

# Our World in Wilson's Hands

Samwell Gervacio

HAVC 100A

Jordan Reznick

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## Abstract

The work, *Atlas*, 1995, by Fred Wilson, depicts a racist “happy black servant” figurine<sup>1</sup> holding a globe configured as a symbol of the African diaspora by using push-pins and flags to mark major populations of people of African descent around the world. Through an analysis of visual elements and historical socio-political contexts expressed in *Atlas*, I will investigate how Wilson works with theoretical concepts involving race and colonization. I argue that *Atlas* discusses specific theories explained by Frantz Fanon concerning the construction of narratives by colonial powers, the violence projected from slavery onto the present, and the ultimate struggle by the colonized to liberation. I support my argument by referring to Fanon’s “The Fact of Blackness” and “On National Culture,” in relation to elements of the work like symbolic placement and inclusion of historical objects, and by putting *Atlas* in conversation with Wilson’s Entrance to the U.S Pavilion from the 2003 Venice Biennale featuring two large African slaves transferred from a tomb to hold Neoclassical architecture labeled with “STATI UNITI D’AMERICA” (“United States of America”).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Riggs, Marlon. *Ethnic Notions*. San Francisco, California, USA: Kanopy Streaming, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Erickson, Peter. “Respeaking Othello in Fred Wilson’s Speak of Me as I Am.” In *Art Journal* 64, no. 2 (June 1, 2005): 4–19.

In his work, *Atlas* (1995, figure 1) Fred Wilson expresses what Frantz Fanon believes as fundamentally important: for the colonized to reclaim the past and revive the past's legacy.<sup>3</sup> This work depicts a racist "happy black servant" figurine<sup>4</sup> holding a globe configured as a symbol of the African diaspora by using push-pins and flags to mark major populations of people of African descent around the world. Through an analysis of visual elements and historical socio-political contexts conveyed in *Atlas*, I will investigate how Wilson works with theoretical concepts involving race and colonization. I argue that *Atlas* discusses specific theories explained by Frantz Fanon concerning the construction of narratives by colonial powers, the violence projected from slavery onto the present, and the ultimate struggle by the colonized to liberation. These theories can also be seen while juxtapositioning *Atlas* to Wilson's "Speak of Me as I Am" Entrance to the United States Pavilion (2003, figure 2) from the 50th Venice Biennale. This entrance depicts two large Moor figures dressed in torn clothing transferred from the bottom section of Baldassare Longhena's 1669 tomb for Doge Giovanni Pesaro in S. Maria Gloriosa dei Frari, Venice, and reconfigured to hold up Neoclassical architecture engraved with, "STATI UNITI D'AMERICA" ("United States of America" in Italian) above them.<sup>5</sup> Comparison between these two works can be used to develop a better understanding of theoretical concepts as they use similar visual and conceptual strategies to reclaim narratives and bring awareness to the legacies of slavery expressed by Fanon which are often overlooked because of "colonial aphasia." Ann Stoler claims that "colonial aphasia" is not just a colonial collective forgetting,

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<sup>3</sup> Fanon, Frantz. "On National Culture" In *The Wretched of the Earth*, (New York: Grove Press, 1968.) 145-180.

<sup>4</sup> Riggs, Marlon. *Ethnic Notions*.

<sup>5</sup> Erickson, Peter. "Respeaking Othello in Fred Wilson's Speak of Me as I Am." 7.

ignorance, or absence.<sup>6</sup> “Colonial aphasia,” to Stoler, is the colonial “occlusion of knowledge” and, “dismembering, a difficulty speaking, a difficulty generating a vocabulary that associates appropriate words and concepts with appropriate things.”<sup>7</sup> Stoler argues that aphasia, “describes a difficulty retrieving both conceptual and lexical vocabularies and, most important, difficulty comprehending what is spoken.”<sup>8</sup> *Atlas* and the entrance to the United States Pavilion in the Venice Biennale, 2003, fight against this colonial aphasia by spotlighting this history and legacy of slavery.

The figure placed under the globe is a racist happy servant ceramic figurine which considers Fanon’s theories about blackness and racism. The figure has been painted with very dark black skin, and wears a white waiter’s top with two red spots of paint on his neck and torso (remnants of paint from his tie and one of his buttons), dark green pants, and black shoes, while standing on a brown base. The colors used to paint the figure are mostly made of muted tones except for his bright white shirt and red spots. These subdued colors display how antique he is versus the modern world. The figure bends to his side with a hand on his hip and another holding up a plate while expressing his content with a wide smile. This figure is an example of the racist collectibles portraying African Americans that “littered the cultural landscape of the United States just a few decades ago.”<sup>9</sup> These images were destructive and “manifestations of the white man’s historical imperative to demean, disenfranchise, and profit from black people.”<sup>10</sup> Including

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<sup>6</sup> Stoler, Ann. “Colonial Aphasia: Race and Disabled Histories in France.” In *Public Culture*. Volume 23, Number 1: 125.

<sup>7</sup> Stoler, Ann. “Colonial Aphasia: Race and Disabled Histories in France.” 125.

