Objects among objects

I came into the world imbued with the will to find a meaning in things, my spirit filled with the desire to attain to the source of the world, and then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects.

– Frantz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks

When she died in 1989 at the age of 101, my grandmother left few possessions. She had lived since she was in her sixties in a room in my parent’s various houses, so there wasn’t much space for personal property. Her most treasured objects were in a small black wooden box, and most prized amongst them were a few photographs. Black and white, of course, and most of them formal portraits or wedding photographs mounted on thick card. Encouraged by her granddaughter, she had written the names of those featured in the main family portrait: Lizzie, Father, Annie, John, Martha, Mother and Mary. In my conversations with her, the photographs would often be shown as we talked about her childhood, her three-mile walk over the moors to school, the times when she was sent to the pub to haul her father from his drinking and bring him home, and her work as a young girl in the Lancashire cotton mills. After her mother died, at the age of 48, the family moved to the seaside town of Lytham St Annes. Mary also died relatively young, nursed by my grandmother through a long illness, and Martha died in childbirth. Annie married a Catholic, and bore four surviving children, one of whom is my godmother and still lives in Lytham, where I was born, with her children and grandchildren. The only one of my grandmother’s siblings I met was Uncle John, who, until his death, lived in the Lancashire textile town of Accrington with his daughter Cicely.
I never met either of my grandfathers. I have no memories of them, only photographs. The pictures of my maternal grandfather, Richard Smith, were among the most precious of the photographs carried by my grandmother through all the thirty-odd years she lived with my parents, my brother and me. As well as two portraits of Dick, as she called him, one full-face and one in semi-profile, there was a photograph of him in a bed in a field hospital at the front in the First World War. She also had his army papers. He served in the Lancashire Fusiliers for one year and 103 days, and was with the British Expeditionary Force from 13 March to 20 October 1917. His papers show that he was discharged on 8 June 1918, no longer fit for war service. He had been gassed in the trenches, and never fully recovered. He came home of course, and he and my grandmother were married in 1920. By 1925 he was dead. During that period the family moved back and forth between the industrial and shipping town of Salford, where Dick had worked before the war as a cotton packer, and Diggle, a village in Saddleworth on the Yorkshire moors, a short distance away from the smoke of the city, which he could no longer tolerate. My mother was born in 1922 in Diggle, and she was just two and a half when her father died. My grandmother was not entitled to a war widow’s pension – the couple had waited until after his discharge before they married. She moved back to Lytham, to live with her father in Holmfield Road, and took work where she could find it, mostly as a housekeeper in local hotels, I think. This type of work suited her circumstances, though not her sharp intellect. With a child to raise, she turned down opportunities for more responsibility in favour of being able to look after her daughter, and, eventually, her sister Annie’s sons and daughters too.

Many of us these days have far more than a few treasured photographs. Behind me as I write is a large wooden trunk, much larger than my grandmother’s box, full of unsorted family snapshots. Elsewhere in the house are several albums. Drawers in a filing cabinet are full of the overflow from the trunk, and on my hard drive hundreds more images are stored. If they had to rescue something in a house fire, most people would choose the family photographs, such is their value and importance. In my case that would be difficult: I could hardly gather up the whole trunkful. I have been meaning for years to have a clear-out. But the reason I haven’t done this is not just lack of time or
motivation. I haven’t put any photographs in albums since my father died, suddenly, twenty-odd years ago. It seemed to me that if I looked at the photographs of him, I would somehow lose my memories of him as a physical, moving, solid being. And I wanted above all to retain those as long as I could.

What is most precious, and what is most lost when someone dies, is their physical presence: the smell of them, their flesh, the hairs on their arms, the look in their eyes. Even if – or, maybe, perhaps, especially if – the relationship was fraught and difficult. And it is hard that things – objects, furniture, jewellery, clothes, places – remain, mocking us with their indestructibility when compared with the frailty of flesh. I remember my father one time when he visited us – maybe even the last time – bringing a large suitcase up our narrow, winding stairs. I reached down to take the suitcase from him, and he was grateful. The stretch of his arm as he handed the suitcase to me, the look in his eyes – a touch of shame at his own weakness, and gratitude, even a pride in me – I still remember these. Another time I remember the huge strength of his concern – and the hug he gave me – as I was leaving for the hospital, in the advanced stages of labour with my second son. I remember thinking, ‘If you don’t let me go soon, your grandson will be born here in this hallway.’

