



Is Fanon Relevant? Toward an Alternative Foreword to “The Damned of the Earth”

Nigel C. Gibson

Emerson College

nigel_gibson@emerson.edu

Abstract: By investigating Fanon’s relevance for whom and for what this article examines a question that concerns Homi Bhabha in his new foreword to *The Wretched of the Earth*. It reviews the history of *The Wretched* in English and subjects Bhabha’s foreword to critical review. The reader is reminded that Fanon challenges radical intellectuals to ground their work in the struggles of the damned of the earth. Aware of the physical and often existential gulf between intellectuals and those damned, Fanon proposes a living relationship that requires ongoing theoretic labor to work out new humanist concepts. If this was difficult during the anti-colonial period of Fanon’s time, how much more difficult is it in our current period of retrogression and what would Fanon possibly say today at a moment when his revolutionary presuppositions are apparently off the table?

The question in the title of my paper seems absurd, one and a half days into a two-day conference subtitled “Conversations with Fanon on the meaning of human emancipation.” The very title, “Conversations,” presupposes a Fanon alive, discussing the issues of relevance to human emancipation. What else, in other words, would Fanon be talking about and who is he talking to?

Perhaps we should also keep in mind Fanon’s now famous opening lines to “On National Culture”: “Each generation must discover its mission, fulfill it, or betray it.”

Since “la trahir” could also be translated as treason,¹ a much more political term than betrayal—a term that perhaps betrays Fanon’s own concern while reflecting on the anti-colonial revolutions—we might consider the betraying of Fanon.

“Is Fanon relevant?” also depends not only on what is indeed translated as relevant but on other perspectives such as relevant to what, for what and for whom? And in these conversations with Fanon what is

¹ Reminiscent of Julian Benda’s “Treason of the Intellectuals” (the Clerics).

Nigel Gibson is the director of the Honors Program and teaches at the Institute of Liberal Arts and Interdisciplinary Studies at Emerson College. He is also an Associate in Research at African-American Studies at Harvard University and the editor of the *Journal of Asian and African Studies*. His many published works include *Fanon and the Postcolonial Imagination* and the anthologies *Rethinking Fanon: The Continuing Dialogue*, *Adorno: A Critical Reader* and *Contested Terrains and Constructed Categories: Contemporary Africa in Focus*. His most recent work is *Challenging Hegemony: Social Movements and The Quest for a New Humanism in South Africa* and he is currently co-editing a volume on Steve Biko.

relevant to him?

Let me backtrack a bit since the conversations in English with Fanon have always been translated and since we have a new translation, by Richard Philcox, of his *Wretched of the Earth*.² Let us begin with a retrospective.

1. ON TRANSLATION AND APPEARANCES

Undergoing numerous printings totaling over one million copies, Constance Farrington's translation of *Les Damnés de la Terre* remained in print for over 40 years and has appeared in many formats in the U.S.

The original English translation of *Les Damnés* (1961) along with Jean-Paul Sartre's preface was published by *Présence Africaine* in 1963. It had an orange cover with black and white text and was called *The Damned*. On the back cover was the following quote from Sartre:

We have sown the wind; he is the whirlwind ... We were men at his expense, he makes himself man at ours: a different man; of higher quality.

In 1965, Grove Press repaginated this edition as *The Wretched of the Earth*. On the cover, beneath Fanon's name, the book was mistakenly labeled, "A Negro Psychoanalyst's study of the problem of racism and colonialism in the world today." The back cover had three quotes that would remain on the book for 30 years: the first from Sartre, "Have the courage to read this book," the second from Emile Capouya (*Saturday Review*), "*The Wretched of the Earth* is an explosion. Readers owe it to their education

² The Philcox translation (Boston: Grove Press, 2005) will be cited in-text as RP, and the Constance Farrington translation (Boston: Grove Press, 1968) as CF.

to study the whole of it"—advice rarely followed given the penchant for denigrating Fanon as a "philosopher of violence"—and the third from Alex Quaison-Sackey, the President of the U.N. General Assembly, "This is a book which must be read by all who wish to understand what it means to fight for freedom, equality and dignity." These powerful endorsements about the book's relevance remained until 2000.

