

***FANON AND THE POSSIBILITY OF POSTCOLONIAL CRITICAL
IMAGINATION***

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Preface

The name sounds today like a spectre from another time and place, an emanation from a past at once so recent and yet so remote. The fate of his words is like an uncanny imitation of that which he famously assigned to the national bourgeoisie of the nascent postcolony: that of precocious demise; his claim on our attention “untimely ripped” from the tormented and mocking body of contemporary African history. I lay stress on the strange fate of Fanon’s name in the living drama of African history and thought, the virtual oblivion to which he has been consigned in these times of wonder in this place of his most passionate solicitude. For, of course, he is being fervently remembered and invoked in the service of other passions in other places. I have been chastised for distinguishing “our Fanon”, the Fanon of the postcolony, from the Fanon who titillates the minds and exercises the preoccupations of critics in these other places, the Fanon of “postcolonialism”. It is as if I meant by that distinction to be espousing a kind of possessive individualism with respect to the intellectual artifacts of the African world. Or even more crudely, laying down a residential-determinist criterion of validity in the interpretation of these artifacts. What I meant to signal was not indeed an unbridgeable chasm in geographies of understanding, still less an ethnoracial proprietorship of African works, but simply demonstrable differences in situations of reading, alternative hermeneutic circumstances, always the province of finite histories and particular spaces of political existence. Needless to say, that variety in idioms of reading obtains not simply between critics of the African world and those outside that world but indeed among members of the interpretive community of readers within the African world. But there is no denying the fact that there are situated differences, whatever their provenance may be, in the contemporary reception of Fanon’s work. A little detail will illustrate the point. The original blurb proposed for *Fanon’s Dialectic of Experience* began thus: “With the flowering of postcolonialism, we return to Frantz Fanon”. The “flowering” of postcolonialism? Would that locution come from the mouths of critics for whom the outcome of what this symposium calls the “African Revolution” and the predicament of the African postcolony are *their* principal preoccupation?

Concerning the “African Revolution” and the predicament of the postcolony, Frantz Fanon has sometimes been relegated to the status of an untruthful witness, his putative predictions contradicted by the actual course of events in African history. Or he seems to our contemporary eyes with their educated sobriety as an utterly irrelevant visionary, “the prophet of the black nirvana” according to Kofi Awoonor’s image of him and a putative epigone, an unmistakable Ghanaian writer, in *Comes the Voyager at Last* (91). Fanon’s dream of a “new humanity” irrevocably schooled by revolution in “the practice of action” strikes us today as the risible relic of one of those “orthodoxies of deliverance” satirized in Achebe’s *Anthills of the Savannah*. New orthodoxies of deliverance are abroad, though they ritually disown fealty to any doctrine whatever and swear to apprehend the real world and human necessities unfettered by the chains of ideology.

But it is not so much or simply the substance of things Fanon hoped for, say, the egalitarian, non-authoritarian socialist society of his latent dreams, that appears discredited today. Questionable in a more fundamental sense is what is taken by some to be the defining

grammar of his historical and critical vision, the principal terms of moral and political argument that accompany that vision and which would seem to bear a regrettable family resemblance to what Achille Mbembe sees as the dominant tradition of “African modes of self-writing”.

“African Modes of Self-Writing” offers a sweeping excoriation of two centuries of social thought in the African world for being driven by a debilitating historicism in the twin forms of “Afro-radicalism” and “the metaphysics of difference (*nativism*)”. The hallmark of these twin currents of thought, according to Mbembe is a fixation upon the three emblematic historical events of slavery, colonization, and apartheid construed as violent and wholly exogenous acts of radical evil. The name of this evil or rather triad of evils is the alienation of the African self from itself, its material dispossession, and spiritual degradation – the seizure of native soil and soul. And the redemptive enterprise mandated by this story of ruinous estrangement? Let the alienated self come home, the divided subject retrieve its ancient wholeness, the captive mind attain knowledge of itself. Into the service of this epic enterprise is to be pressed all thought and action. The “sole criterion for determining the legitimacy of an authentic African discourse”, complains Mbembe, is the degree to which that discourse contributes to this programme of emancipation, in the severely reduced meaning assigned to it by Afro-radical and nativist criticism. Mbembe could have cited as a prime exhibit of this politico-historicist reductionism the famous passage in *The Wretched of the Earth* regarding “the problem of truth” – a passage regularly quoted out of its dramatic narrative context – according to which “Truth is that which hurries on the break-up of the colonial regime” and *its* regime of truth (50).

In a footnote Mbembe does indeed place Fanon in the unholy family of those given to lamenting the alienation and deracination of the African self from its native essence. That picture of Fanon is echoed by other enemies of grand narratives, certainly enemies of “*the* narrative of liberation”, who see in him a votary of secular teleology with its abhorrence of contingency in “time’s body”, its depreciation of finite dramas of historical existence and the moral life. Such is David Scott’s criticism of Fanon (190-220). In place of epic enterprises of revolutionary disalienation, self-realization and homecoming, Scott, following Foucault’s notion of “practices of freedom”, vindicates the postcolonial subject’s “practices of *self-formation*” (206). Similarly, Mbembe endorses “current African imaginations of the self [that] are born out of disparate but often intersecting practices, the goal of which is not only to settle factual and moral disputes about the world but also to open the way for *self-styling*” (242).

