and material justice—a circumstance made possible only when the people unite and form a nation. Fanon made this clear when suggesting: “National liberation and the resurrection of the state are the preconditions for the very existence of a culture” (Fanon 2002: 177). That is to say, in the context of a nation-state system and colonial occupation, culture requires a national consciousness.

Given Fanon’s emphatic linking of culture to the state, he unsurprisingly expressed a deeply pessimistic view of traditions and customs as valuable in-and-of-themselves. Fanon insisted that culture can only be substantive and productive when legitimized by the state; he demonstrated almost no respect for culture in any other context. He contended that after centuries of exploitation, national culture “has radically shriveled. It has become an inventory of behavioral patterns, traditional costumes, and miscellaneous customs.” As such, the colonized, when they are not engaged in active resistance, have “no real creativity, no ebullience” (Fanon 2002: 172). Again, what was noteworthy was his contention that creativity and ebullience do not create emancipatory possibilities; rather, it is only with liberatory struggle that a people become creative since otherwise their culture remains suppressed and clandestine. Such a prioritization of liberation demonstrated the severity of the colonized condition for Fanon. Under colonial rule, the oppressed experienced immense material deprivation and psychological debasement as well as complete “cultural obliteration” in which the people have almost no self-expression except “a desperate clinging to a nucleus that is... increasingly hollow” (Fanon 2002: 170, 172). Fanon’s disparaging remarks regarding Blues music in the American South as the, “desperate yearning of an old ‘Negro,’ five whiskeys under his belt... jazz lament hiccupped by a poor, miserable ‘Negro’” reveal quite clearly what he thought of culture independent of national consciousness; i.e., that it must be considered nothing but a self-demeaning parody (Fanon 2002: 176). Although Fanon was demeaned Mississippi bluesmen specifically, the example was nonetheless consistent with his argument that national liberation was necessary for the “maturing” of culture to something that had “credibility, validity, dynamism, and creativity” (Fanon 2002: 176–77).

To be fair, Fanon was pessimistic towards culture as inherently liberating only because he was optimistic concerning the abilities of those colonized to overthrow that system and forge a new destiny. Indeed, his optimism towards emancipation is the only way to grasp Fanon’s cultural skepticism. Without this revolutionary element, without the understanding that the people will forge a new humanity from the ashes of decolonial struggle as they recreate their self-esteem as equals in global society, Fanon’s framework would appear as a tragic dead-end for the previously dehumanized/cultureless oppressed. Additionally, it is this telos leading to nationalism and national liberation that resolves what may at first appear to be a contradiction in Fanon: his apparent celebration of culture and traditions in the early pages of “On National Culture” and his later denigration of the very idea of culture unless accompanied by the “productiveness, homogeneity, and substance” provided by the state (Fanon 2002: 155). Nowhere was this teleological trajectory clearer than when he provided his most robust definition of culture and distinguished that characterization from national culture: “A culture is first and foremost the expression of a nation, its preferences, its taboos, and its models...National culture is the sum of all these considerations, the outcome of tensions internal and external to society...” (Fanon 2002: 177). Although even that passage presupposed the nation. Thus, “In the colonial context, culture, when deprived of the twin supports of the nation and the state, perishes and dies” in a maelstrom of conflicting ideals and contradictory beliefs (Fanon 2002: 177). For Fanon, the lineage flowed from a diffuse and repressed culture of traditions and of the past to that of a national struggle and a rich and productive national culture.

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Fanon’s emphasis on national culture arose from the fact that such must exist “in the colonial context”. In a colonial/imperialist world of nation-states, culture’s value is unlocked at the national level—hence his warning that seeking continental or cross-cultural comparisons was “a dead end” without first developing culture nationally (Fanon 2002: 152). Thus, Fanon’s definition of culture was one born more of political realism and necessity than of an a priori distaste for traditions, customs, and ceremonies writ large. As the nation loomed large in Fanon’s revolutionary project, it likewise acquired outsized importance in his assessment of culture—the two become inextricably linked in a process in which national struggle created a new national culture that could motivate and unite the people (Fanon 2002: 177).

III. NATION AS THE PRODUCT OF CULTURE—CABRAL

Fanon was not the only thinker to merge culture closely with revolutionary action, nor was his analysis limited only to the Algerian War for Independence despite his suspicion of cross-cultural comparisons. His final work, after all, was entitled Wretched of the Earth and not the Wretched of Algeria in 1959. Amilcar Cabral’s speeches in Return to the Source complement Fanon’s analysis. Like Fanon, Cabral aligned culture closely with national liberation—unsurprising, given his role as Secretary-General of the African Party for the Independence of Guinea and the Cape Verde Islands (PAIGC). Indeed, in the introduction to Return to the Source Cabral’s ideas regarding the native bourgeoisie’s return to native culture (the source) are described in a particularly Fanon-ian fashion: “Among the many truths left by Cabral, is the fact that the process of returning to the source is of no historical importance (and would in fact be political opportunism) unless it involves... complete participation in the mass struggle against foreign political and economic domination” (12). Cabral’s views on culture were, like Fanon’s, deeply embedded within the political and economic struggle of decolonization; there was certainly no compartmentalization in which culture was a means to its own ends in his analysis. However, Cabral differed from Fanon on culture’s role in decolonization in at least two interrelated ways. First, he began his analysis with a more optimistic assessment of the sociocultural state of the colonized by arguing that their dehumanization at the hands of colonialism could never be complete and that culture was itself proof of their resistance. Second, Cabral at times reversed Fanon’s contention that culture gained meaning only with national liberation. For Cabral, culture was indeed the product of history, but it was also key to the identity of a people and thus aided in fueling the fight for independence in more pronounced ways than in Fanon’s framework.

