

Relative Opacity: A New Translation of Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*—Mission Betrayed or Fulfilled?

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*Frantz Fanon's revolutionary text *The Wretched of the Earth* has had a major impact on English-speaking readers since it first appeared in translation in 1963. This article charts the shifting contextualization of the book as it has framed subsequent editions, culminating in an exploration of the most recent translation by Richard Philcox. By contrasting this translation of the book with previous versions, and also by critically examining the new forward by Homi K. Bhabha, the author explores Fanon's relevance to the current social and political world. He finds continued relevance for *The Wretched* in Fanon's quest to get beyond the manicheism that characterises the colonial and anti-colonial periods as well as the contemporary rhetoric of Bush and Bin Laden. The author argues that our engagement with Fanon should begin from his most critical insights into the postcolonial period and in his critique of the national bourgeoisie and postcolonial petit bourgeoisie, which is grounded in an engagement with Fanon as a living thinker.*

Chaque génération doit dans une relative opacité découvrir sa mission, la remplir ou la trahir. (Fanon)

A few generations of English speakers have often repeated Fanon's watchwords from his address to the Second Congress of Black Writers that 'Each generation must out of relative obscurity discover its mission, fulfill it, or betray it'. A whole new generation will instead be reading and quoting the following: 'Each generation must discover its mission, fulfill it or betray it, in relative opacity'. For those of us who have grown up with Constance Farrington's translation, warts and all, the new translation may feel a little awkward. But apart from this feeling, what is at stake with a new

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edition of this revolutionary text—a text of enormous importance to the ‘Black World’ and revolutionary Pan-Africanism as well as to Anglo-American academia?

A Life of a Translation

Philosophie, die einmal üschien, erhält sich am Leben, weil der Augenblick ihrer Verwirklichung versäumt ward. (Adorno, 1973)¹

L’explosion n’aura pas lieu aujourd’hui. Il est trop tôt . . . ou trop tard. (Fanon)²

Undergoing numerous printings totaling over one million copies, Constance Farrington’s translation of *The Wretched of the Earth* has remained in print for over 40 years since its first appearance in the US. Her translation has stayed the standard for many years and has been regularly criticized; certainly it is refreshing to see her typos and errors fixed. But before we move to the 2005 edition let us consider the life of Farrington’s translation of *The Wretched*.

Farrington’s original English translation of *Les Damnés de la terre* (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*.³ On the back cover was the following quote from Sartre:

We find our humanity on this side of death and despair; he finds it beyond torture and death. We have sown the wind; he is the whirlwind. The child of violence, at every moment he draws from it his humanity. We were men at this expense, he makes himself man at ours: a different man; of higher quality.

In 1965, Grove Press reprinted this edition, with the title *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 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 UN 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 remained on the book up until 2000.

The blurb on the back, which remained the basis for the publicity on further editions until 2000, emphasized Fanon’s anger and situated him as a direct descendant of Engels and Sorel:

This is a book written in anger, 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, for in it Fanon, a political thinker who is a direct descendant of Engels and Sorel, calls for the use of absolute violence against colonial oppressors. His work is a manifesto which is being read and studied throughout the emerging nations of the Third World. It should be studied, too, by those in the West who wish to understand the multitude of forces behind the anticolonial revolution which is taking place in the world today.

While they got it right, in contrast to the front cover, that Fanon is a psychiatrist not a psychoanalyst, the 'direct line' to Engels and moreover to the 'fascist Sorel' is simply wrong. Sure, Fanon had mentioned Engels, but he had dismissed Engels' technological determinist argument about 'force' as 'childish'. And certainly Sartre had mentioned Sorel in his introduction, but only to dismiss him as 'fascist chatter'. Nevertheless it became the mainstream opinion of Fanon promoted by serious scholars such as Hannah Arendt and Aristide Zolberg. While Arendt (1972, 1969) held that readers of Fanon were generally only familiar with the first chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth*, she charged that Fanon 'glorified violence for violence's sake' and opined that 'Fanon was greatly influenced by Sorel'. And Zolberg agreed, arguing that Fanon believed that the 'natives' needed a Sorelian 'myth'. Without any evidence, either in the text or from those close to Fanon, the 'myth' of the connection to Sorel, even as it waned in the scholarly literature, remained in popular reviews. What underlie this perception was a preoccupation with and a reaction to Fanon's conception of violence.