The blurb on the back, which remained the basis for future publicity emphasizing Fanon's anger and his threat, read:

This is a book written in anger, this book by a leading spokesman of the revolution which won independence in Algeria a few years ago. But it is no mere diatribe against the white man or the West: Fanon's is a cold anger, his intelligence is uncompromising, and as a doctor and a psychiatrist who has treated the bodies and minds of his fellow men, his compassion is great. *The Wretched of the Earth* is a work that will shock many ... His work is a manifesto which is being read and studied throughout the emerging nations of the Third World.

Probably the most widely read version of the Farrington translation came out in the U.S. in the earth-shattering year of 1968 when Grove replaced the "Evergreen" with the "Black Cat" edition. The blurb was revised with the following added, which would remain unchanged for over thirty years:

It is a brilliant examination of the role of violence in effecting historical change which has served leaders of emerging nations as a veritable handbook of revolutionary practice and social organization.

Certainly there is a passion to *The Wretched*, which was written at breakneck speed as he was weakened by leukemia; but Fanon did not write *The Wretched* “in anger,” even though this is a view echoed in the new foreword and afterword of the 2005 edition. In fact a close reading of the text would have noted Fanon’s insistence that anger cannot sustain a political movement or a political argument. Instead he emphasized the importance of thinking, the “the force of intellect” in the development of political agency (CF 146), and “the power of ideology” (RP 95) that are needed because³ “if this pure, total brutality is not immediately contained it will, without fail, bring down the movement” (RP 95).

Perhaps the blurb was simply a marketing ploy but it had the effect of reinforcing the idea that all Fanon was about was violence. Additionally, the claim that Fanon’s ideas had served the leaders of “emerging nations” in Africa was not irrelevant but still far from true. On the African continent, Cabral in Guinea Bissau and Biko in South Africa, perhaps Fanon’s most important interlocutors, didn’t focus on violence. Of course, blurbs tend to be overblown but it might be said that the book frightened rather than served leaders of “emerging nations,” many of whom followed the path of degeneration and neocolonialism predicted in the book.

The 1968 Black Cat edition was a mass-market printing published at the height of the Black revolution in the U.S. It was cheap and widely available, going through countless printings and selling a million copies.

³ Because “ideology” is almost considered a swear word, rather than connected to ideation, I prefer Farrington’s less literal translation which nuances the power of the mind. Certainly by the term ideology he had in mind a critique which involved thought, clarification, enlightenment and consciousness. On Fanon’s notion of ideology see Nigel Gibson, “Beyond Manicheism: Dialectics in the thought of Frantz Fanon,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 4.3 (1999): pp. 337-364.

The cover, which remained unchanged from 1968 to 2000, displayed a turbulent orange and black image of the masses with Fanon’s name in green. Under his name appeared the words, “The handbook for the Black revolution that is changing the shape of the world.”

The cover was replaced in 2000 with a new design. It was now yellow with a purple and red title at the top and Fanon’s name in black type at the bottom. The modernist font was replaced by a more ethnic, “third world”-looking type. Gone was the front-page blurb labeling it a “handbook for revolution.”⁴ Gone were the quotes, and in the place of the old blurb about the book being “written in anger” was a more sober description that emphasized Fanon’s understanding of the people’s anger and his worldly impact as a revolutionary theorist. His historical influence on the U.S. Black Power movement was marked by a quote from the *Boston Globe*.

Thus the way the book now appears tells us something about Fanon’s [ir]relevance.