But the most compelling yet problematic aspect of Mbembe’s brief against the historicist foundations of “Afro-radicalism” and “nativism” is what he charges them with evading, what they allegedly fail to do. The lamentable habit of disowning responsibility for the catastrophes befalling Africa, manifest in the prevailing rhetoric of exogenous ruination, is but a symptomatic expression of a deeper evasion. A related and more grievous sin of omission on the part of these discourses is that they renounced the “the possibility of a properly philosophical reflection on the African condition” (251), let alone on universal questions of being and time. In this politicist historicism, everything is reducible to power, its obnoxious theft by the enslavers and the imperialists and its just return to native hands. What place is left for other questions, even for other questions of power – to leave matters at the *merely* political – to say nothing of *the* question of power? Expelled from the purview of this tradition is any philosophical exploration of the African condition – “the most profoundly human condition”, according to Ayi Kwei Armah (“The Definitive Chaka 11) – as an instance of the human condition in history; any critical reflection on the metaphysics of human existence. (Mbembe can say this with a straight face in the teeth of such texts as Kwame Gyekye’s *Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical*

Reflections on the African Experience.) Such, to echo the title of Karl Popper's famous text, is the poverty of African historicism. In *Caliban's Reason*, Paget Henry has delivered kindred strictures on the Caribbean intellectual tradition. Henry thinks that under the duress of historical imperatives, Fanon valiantly tried but failed to break with this tradition and its restricted political preoccupations (68-89).

I am not unsympathetic to Mbembe's critical intentions, in particular his insistence on a philosophical attention to the reality of indigenous iniquity and responsibility for the African predicament within an overarching interpretation of the human condition in history. Nor am I unconcerned with the fundamental question of a tension between historicism on the one hand and political philosophy and metaphysics on the other. Still, I take it that Mbembe's is not the kind of critique of historicism that, with Leo Strauss (*What is Political Philosophy?*) and Emil Fackenheim, (*Metaphysics and Historicity*), erects an epistemological apartheid between the historical consciousness and political philosophy and metaphysics. I hear him as saying that knowledge of history, its terrible and obdurate effects, above all, the experience of crisis which is its hallmark and of which the African condition is replete, is and ought to be the occasion of language and thought regarding what Fanon called "human things" (WE 205). I hear in Mbembe's brief the voice of the Akan elders according to which "crisis is the occasion of the proverb". The proverb understood not as received precept, still less as dogma, but, with Kwame Gyekye and Kwesi Yankah, as the work of thought and language aroused by enigma. But if that is the case, if that is what Mbembe means to say, then what distinguishes him from the best in the tradition he so summarily dismisses?

The Native Forest and the Fifth Grove

Courageous tom-tom rider / is it true that you mistrust the native forest?

Aimé Césaire

The fifth grove is not a place of visible paths.

Ayi Kwei Armah

The most profoundly searching of the "anti-colonial" texts of the African world do not aver, as if possessed of a perverse will to self-renunciation, that the history of Africa is the history of its invaders; that the burden of history, imperial history, trumps all internal stories of historical existence, and that it *radically* frames all there is to be, all there is to be done and all there is to be known. That, contrary to Mbembe's caricature, is not their complaint. They say simply (?), with Stathis Kouvelakis and his understanding of the historical consciousness (8), that the effects of that history impose limits on being, action and knowledge. By virtue of that very plaintive knowledge of limits, however, they signal the human refusal of abject captivity to their dominion. For they wonder aloud what the world and the drama of human life would look like, what promises and predicaments they might proffer, were they ever unshackled from the constraints of a particular time and place, a particular historical circumstance. A coherent historicism is predicated, has to be predicated, on a consciousness of the possibility of freedom, intimations of what the nature of things might have been. Call this stance *critical historicism*.

Nor do the founding discourses of the African world say, or mean to say, that there was a fullness of being before the Fall, that we had no questions about the justice of the earth, no arguments among ourselves, or that the good is identical with what is our own, and that the