One must begin any comparison of these authors, however, with the extremely strong similarities between them concerning the claim that culture cannot be ignored. Specifically, Cabral defined culture within a revolutionary struggle for decolonization—although in his case against the Portuguese rather than the French. In other words, both Cabral and Fanon found themselves engaged in decolonization efforts in the context of civil wars against colonial occupation in their respective countries. In his memorial lecture honoring Eduardo Mondlane, “National Liberation and Culture”, Cabral’s opening definition of culture was that “culture is, at any moment in the life of a society (whether an open or closed one), the more or less conscious result of economic and political activities” (Cabral 1974: 13). More explicitly, Cabral began the lecture by noting “the value of culture as a factor in the resistance to foreign domination” (Cabral 1974: 12). Cabral and Fanon shared an operating definition of culture as an expression of the people that “teaches us what have been the dynamic syntheses” of the economic, political, and social conflicts that characterize society (Cabral 1974: 13). Like Fanon, Cabral’s definition of culture reflected his understanding of colonialism. That perspective in many ways paralleled the understanding articulated in Wretched of the Earth. For instance, Cabral stated that colonialism “cannot be sustained except by the permanent and organized repression of the cultural life of the people in question. It can only firmly entrench itself if it physically destroys a significant part of the dominated people” (Cabral 1974: 12). This “permanent and organized” attempt to “destroy” the cultural identity of a people on the part of imperial domination was undoubtedly similar to Fanon’s understanding of colonial

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5 All cited essays from Cabral are drawn from Return to the Source: Selected Speeches of Amilcar Cabral.
society as one of “cultural obliteration” (Fanon 2002: 170). For both Cabral and Fanon, colonial regimes secured their domination not only through material exploitation, but also through cultural dominion as evidenced by a persistent valorizing of European culture and a delegitimizing of native traditions, customs, and art forms.

For Cabral, “to dominate a nation by force of arms is, above all, to take up arms to destroy or at least to neutralize and paralyze its culture” (Cabral 1974: 12). This assessment led Cabral, at times, even to go so far as to appear to share Fanon’s linear trajectory from popular culture to resistance to national culture, as when he suggested: “The liberation movement must be able to bring about slowly but surely... a convergence of the levels of culture of the various social categories which can be deployed for the struggle, and to transform them into a single national cultural force which acts as the basis and the foundation of the armed struggle” (Cabral 1974: 16). In other words, culture appears as a confused and contradictory set of beliefs and expressions (as it did for Fanon) and it is the revolutionary battle that can reveal this “complexity of cultural problems” and thus act as “a sad but efficacious instrument for the development of the cultural level” (Cabral 1974: 16).

Here, Cabral was quite close to Fanon’s teleological understanding of the emergence of culture within revolution, and he even shared Fanon’s sentiment that this reality was born of necessity, of the violent conditions in which the colonized find themselves. Culture for Cabral does have its own value, but in this world of nations and of domination, revolutionary struggle is necessary—a “sad” but essential truth.

Given these similarities between Cabral and Fanon, how do they differ? A close read of Cabral’s work reveals that, while he shares many of Fanon’s convictions, he sometimes complicates them and as he did so, culture assumed a more central role in his framework. To put their differences another way, Cabral was far more generous and optimistic towards what he called “popular culture”; that is, the cultural roots of a people that preceded or were independent of national liberation. Cabral shared Fanon’s belief that such popular culture—be it past art forms, ceremonies, traditions and customs, etc.—would eventually give way to a national and even universal ethos that would beget “the ceaseless and widespread raising of humanistic sentiments of unity and respect and of selfless devotion to the human person” similar to the “new humanity” that Fanon called for in his work (Cabral 1974: 17; Fanon 2002: 178). However, Cabral’s description of this evolution made popular culture the central fuel of this process rather than a confused miasma of traditions and customs to be overcome by national revolution. This difference appeared to stem primarily from divergent diagnoses between Fanon and Cabral regarding the condition of those colonized in the colonial system. As shown above, for Fanon the colonized were utterly negated, their national culture “increasingly shriveled, increasingly inert, and increasingly hollow” (Fanon 2002: 172). While that condition held the germ for revolution since the “expression condemned by colonial society is already a demonstration of nationhood” it was nevertheless the case for Fanon that the colonized began from a position of “no culture, no civilization, and no ‘long historical past’” to quote his assessment in Black Skin, White Masks (Fanon 2002: 172; 2008: 17). While Cabral agreed that the goal of imperial domination was “the negation of [the people’s] cultural processes” via attempts to erase indigenous culture and thus native identity and dignity, he believed that efforts to attain this aim had been an “utter failure” (Cabral 1974: 13,12). For Cabral, the cultural life of a people—even a colonized people—was “indestructible” and thus colonizers were unable ever fully to eradicate the identity of their subjects.