In *The Wretched’s* movement from “handbook of the Black revolution” to theoretical ground for Africana intellectuals, Fanon is positioned as a thinker who had a major impact on civil rights, anticolonialism, and black consciousness movements. Is Fanon simply a historical personage, a theorist of colonialism and racism, as Angela Davis is quoted as saying on the new edition? Is the book merely an artifact of the 1950s and 1960s anti-colonial and Black U.S. revolts, or does it also continue to have a concrete resonance among the contemporary “damned of the earth”? Indeed the blurb for the 2005 edition finally acknowledges that Fanon has something to say

⁴ Ballantine Books (in an arrangement with Grove) put out an edition in 1973 calling *The Wretched* “The Handbook of the Third World Revolution.” I don’t know if there were any other editions; I am working with what I have in my own library.

about the postcolonial world, remarking that the book predicts “postindependence disenfranchisement of the masses by the elite.” This postcolonial sensibility which names Fanon’s work a “classic” also has a price. For Fanon is now situated as a “founding father” of academic postcolonial theory, a relic from a previous age rather than a living thinker, revered and important but somewhat naïve. Consequently, the 2005 blurb does not mention revolution or any such totalizing terms used in the previous edition’s blurb, but speaks in a much quieter way of “historical change.” In short, the blurb reflects an ideological shift, which is also articulated in mainstream postcolonial studies.

2. FOREWORDS, PREFACES AND THE LAYERING OF OBFUSCATIONS

Fifty years after Nkrumah sought first the political kingdom and Ghana gained political independence Africa is considered a basket case. Poor, suffering and congenitally backward, Africa’s existence in the world has become naturalized—a suffering humanity long separated from the transforming processes of the anti-colonial struggles; its poverty is ontological, its riches are an opportunity for neocolonial exploitation. In this changed world, in what sense can Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth* be relevant? After all the foreword to the 2005 translation written by Harvard Professor Homi Bhabha was first excerpted in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* under the title “Is Frantz Fanon Still Relevant?”⁵

Why does *The Wretched* need a new introductory text? Not to mention that when added to Sartre’s preface it takes up more than 50 pages before we even get to Fanon’s text?

Even though Fanon reportedly said nothing after reading Sartre’s piece, at least

Fanon had asked Sartre to write a preface to *The Wretched*. Why now bog down and frame *The Wretched* with more prologues? Could it be that just as Sartre’s introduction was a kind of guarantor of authenticity, Bhabha’s 2005 foreword is a guarantor of continuing relevance? And thus we ask again, relevance for whom?

Fanon’s relevance is invoked, maintains Bhabha, “by liberal students, radical activists, human rights workers, cultural historians [and] international civil society *in the making*.” (B xvii) He speaks critically of the IMF and the World Bank and suggests that globalization has created a “global duality” that can be understood in terms of Fanon’s description of the Manichean structure of colonial society. Of course this is all fair enough, but it is not far enough, as it positions Fanon all too neatly in the discourses of development and human rights. Bhabha contends that Fanon puts a critical value on “economic and technological support for ‘underdeveloped regions’” (B xxvii), without questioning the issue of “development” and the technicist assumptions that lie under the professionalization of these discourses financially supported if not by the World Bank then by NGOs based in or funded from the North. The result is that more often than not liberal students and human rights organizations reproduce discourses of development (and elitism) which aid if not build upon the deactivation of grass-roots political agency. Allied to the liberal presumptions of “international civil society *in the making*,” which Fanon would consider cosmopolitan and elite, Fanon is no longer threatening.

However Bhabha has little interest in this kind of discussion since his project is the transformation of “development” and “economic terms of reference” into “those forceful and fragile ‘psycho-affective’ motivations and mutilations that drive our collective instinct for survival, nurture our ethical affiliations and ambivalences, and nourish our political desire for freedom” (B

⁵ Bhabha’s foreword is cited in-text as “B.”

xvii).⁶ This is not surprising given Bhabha's reading of *Black Skin, White Masks* but is it "relevant"?

For Bhabha the exploration of the psycho-affective "insistently frames [Fanon's] reflections on violence, decolonization, national consciousness, and humanism" (B xix). Thus channeling Fanon's relevance into "the psycho-affective realm" means that not only concrete political analyses are subverted, but that Fanon's politics is relegated to "nervous conditions and ... agitations of psycho-affectivity" (B xix)⁷—thereby debilitating and demobilizing political action.