conquerors came and wrecked everything. No, that is not their claim. That is not what, to take a hallowed text in the canon, *Things Fall Apart*, says. True, a maligned idiom of the accursed nativist jeremiad, *déracinement*, can always be heard in these discourses. So it is that Damas laments “the hour of deracination” (*Pigments* 44), and Césaire sings with tragicomic exultation of “those who have known voyages only through uprootings (*déracinelements*)” (*Notebook* 65). But what is it, what is this cherished treasure lost to the vanquished world? The same Césaire says of this violated earth that it is “cast adrift from its *precious malignant purpose*” (61, emphasis added). “Precious malignant purpose”: That is Césaire’s name for the world we have lost. What, then, contrary to doctrines attributed to them in sweeping and fashionable denunciations of nativism, do these canonical African modes of self-writing ultimately want to say. Simply this: that our idioms of wondering and our local terms of disputation – native *partisan* universals – not our pristine and tearless purities, were dislocated, displaced, disparaged, made instrumental and subservient to the requirements of racial vindication and political litigation with the white man. Soyinka has called the results “the schemata of interrupted histories” (*Myth, Literature and the African World* x). It may be that even this claim or complaint is bogus. I mean this idea of the dislocation of native principles and procedures of moral argument, of the displacement of idioms of existential predicaments, as distinct from the idea of the alienation of substantive moral essences. It may be that even this idea is the false complaint of truly alienated intellectuals woefully ignorant of the effervescent dramas in which African peoples enact and have always enacted the essential tensions of human existence. But what this complaint does not and cannot foster is the dream of a “black nirvana”. For by virtue of that very complaint such discourses forswear the facile identification of the good with the indigenous, preferring to see in the native the occasion of questions and quests regarding the good. Call this stance *universalist nativism* or if you prefer *nativist universalism*. (See Ngugi, Parry and more recently Adéèkó for more nuanced understandings of nativism.)

A historicism cognizant of the constraints history has imposed on experience, thought and action but also of the possibilities it has repressed: subjugated, untried, misdirected possibilities of material and symbolic production. A nativism for which the vernacular bespeaks the promise and the agony of human universals. Together they inform the understandings that key figures in African thought have brought to bear on what Mbembe identifies as the three defining historical events of slavery, colonization, and apartheid. And together they make possible a vocabulary of moral and political judgment that transcends these events even as they inescapably testify to their fateful consequences. They make possible, that is to say, a postcolonial, or to invoke a synecdoche, a *postapartheid* critical imagination. What, then, is Frantz Fanon’s relation, manifest in his understanding of the colonial order and vision of decolonization, to this metacritical tradition of critical historicism and nativist universalism?

“This narrow world strewn with prohibitions”: Probing The “Farthest Meaning” of Fanon’s Spatial Metaphor

Mbembe is concerned to “reinterpret subjectivity as time” rather than motionless substance. With some qualifications Frantz Fanon would not have disapproved. For with Heidegger and Sartre and Marx before them, Fanon understood subjectivity and its constitutive principle, freedom, as time. Fanon associated freedom with human temporality, specifically with

our openness toward the future, such that we are not slaves of the past, any past. This is precisely how he framed the question of “alienation” and “disalienation” faced by the subject of racist culture in the Conclusion to *Black Skin, White Masks*:

The problem considered here is one of time (*temporalité*). Those black people and white people will be disalienated who refuse to let themselves be sealed in the materialized Tower of the Past. For many black persons, in other ways, disalienation will come into being through their refusal to accept the present as definitive (226).

And the penultimate utterance of the book proclaims: “I want the world to recognize with me the open door of every consciousness” (232).

It is this idea of freedom as time – Marx called it “the space of human development” (*Grundrisse* 708) – and not the desire for the recovery of the substantive virtues of a vanquished native self, that informs Fanon’s condemnation of the colonization of human existence and racist culture. Exemplifying the triad of “critique, norm, and utopia” (Sheila Benhabib) characteristic of visionary foundationalism as a critical enterprise, Fanon’s cry is this. In the “racial polity” as Charles Mills calls it in *Blackness Visible*, in a racist world order, a being destined for infinite horizons in the company of other beings apprehends itself as “walled in”, occupant of a “fixed position”, prisoner of a compulsory finitude (*Black Skin* 117, 211). Dwelling in that captive space, the challenge of our human temporality – our openness to the future and the possibility of self-constitution and self-revision, which accompanies it – withers away. This is the “lived experience of the black [subject]”, *l’expérience vécue du noir*, that the entire work and, more specifically, the fifth chapter, bemoans. And it is a denunciation different from the Romantic version of nativism. That version’s lament, to repeat, is this. The damage inflicted upon the African world by the triad of historical catastrophes – slavery, colonization, and apartheid – is damage done to native particulars in their wondrous uniqueness. For Fanon, by contrast, the damage consists in an “existential deviation” (14), a deviation from the regular predicaments of human intercourse, normal pathologies and prospects of the paths of liberty. Promises and tragedies native, according to Ben Okri’s book of aphorisms, to “a way of being free”. That is why the constituent chapters of the *Black Skin, White Masks* almost invariably open with an invocation of a human universal: the human, all-too-human drama of language, or of desire and recognition, or of existence-for-others. That invocation functions as an anaphora prefacing anguished accounts of the peculiar laws of language, of desire and recognition, and of existence-for-others in the “racial polity” and a racist world order. It signifies the visionary ontology in reference to which we may see the specific gravity of the proscriptions demanded by racist culture in an apartheid social order. Concerning the consequences of those proscriptions the protagonist of Césaire’s *Notebook* says of his grandfather, figure of the “old negritude”, “an evil Lord had for all eternity inscribed Thou Shall Not in his pelvic constitution” (79). Fanon’s protagonist, Fanon *as* protagonist, announces a revolt, in the brave accents of existentialist humanism, against every attempt to capture the horizons of a being that is, in any case, irrepressibly free.