A photograph is a strange thing, particularly a photograph of a person. On the one hand it is an object among other objects – to use Frantz Fanon’s phrase – and it circulates, changes hands, is reproduced, enlarged, cropped, captioned, displayed, filed in an album. On the other hand, it is very intimate, almost painfully so. If it is a portrait, and if the eyes look at the camera, then we have potentially the same feeling of intimacy of contact as when we meet someone’s eyes face to face. They are looking at us as if we were the person in front of them – or the person behind the camera, the one taking the photograph. The illusion is amplified if, as I have done from time to time with old portraits where the negatives are long since lost, we take a photograph of the photograph. Looking through the lens as you focus carefully, it feels almost as though you are facing the original subject in person, there before you, summoned up like a ghost.

My father died on 1 February 1985. His time of death was recorded as 7.30 p.m., I learned later, but he died in hospital, having suffered
a massive heart attack. So I imagine that he had been subjected to several attempts at resuscitation. He began to feel ill at around 4.30 p.m., on a visit to the supermarket in Henleaze. My mother spent time driving him (slowly, very slowly) from their house in Westbury-on-Trym to see the doctor in Shirehampton. They returned home, having seen or not seen the doctor, I don’t know, but not having had any help. My father felt terrible – he didn't know whether to sit up or lie down, or what to do. He got rapidly worse, and they finally called the ambulance. My mother didn’t go with him, though I think he was still conscious then. She remained in the house to look after my grandmother. Eventually she called a neighbour to granny-sit and followed the ambulance down to the Bristol Royal Infirmary, but I don’t think she saw my father alive again. My brother telephoned me at about 7.45 p.m. I remember most of all the conviction that I was in the wrong place: I had to go to Bristol. Nothing else mattered. I bundled my sons into their car seats (they were two and three years old and fast asleep) and we drove to Bristol at once – a two-and-a-half-hour journey. It’s strange, the impact of a death. I must have been totally self-absorbed, because when we got to Bristol and my eldest son woke and asked eagerly ‘Where’s Grandad?’ I couldn’t think what to say. I hadn’t expected that question.

In my own mind, trying to think through the shock during the course of that long journey, three things became perfectly clear. Decisions that had been forming, to do with my future academic work, where we should live, and my own political activism, suddenly clarified themselves. It was not a question of being brought up short and making time to consider important issues generally put to one side, though there must surely have been some sense that priorities had changed, rather it was just that there was no longer any need to doubt. What I should do became plain, all by itself. There really wasn’t a process of deciding. That was what was so striking about it. There is no slow-motion version I can give, indeed there is no narrative time at all. I wanted to travel to Bristol ‘instantly’. I mention the two and a half hours the journey must have taken, reminding myself perhaps that time did indeed elapse, but I suppose that in some sense I did transport myself from one place to the other in an instant, my body catching up with where my intention already was. And maybe the
process of deciding took ‘time’ – but it appeared to me to have been instantaneous.

My father’s death confirmed me in my political convictions. The period 1984–85 was the time of the miners’ strike and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher’s successful attempt to break the back of organised trade unionism in the UK once and for all and clear the way for privatisation, deregulation and the move away from the welfare state. It was also a time of intensified Cold War antagonisms and a real concern about the possibility of nuclear war, with a sharp escalation of the arms race. Cruise missiles were being installed in Europe, despite grassroots opposition. The Greenham Common Women’s Peace Camp had been established, and nuclear convoys were being tracked by protesters. The Ecology Party (later renamed the Green Party) had fielded 100 candidates in the 1983 General Election, including one in my own constituency, St Albans, and I had been active in the campaign. I was beginning to find my own way politically: prompted by the arrival of my two sons, politics suddenly seemed more important, activism a must.