Bhabha's reductive reading collapses Fanon's political analysis of the "phases" of colonialism and "timing" of decolonization, and moreover flattens Fanon's discussion of resistances to colonialism, forms of nationalist organization and their relationships to the urban and rural folk as well as the problematic of the middle class intellectuals: their unpreparedness, lack of intellectual clarity and detachment from the masses. Bhabha, in short, seems oblivious to the movement of *The Wretched* which heralds the "truth" of the unemployed and the damned, the revolutionary potential of the peasantry, the radicalism of lumpenproletariat and the work of the militants. It is a "truth" that Bhabha finds so absolutely outrageous that he cannot entertain Fanon's critique of the Manichean logic of colonialism and the reaction against it, and skips over Fanon's warnings about the breakdown of apparent truths, the betrayals, treason and the brutality of certainties.

When Fanon does mention "psycho-affective mutilations" in the *Wretched* he is

⁶ Later Bhabha speaks quite differently, not of the "transformation" of economic terms but of Fanon's "extension" of "Marxism toward a greater emphasis on the importance of psychological and cultural liberation" (B xxix).

⁷ It is not far from here to colonial ethno-psychology which considered anti-colonial revolts and the struggles of millions of people as pathologies.

speaking of the colonized intellectual's long circuitous road from colonial product to anti-colonial oracle. But rather than follow this trajectory, Bhabha finally dismisses *The Wretched* as a poem on the "the vicissitudes of violence." And Fanon as a "poet-politician," a mythmaker rather than a participant-theoretician of the revolution, hemmed in by a trail of violence.

If things were different I would have simply left Bhabha's forward to the gnawing criticism of the mice. But since we are to confront it every time we open Fanon's *Wretched*, it does frame Fanon. It is a frame-up. You can read it yourself and you can read my critique in *Social Identities*.⁸ But since the question of the role of the intellect and the relevance and irrelevance of the intellectual has been raised, I would like to consider an alternative to Bhabha's foreword.

3. WHO ARE INTELLECTUALS AND WHAT SHOULD THEY DO?

In the fourth chapter of *The Wretched*, "On National Culture," Fanon maps out the intellectual's experience as a dialectic of estrangement, collaboration, return or perhaps pseudo-return, and his/her role in the making of a national culture. He writes, "seeking to cling to the people," the intellectual tends to miss the point and instead "cling[s] to a veneer, a reflection." Philcox translates this action as "reification" (RP 160). The intellectual who has rejected colonialism fails to understand the motion of the anti-colonial struggle. In grasping only at externals of his/her culture, "the Sari becomes sacred" (CF 221) and in seeking to connect to the people's culture, the people

⁸ Nigel C. Gibson, "Relative Opacity: A New Translation of Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*—Mission Betrayed or Fulfilled," *Social Identities* 13.1 (Jan 2007): pp. 69-95. The first two sections of this paper are based on the *Social Identities* article.

are reified. Turning Georg Lukács⁹ around the issue here is false consciousness of the intellectuals mesmerized by “mummified fragments” and out of step with actual life of the struggle. Thus it is not surprising that the nationalist intellectual tends to behave like a common opportunist, trumpeting this or that aspect of a culture without really engaging its contradictions and the creative mutations of culture mutating in the struggle against colonialism. Schooled in colonialism but never having completely broken with its elite notions, never really connecting to the actual struggles of people on the ground, the intellectual swings from celebration of the people to a celebration of leaders, the African personality and the re-discovery of authentic ethnic culture.

Fanon develops his warning about the pitfalls of the intellectuals throughout *The Wretched*. The “Misadventures of National Consciousness” result not from an “objective dialectic” but are caused partly by the unpreparedness—indeed Fanon calls it the cowardice and ideological backwardness—of the nationalist intelligentsia and middle class. Schooled in bourgeois values, the nationalist intellectual often lives in an illusion that one could remain committed as an outside observer. In the colonial world, Fanon insists that there is no such privileged position. In fact do attempts to remain untouched by actual struggle produce in the intellectual a psycho-affective mutilation—the wish in other words, to be stateless, borderless, colorless, and angelic—a scholar in an elite academy?