This constitutes a key difference in Fanon’s and Cabral’s diagnoses of the condition of those colonized. Whereas Fanon saw such populations as being stripped of their culture except in its most primordial aspects, Cabral believed such obliteration impossible. In fact, in his honorary doctoral lecture at Lincoln University entitled “Identity and Dignity in the Context of the National Liberation Struggle”, Cabral directly criticized the idea of a cultural renaissance instigating or arising alongside national liberation: “Certainly imperialist domination calls for cultural oppression... But the people are only able to create and develop the liberation movement because they keep their culture alive despite continual and organized repression of their cultural life and because they continue to resist culturally even when their politico-military resistance is destroyed” (60). For Cabral, culture is a source of immense resistance and dignity for a people
even when political and military revolutions are absent. This is starkly different from Fanon’s pessimistic outlook that “a Black is not a man” and his famous assessment that Blacks exist in “a zone of nonbeing” —a condition that can only be overcome via the mutual recognition achieved in the (violent) assertion of the self6 (Fanon 2008: xii). Of course, Fanon does locate the potential for national independence in the cultural oppression of the people, but he does so with the understanding that such subjugation has more-or-less completed its objective of cultural domination. For Cabral, it was “the indestructible character of the cultural resistance of the masses” that spurs rebellion, rather than Fanon’s argument that “exploitation, poverty, and endemic famine increasingly force the colonized into open, organized rebellion” (Cabral 1974: 59; Fanon 2002: 172).

This difference between Cabral and Fanon concerning the relationship between popular culture and the emergence of the liberation movement had implications for Cabral’s analysis of the evolution of national culture as well. Although the general progression from culture to national consciousness to revolution/national culture was similar between Cabral and Fanon, Cabral’s work assigned greater importance to the indestructible nature of popular culture. Moreover, Cabral synonymized culture with the will of the masses without emphasizing its explicit revolutionary character. Cabral’s unique understanding of how national culture emerges can be seen in this floral analogy from “National Liberation and Culture” in which he postulated a more dialectical relationship between culture and history than Fanon suggested. He contended that culture is the product of history “as the flower is the product of a plant. Like history, or because it is history, culture has as its physical base the forces of production and the means of production” (Cabral 1974: 13). That is, culture emerges from its social conditions, whether revolutionary or not. Cabral went further: “As with the flower in a plant, it is in culture that you find the capacity (or responsibility) for the production and fertilizing of the seed which ensures the continuity of history...” (Cabral 1974: 13). Here, he appeared to contend that historical events are reproduced and furthered by culture. Thus, Cabral’s framework is somewhat cyclical: “the armed struggle is not only a cultural fact but also a builder of culture” (Cabral 1974: 17). There is nevertheless still an undeniable trajectory in Cabral’s final list of objectives from the “development of a popular culture and of all positive indigenous cultural values” to the “development of a national culture based upon the history and the achievements of the struggle itself” and finally to “a universal culture for...constant and generalized promotion of feelings of humanism, of solidarity, of respect and disinterested devotion to human beings” (Cabral 1974: 17). However, for Cabral this trajectory was epicyclical—constantly returning to the popular culture and beliefs of the masses for rejuvenation even as history moved forward into the process of decolonization. In other words, for Cabral, the artistic and traditional culture of the masses served as the engine for popular participation in the revolution, while also being propelled by that upheaval once underway. The idea of cultural artifacts reflecting and promoting revolution was also evident in Fanon’s work, but for Fanon that relationship occurred only once material depravity had pushed the colonized to revolt; that a dynamic popular culture with emancipatory potential could exist prior to its revolt and be a necessary cause of that set of events is a Cabralian formulation.

As Nandy’s commentary on Cabral and Fanon demonstrated, these nuances between Cabral’s and Fanon’s assessments of culture arise from differing positions and views of political possibilities. Some of these possibilities and positions include differing views of the colonizer’s culture and role in social change, solidarity among colonized groups, and the power of culture in creating new psychic and political possibilities that threaten the colonizer’s world order. Here, however, what is worth noting in Cabral’s work is how culture’s definition differed from Fanon’s as the result of their different political assumptions. Fanon had little faith in the popular culture of the masses unless accompanied or led by a national struggle. Indeed, Fanon doubted culture (and by extension the humanity of those colonized) existed during colonization until the people united and began to fight. Cabral did not share that pessimism, instead arguing that the masses “do not stop resisting

6 In Black Skin, White Masks Fanon drew on Hegel to make this point. However, he differed from Hegel’s idealist notion that the slave, by virtue of working as a slave, will recognize himself and thus turn against the Master. See pages 191–5 of the Philcox translation. For Hegel’s conception of recognition in the Master/Slave dialectic, see his Phenomenology of Spirit pages 115–117. Hegel, though, uses the terms Lord/Bondsman, not Master/Slave.
the colonial power” even absent violent insurrection, and do so by “keeping their culture and identity” and thus “keep intact the sense of their individual and collective dignity, despite the worries, humiliations and brutalities to which they are often subjected” (Cabral 1974: 68–69). For Cabral, where individuals had been colonized, there was resistance. That resistance drew its strength from undying and unyielding cultural practices. In other words, the people are their culture and vice versa—nationhood hones and reforms culture rather than making it afresh or remaking it anew.