My father had been an active supporter of the Liberal Party – and as a child I had delivered election leaflets with him – but I wasn’t drawn in that direction. My own activism had been motivated in part by the recognition of the Green Party as my political home. I was sympathetic to its anti-nuclear, almost pacifist, stance. Economically it was left wing, and yet there was more: a belief in the local, the face-to-face, alongside a concern for the global, and a commitment to ecology – a deep ecology, involving an attitude and comportment towards the world as whole. And it confirmed me in my desire to escape Thatcherism. By then we had been contemplating for a while a move to Wales – to Aberystwyth in particular – as a way of leaving behind the sterile and heartless environment England seemed to be becoming under Thatcher. There was no such thing, she proclaimed, as ‘society’: individual effort and ambition should be allowed free rein. Looking after each other was to encourage dependency, and social welfare was an invitation to the profligate poor to abnegate any sense of self-responsibility. Neo-liberal market economics was all. The state was to be ‘rolled back’ – except of course that a strong state was essential in certain circumstances: the Falklands War being
the prime example. Socialism, unionism, nationalised industry – these were ‘the enemy within’. In contrast, Wales was still, it seemed to us, based on different, what we thought of as more ‘civilised’, values of community and commitment. Culture, public service and community responsibilities were still taken seriously. People in Wales did not move every few years, following their careers; families remained in the same broad locality for generations. The sense of reciprocity and the need to compromise that went with a more settled commitment to place made for a different approach to life. And poetry, literature and art remained more central than money or possessions.

It also confirmed me in my decision to take a second undergraduate degree, a degree in the social sciences with the Open University. As a teenager, trying – as I thought at that stage in my life was necessary – to find my place in the world, the only thing I knew was that I wanted to find ‘the source of the world’, to use Fanon’s words again. I had no idea how to go about it. As to what I was going to ‘do’, what I was going to ‘be’, I knew nothing of the possibilities of an academic life, and nothing about the options of studying sociology or politics. I knew, so I thought, that I didn’t want to be a teacher like my parents: I could not see myself standing up in front of a class. The closest I could get to studying something that would feed my intellectual curiosity at that point seemed to be the natural sciences. To find the source of the world meant to engage with the big questions about life, the universe and everything – and the natural sciences, as I had been taught them, certainly did that. By then, my choices were fairly limited anyway. My qualifications led neatly to degrees in mathematics or physics; I had been persuaded against studying English and history alongside physics at ‘A’ level at school. It wouldn’t fit the timetable, for one thing. For another, it didn’t make sense in terms of university entrance requirements. My feeling that a broader, interdisciplinary approach would be more what I was interested in was not supported by the school. In the all-girls school I attended, it was taken for granted that a girl who could do science and maths should follow that track. It was also obvious to the school that anyone capable of it should be aiming for a place at Oxbridge, not at one of what were then the ‘new’ universities like Sussex or Keele, where disciplinary boundaries were no longer sacrosanct and exploration and innovation were encouraged. And of
course, it was good for the school’s recruitment to be able to boast of the number of girls it sent on to Oxford and Cambridge. I did not have the self-confidence to make a stand on my own against these views, and there was no one I could turn to with the experience to support me – and of course, to be regarded as capable of getting a place at a prestigious university was flattering too. So, bowing to the inevitable, I applied to Oxford to read for a physics degree.

I had a wonderful time at Oxford. I punted on the river Cherwell, partied, and latterly, and rather briefly, spent ten weeks in my final year studying in the libraries in preparation for my examinations. But almost as soon as I had started at St Anne’s, I realised my mistake: physics was not for me. We were spending our time reworking the physics I had already been taught, and whereas my physics mistress at school had taken us through the subject by following the sense of curiosity and adventure generated by the puzzles posed by trying to grasp the world, at college we focused in our first year on the detailed mathematical expression of the solutions that had been posited. My friends were historians, philosophers, political theorists – that was what I should have been doing. They were the ones encountering interesting new ideas and challenging debates. And my other enthusiasm, first fostered by a perceptive English teacher at school and many years as a season ticket-holder at the Bristol Old Vic, was in drama. At St Anne’s, two of us set up a drama group in college and built a stage, and I played a series of parts in theatrical productions put on elsewhere. A change of course from physics to philosophy, politics and economics, or even to psychology and philosophy, was not countenanced by the college authorities: what I wanted to do was too difficult a move to make within the time span of my three-year grant, and there was not the tutorial support necessary. I had to continue and complete my physics degree, which I did. I attended sessions on the history of science in a basement room filled with astrolabes, and incomprehensibly dense lectures on the philosophy of science by Rom Harré. I took copious notes in a mathematical language I can no longer understand in lectures on nuclear physics and solid state electronics.