In the second chapter of *The Wretched*, “The Grandeur and Weaknesses of Spontaneity,” Fanon writes of another group who has totally broken with colonialism. This

⁹ Georg Lukács, “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat,” in *History and Class Consciousness* (London: Merlin Press, 1971). On the relationship between Lukács and Fanon see Edward W. Said, “Travelling Theory Revisited,” in *Rethinking Fanon*, ed. Nigel C. Gibson (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1999).

breaking is painful and potentially suicidal but it is made in a social rather than individual context. Militants on the run, they are expelled from the nationalist parties and trade unions, and increasingly realize the importance of developing a liberatory ideology, they receive their political education in prisons and in the underground and they find protection in the shantytowns and marginal spaces outside the colonial city. It so happens that these militants are essential to the formation of a new relationship as local revolts become organized against colonialism. The growth of the grass roots radical local organizations emerges from the long discussions of the handful of militants inside what Fanon calls, “the structure of the people.” It is an embryonic political body of insurrection.

This group of intellectuals represents the truth of the Manichean situation. They cannot go back to their old lives but find a new community among the damned. Their role is to clarify and enlighten, to interpret the situation and moreover “nuance” the formally Manichean understanding that had so powerfully mobilized the people (RP 93). First the necessity of nuancing is a product of the colonizers’ change of tactics but moreover nuancing means confronting the brutality of thought that is created by years of colonial rule.

Thus the problematic of the intellectual is central to Fanon’s understanding of national liberation but at the same time, the conceptualization necessitates a complete rethinking of the role of the intellectual both as critic and as pedagogue (literary thinking while walking with another). As Marx put it in one of the other theses on Feuerbach, the educators need to be educated, and the militant intellectual’s education emanates from, in part, the truths that the damned of the earth know. The struggle over land, bread, water and freedom in sum necessitate the destruction of the colonial regime.

Thus to put oneself in the school of the

people is to break with the bourgeois, elite and individualistic conception of intellectual. Such rethinking has to get beyond the Manichean. The point is to shift the ground of reason: to join the people is not a Guevarist celebration about breaking ground with the peasants, it is the discovery that the landless think and are interested in working things out.

The radical intellectual who “comes down” as Fanon writes of Césaire in *Black Skin White Masks*,¹⁰ experiences the unsettling and frightening realization that joining the revolutionary movement brings enlightenment: upsetting the arrangements of the here and now and prefiguring new social relations. For such intellectuals, Fanon writes, “Gone are the cafes [and] the discussions about the coming elections.” Gone are the politics of intrigue and positioning. Instead, the militant intellectuals’ “ears hear the true voice of the country and their eyes see the great infinite misery of the people” (RP 78-79). They discover a “coherent people” and discussions about the power of ideology and the limitations of a politics based on reaction become a routine. This nuancing of political position “constitutes a danger and threatens popular solidarity” that has been built on a Manichean reaction. But, says Fanon, “disgusted by politics, the militant discovers a new field of politics. Just as resentment cannot sustain a war of liberation, the struggle itself uncovers unknown facts, brings to light new meanings and underlines contradictions that were camouflaged by this reality” (RP96). Without this praxis, he argues, independence is nothing but a carnival parade and a lot of hot air.

But it turns out that much of what is touted as national consciousness, as Pan-Africanism and African socialism, is a carnival with a lot of hot air. It turns out that

¹⁰ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, (Peau Noire, Masque Blanc, 1952), trans. Charles Lam Markman (Grove Press: Boston, 1967) p.195.

the demands for nationhood, for democracy and human rights become farce. When Fanon opens the third chapter of *The Wretched*, “The Trials and Tribulations of National Consciousness,” he parades the utter uselessness of the nationalist elite, the nationalist organization and its intelligentsia, including the more socialist and Pan-African minded. All the slogans and rhetoric of national unity, liberation and freedom falls away to reveal that the political kingdom is nothing other than a means to get rich.