“Concerning Violence”, the opening chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth*, takes up the existential phenomenology of *Black Skin, White Masks*, places it in a more explicitly determinate historical circumstance, the “colonial context”, and in so doing gives it a more robust political charge. (An exemplary instance, Paget Henry might say, of those occasions in Fanon’s critical imagination when the promise of an exploration of the *human* condition is botched and his historicism is seen “asserting itself at the heart of his existentialism” [81].) In an emblematic passage, part of a cluster of images in which domination as coercion is depicted as a spatial

relation, “Concerning Violence” calls the colonial order “this narrow world strewn with prohibitions”. And the text goes on to name apartheid as the quintessence of the colonial system’s “geographical ordering” with its obdurate “system of compartments” and the “dividing line” that sets apart the spheres of existence of two collectivities in “a motionless Manicheistic world” (37-38, 51).

But does this rhetoric of space do more than describe and denounce the social order of what David Theo Goldberg calls “racialized space” (*Racist Culture* 185), the material foundations of “a partitioned social ontology”, according to Charles Mills’s account of the “racial polity” (7)? Or what Lucius Outlaw Jr., writing of American “racial apartheid”, refers to as “sharply drawn, tightly structured, and forcefully maintained race-focussed realities of daily life and the scripted limitations on the futures of colored folk” (xi)? Could it be that it gestures at something more than the “lines of force” (38) – the physics and metaphysics of the racial polity – from which the enterprise of revolutionary decolonization will take its bearings? Does it call for something more than a nationalist politics of repossession of power understood as re-conquest of space. What is the “farthest meaning” of Fanon’s rhetoric of space?

I borrow the phrase the “farthest meaning” from “The Return” chapter of Ayi Kwei Armah’s *Two Thousand Seasons*. There, the quest for meaning, more specifically the meaning of “the way”, is depicted as the journeying mind’s movement through three circles of understanding: the closer meaning, the closest meaning, and the farthest meaning (149). I invoke that text to honour the fact that this year marks the thirtieth anniversary of the publication of that monument of the African narrative imagination. And also because I see its author, Ayi Kwei, as Fanon’s spirit companion. Exemplars of the idiosyncratic and the paradoxical, the one, Fanon, gives “history and, above all, *historicity*” (*Black Skin* 112), its due but demands and practices a release from its empire. The other, Armah, has his narrators summon us to remember “*our way*”. But in what may be misconstrued as radical nativism gone incongruously imperial, the same narrators invoke “*our way*” not indeed as a radical particular but rather as a possible and choice-worthy instantiation of “*the way*”, a human universal wrested from history. Wrested from it in the teeth of its recurrent and indelible “scene of carnage”; in spite of the circumstance that “the foundations have been assaulted and destroyed” (8, 204). And in the idea of the “farthest meaning” evoked in that scene of interpretation in “The Return” chapter, that “conversation of discovery” regarding not only the ends of historical action but also the meaning of meaning itself (148), I see a cautionary tale. What might that be? An invitation to attend to words and things beyond what is ordained by their immediate occasion and the most impelling necessities they address or appear to address. So it is with Fanon’s rhetoric of space. Perhaps that rhetoric, probed for its “farthest meaning”, might reveal Fanon not as the notorious advocate of revolutionary, even nihilistic, violence, as some earlier and now post-9/11 assessments would have it, but as a figure of the immanent criticism of the ends, outcome and self-understanding of the “African revolution”.

You might have guessed my answer to my own question. In that emblematic spatial metaphor – “this narrow world strewn with prohibitions” – and its cognates, it now seems to me, Fanon is addressing something more grievous than the power relations of apartheid understood as the quintessence of the colonial-racial order. He speaking more profoundly of the brutally narrowed compass and categories of our moral and political argument, reasoning, and imagination, from the moment the salient and defining feature of our being becomes our ascribed racial identity and membership. The inequities and iniquities wreaked in virtue of the racial polity’s partitioned space are no small matter. But Fanon hints at something no less grave and

seldom commented on: the perceptual enclosure, the restricted picture of the world which the “racialization of thought” threatens to foist on us, the severe constriction of the space and shapes of our moral and even political consciousness. This, in an enlarged sense, is what Fanon meant when he said of colonial domination that it is “total and simplifying” (*The Wretched of the Earth* 236). Of the archetype of that domination, apartheid, Bessie Head wrote in a similar vein that it “kept everything in its place.”

See apartheid, then, as something more than an extreme order of separation and exclusion, one made palpably manifest in space. Call apartheid a metaphor for a certain family of obdurate habits of mind and attitudes to the world: an insistence on isolate particulars, a refusal of universals; contempt for the principle of connectedness, above all an inability or unwillingness to discern the human commonalities that, for better or for worse, reside in the discrete histories and cultures of diverse and divided communities, commonalities that precede and survive the brute and odious facts of social and political separations. The most ruinous consequence of apartheid, on this view, is what Soyinka in the early days of the postcolonial era called a “narrowness of vision”, a vision immured in the particularism of racial self-assertion, litigation and vindication. A prison house of language in which the totality of your moral vocabulary risks being colonized, compulsorily diverted from any concern with the human predicament as a *human* predicament; any solicitude for the dignity of the human person as a person, as opposed to being a member of a spurned and insurgent collectivity. A postapartheid moral consciousness would then be first and foremost, an exercise in the retrieval of these common human dramas and predicaments.