In my final year, quite unexpectedly, I recaptured the interest in the subject that I thought I had lost. Suddenly we were no longer
putting the mathematical underpinnings to ideas to which we had been introduced before, but rather reaching the boundaries of knowledge in nuclear, particle and high-energy physics. And what became apparent was the way in which knowledge was not what it was all about. No longer were we looking to find out what was happening in some world of which we were objective observers – objects looking at objects. Rather, we were attempting to think up pictures or models that would help us imagine what might be going on – and more than one picture seemed to be necessary. The world was not fathomable in one image. And, indeed, the world was not fathomable, full stop. It was not ‘out there’, waiting to be ‘discovered’: we were part of it and our observations as scientists changed the world we were observing. This was heady and exciting stuff, and my tutorial sessions in the eighteenth-century rooms of Christchurch College were purposeful and invigorating. The insights from that time continue to inform my theoretical orientation now, in a way that studying philosophy and politics in a very traditional context would never have done.

It was many years later that I had the opportunity to make the change of course I had tried to make at Oxford. My eldest son had just been born, and I had been made redundant from my job shortly before his arrival. After several fruitless attempts to find a similar job elsewhere, I finally began to look at the possibility of returning to study. The Open University proved the ideal institution for this move. It admits anyone and everyone – no questions asked, no qualifications required – that’s one part of what ‘Open’ means. Its teaching is through course units sent out in the post, with complementary television broadcasts and radio programmes, monthly tutorial meetings held on Saturdays, and summer schools. It prides itself on being open in other ways too – to ideas of all kinds and to a range of teaching methods. It was the only option available logistically, since with young children there was no way I could get to any of the local universities, but it turned out that it could not have been more suited to what I wanted to do. I began with a foundation course in the social sciences – and immediately it was like coming home intellectually. This was where I had wanted to be. The teaching of Stuart Hall in particular was an absolute inspiration. Encountering Marxism for the first time was extraordinary: why had I not come across this before? Conversations suddenly made sense for
the first time. It was amazing. And at that point I knew that I would like to carry on – to do research. I went to see a university counsellor about it at one of the summer schools. I told him what I was thinking, and, bless him, his response was ‘I don’t see why not.’

At the time of my father’s death, this was in the future, though: I registered for my first Open University course in March 1985. We stayed in Bristol for a fortnight or so after his death, dealing with the bureaucracy, organising the funeral and trying to support my mother and explain to the children what had happened. The funeral service was well attended: my father’s work as a head teacher, hugely supportive of his students and staff and innovative in his approach, was widely respected. But then came the bombshell. During one of the many quiet conversations that took place over those weeks, my mother mentioned, almost in passing, two things, both to me totally astonishing, that threw into turmoil the memories I thought I had of my small, contented, ‘normal’ childhood. She told me that my father had been married before: my mother was his second wife. And she told me that his father – my grandfather – had disappeared, walked out on his wife and child, when my father was in his teens. None of this had I ever so much as suspected. I knew, or so I thought, that both my grandfathers were dead. Now it turned out that no one knew whether my father’s father was alive or dead. I knew that my parents were very much in love, and their wedding photograph showed my mother looking young and beautiful in a dashing 1940s hat and dark dress. They had been married in a Registry Office, but of course it had never occurred to me that that was because, as a divorcee, my father couldn’t remarry in a church. I had thought that it was just his beliefs – his atheism – that led them to avoid a church wedding. And I had arranged that my own wedding would be in a Registry Office too.