Probably the most widely read version of the Farrington translation came out in the US in the earth-shattering year of 1968 when Grove replaced the Evergreen edition with the Black Cat edition.⁴ The text remained the same (the French quote marks were removed from the 1965 edition) and the blurb was revised with the following, which would remain unchanged for over thirty years:

Written in anger, this book by a distinguished Black psychiatrist and leading spokesman of the revolution which won independence in Algeria is no mere diatribe against the white man or the West. 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 explained how anger cannot sustain a political movement or a political argument. 'La puissance du niveau idéologique' (D, p. 140) ['the force of intellect' (CF, p. 146) or 'the power of ideology' (RP, p. 95)] is needed because⁵

cette brutalité pure, totale, si elle n'est pas immédiatement combattue, entraîne inmanquablement la défaite du mouvement au bout de quelques semaines (D, p. 140)

if this pure, total brutality is not immediately contained it will, without fail, bring down the movement within a few weeks. (RP, p. 95)

[t]his unmixed and total brutality, if not immediately combated, inevitably leads to the defeat of the movement within a few weeks. (CF, p. 146)⁶

Perhaps the blurb was simply a marketing ploy but it had the effect of reinforcing the idea that all Fanon was about was violence. The claim that Fanon's idea of violence had served the leaders of 'emerging nations' was also well off the mark. 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 have said that the book frightened rather than served leaders of emerging nations, many of whom followed the path of degeneration outlined in the book.

In addition, the 1968 Black Cat edition was a mass-market printing that tended, quite literally, to fall apart. It was cheap and widely available, going through countless printings and selling a million copies, until 1991 when the unchanged book was enlarged into the Evergreen edition. The cover, which remained unchanged from 1968 to 2000, still 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'. This version is the one most people recognize and can still pick up for a buck on the street.

The cover was replaced in 2000 with a design by Jackie Seow. The cover was now yellow with a purple and red title at the top and purple with the author 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'.⁷ Gone were the quotes from Quaison-Sackey and Emile Capouya. 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 influence on the US Black Power movement was marked by a quote from the *Boston Globe*.⁸

From 'handbook of the Black revolution' to theoretical ground for Africana intellectuals, Fanon was positioned as a thinker of the contemporary world. The blurb for the new translation proclaims that the book has had a major impact on civil rights, anticolonialism, and black consciousness movements and ends with the words that '[*The Wretched's*] lessons are more vital now than ever'. Yet this is precisely the tension and the problematic that one feels in reading Fanon today. Is Fanon simply a historical personage from the twentieth century, the theorist of colonialism and racism, as Angela Davis is quoted as saying on the new edition? Is the book merely an artefact of the 1960s and 1970s anti-colonial and black US revolts, or does it also

continue to have a concrete resonance among the contemporary ‘wretched of the earth’? Indeed the blurb for the 2005 edition finally acknowledges that Fanon has something to say about the postcolonial world, remarking that the book predicts ‘postindependence disenfranchisement of the masses by the elite’. In a sense, we have moved from fixation with violence and Fanon’s chapter one, ‘On violence’, to a critique of the postcolonial elite in the ‘Misadventures of national consciousness’ (chapter three), from the period of anti-colonial movements and urban black revolts to the identity politics of the postcolonial and the postmodern. But this postcolonial sensibility, which places Fanon’s ‘classic’ alongside Said’s *Orientalism*, also has a price. For Fanon is now situated as a ‘founding father’ of 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 term 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.⁹

New Translation: From the Bottom Up or from the Inside Out?

You might think that translating the dead gives you a whole lot of freedom . . . (Philcox)

The new translator of *The Wretched*, Richard Philcox, first ‘met’ Fanon in 1968, the year the Black Cat edition appeared in the US, and has felt for a number of years that the English translation of *The Wretched* had not done Fanon justice and that his voice had been distorted. Listening to a tape of Fanon’s 1956 address to the First Congress of Black Writers over and over again, Philcox was struck by Fanon’s use of language and the precision of his thoughts. Echoing Ato-Sekyi-Otu’s (1996) conceptualization, he sees *The Wretched* as a dramatic narrative, but moreover he hears drama in Fanon’s voice as he dictated *The Wretched* to his wife in the final year of his life. Thus Philcox attempts to make the book ‘read more like an oral presentation with that earnestness of voice he was known for’ (RP, p. 245).