Of the founding figures and successor thinkers in oppositional race theory, Frantz Fanon is the principal architect of a unique and uniquely difficult tradition. That tradition may best be defined by negation. Let me characterize it as an audacious way of thinking the racialization of the world that, with unwavering consistency, eschews both the evasion and the hypostatizing of race. See what he accomplishes in the climactic fifth chapter of his first book, *Black Skin, White Masks*, the chapter entitled “The Lived Experience of the Black.” The most incisive and gut-wrenching account of “existence in black” (to borrow Lewis Gordon’s term) since W.E.B. Du Bois’s 1903 “Of Our Spiritual Strivings”, Fanon courageously confronts and rejects the reactive temptation to fashion out of the oppressive racialization of experience a foundational race-centered social and moral ontology. In that sense Fanon was the first to live up to the true meaning of what has come to be called “critical race theory.” With Fanon critical race theory is what it should be: an exercise in visionary realism. Despite the contingent obduracy of its object, critical race theory must be work that envisions, if not its own extinction, at least its eventual subordination to the task of exploring questions and problems and predicaments arguably far more central to the human condition in history. That is why Fanon, the first to name apartheid as archetype of the division of human experience, was also the first philosopher of a postapartheid, a truly postcolonial, moral universe. For the postapartheid is not something posterior to the epoch of formal apartheid. The postapartheid is the dissenting and ironic challenge to racial reasoning precisely in the epoch when it seems most incontestable. It is thus the prior and anticipatory analytic of a world not indeed oblivious to the historical reality of racialization, but insistent, all the same, on the poverty of a political morality founded on race.

The power of such a post-historicist response to historical reality and its significance for postcolonial criticism is thrown into relief if we consider it in relation to the stance of a more recent figure, say, Charles Mills, the important and quite original theorist of the “racial polity”. Mill is no race-fundamentalist. Nevertheless he draws inferences regarding the historical reality

of a racialized world that, although he invokes Fanon to his aid (*Blackness Visible* 12), are somewhat distinguishable from Fanon's position as I understand it. From an ostensibly kindred rhetoric of space and radical division of the social world Mills extracts divergent proposals. Taking the historical reality of a "partitioned social ontology" as "your foundation"(7), Mills poses a radical challenge to received Enlightenment moral and political philosophy. Out of the window goes "the apparent universality of the colorless normative." If an apartheid ontology of divided human kinds has always been a constitutive but unacknowledged feature of Western modernity, the world it fashioned, and its philosophical discourse, then, according to Mills, "the universalizing pretensions of Western philosophy" must be exposed. We must perform a "relativizing" operation upon what are purportedly "the problems of philosophy", or *the* predicaments of human existence. We must reveal these putative universals as "problems for particular groups" (9-10). So, relativize the counterfeit universal. Challenge the formal universalism of Western metaphysics, epistemology and ethics. But also repudiate the substantive aspects of Western, particularly liberal, moral ontology: "The atomic-individualist ontology is necessarily displaced by a social ontology in which races are significant sociopolitical actors". Since one's collective being, one's race, as Mills puts it, "is the most important thing about the citizens of such a polity" – and the racial polity is a global system – the standard units of moral and political inquiry, hence the canonical terms of political philosophy and ethics, to say nothing of existential analysis, are displaced (134). Outlaw similarly calls for a serious revision of political philosophy in light of the centrality of race in the constitution of the political community (*On Race and Philosophy* 134-157).

But the question, the question I believe Fanon would have posed is this? With what critical weapons shall we address native questions of brutality and injustice, questions relating to what Miriam Ba called "the *internal* ordering of our society with its absurd divisions"? What critical vocabulary is available to us in our ordinary language of moral and political judgment if we assent to the *radical* reform of moral and political philosophy proposed by Mills and others in the name of historical reality?

Only a postapartheid critical vision, one alive to this colourless banality of social evil, and the race-transcending possibilities of human goodness, can effectively address these transracial conditions of inhuman existence. If moral and political philosophy, with its allegedly abstract Lockeanism and abstract Kantianism, is guilty of "the evasion of race", as Mills charges, let us be careful that the new improved version does not surrender our critical judgment to the imperialism of race-centeredness. Let us be careful that in questioning and even jettisoning the standard texts of ethics, we do not dispossess ourselves of powerful weapons of criticism, weapons inescapably forged with a set of ethical standards and imperatives. It is the same Alain Locke who found race "a centre of meaning" that demands a rethinking of received principles, it is the same Locke who declared: "In dethroning our absolutes, we must take care not to exile our imperatives, for after all, we live by them" ()