But *The Wretched* also describes a cycle. Fanon’s dialectic of *The Wretched* is a deepening circle, always coming back to the same problem as the “thing” becomes “human,” becomes an historical protagonist through the very same process that it liberates itself. From a celebration of decolonization on its first page, to a critique of its misadventures and warnings, from an apparent praise of anti-colonial violence that has shaken up everything solid in the world, to the tragedies described in “Colonial Wars and Mental Disorders,” the issue is agency, its flaws and the reflection on its failures.

From the revolutionism of chapter two we thus face the misadventures of chapter three. The mass movement is sidelined and crushed. The militants from the anti-colonial struggle are co-opted or silenced. But whatever the power of Fanon’s prescient critique of the mimicry, huckstery and crude materialism of the national pseudo bourgeoisie, the degeneration of the nationalist party—increasingly authoritarian, unscrupulous and cynical (RP 111, CF 165)—“*the transformation of the militant into an informer*” (my emphasis, RP 125) and the contemptuous attitude toward the masses—the damned—it is not the end of *The Wretched*’s dialectic. Little by little there is realization by the people that the promises are threadbare and shell game is an “unspeakable” social “treason” (RP 94, CF 145). Little by little the “small number of up-

standing [or honest¹¹] intellectuals” (RP 121, CF 177), who distrust the race for jobs and handouts reappear. New struggles re-surface and explode and are beaten back. The honest intellectuals are imprisoned, the military takes over and demonstrations are crushed. It is the story of the postcolonial period.

In the conclusion to *Black Skin, White Masks* Fanon had taken a long quote from the *Eighteenth Brumaire* about the social revolution stripping itself of superstitions and finding its own content. In the *Eighteenth Brumaire* Marx had written about the difference between the speed of bourgeois revolution and the painstaking critical work of the proletarian revolution unmercifully derisive of the inadequacies, weaknesses and paltriness of the first attempts.

In the same sense we can consider the conclusion to *The Wretched* less as a call to arms than a call to Fanon’s comrades, that small group of those he calls honest or committed intellectuals, to work out new concepts. The painstaking analysis of the weaknesses and inadequacies of “independence” begins not only with a critique of elitism of the nationalist intelligentsia but also the technological obsessions among progressives (namely the latter’s belief in the administration of a technical solution to human problems) have in common patronizing and depoliticizing poor people: colonial and capitalist attitudes of time and “development” that are out of time and place but sadly remain in the dominant paradigms. On this note Homi Bhabha concludes his foreword with a quote from *The Wretched* (RP 135, mistakenly noted as p.122 in Bhabha’s foreword): “[T]ime must no longer be that of the moment or the next harvest but rather of the rest of the world.” On the same page Fanon articulates his idea of independence and nation building as a process that is quite in contrast to any

¹¹ Farrington translates *honnête* as “honest.”

technicist solution. The process is long and painstaking but it is a wonderful articulation of Fanon’s challenge to intellectuals and it is worth quoting in full. He writes:

In an undeveloped country experience proves that the important point is not that three hundred people understand and decide but that all understand and decide, even if it takes twice or three times as long. In fact the time it takes to explain, the time ‘lost’ humanizing the worker, will be made up in execution. People must know where they are going and why ... [T]his lucidity must remain deeply dialectical. The awakening of the people will not be achieved overnight; their rational commitment to the task of building the nation will be simple and straightforward; first of all, because the methods and channels of communication are still in the development stages; secondly, because the sense of time must no longer be that of the moment or the next harvest but rather the rest of the world; and finally, because the demoralization buried deep within the mind by colonization is still very much alive.

So.

4. WHAT’S RELEVANT TO FANON?

We were ready here for big and beautiful things, but what we had was our own black men hugging new paunches, scrambling to ask the white man to welcome them onto our backs. ... They came like men already grown fat and cynical with the eating of centuries of power.