Nothing my father said on that occasion, or indeed any other, led me to suspect that he had more experience of marriage as an institution than I thought. Whole areas of my childhood, and whole undercurrents of the shame and secrecy that divorce entailed in those days, had been hidden from me – or, rather, not so much hidden, since I never thought that anything was mysterious or concealed, but just not known about. Children are logical beings, and they opt for the straightforward: they do not question what seems obvious. My
mother’s quiet sessions in the bedroom sorting pennies into sections of a small blue cash box to try to stretch the weekly housekeeping was not just that my father’s pay as a head teacher was low, but that he had to send regular payments to his ex-wife; my father’s locked metal box kept under the bed wasn’t just because he was well organised and tidy: this was where the documents relating to the divorce and the maintenance payments were kept; his lack of a university education was not through choice, but because his father had refused to support him; their move to Bristol from Lytham when my father got his first teaching job was not just a preference for the West Country over the North, where they were both from, but in part to escape contact with his former wife; and an absence in my childhood world of my parents entertaining friends and family and visiting relations in Lytham was not just because they were both only children: the reticence and diffidence it reflected could be traced in part to their situation.

This is how, eventually, I came to have a photograph of my paternal grandfather. Faced with the news that no one knew what had become of my grandfather, I determined to find out. There was a blind spot in my childhood – in my sense of self – and I wanted to fill it in. My grandfather could not be allowed to just disappear. My father had made no attempt to trace him: he had been a violent husband, and my father’s young life had been spent protecting his mother from that violence. But I needed to know more. How could I understand my father and his all too violent concern for me if I did not know more of his father? It was not difficult to trace him, the missing grandfather. Absurd in a way, since we seem to spend all our lives trying to piece together traces of people we are close to in the hope of finding out who they – and we – are. Searches of the Register of Deaths in Somerset House showed that he had died when I was twelve. I managed to trace more of the family history – motivated now by all the questions I had failed to ask as a child, I combed the records for all branches of the family, on my mother’s side as well, but in particular I traced those who had registered my grandfather’s death. It turned out that he had gone back to his relations from Worcestershire, by then living in Birmingham. Finally, I tracked down the current phone number of a second cousin, who confirmed that he had known my grandfather in his later years, and who sent me a copy of a family
change and the politics of certainty

photograph. There was more – hints of a bigamous relationship and further children. I was offered the phone number of another cousin who would be able to tell me more. But there my curiosity ended. I’m not sure why. Maybe my seemingly endless trawling through the records was a little too disembodied: I could face the intellectual challenge of piecing together the fragments of family history from the archives. What I couldn’t face was the prospect of an actual, physical encounter. I visited my grandfather’s grave in Birmingham, and left flowers, alongside flowers left by someone else: I was not the only visitor to his grave. And I filed the photograph. I’m not sure it meant that much to me in the end. I wonder now why I had never asked before – at home, as a child – to see his photograph. Of course, there was no such photograph, but I do wonder what would have been the outcome had I asked the question and been told the answer, before my father’s death.

Family photographs are brutally torn from their context and displayed for all to gaze on when tragedy strikes. When someone is missing, or when they are the victim of a crime, a family snapshot will be reproduced in newspapers or on missing-person posters – or, in the case of children missing in the United States in the past, on milk cartons. If the disappearance is part of a larger-scale catastrophe – the collapse of the World Trade Center in New York in 2001, or the Asian tsunami of 2004, for example – the images will be displayed alongside those of other people’s missing friends and relations. When large-scale disappearances are orchestrated by a tyrannical regime, blown-up pictures of those abducted and tortured are held aloft by people protesting the disappearances in demonstrations and marches.

Often genocidal regimes will document their practices, strangely enough, by photographing those they incarcerate or kill as part of the bureaucracy of genocide. Such was the case in Pol Pot’s Cambodia and in Nazi Germany, for example. Even in liberal democracies, the mug shot has its function in recording suspects and criminals as well as controlling populations and their movements more generally through identity cards, passports and other documents. And when photography first became available it provided a means for administrators to record the features of different groups of people (the poor or the
deviant, for example), a technique soon taken up by anthropologists and travellers keen to capture the images of exotic peoples.