<sup>8</sup> Stoler, Ann. “Colonial Aphasia: Race and Disabled Histories in France.” 125.

<sup>9</sup> Berger, Maurice. “Viewing the Invisible: Fred Wilson’s Allegories of Absence and Loss.” In *Fred Wilson : Objects and Installations 1979-2000* (Baltimore, Md: Center for Art and Visual Culture, University of Maryland Baltimore County, 2001) 13.

<sup>10</sup> Berger, Maurice. “Viewing the Invisible: Fred Wilson’s Allegories of Absence and Loss,” 13.

this figurine references the history of racist happy servant figurines that were used to justify and glorify the enslavement and treatment of people of African descent. These caricatures of African Americans, which many white people would buy for their homes and even display them on their lawns which marked the space as “white” (even if unintentionally), dehumanized people of African descent, and reinforced stereotypes. This relates to Fanon’s claim that his blackness is pre determined by other people’s perceptions which have been influenced by racist imagery, constructed histories, and stereotypes and thought of as facts.<sup>11</sup> Presenting black happy servant characters reinforced the idea that black people wanted to be enslaved and took pride in it. These images claimed what blackness meant and were consumed by the white public.<sup>12</sup> A result of this imagery is expressed by Fanon when he writes, “I discovered my blackness, my ethnic characteristics; and I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetichism, racial defects, slave-ships, and above all: ‘sho’ good eatin’.”<sup>13</sup> What Fanon describes is having to live with narratives constructed by white people forced upon him and determining who he is supposed to be and who he is already seen as. These racist images have continued this perception and creates a world were, “the black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man,” since, as Fanon points out, “the white man” has, “woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories.”<sup>14</sup>

The use of a household figure also shows Fanon’s idea that the systems in place create a world where racism was an everyday occurrence and thought of as acceptable.<sup>15</sup> This figure was

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<sup>11</sup> Fanon, Frantz. “The Fact of Blackness.” In *Black Skin, White Masks*, 257-266. New York: Grove Press, 1967.

<sup>12</sup> Riggs, Marlon. *Ethnic Notions*. San Francisco, California, USA: Kanopy Streaming, 2014

<sup>13</sup> Fanon, Frantz. “The Fact of Blackness.” 84-85.

<sup>14</sup> Fanon, Frantz. “The Fact of Blackness.” 84.

<sup>15</sup> Fanon, Frantz. “The Fact of Blackness.”

one of many found by Wilson in flea markets, thrift shops, and antique stores.<sup>16</sup> These figures' widespread availability and heightened prices affirm the continuation of commoditization of African American bodies and the stereotypes they exemplify.<sup>17</sup> The racism developed from slavery (and reinforced by the creation of the figure) affects lived experiences and is still projected into the present.<sup>18</sup> The fact that the figurine is a household object and one still available to collect also shows that racism can still be thought of as acceptable.<sup>19</sup> The racism developed from slavery (and reinforced by the creation of the figure) affects lived experiences and is persistently projected into the present.<sup>20</sup>

The globe is shown at an angle to elevate the continent of Africa which expresses Fanon's theories about colonialism and constructed histories. The globe is tilted and shifted in a way most displays of globes are not presented. This strategy questions why the globe is usually presented a certain way (with Africa usually lower than it is in Wilson's work) when Earth actually can be seen from different perspectives. For instance, on a standard globe, more developed countries are towards the top of the globe while less developed countries are toward the bottom. This reflects on the structures Fanon claims are in place to create perspectives thought of as facts.<sup>21</sup> Because Earth is floating in space, we can imagine that our globes could be configured to be read upside down and still be accurate. We have been conditioned to think the Earth should be presented with colonizer countries at the top. This tactic also plays with Fanon's

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<sup>16</sup> Berger, Maurice. "Viewing the Invisible: Fred Wilson's Allegories of Absence and Loss." 13.

<sup>17</sup> Chubb, Emma. "Fred Wilson." In *Black Refractions: Highlights from The Studio Museum in Harlem*, by Connie H. Choi, Thelma Golden, and Kellie Jones. (Rizzoli Electa, 2019.) 218.

<sup>18</sup> Fanon, Frantz. "The Fact of Blackness."

<sup>19</sup> Fanon, Frantz. "The Fact of Blackness."

<sup>20</sup> Fanon, Frantz. "The Fact of Blackness."