IV. CULTURE AS SUBVERSION—NANDY AND HIS CRITICISMS

Previous sections described Fanon’s and Cabral’s conceptions of culture. Fanon saw culture (and by extension, a people’s self-esteem) emerging only with the exorcism offered by the struggle for national liberation. This contention stemmed from Fanon’s assumption that, in the colonial framework, those colonized could not be considered full persons. This was so because, in his view, the dehumanization wrought by colonialism was complete. Meanwhile, Cabral shared Fanon’s telos of culture as developing within the trajectory of the anticolonial struggle. However, he did not assume that colonialism had succeeded in recasting the colonized as brute. In fact, Cabral argued that such colonial missions were self-defeating because a people’s culture—their traditions, their practices—sustain their self-worth and dignity even in the face of immense oppression. Nevertheless, Cabral viewed violent revolution as the goal and even the inevitable outcome of a history of colonial brutality. For Cabral, culture sustained and guided those oppressed in a way that Fanon did not posit. Nonetheless, the ultimate political destination for both authors was violent revolution.

For his part, Nandy’s framework sought to reframe political assumptions and provide alternative modes of living to the colonial paradigm. He harshly criticized Fanon while offering a more generous reading of Cabral. While Fanon and Cabral each viewed culture as part of a violent revolt for national liberation, Nandy contended that culture could provide alternative and superior counters to colonialism than conflict could afford. Both conceptions offer valid points and together they suggest that the tension between them is perhaps fundamental to a comparison of decolonial efforts.

In The Romance of the State, Nandy provided three definitions of culture. For the first and second of those, Nandy argued that there were two predominant meanings of culture usually deployed by middle-classes in Third-World societies (Nandy 2008: 151). The first was one in which cultural artifacts are “a concrete, packaged, distinctive, public expression of a community’s artistic self” (Nandy 2008: 152). Such a definition might connote such examples as concerts, museum exhibitions, and other public displays in which culture is expressed in a distinct artistic media. For Nandy, this approach “first separated [culture] from everyday life and viewed [it] as a form of cultivation or entertainment or as a sum of serious expressive forms.” In other words, in this conception the cultural product must be distilled from everyday experience in an artistic form. Then, it is “reincorporated into everyday life on the basis of a new set of justifications [such as the morally charged role of art in Victorian literature or the emphasis on realism in depicting peasant life in the ‘village prose’ of Soviet art]” (Nandy 2008: 152). The key to this approach is to distinguish culture from the customs and traditions that inform it. In Nandy’s words, “such demarcations almost automatically disjunct critical aspects of culture from the way of life that sustains it. They are predicated on the assumption that...art itself is not by definition social criticism or an alternative form of realism. It has to be used as such” (Nandy 2008: 152). This orientation...
demands a self-aware or politically conscious artist to transform traditions and customs into political commentary—culture must be interpreted via artistic artifacts in order to take on a social role.

Nandy’s first definition of culture is very close to that which Fanon offered. This “culture as resource” approach makes the urban intellectual a central actor, the bourgeois, whose critical capacities can mobilize culture by making it into politically-conscious artistic expression (Nandy 2008: 153). Nandy observed that adherents of this approach negate the traditions and customs that act as “the springs of their own creativity” by assuming that culture needed to be politically interpreted—that is, that it was not innately political. In this regard it is helpful to recall Fanon’s praise of Fodeba’s work: “He reinterpreted all the rhythmic images of his country from a revolutionary perspective... a genuine invitation for us to reflect on demystification and combat” (Fanon 2002: 163). For Fanon, Fodeba (the artist) had to “interpret” the culture around him into something “revolutionary” i.e., something useful. Fanon emphasized Fodeba’s explicit content and political themes, not the cultural norms that provided his source material. Put in the language of aesthetics, one might say that Fanon was concerned with Fodeba’s revolutionary content, not his cultural form. A Nandy-ian analysis would instead note that Fodeba’s poem, as Fanon presented it, was rather Western in its structure—the uniquely African (Guinean, in this case) elements of the work were relegated to parentheticals:

(Kora music)
At last one day a letter from Naman came to the village, to Kadia’s address. She was worried as to what was happening to her husband, and so that same night she came, after hours of tiring walking, to the capital of the district, where a translator read the letter to her. Naman was in North Africa; Tie was well, and he asked for news of the harvest, of the feastings, the river, the dances, the council tree... in fact, for news of all the village.