The new translation cleans up errors that we have lived with for forty years.¹⁰ Philcox has also cleared up some inconsistencies (which is a plus for new students reading *The Wretched* for the first time). Where Farrington had used the word ‘native’ without quote marks—and thus without indicating the irony of the term—the new translation gives us the scare quotes but also uses the more neutral ‘colonized’. Philcox also uses the term ‘national bourgeoisie’ consistently and has addressed Fanon’s use of the terms ‘noir’ and ‘nègre’. Farrington had translated both as ‘Negro’; Philcox uses ‘black’ when referring to peoples of Africa and the diasporas and ‘nigger’ when it is the colonizer referring to these peoples. For historical contextualization ‘Negro’ is left in, but Philcox does lament that something is lost in the translation of ‘nègre’ which for Fanon is also related to negritude, or perhaps in contemporary slang ‘niggaz’.

Another advantage of the new edition is the retranslation of the chapter headings which are simply better translations that bring out the nuance of the subject matter. Chapter two becomes ‘Grandeur and weakness of spontaneity’ (*Grandeur et faiblesses de la spontanéité*) instead of ‘Spontaneity: Its strength and weakness’, and chapter three becomes ‘The trials and tribulations of national consciousness’ (*Mésaventures de la conscience nationale*) instead of ‘The pitfalls of national consciousness’.

As I mentioned earlier, having become so accustomed to the language of Farrington’s translation, how do we judge the often slightest changes of meaning? Often Philcox has provided a more literal translation. For example he translates ‘*commissaire politique*’ as political commissar rather than political educator, as Farrington does. Political commissar sounds ‘Communist’ (indeed Stalinist) and a little archaic but it does remind us of the period and its leftist discourse. Similarly, where Fanon uses the term ‘*à nuancer*’ Philcox translates it as ‘nuance’, which is much richer and more literal than Farrington’s ‘modify’.

Philcox’s more literal approach has its pluses and minuses. On the first page of the book Philcox translates ‘*un panorama social changé de fond en comble*’ literally as a ‘social fabric that has been changed inside out’ whereas Farrington’s more political translation reads ‘a whole social structure being changed from the bottom up’. The bottom up jibes with the idea of the wretched of the earth, at the bottom—‘the scum’ rising up—creating history from below. ‘Inside out’ is rather more literary but makes sense if understood as a house being turned inside out or upside down.

I like the fact that Philcox uses philosophical language like ‘reification’ and ‘being’. For example, he translates ‘substantification’ (literarily the production of a substance) as ‘reification’ where Farrington had left it as ‘substantification’, a rather obscure English word of French origin. Here is a comparison.

Philcox:

Decolonization is the encounter between two congenitally antagonistic forces that in fact owe their singularity to the kind of reification secreted and nurtured by the colonial situation . . . Decolonization never goes unnoticed, for it focuses on and fundamentally alters being, and transforms the spectator crushed to a nonessential state into a privileged actor, captured in a virtually grandiose fashion by the spotlight of History. (RP, p. 2)

Farrington:

Decolonization is the meeting of two forces, opposed to each other by their very nature, which in fact owe their originality to that sort of substantification which results from and is encouraged by the situation in the colonies . . . Decolonization never takes place unnoticed, for it influences individuals and modifies them fundamentally. It transforms spectators crushed with their inessentiality into privileged actors, with the grandiose glare of history’s floodlights on them. (CF, p. 36)

Here Philcox’s translation is undoubtedly clearer and more precise with ‘reification’ connecting to the following sentence quite neatly: ‘Decolonization is truly the

creation of new man. But such a creation cannot be attributed to a supernatural power: The “thing” becomes a man through the very process of liberation’ (RP, p. 2).

But Philcox translates ‘la violence absolue’, which challenges the colonized world, as ‘out and out violence’ (RP, p. 3) rather than ‘absolute violence’ as Farrington does (CF, p. 37). I think ‘violence absolue’ retains a philosophic meaning that connects to Fanon’s conception of decolonization, which he defines as an ‘absolute substitution’ of ‘one species of mankind for another’ (CF, p. 35; RP, p. 1). This philosophic use of ‘absolute’ reappears in Fanon’s statement that ‘the challenge to the colonial world is not a rational confrontation of points of view’ (CF, p. 37) but ‘d’une originalité posée comme absolue’ (D, p. 44). Philcox prefers the unimpassioned claim that ‘their world is fundamentally different’ (RP, p. 6). I think Farrington’s translation, an ‘original idea propounded as an absolute’ (CF, p. 41), reveals Fanon’s philosophical background and conception of dialectic. It is an issue I will return to.