<sup>21</sup> Fanon, Frantz. "The Fact of Blackness."

emphasis that colonialism destroyed and regulated the colonized cultures to put their own on top. This is because, as Fanon explains, colonizers use every effort they have, “to make the colonized confess the inferiority of their culture... to acknowledge the unreality of their nation.”<sup>22</sup> Here Wilson has switched the roles and put Africa toward the top.<sup>23</sup> Reclaiming the narrative, as Wilson has done here, does what Fanon argues as, “importing new meaning and dynamism” which “restructures his own perception. The world no longer feels doomed. Conditions are ripe for confrontation.”<sup>24</sup>

By positioning of the racist figure, lifting up the globe which symbolizes the African diaspora and presenting it as a powerful figure, Wilson reflects Fanon’s theory that the colonized must reclaim the past and revive the past’s legacy.<sup>25</sup> This figure can be seen as reclaiming a narrative and bringing to light the legacies of slavery when we compare *Atlas* to Wilson’s “Speak of Me as I Am” entrance to the U.S. Pavilion at the 2003 Venice Biennale. This entrance depicts two African slaves dressed in torn clothing transferred from the bottom section of Baldassare Longhena's 1669 tomb for Doge Giovanni Pesaro in S. Maria Gloriosa dei Frari, Venice.<sup>26</sup> In the original, the figures are smaller and struggle under the weight as they hold up more privileged figures. Selecting these smaller figures from this monument and enlarging them as the only figures in this work takes marginalized figures and empowers them, reclaiming the narrative like reclaiming the racist figurine into something positive.<sup>27</sup> Because they are at the

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<sup>22</sup> Fanon, Frantz. “On National Culture.” 171.

<sup>23</sup> Fanon, Frantz. “On National Culture.”

<sup>24</sup> Fanon, Frantz. “On National Culture.” 176.

<sup>25</sup> Fanon, Frantz. “On National Culture.”

<sup>26</sup> Erickson, Peter. “Respeaking Othello in Fred Wilson’s Speak of Me as I Am.” *Art Journal* 64, no. 2 (June 1, 2005): 7.

<sup>27</sup> Erickson, Peter. “Respeaking Othello in Fred Wilson’s Speak of Me as I Am.” 7.

entry, visitors are forced to notice them and walk past as the figures seemingly prevent the roof from falling onto the people below. Wilson has also changed the positions of their heads so instead of looking downward, they are more lifted, allowing the figures to gaze at visitors and giving the slaves more agency and power.<sup>28</sup> The Moor figures are shown supporting Neoclassical architecture engraved with, “STATI UNITI D’AMERICA” (“United States of America” in Italian) above them.<sup>29</sup> This is similar to how the figurine supports the globe. This physical support can be interpreted as how populations of people of African descent have supported the economy of America (and other countries) with their labour. This strategy is a way of reviving the past and connecting it to its legacy by illuminating the fact that people of African descent have helped create the world we live in today. These strategies embody what Fanon claims the colonized intellectual must do: to use the past, “with the intention of opening up the future, of spurring them into action and fostering hope.”<sup>30</sup> Both works do this by reclaiming the past, bringing awareness, and empowering the marginalized and colonized.

*Atlas* is displayed on a pedestal about waist high which can affect how visible the figure is under the globe and can comment on Fanon’s ideas of colonialism. If you look from the top of the globe, the figure may completely disappear or look less visible. If you crouch down, focus changes to the figure which seems to give off more importance. This aspect of the work can be seen as representing the hidden history of how people of African descent have helped the world progress and relates to Fanon’s idea of constructed histories determined by colonial powers.<sup>31</sup> During colonial times many wealthy people were wealthy because they benefited from slave

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<sup>28</sup> Erickson, Peter. “Respeaking Othello in Fred Wilson’s *Speak of Me as I Am*.” 7.

<sup>29</sup> Erickson, Peter. “Respeaking Othello in Fred Wilson’s *Speak of Me as I Am*.” 7.

<sup>30</sup> Fanon, “On National Culture.” 167.

<sup>31</sup> Fanon, Frantz. “The Fact of Blackness.”

labour and many people are still profiting from it today. This history is usually not discussed which can be explained by “colonial aphasia”<sup>32</sup> and Fanon’s explanation of colonial domination contributing to the cultural obliteration of the colonized. This contribution was “the denial of national reality, the new legal system imposed by occupying power, the marginalization of the indigenous population and their customs by colonial society, expropriation, and the systemic enslavement of men and women.”<sup>33</sup> This positioning can be interpreted as depicting the fact that this history often does not receive as much attention (as the figure can be hidden from view), but once it is found, it can be empowering and is not absent because it has always been there all along (like the figure is always supporting the globe, even if out of view).

In conclusion, through the inclusion of a racist figure with historical and present day significance, placement of the figure under a globe signifying the African diaspora where the figure may be hidden but ultimately powerful and never absent, and juxtaposition with Wilson’s Venice Biennale U.S. Pavilion entrance, we can see how Wilson visualizes Fanon’s theories about understanding blackness and the colonized reclaiming the past and resisting colonial aphasia in order to fight for liberation. This struggle to regain national sovereignty, Fanon argues, “constitutes the greatest cultural manifestation that exists.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Stoler, Ann. “Colonial Aphasia: Race and Disabled Histories in France.”

<sup>33</sup> Fanon, Frantz. “On National Culture.” 170.

<sup>34</sup> Fanon, “On National Culture.” 178.





Figure 1. *Atlas*, By Fred Wilson, 1995, Image provided by Larry Qualls



Figure 2. *United States Pavilion*, By Fred Wilson, 2003. Image from “Respeaking Othello in Fred Wilson’s ‘Speak of Me as I Am’” by Peter Erikson, 2005.

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