(Balafo Music)
That night the old women of the village honored Kadia by allowing her to come to the courtyard of the oldest woman and listen to the talk that went on nightly among them. The headman of the village, happy to have heard news of Naman, gave a great banquet to all the beggars of the neighborhood.

(Balafo music) (Fanon 2002: 165)

For Nandy, such an approach missed how the cultural elements of the work could subvert Western norms. Fanon’s interpretation shrinks the Kora music and balafon (the distinctly Guinean elements) to afterthoughts—what was key for Fanon was the poem’s “revolutionary perspective” and its historically relevant content. (Fanon 2002: 168) He missed how a Cabral-ian embrace of these traditions could be a subversive act while also evincing and preserving the esteem and dignity of the people, celebrating their unique cultural heritage in the face of intensive assimilation efforts. Although he chose to analyze the novels of Saratchandra Chattopadhyay, Nandy might as well have been responding to Fodeba when he contended that Chattopadhyay’s seemingly apolitical novels: “may have been less self-consciously political but more subversive... he is not trying to be a political activist or socially relevant; he is merely trying to give expression to the experienced suffering of a people deprived of their voice” (Fanon 2002: 153). For Nandy, the Fanonian culture-as-resource approach was unsatisfactory, because it missed the anticolonial potential implicit in artistic form despite its explicit dedication to decolonial political movements.

Nevertheless, Nandy was not in favor of a celebration of cultural practices independent of politics writ large. This orientation led naturally to his second approach to culture, “Culture As Lifestyle”

9 I borrow this language from John Miller Chernoff’s African Rhythm and African Sensibility: Aesthetics and Social Action in African Musical Idioms. For Chernoff, cultural forms were themselves statements of beauty and goodness, and thus political. Thus, the heterogeneity of cross-rhythms or the grooves of repetition unique to the West-African drumming of Dagbon is in some ways more anti-Western than the explicitly political Fela Kuti, whose form is mainly inspired by the Western Jazz Bands of Art Blakely and Don Ellis. For more on the links between form, culture, and politics see Timothy Brennan’s Secular Devotion: Afro-Latin Music and Imperial Jazz.
In this view, “culture refers to the organizing principles of a way of life or a tradition of social living” and closely adheres to Western Anthropology’s assumptions of cultural relativism (Nandy 2008: 154). In this conception, cultures are customs and lifestyles and nothing more—their organizing principles and aesthetic judgments can only be internally understood and do not speak to larger criticisms or subversions of other cultures. For Nandy, such relativism “tends to underwrite the belief that cultures can be criticized only from inside,” which had the benefit of validating a culture’s practices but excluded the possibility of intercultural criticism and subversion—a crucial aspect of decolonialism for Nandy (Nandy 2008: 154). In a colonial framework, conflicting cultural values were colliding, and thus relativism could serve only to neuter the ways the culture of those oppressed could speak against the cultural frameworks of the colonizer. Nandy contended that native cultures should be understood in relation to the cultures of their colonizers, not simply as insulated phenomena of traditions, since it is precisely such cultural practices that harbor the peoples’ criticisms of the colonial order and offer alternatives for a decolonial future. Moreover, Nandy observed that historically, “emphasis on native categories and the principle of cultural relativism have often coexisted with attempts to classify cultures as primitive and modern, simple and complex, ahistorical and historical, little and great, and so on.” (Nandy 2008: 154) While this is not an inherent fault of relativism, Nandy’s central point was that relativism misses the fact that cultural expressions are assertions of political values and moral imperatives. If the first approach to culture he described placed too much emphasis on explicit emancipatory projects in his conception, the second was, in his view, apolitical to the detriment of the colonized.

I turn next to Nandy’s third approach to culture—the one he endorsed. In this perspective, culture was “simultaneously a form of political resistance and the ‘language’ in which such resistance is articulated” (Nandy 2008: 155). That is to say, the affirmation of indigenous culture is a form of resistance in that it is “a protest against political domination, a means of challenging the legitimacy of the domination, and a defiance of the language of domination” (Nandy 2008: 155). How, exactly, was this the case for Nandy? In his view, this approach shifted the conversations from the Western norms of modernity and rationality that stipulated not only what practices are legitimate, but also what criticisms could be so considered. As Nandy suggested: “Culture in this third sense rejects this stipulation and the assumption that the future shape of all human consciousness was decided once-and-for-all in seventeenth century Europe” (Nandy 2008: 156). Compared to the liberation and new humanity offered by Fanon, this shift in assumptions might seem small. However, Nandy explicitly aligned Cabral’s view with this culture-as-resistance approach, writing that Cabral belongs to “a galaxy of politically sensitive thinkers and activists [that] have given shape to this meaning of culture” (Nandy 2008: 155). Indeed for Nandy, as for Cabral, this shift in cultural and psychic assumptions was no small achievement on the part of non-Western cultures. Elsewhere, in the Intimate Enemy, Nandy contended that colonialism’s “ultimate violence” was “that it creates a culture in which the ruled are constantly tempted to fight their rulers within the psychological limits set by the latter” (Nandy 2010: 3). To put it colloquially, colonialism conditioned its subjects to hate the players (colonizers) but not the game (hypermasculinity, organized violence, anti-democratic rule, dichotomous thinking, Newtonian rationality, etc.).