The notion of embodiment, the physical and bodily conception of Fanon’s anti-colonial liberation, is expressed in Farrington’s translation of ‘d’être histoire en actes’ as ‘deciding to embody history in his own person.’ Philcox prefers ‘taking history into their own hands’, which is certainly correct and perhaps better English, but, and I might be quibbling, ‘hands’ is not ‘body’, even though Philcox retains the nuance of ‘en actes’. Likewise Philcox does translate ‘organisme Politique’ as a political body rather than political organization, as Farrington does, but he sees ‘le cadre d’une organisation, d’un encadrement du peuple’ as simply ‘the people are organized and guided’ (RP, p. 92). Farrington had translated ‘cadre’ as organization rather than leadership, writing more awkwardly ‘within the framework of an organization’ but adding—‘and inside the structure of a people’ (CF, p. 143). The notion of ‘embodying’ history reoccurs in Farrington’s choice to translate ‘de dirigeants insérés dans histoire’ (D, p. 140) as ‘organizers living inside history’. Philcox writes more flatly of ‘leaders working with the tide of history’ (RP, p. 96). What is lost in both translations, however, is the connotation of ‘insérer’ (to insert) as an intervention in the living organism of the social movement. Nevertheless, much more troubling is the texts that frame the book.

Forewords, Prefaces and Introductions and the Layering of Obfuscations

Fanon asked Sartre to write a preface to *The Wretched*. When Fanon read it, he reportedly said nothing. Sartre’s 24-page preface is perhaps one of his most radical pieces of writing. Indeed, it is also perhaps one of his most well known, having an impact that went beyond the physical fact that Fanon’s first chapter begins on page 35 of the Farrington translation. Like the aforementioned blurbs, Sartre’s preoccupation with violence and its healing qualities played a role in channeling and echoing this theme among readers. In fact Sartre’s preface began to look like it really belonged to Fanon.

Alice Cherki, a colleague of Fanon’s in Tunisia, maintains that Sartre’s introduction ‘betrayed Fanon’, distorting his tone and intention (2006, p. 181). There is a certain truth to this. Sartre’s introduction is about Europe written for ‘we Europeans’ (RP,

p. xlvii). It is, in other words, very much about Sartre, about his own relationship to the Algerian revolution and his own earlier ambivalence and concerns about its violent direction (Cherki, 2006, p. 182). But what is violent is the one-dimensional and reductive way Sartre understands Fanon's conception of violence: 'read Fanon', Sartre writes, and 'you will learn in the period of their helplessness, their mad impulse to murder is the expression of the natives' collective unconscious' (RP, p. lii; CF, p. 18).¹¹ What is at stake is the different conception of violence—for instance, the differences between Fanon's understanding, grounded in the repressive and violent colonial context and multilayered analysis of counter-violence, and Sartre's existential justification ('a mad impulse to murder')—which 'displaces the conflict onto another register of violence, namely language'. By Sartre's own admission, argues Cherki, he allows himself to be 'swept by a torrent of words' (2006, p. 182). In other words Sartre's preface also expresses the Cartesian logic of Europeans seeing his text as a threat to themselves which can then invite and justify containment strategies: the passionate, angry, borderline hysterical, above all physical native. And while it is often thought that Fanon, despite his protestations, eventually followed Sartre's critique of negritude (see McCulloch, 1983), it may be interesting to note here that under the influence of Fanon, Sartre changed his view about the Algerian anti-colonial struggle. However Sartre went to the other extreme embracing violence too uncritically and too enthusiastically. He wanted to shock his European readers and consequently does Fanon a disservice. Rather than seeing violence akin to a 'minor stage' in the dialectic of revolution toward a new society, Sartre blew apart the idea of stages, and posited instead violence not as an absolute but as the 'the end' of the dialectic altogether. But this was not Fanon's view of violence or of the dialectic. Since it keeps coming up, it is an issue I want to consider in a little more detail.

The Absolute and the Dialectic in Fanon and Sartre

The absolute is man. (Sartre)

Fanon's use of the term 'anti-raciste racism' in *The Wretched* refers directly to Sartre's critique of negritude in *Orphée Noir*, his introduction to Senghor's anthology of negritude poetry, where Sartre had used the phrase as an appellation for negritude. Yet, despite the fact that Fanon had taken issue with Sartre's conceptualization of negritude as an 'anti-racist racism' in *Black Skin, White Masks*, Farrington completely missed this connection, translating the phrase as 'racial feeling, as opposed to racial prejudice'. The consequence of this missed connection can be appreciated when we compare Fanon's full sentence with Farrington's translation.