We are likely to keep alive memory of these indispensable imperatives in our judgment of indigenous social and moral conditions if we follow Fanon, as he says in *Black Skin, White Masks*, in putting things in their proper places. Like today's critical- race theorists, Fanon was quite impressed by how an artifact, race, becomes an obdurate material social reality. Unlike some of today's theorists, Fanon unambiguously insisted that that artifact must not be permitted to provide the final vocabulary for our self-understanding and moral reasoning. All his principal texts speak with horror and fury and indeed sorrow of a thing that, notwithstanding the baneful efficacy with which it has re-ordered the world, does not deserve the place it has come to occupy

in human affairs. *Black Skin, White Masks* speaks of an “existential deviation” that has been foisted on the racially subjugated – a deviation from the native problems of being human. In a seemingly bizarre passage Fanon says: “The black is not a man. The black is black man.” This need not be read as a masculinist regret over racist culture’s emasculation of the black *man*. It is rather, I think, the fury of a universalist humanist at the fact of being fixated, penned to an unwilling particularity. You want to go about your business as a human being, but you are made to discover and to live by your blackness. “The black,” Fanon writes, “is aiming for the universal, but on the screen his black essence, his black ‘nature’ is kept intact”. And the author prays, screams, for the restoration of the racialized subject to “the universality inherent in the human condition”.

“West Indians and Africans” written three years later not only protests that racist culture is profoundly de-individualizing, that it deprives people of “any possibility of individual expression”, and that it imposes on them a false “principle of communion”. More seriously, Fanon sees the ascendancy of the very principle of race in the social world as an act of usurpation: The usurpation, in his words, by the “contingent” of the privileged place of what is “important,” what ought to be truly foundational. “The urgent thing,” he declares, “is to rediscover what is important beneath what is contingent” (*Toward the African Revolution* 17-18). And lastly, the famous Conclusion to *The Wretched of the Earth* re-awakens us to the unfinished business of the human condition in history put on hold, so to speak, by this long draining confrontation with race and racial apartheid.

Deviation, usurpation, interruption of distinctly and generically human preoccupations; closures and enclosures of the spaces of human being and human meaning; the forcible reduction of our political morality to the narrow horizons of what Cornell West in *Race Matters* calls “racial reasoning”; the daring call to work through and go beyond this narrow world and the impoverishing history that fashioned it. Such are the tropes of a resistant, visionary realism that informed Fanon’s understanding of decolonization and framed what Emmanuel Eze would call his “idea of a postracial future”.

It is that visionary realism which leads Fanon, in “Spontaneity: Its Strength and Weakness” (the second chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth*), to envisage a moment in the nascent postcolonial experience when our moral and political understanding undergoes a critical challenge. That account is a far cry from Achille Mbembe’s version of the narrative of decolonization dear to “Afro-radicalism”. According to that narrative, the battle for independence is fought under the aegis of a simple understanding of the divisions of the social world and, as a consequence, by a moral knowledge seemingly blessed with a transparency of its objects. According to Fanon’s dissenting version, even before the founding ceremonies of nationhood begin, even before the new ruling class enshrines its predatory ownership of the spoils in despotic edicts, the people could already sense the imminent dusk of a fleeting dawn. They detect in the preparation for independence the seedlings of a new form of inequity, a “national system of exploitation”. In that agonizing moment of recognition they are rudely disabused of their erstwhile all-too-simple understanding of social evil, one dictated by a racialized vision of the world. In that uncluttered vision bequeathed by the “primitive Manicheism of the colonizer”, and its “narrow world” moral reasoning, “the bad [white] people were on one side, and the good [black] on the other”. The discovery that “the iniquitous phenomenon of exploitation” is a transracial thing precipitates a new, potentially liberating understanding of the human condition in history. But the immediate consequence of that discovery is utterly unsettling. “The simple idyllic clarity of the beginning”, Fanon writes, is

“followed by a *penumbra* that bewilders the senses.” Such is the nature of the perceptual world which an incipient postapartheid apprehension of good and evil, so to speak, engenders. True, the recalcitrant albeit educated rationalist in Fanon would evoke and enjoin the desperate need of the nascent postcolonial mind – the dogged and irrepressible straining of the human mind – for “rational knowledge” amidst the ruins of clarity. But that labour of reason will have to keep faith with the indelible results of a disconcerting phenomenology of political and moral experience. (*The Wretched* 144-145, 227). In his dialectical vision of decolonization and postcolonial being, Fanon finds this traumatic supplanting of clarity by penumbra an auspicious occurrence. Why? Because unlike votaries of a “black nirvana” enamoured of the comforting enclosure of putative native certainties, “penumbra” signifies an infinitely enlarged existential and moral landscape. Close to the end of the same chapter Fanon applauds the resurgence and re-cognition of tensions and “contradictions” that have been repressed, censored, concealed from the public sphere, thanks to the obscuring simplicity mandated by “this narrow world”. And elsewhere, with the transformation of the family in the course of the Algerian revolution as an exemplary instance, Fanon writes that “the Revolution reopened all the problems: those of colonialism, but also those of the colonized society”, that is to say, problems native to human society (*A Dying Colonialism* 101). According to Fanon, then, the ultimate virtue of the revolution, the goal of historical action, is not the conquest of power but the resurrection of repressed questions and the disclosure of “unexpressed values” (109). In his approving depiction of such transformations, such a renewal of openness to untried possibilities, may be discerned what he meant by “true decolonization”.