Nandy saw colonialism’s ability to define the contours of resistance as a political problem but also a psychological one—by means of which subjects were ideologically acculturated not only to accept domination, but also to combat domination in limited ways defined by their oppressors. This was a chief concern for Nandy and, likewise, in his view, anyone looking to reshape the world. As Nandy explained, a psychological and cultural understanding of colonialism must account for “the long-term cultural and psychological effects of violence, poverty, and injustice—effects which persist” even after the formal colonial apparatus is removed:

Long-term suffering also generally means the establishment of powerful justifications for the suffering in the minds of both the oppressors and the oppressed. All the useful modes of social adaptation, creative dissent, techniques of survival, and conceptions of
the future transmitted from generation to generation are deeply influenced by the way in which large groups of human beings have lived and died, and have been forced to live and forced to die. (Nandy 2010: 26)

This is to say that the oppressed cannot simply deny their scars. Human beings adapt to their oppressive conditions and are inevitably shaped in some measure by them. In this sense, Nandy might seem to agree with Fanon; indeed, Fanon found colonialism’s shaping of the colonized to be almost total. However, Nandy’s view that forms of resistance are themselves defined by colonialism led him to reject violence and revolution, putting him at odds not only with Fanon but also Cabral.

To summarize, Nandy’s psychological framework led him to question colonialism not only as a political or economic problem, but also as a psychological and cultural one. As he observed in his conclusion to “The Psychology of Colonialism”, “colonialism is first of all a matter of consciousness and needs to be defeated ultimately in the minds of men” (Nandy 2010: 63). This “ultimate defeat” was, in his perspective, to be won on the battlefield of culture, which defines how humans conceptualize their world and, thus, how they conceive solutions and alternatives. In this sense, Nandy’s view that indigenous cultures can push one’s thoughts to modes of resistance beyond those premised on colonial paradigms was not a passive capitulation to the political and economic dominance of the West. More accurately, it was an effort at decolonization within an appreciation of those forces. In this sense, Nandy may be said to be quite distant from both Fanon and Cabral. 12

As a result of redefining the qualifications of thought and criticism, Nandy’s culture-as-resistance approach highlighted specific alternative politics and utopian conceptions that indigenous cultures embody. Indeed, colonial regimes targeted colonized cultures (and subversive voices within colonized countries) for repression precisely because they offered such alternatives, thereby threatening the imposed hierarchy of colonial power. 13 In “Towards a Third World Utopia,” Nandy explicitly listed some of those alternatives and suggested how they challenged dominant modes of Western thought and culture. Although one might hesitate at Nandy’s homogenizing assumption that “all civilizations share some basic values” and his conflation of African and Asian practices, his goal was to identify possible alternatives to Western cultural paradigms—their exact geographical and sociocultural location was (and remained) secondary in his analysis.

Nandy offered six ways third-world cultures provided alternatives to Western political thought and frames. 14 The first four involved a rejection of Cartesian dichotomies, particularly the binaries of oppressor/oppressed, male/female sexuality, adulthood/childhood, and work/play. The latter two examples of alternative, third-world utopia involved a rejection of linear, progressive conceptions

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11 Nandy was not alone in this formulation of resistance. One can find similarities in the Resurgence efforts of Native Americans, in particular. See Corntassel’s “Re-envisioning resurgence: Indigenous pathways to decolonization and sustainable self-determination” Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society. 1(1), 86–101, http://dspace.library.uvic.ca/handle/1828/12471 and Leanne Simpson’s As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance.

12 Closer, instead, appears the school of Decoloniality in the likes of Mignolo and Quijano. These thinkers often assume decolonization to have failed, and have themselves shifted to analyses of Eurocentric practices, knowledge, and culture in attempts to reframe resistance beyond Western paradigms. However, Nandy differs from these thinkers and the Resurgence politics of Native American scholars in that he identified specific psychological and material politics that must be honed from cultural practices—merely practicing or celebrating them is closer to his second approach to culture.

13 In what is perhaps his most famous text, The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism, Nandy explained how a key aspect of colonialism is its repression of previously dominant, non-imperial modes of living and its elevation of previously marginalized, hyper-masculine and hierarchical traditions. This process occurs not only within the culture of the colonized but also within the culture of the colonizer. See pages 5–8 in the chapter “The Psychology of Colonialism”.