I am working at the moment on a book entitled ‘Missing Persons’. I thought I was working on a book about the portrait photograph, but the motif of the missing kept returning to haunt and distort that book. It was only belatedly that it occurred to me that I had a personal reason for my interest in this area, albeit in a very attenuated way. Most of those ‘missing’ whose stories I examine or will examine in the book are heartbreaking and traumatic in a way my own most definitely is not: I look at the missing in New York after September 11, and in London in the aftermath of the July 2005 bombings, and in Argentina. The first two are difficult enough, but in the case of the missing in Argentina (and other countries in Latin America), not only were people ‘disappeared’, but this happened in a context of fear, denial and silencing that made the suffering of those searching for relatives much worse. It is only now, some twenty years later, that many of the most difficult stories are beginning to emerge: stories, for example, of the children of the missing who were seized by those who had abducted their parents and adopted by families connected to or involved in the military regimes. It is only now that some of them have discovered their ‘origins’ and been reunited with their surviving blood relatives.

There is another way, of course, of thinking about our abiding interest in what I have just described as the heartbreaking and the traumatic. Our conversations, as well as our newspapers and news broadcasts, are full of tales of dreadful or even devastating events that happen to others. As I have argued in my other writing, events we call traumatic provide an opening for us to prise open the systems of oppression and depersonalisation that we live under – that we produce and reproduce for ourselves, of course: no one else is there to take responsibility. It is probably a mistake to highlight the dramatic and the overwhelming, though: trauma is not absent from everyday exploitation. It is perhaps at the everyday level that it is most amenable to challenge, and at this level that finding a different way is most important. One of the most interesting aspects of the aftermath of the bombings in London a couple of years ago was the way in which people helped each other. While regulations prevented the
emergency services from attending the scene of the events until it could be confirmed that there was no further danger of explosions or risk of biological or chemical contamination, the people on the trains, and the train drivers, stayed with the injured, talking to them and helping where they could. We are encouraged to leave response to the emergency services, and accused of ‘rubber-necking’ when we don’t, but it seems that the capacity to respond – person-to-person – remains.

It has taken a long time, surprisingly enough, for me to realise that an abiding concern in all my research from the start has been the question of the instrumentalisation or commodification of life. And it has taken perceptive friends to point this out to me. In my doctoral thesis, this concern with the instrumentalisation of life was expressed through the term ‘technologisation’. In my discussion of famine, I argued that technical solutions to famine missed the point: to adopt a technical solution was to conceal the way that famines often arise through deliberate actions or inaction of people who are aware of what this will lead to. Famines are not so much a failure of a social or economic system, but rather its product – in some sense, they are a sign of its success. They are in large part the outcome of a system that enables the private ownership of the means of subsistence; people starve because they are dispossessed of the earth, if you like, not because of some natural calamity. And in a large part the aid that is offered to famine ‘victims’ compounds the error: people are treated as what philosopher Giorgio Agamben has aptly called ‘bare life’. Their lives are ‘saved’, but nothing is done to enable them to reinstate the way of life that was theirs before exploitation or brute force deprived them of it. They have no voice in the way in which they are helped; they are assumed to be helpless and apolitical. We judge what is best for them.

A similar approach is found in the treatment today of ‘victims’ of what we call terrorist attacks. There is no doubt of course that as far as those who carry out the attacks are concerned, for the most part at least, it does not matter who precisely is injured or killed in the attack. More often than not, it does not even matter what nationality, religious affiliation or class the victims might have. This disregard for the particularities of personhood is repeated by the authorities who deal with the aftermath of such attacks. We find, for example, to return to the London bombings, that many if not all victims were treated as
potential perpetrators – assumed guilty until proven innocent – and relatives and friends were deliberately kept in the dark about the fate of those missing for days on end, despite the obvious distress this caused. In New York, victims of the Trade Center attacks were co-opted into the Bush administration’s campaign of vengeance and retribution against Afghanistan, and later Iraq. Their consent, or the consent of their families to this use of their names – to their invocation as heroes who sacrificed their lives for the nation in the newly declared war on terror – was not sought. They were treated not as persons with diverse political views but as lives lost, lives belonging to the nation-state.