True decolonization, the postapartheid, on this view, is ultimately not a matter of the final dawn of inter-racial justice, or of “exploring”, in the words of Derek Attridge and Rosemary Jolly (in their introduction to *Writing South Africa*), “possibilities of ethical cross-cultural intercourse”, although that is also terribly important. For supposing colonialism and its archetype, apartheid, are, in a more ethically significant sense, not so much a matter of racial dispossession and injustice but rather an event of disruption? What then? That is certainly a textually defensible reading of Fanon’s understanding of colonial history. In effect Fanon says in one and the same crucial paragraph in *The Wretched of the Earth* that colonialism effects not only a cultural dispossession but also a “dislocation” of the moral grammar of the subjugated people (236). This formulation anticipates Wole Soyinka’s account of the colonial condition as one of “interrupted history.” Even more strikingly, Fanon’s formulation foreshadows the Nigerian historian J. F. A. Ajayi’s audacious claim made in an essay published more than thirty years ago to the effect that colonialism was an episode in African history. When I first read that, I took it as the day-dream of a Romantic nationalist historian intent on wishing away the long-standing effects of colonialism. Today I am not so sure. Just think of the profound political and ethical implications of that idea. Colonialism as an episode in the life of a people, a rude interruption of the rhythms and idioms that sustain their local and common humanity, a digression from the terms of their moral argument with themselves, a distraction, a hell of a major distraction, yes, but a distraction all the same.

Supposing, then, that decolonization, the postapartheid radically construed, is not a matter of getting back stolen legacy, reclaiming patents and ownership rights; gaining recognition of equal worth for our customs and practices and beliefs; getting back our very own world and words, our gods and our shrines; getting back our title deeds to artifacts upon which others have through ruse and force affixed their names? What if it is not merely or principally a matter of moral litigation and restitution and distributive justice between “us” and “them”?

Supposing decolonization, the postapartheid, is first and foremost, a resumption of interrupted history. A resumption not indeed of some original purities and essences before the Fall, but of interrupted dramas, indigenous and universal dramas; above all a resumption of our dialogue with one another, with ourselves.

This is the most revolutionary moment in Fanon's portrait of decolonization, the moment when decolonization ceases to be strictly and restrictively anti-colonialist. Or rather the moment when it becomes most radically anti-colonialist precisely because its political, moral and cultural horizons cease to be concerned with white supremacy, white ethics, in a word with the white man. True decolonization, the postapartheid, would be signalled by the return of the inward eye upon the native and universal injuries of human existence.

Let me return to my question. With what critical vocabulary shall we address such internal tensions and predicaments? We may, of course, want to reject specific substantive features and ideals of standard (Western) ethics. We may, for example, want to dispense with the alleged atomistic individualism of the liberal view of the moral subject. We need not, in our substantive commitments, be Lockean or Kantian or Habermasian or even liberal. But metaethically, we cannot help, in our postcolonial political morality, being universalists. We cannot avoid justifying our critical attitudes in universalist terms. In "Universality in Culture" (her contribution to Martha Nussbaum's *For Love of Country: Debating the Limits of Patriotism*) Judith Butler asks regarding this presumption of the universality of universalism: "What kind of cultural imposition is it to claim that a Kantian may be found in every culture?" The answer is that no cultural imposition is entailed by this argument for the universality of universalism. Our native vernaculars regularly do that work. Not even our notorious despots and tormentors can afford to be *radical* relativists. In the case of Bariya Magazu, the Governor of Zamfara state, Ahmed Sani, no passionate local Kantian he, a shameless, disingenuous sophist in fact, appealed to the universal right of freedom of religion to justify the treatment meted out to the girl! So we are, for better or for worse, to universalism condemned. I would go even further. Not only is metaethical and axiological universalism inescapable. Perhaps some of the substantive moral ideals accredited to the West, such as that of the equal worth of every person, perhaps these are also human universals. Surely the idea of the equal worth of all persons is deeply ingrained in my native tongue. It is the unfulfilled yet recalcitrant standard in virtue of which violations of human dignity, however widespread and even habitual, can be named precisely as violations. It is not an exclusive doctrine of the European Enlightenment, one rendered suspect by the racist metaphysics that the Enlightenment also produced. Give Europe credit for giving formal and institutional expression to the common intuitions and dreams of humanity. But do not award the West exclusive proprietary rights.

The point of that distinction is always worth pressing home but especially so today in these darkened times. I mean the point about the universality of human dreams and idioms of freedom, justice, the equal dignity of all persons, and the West's indisputable success in giving flesh, albeit in terribly mangled shapes, to these dreams. In 1843 a certain German philosopher called Karl Marx, in his *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, called democracy "the generic constitution," the true universal of which all other forms of human association and governance are but poor species, travesties. Marx would not have been surprised to see ideals of democratic freedom invoked, albeit in variegated idioms, in every part of our human world.