14 I realize that Nandy is not only open to criticism that he universalizes third-world experiences (see Shilliam) but also that for, methodological purposes, he perhaps homogenizes Western culture as well. For Nandy, it is not that Western culture is devoid of internal tensions; quite the opposite. The Intimate Enemy was an evaluation of dissenting cultural trends within the British Empire. But, Nandy does make clear that imperialism necessitates the dominance of certain cultural trends: in pop culture, in academia, in governance, etc. Hence his opening salvo that colonialism “alter[s] the original cultural priorities on both sides and brings to the centre of the colonial culture subcultures previously recessive or subordinate in the two confronting cultures.” (2) His primary example in this volume was the hypermasculinity that emerged in Britain and the previously androgynous Indian subcontinent, but other examples abound.
of history and Newtonian or atomized individualism. All of these political alternatives deserve their own essays, their own books. However, for the sake of this article, what is crucial is that Nandy was specific about some of the political alternatives available to decolonial efforts and that his conception of the roles of culture was crucial to envisioning them. For Nandy, culture was not the product of national liberation, and it was also more than national liberation's wellspring. Instead, he considered culture an expression of consciousness. Thus, it set the boundaries for what individuals might imagine and therefore opened pathways by means of which those populations could endorse or, more importantly, resist injustice. In the concluding section, I outline how the political implications of Nandy's work compare to those offered by Fanon and, to a lesser extent, Cabral.

V. CONCLUSION—REVOLUTION VS CULTURE

I have closely examined works by Fanon, Cabral, and Nandy, to show how those authors understood the role of culture in decolonization. With the differences and similarities of Fanon's, Cabral's, and Nandy's works now clear, I return to Nandy's critique of Fanon:

The cleansing role Frantz Fanon grants to violence in his vision of a post-colonial society sounds so alien to many Africans and Asians mainly because it is insensitive to this cultural resistance [to the idea of a clear boundary between colonizer and colonized, aggressor and victim.] Fanon admits the internalization of the oppressor. But he calls for an exorcism in which the ghost outside has to be finally confronted in violence, for it carries the burden of the ghost within. The outer violence, Fanon suggests, is the only means of making a painful break with a part of one's own self. If Fanon had more confidence in his culture he would have sensed that his vision ties the victim more deeply to the culture of oppression than any collaboration can. Cultural acceptance of the major technique of oppression in our times, organized violence, cannot but further socialize the victims to the basic values of his oppressors. Once given intrinsic legitimacy, violence converts the battle between two visions of the human society into a contest for power and resources between two groups sharing the same frame of values. Perhaps if Fanon had lived longer, he would have come to admit that in his method of exorcism lies a partial answer to two vital questions about the search for liberation in our times, namely, why dictatorships of the proletariat never end and why revolutions always devour their children. (Nandy 1992: 33–34)

For Nandy, Fanon's treatment of culture caused him to meet the colonizer on his own terms of 1) organized violence and 2) reification in which the world is neatly split across a binary of the colonizer and the colonized, the privileged and the oppressed, the guilty who dominate the earth and the meek who shall inherit it. For Fanon a productive and valuable culture could not exist apart from national liberation. Prior to the revolutionary moment, Fanon's assessment of the psychic and therefore cultural condition of the colonized was one of sterility; the masses were, in the words of his Toward the African Revolution: “‘Acculturized’ and deculturized at one and the same time”15 (Fanon 1964: 40). Past or traditional cultures offer little in terms of political futures, although their overvaluation might push the masses to revolt and thus create the conditions for a productive national culture to emerge. Thus, Fanon could not see—as Nandy did—that the traditions of the people are themselves revolutionary, capable of offering alternative worldviews to those of their colonizers. Hence, Nandy's assessment that Fanon lacked “confidence” in culture.

15 No doubt Fanonians would point out that his comments on culture occurred in his earlier work, Toward the African Revolution, and his speech therein “Racism and Culture” which he delivered at the first Congress of Black Writers and Artists. There, Fanon wrote “This rediscovery [of traditional culture], this absolute valorization almost in defiance of reality, objectively indefensible, assumes an incomparable and subjective importance. On emerging from these passionate espousals, the native will have decided, ‘with full knowledge of what is involved’, to fight all forms of exploitation and alienation of man” (43) However, Fanon in the same work was extremely critical of such traditions as “archaic”, “simple”, and a “caricature of cultural existence” (41). Past traditions and customs are not a real culture, but a relic to which the native clings, bringing them into conflict with the colonizers pushing assimilation and thus generating a new and dynamic culture from the ashes of the ensuing combat. In other words, this text provides a similar, albeit more nuanced, process to the one described in Wretched of the Earth.
Moreover, according to Nandy, this lack of confidence meant Fanon’s method of decolonization is doomed to recreate the very system of organized violence Fanon sought to overturn. In seeking to combat the colonizers as their equals in the playing field of organized violence (not to mention embracing the nation-state), Fanon accorded domination “intrinsic legitimacy” and thus ensured that societies built on such struggles would reflect the violence that brought them there. It is for this reason that Nandy concluded that “dictatorships of the proletariat never end and revolutions always devour their children” because, at heart, the exorcised revolution called for by Fanon represented “the temptation to equal the oppressor in violence to regain one’s self-esteem as a competitor within the same system” (Nandy 1978: 35).