—Armah, *The Beautiful Ones are Not Yet Born*

To speak of Fanon's relevancy and timeliness, perhaps we should be cognizant that our moment seems so far past Fanon's presuppositions, let alone his dialectic of revolution. What could Frantz Fanon possibly say to Africa at this moment when the revolutionary presuppositions are apparently off the table? So the question is not what can be "saved" in Fanon, but what can be saved in Africa that a revolutionary theoretician like Fanon could possibly speak to and that is so out of place with both the dominant World Bank "pro-poor" rhetoric and the postcolonial discourses concerned with hybrid émigré and cosmopolitan identities. The issue of reading Fanon today, then, is perhaps not about finding the moment of relevance in Fanon's text that corresponds with the world, but in searching for the moments where Fanon's text and the world do not correspond, and asking how Fanon, the revolutionary, would think and act in this period of retrogression. The issue is not so much about decentering Fanon but decentering the world. But even if *The Wretched* is out of place, or perhaps moreover out of joint with the hegemonic world, the point is to find, in a Fanonian sense, the truth in movements of the damned, the excluded and dehumanized.

For me, one place that Fanon's analysis has taken on a new concreteness is in post-apartheid South Africa. On one hand, it seems that the "reality" of neoliberal post-apartheid South Africa has simply been following Fanon's text after Mandela and Mbeki sought the political kingdom. By many accounts the South African economy is booming. The luxury car showrooms are buzzing and Aston Martins and Porsches are on back order. Alongside the white rich, Black Economic Empowerment has created record numbers of Black millionaires with strong political connections to the African National Congress. Yet despite all the hoopla, things have not improved for the bulk of the population. Alongside the

promises of housing, electricity, clean water and sanitation are evictions, cut-offs, and broken promises. Patience has run out and spontaneous revolts of the poor have erupted.

The depth of "Fanonian" critique is articulated, for example, in a remarkable and vibrant shackdwellers movement in Durban, propelled by those who have absolutely nothing, whose lives are a daily state of emergency and, in the most Fanonian sense, represent the truth, judging wealth not only by indoor plumbing, taps and toilets but also human dignity. The movement in the shacks calls itself a university because its members say that though they might be poor they "think their own struggles" and "are not poor in mind."¹²

When Fanon wrote in *The Wretched* that intellectuals needed to put themselves in the school of the people, he had in mind a grounding of new concepts in what the shack dweller intellectuals call the thinking that is done in the shack communities. This thinking, which emerges from reflecting about experience, is both pragmatic and critical. In the case of the shackdwellers' movement [Abahlali baseMjondolo], its leaders and intellectuals are truly organic to it. They live in the settlements, and this partly answers the problematic of separation of the intellectuals from the masses that preoccupied Fanon. But what of the activists at the other university which has become increasingly corporatized and exclusionary?

It is when activist academics make a commitment to work with the shackdwellers that they run directly into that university's administrators who first caution them about their career trajectory, then threaten them with legal proceedings and one way or another to dismiss them. This is exactly what has happened at the local University of Kwa-Zulu Natal where academ-

¹² S'bu Zikode, "The Third Force," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 41.1-2 (2006).

ics who have worked closely with Abahlali have come under enormous pressure, resulting in two of them leaving and a third fired from his job. This should not come as a surprise since the university's mission is grounded in the idea of becoming an exclusive world-class public institution, which means, of course, looking to the liberal Northern donors for legitimation. The thinking and presence of the shackdwellers are most definitely excluded from such lofty plans. In this situation it becomes difficult to work with both universities—the university of the shacks and the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal. One makes a choice or a choice is made for you.

These activist academics have been important in aiding the shackdwellers movement but it is crucial to avoid the pitfalls of social movement “resource mobilization” literature that overstates the role of “outsiders.”¹³

For Fanon, the intellectual who enrolls in the “school of the people”—marvelously articulated on the banners at shackdwellers marches, as the “University Of Kennedy Road” or the “University of Abahlali”—does not come empty handed. Fanon's point is that to appreciate the thinking of damned of the earth does not mean giving up the responsibility for the working out of ideas. Indeed to have the ears to hear, as Fanon puts it, intellectuals from outside must come to the school having cleared their heads of conceptions of “backwardness.” But this does not mean that they must come with empty heads. Conscious of their own thinking, they bring ideas, concepts, and learning that can aid the people's own self-understanding and thereby in a sense work to make themselves redundant.