By contrast, there are some rather strange friends of the party of humanity who would rather hoard the universal, assert, just like the famous pharmaceutical companies, exclusive patent rights over its blessings. An exemplary figure of such value-protectionism masquerading as a universalist is the author of *The Defeat of the Mind*, Alain Finkielkraut. He sees in every philosophy of decolonization without exception not the prefigurative postapartheid universalism I am eliciting from Fanon's vision but a ruinous, xenophobic particularism and moral relativism. This is because, according to Finkielkraut, universalist ideas like human rights, the value of individuality and democracy are peculiar to "the spiritual foundations of Europe." A relativist account of universalism, this. "Europe and Europe alone" imagined, invented and fostered this and that universal ideal. So goes Finkielkraut's mantra, a kind of minor but cacophonous overture to Samuel Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations*. But then the criticism of Third World failings is otiose, pointless. Why be surprised and offended by particularism, to say nothing of contempt for the dignity of the individual, as products of a peculiar "third world ideology"? Why be amazed that these people just can't get it, given the thesis of Western exceptionalism. Perhaps Ann Coulter's unvarnished response to terrorism is quite logical, a perfect way to deal with the radical Other: "Invade their countries, kill their leaders and convert them to Christianity". Invasion and killing – that's the easy part. They would not require the arduous procedures of Habermasian communicative ethics. But given the Finkielkrautian and Huntingtonian apartheid thesis of radical cultural incommensurability and enclosed language worlds, conversion may pose a problem, requiring as it does some possibility of mutual intelligibility!

Amazingly or perhaps I should say predictably, Frantz Fanon makes an appearance in Finkielkraut's rogues' gallery of reprehensible Third World enemies of the open society, universalism and, above all, individuality. With unblushing dishonesty Finkielkraut yanks out of its dialectical narrative context a passage in *The Wretched of the Earth* in which it is said that in the vortex of the national liberation struggle "individualism is the first to disappear" (47). For Finkielkraut this passage reveals that Fanon favoured "the Volk over a society of individuals." The passage, however, does not denounce just any "society of individuals," but quite specifically "the idea of a society of individuals where each person shuts himself up in his own subjectivity." It is that atomistic individualism which is supposedly discredited by the political ethics of the nascent imagined community. Finkielkraut must be unaware of the Fanon whose principal indictment against racist culture is that it does not recognize "the independence of persons". Racists discriminate against us all precisely because they do not discriminate among us at all. Racists, Fanon says again, place all of us "in the same bag." That is exactly why, with Fanon, we crave our individuality as much as our common humanity.

"Each person possesses an inviolability founded on justice that even the welfare of society as a whole cannot overrule". So says a celebrated voice in political philosophy. A Kantian-Rawlsian Fanon? That might be, as Fanon famously said of Marxist analysis and the colonial context, "slightly stretching" things. A left-universalist Fanon, proponent of a "new humanism", one "prefigured" in the ends and means of the national liberation struggle? A far less controversial designation. What is instructive is the extended but fraught family of impulses that gave birth to Fanon's putative substantive commitments. Out of a critical understanding of colonial history, the work of decolonization as an answer to that history, and a vision of the human condition that is at once the premise and

product of his understanding of both historical realities, he forged a view of individuality and community central to current debates in African thought. The substance of that view is no doubt contestable. Fanon's implicit view of individuality and community as well as his account of their status in the colonial context, the nascent postcolonial society and ultimately in *human* society, is subject to debate. While an Alan Finkelkraut will no doubt find Fanon's vindication of individuality surprising, to say the least, others may disapprove of it as an unfortunate legacy of his fealty to Enlightenment ideals. As for Fanon's evidently incongruous ode to the death of individualism, Kwame Gyekye would quite likely see it as a mistaken product of an untenable ideology fashionable in the "socialist interlude" of contemporary African history. That was the time, according to Gyekye, when Marxists and so-called "African socialists" proffered "a tendentious and distorted interpretation of the traditional African socioethical communitarian system" in the service of *their* political commitments (*Tradition and Modernity* 157). So the substance of Fanon's views on individuality and community is, as I say, eminently contestable. But the provenance of those views – its triple heritage in a critical response to the colonial experience, a certain reading of the incipient political morality forged in the vortex of decolonization, and a visionary-foundationalist image of human requirements – has, it seems to me, an emblematic significance. It points the way to overcoming the discursive apartheid dividing attention to anti-colonial political thought, studies in postcolonial theory, and critical investigations of social practices, values, belief systems and questions of human existence as local versions of human universals. For after Fanon, no one can say that questions of the democratic revolution, of human dignity and human rights, are posterior or alien to the enterprise of decolonization; for that enterprise must be understood, with him, as the decolonization of *human existence*. After Fanon, African criticism cannot feign ignorance of history. But neither can they plead captivity to its consequences.

Fanon is our pathfinder in that "conversation of discovery" whose mission is to gather the voices of history and common dreams into the work of the critical imagination.