Treatment of persons in this way – as objects – makes me angry, and motivates me to examine the system of social and political relations of which this treatment is a part. I am angry on behalf of my grandmother, whose life was constrained by her treatment – and that of her husband – as objects to be disposed of or used. I am angry on behalf of my father, whose childhood and later life were restrained by the way in which he was unable to admit to who he was. But both of them tried to find another way, and to some degree they both succeeded. My grandmother made a life for herself that had its own integrity and purpose. She didn’t give up on her commitment to my grandfather, and she adapted, and flourished, in whatever situation she found herself. She didn’t compromise on her strength or her independence. My father devoted himself to his students. He once described his work with children with what these days are called learning difficulties as an attempt to discover, as one might with a machine, what had gone wrong and hence how to put it right. But his work belied this approach. Throughout my childhood, his pupils would call him at home to seek help – they would come round to the house, and he would go to them. He insisted that the system be adaptable, and fought against regulations that prevented him from doing what he thought would be best for each person. And every Christmas, he would carefully choose and wrap individual presents for each of his staff. His funeral was testament to the regard in which he was held – as a person.

It is no longer my aim, as it once was, to seek the origin of the world. The desire that motivates my work now is a desire to contest
the way in which people become objects among other objects. At the end of *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon remarks that he wants ‘only this: That the tool never possess the man. That the enslavement of man by man cease forever. That is, of one by another … Why not the quite simple attempt to touch the other, to feel the other, to explain the other to myself?’8 In Marx’s analysis of alienation, Foucault’s description of disciplinary practices and technologisation, and Derrida’s call for a justice beyond the law, a justice answerable to the absolutely other, we find a series of ways of approaching this question.9 In my work at the moment I am approaching it through an analysis of the way in which ‘personhood’ as such is missing in today’s politics. For me injustice lies in the objectification of human lives – the treatment of people by each other as nothing more than identical figures in a population that is to be administered or made secure, a treatment sometimes so rule-bound and heartless that it has no space for exceptions, for difference, for concessions, for understanding and, importantly, for the acknowledgement of the impossibility of ever fully understanding.

It is this impossibility of full understanding that is perhaps most important here. As my friend and co-author Véronique Pin-Fat often reminds me, the person as such must and always does remain missing. In the process of attempting to write this account of how my intellectual pursuits might relate to my life more broadly – to draw back some of the veils that we normally, as academics, draw over such things – something has changed. Prompted by Naeem Inayatullah, my extraordinary editor, to delve more and more into aspects that I wanted to move past quickly, I have come to understand my own motivations and limitations more closely. However, I still do not in any sense fully grasp what I am about, or who I am; in any case, as my student Marie Suetsugu relates in her doctoral thesis – itself an attempt to transgress the boundaries between the academic and the personal – in telling an autobiographical story we are necessarily concealing as well as revealing.10 In the Lacanian sense I suppose, the veils do not conceal anything but the fact that behind the veils there is nothing: the person is missing.11 As I write this, it seems that a more modest motivation than that I identified just now is appropriate: not the desire to somehow achieve a world where the tool never possesses the man, but rather what Fanon describes, maybe somewhat disingenuously,
as the ‘quite simple attempt’, on an everyday level, to make time for the endeavour to attend to and to open to the ‘other’ – and the other within the self – alongside an appreciation, and a willing assumption, of the impossibility of ever succeeding.\(^{12}\) The anger dissipates, to give place to, or, more appropriately perhaps, to give birth to, a more tempered and more careful sensibility.

A few days ago, my mother showed me a letter, written to her by my father shortly after my brother had been born. My brother was premature, and initially not expected to survive. The letter was touching, full of my father’s love for his wife and his six-year-old daughter – he was looking after me alone, presumably for the first time, and had just tucked me up in bed – and hope for his new son. He spoke of his plans for the future, for the move back to Bristol from Darlington that the family was about to make, how sometimes he felt he wanted to push things on, while at others he thought he should let them take their course. He wondered how things would turn out.

The letter showed me a father I had hardly known: reflective, emotional, full of feeling. It also showed him as an intellectual: I remembered the books, few in number, but challenging and wide-ranging, on his shelves. He had been too diffident to parade his intellect at home. I am my father’s daughter, nothing more, despite any feeling of having made my own route in the world. And, possibly, hopefully, I am my father’s daughter in other ways too. That’s how things have turned out, in one small area at least.

_Aberystwyth, 2007_

Notes

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Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 231.


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