¹³ Such a position is exemplified by the vanguardist Left but also among paternalistic liberals exemplified in the NGO community and leads (especially in the South African situation) to racist and classist thinking that poor and marginalized people can't organize and think for themselves. This is the clearing of the head of preconceived ideas that Fanon insists on.

This is exactly where the problematic begins. By reacting against their importance, the other danger is underestimating the role of the outside activists, who can put their expertise to the service of the people.

The activist academics in Durban insisted on this Fanonian¹⁴ position that the militant's work was to destroy the spirit of discouragement marginal people feel and to help them build their confidence in their own right to resist through discussions that explore viable modes of resistance. Having worked with and written about social movements in post-apartheid South Africa these activist academics brought a practical knowledge of the kind of movements that had been successful and those which had not. Turning the anthropological gaze on its head they became informants on how to engage with the state, how to express opposition, and helped to explain the problematics of donor funding and the NGO terrain.¹⁵ Rather than coming with preconceived agendas or research programs the activist academics were willing to spend time becoming active participants in the discussions that gave rise to and sustained the development of the movement. Their actions exemplify those of Fanon's committed intellectual, who uses knowledge snatched from the elite university or the technical college to help the self-understanding of the damned. From the perspective of the institutional elite university like the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal this is really incendiary, since universities (accredited through technical language and designed in Fanon's terms to “cheat the

¹⁴ On Fanon's challenge to intellectuals and his conception of political education see Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (Grove Press: New York, 1968) pp. 185-205 and Nigel Gibson, *Fanon: The Postcolonial Imagination* (Oxford: Polity Press, 2003), chapter 8, especially pp. 192-200.

¹⁵ Before his involvement, Pithouse had written the important piece “Solidarity, Cooption and Assimilation,” in Nigel C. Gibson (ed.) *Challenging Hegemony: Social Movements and the Quest for a New Humanism in Post-Apartheid South Africa*, (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2006).

people”¹⁶) consider this knowledge part of their intellectual property not to be shared with poor people who will use it to challenge the establishment, which includes the university itself. For these universities, in other words, knowledge, and therefore power, flow the other way. As Abahlali’s deputy President, Philani Zungu, understands:

Why are we not allowed to work with academics at the university? Why are academics at the university not allowed to work with the poor? The answer is clear. This democracy is not for us. We must stay silent so that this truth can be kept hidden. This democracy is for the rich.¹⁷

Thus the challenge to take the thinking of the damned seriously is about taking thought seriously. It is not simply Cabral’s point, echoing Lenin, that without revolutionary theory there can be no revolution. For Fanon, it is far more dialectical. It is the starting point to working out—as Fanon puts it in the conclusion to the *Wretched of the Earth*—“new concepts.”

5. TOWARD A CONCLUSION

Fanon’s relevance?

Perhaps a moral imperative as he puts it in his resignation from Blida hospital, “there comes a time when silence is dishonesty.”

“Come comrades ... let us re-examine the question of humanity.” He concludes *The Wretched*.

Always a man of action, the time is always now because it is always getting too late. The world is teetering between atomic

destruction and spiritual disintegration.

“Now let us leave this Europe and this America [which] has become a monster where the flaws, sickness, and inhumanity of Europe have reached frightening proportion.”

Can we say he’s wrong?

Now to take the step,

Now to stand up

Now to speak out

Now to change sides

Now to abandon old ways of thinking

Now to “start a new”

Now to “develop new ways thinking,” new understandings.

Now, toward a new humanism

For Fanon does not come with timeless truths.

¹⁶ Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, p.189.

¹⁷ Philani Zungu, “From Party Politics to Service Delivery to the Politics of the Poor” (<http://www.abahlali.org/node/304>).