There was thus a severe political divide between Fanon, one of the most famed advocates for revolution in the 20th century, and Nandy. But the key to Nandy’s critique was that this divide inhered in culture and that Fanon failed to see the alternate possibilities contained within non-colonial ways of life. This is why he lamented the fact that Fanon “converts the battle between two visions of the human society into a contest for power and resources between two groups sharing the same frame of values” (Nandy 1978: 34). Nandy aimed to wage a battle between visions, a fight for how groups might see the world and organize societies in relation to one another. Without consideration of cultural alternatives, Nandy warned, the colonized were condemned to the same power struggles and domination that they had fought to overcome despite their purportedly emancipatory struggle.

Cabral, while far more generous to the possibilities opened by the cultural traditions of the masses, would nevertheless not follow Nandy to these conclusions. Cabral, like Fanon, defined the project of national liberation as one of war and revolution. And yet, a close reading of Cabral shows that his greater confidence in the role of culture and traditions does create spaces in his work for what might be called a more Nandy-esque politics. Take, for instance, Cabral’s contention that “Africa has been able to achieve respect for its culture” not in spite of colonialism but “because of it”, which was far removed from Fanon’s description of how precolonial and colonial cultures in Africa should be viewed (Cabral 1974: 15). More pertinent, though, was Cabral’s tone towards armed revolutionary struggle, which he described as “sad” and, when speaking of himself, he observed “I am not a great defender of the armed fight. I am myself very conscious of the sacrifices demanded by the armed fight” (Cabral 1974: 16, 79). Still, these equivocations perhaps pale in comparison to his description of the end goal of decolonization, which, for him, was not a Fanonian new human and new culture, but rather: “the expression of our culture... a ferment signifying above all the culture of the people which has freed itself” (Cabral 1974: 17). That is, a celebration of the culture the people already had, the one that held the keys to their resistance, true, but also to their alternative “general framework of history” (Cabral 1974: 17) that proved itself to be the true liberation once the cannon smoke had cleared. This is not to say Cabral aligned with Nandy, nor even that he split the proverbial difference between Nandy and Fanon’s views—he aligned closely with Fanon’s vision of culture despite their differences. Rather, what this analysis has revealed is the possibility that as culture takes an increasingly central role in decolonial frameworks, revolution (and the violence and dichotomous thinking it requires) becomes increasingly complicated.

How might the two revolutionaries treated here respond to Nandy were they alive today? One need not share Nandy’s assumption that Fanon would change his methods if he “had lived longer.” And, even more tragically, Amilcar Cabral was murdered in the struggle that defined his life, becoming one of the many martyrs in the wars for African freedom. However, if their works are any indicator, one of the most immediate responses one might offer to the above query is to highlight the significance of context. Ashis Nandy never found himself in a warzone, and never faced the trauma of Fanon’s patients nor the wounds of Cabral’s comrades. Fanon and Cabral lived in circumstances in which they needed to make choices, and doing so often involved taking sides. In such conditions, the need for justice and for response can not only prove overwhelming but also necessary. Perhaps Nandy was not sensitive enough to the strength of that desire despite his Freudian training; that is, the desire to end colonial occupation and cease centuries of exploitation and misery. Indeed, Nandy opened “Towards a Third World Utopia” with the admission that his “theories of salvation do not save” (20). But in response to such placidity one can almost hear
Fanon and Cabral scream: What if people need saving? And, more urgently, what if we are tasked with saving them? These questions are not satisfactorily addressed by Nandy even if one accepts his analysis of culture.

One might, then, conclude by asking to what degree academic understandings of systems of domination are jeopardized by perceived overwhelming needs for emancipation and justice, or vice-versa. Fanon, Cabral, and Nandy raise questions that remain relevant for the task of decolonization in the 21st century. Can the need for emancipation, liberation, and decolonization blind us to more nuanced understandings of our cultures and how society shapes us? Or, inversely, will overly nuanced/de-reified understandings of the world freeze us in our tracks and stop us from trying to change the world, moving us instead to cultural analysis and resurgence at revolution’s expense? These are open questions.

Where, then, does this Fanon/Cabral/Nandy constellation leave readers? On the one hand, Fanon and Cabral remind scholars that cultural celebration is not enough to ensure actual material and infrastructure are made available to human beings in the present. One must understand Fanon and Cabral by honoring the fact that their views were shaped by the pressing urgency each saw for material change. Nandy, meanwhile, like many postcolonial thinkers in the textual/cultural turn of the 1980’s, warned against the cultural and psychological limitations of adopting such a view. Indeed, he found in Fanon’s revolutionary ire a tacit legitimization of violence and dichotomous thinking. However, Nandy perhaps failed to grasp how Fanon’s and Cabral’s positions are necessitated by their historical context. Moreover, Nandy’s vision offered little material justice for the colonized.

There is, then, a tension between a revolutionary and a cultural politics, each seeking in its own way to invert colonialism’s injustice and its effects. In the present context, in which global armed struggle seems no longer on the horizon but the life-threatening effects of colonialism and capitalism continue to define contemporary politics, scholars are left with the task of unraveling the implications of this abiding tension between revolutionary and cultural politics. Only with an appreciation and awareness of this friction can we begin to build a re-envisioned, revolutionary politics that rejects not just the rule of colonizing countries, but also the ideologies and methods by which they rule.

COMPETING INTERESTS
The author has no competing interests to declare.

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