In *Les Damnés*, the full sentence reads,

Le racisme antiraciste, la volonté de défendre sa peau qui caractérise la réponse du colonisé à l'oppression coloniale représentent évidemment des raisons suffisantes pour s'engager dans la lutte. (D, p. 133)

Farrington translates it as

Racial feeling, as opposed to racial prejudice, and that determination to fight for one's life which characterizes the native's reply to oppression are obviously good enough reasons for joining in on the fight. (CF, p. 139)

Philcox finally corrects the Farrington mistranslation:

Antiracist racism and the determination to defend one's skin, which is characteristic of the colonized's response to colonial oppression, clearly represent sufficient reasons to join the struggle. (RP, p. 89)

But beyond missing the reference to *Black Skin* mentioned above, Farrington misses another crucial connection: Fanon's use of the word 'skin' (*peau*), which also gestures to *Black Skin*, *White Masks*. And what is at stake is exactly the point he was making in his critique of Sartre's claim in *Black Skin* that negritude was a 'minor term', and a 'passing stage' of the dialectic.

The issue, in other words, is not whether Fanon's use of the term 'anti-racist racism' indicates an embrace of Sartre's critique or not; the issue is that Sartre fails to account for the dialectic of experience. Certainly Fanon is critical of negritude intellectuals in *The Wretched*, but moreover in *Black Skin* he objects to Sartre's intellectualization of black consciousness, charging that it is precisely his intellectualization that had caused him to fail to account for the dialectic of experience. Indeed, Fanon maintained that the only condition in which one can attain consciousness of self was to 'lose one's self-consciousness in the night of the absolute': 'la conscience a besoin de se perdre dans la nuit de l'absolu, seule condition pour parvenir à la conscience de soi'. Directly criticizing Sartre, he added that Sartre had forgotten

that negativity draws its worth from an almost substantive absoluteness. A consciousness committed to experience is ignorant, has to be ignorant, of the essences and the determinations of its being. (BS, p. 133–34)

il rappelait le côté négatif, mais en oubliant que cette négativité tire sa valeur d'une absoluité quasi substantielle. (PN, p. 108)

Thus 'absolute' was posited phenomenologically as experience, an experience that one had to have in order to be, and Black Consciousness is posited as an absolute 'immanent in its own eyes' and lacking nothing (BS, p. 135). While this might be a misreading of the processes of history understood by a Marxist and while Fanon agrees that 'black experience is not total', the dialectic of experience for Hegel is always posited as never knowing the outcome precisely because it has to painstakingly work through the negations and contradictions it encounters (Hegel, 1977, p. 800).

Methodologically, the dialectical movement in Fanon's critique of Sartre and negritude is similar to Fanon's understanding of violence and the dialectic of *The Wretched*. To state reality—the reality of colonialism's violence which inhabits the day to day waking life of the 'native', the violence that characterizes colonialism from

its birth, from its expropriation of land and labor, to its death-knell napalming and carpet-bombing 'is a wearing task'. But Sartre, that 'born Hegelian',¹² says Fanon, should have remembered that for Hegel the Absolute provides a new beginning and that one only 'knows' it in its completion. In other words, as Hegel puts it, 'nothing is known which does not fall within experience or (as it is also expressed) which is not felt to be true'. This transforming process, a process of overcoming opposition through *action* is, for Fanon, history. Thus Fanon concludes *Black Skin, White Masks* with the plea 'to educate man to be *actional*' (BS, p. 222), just as in *The Wretched* he argues, 'the native's' action gives birth to a new historical protagonist.¹³

Is Fanon Relevant or is Fanon Framed? Homi Bhabha's New Foreword to *The Wretched of the Earth*

Perhaps the most important 'translator' of Fanon is Steve Biko.

[Fanon's] books became a feature of American campuses; and later, in more politically correct times, his works finally became a mainstay of university curricula. It is difficult to know if this would have pleased Fanon. The only thing that can be said with any certainty is that Fanon lived in a state of perpetual motion and invariably left his texts behind him. (Cherki)

Forty years after the political independence of much of Africa, the tide of history seems to have passed the continent by. Africa is considered a basket case—poor and suffering—and discussion about how this situation came to be, namely a historicization, seem irrelevant. In other words, Africa's existence in the world has become ontological—it is poor, sick and needy. It is suffering humanity, a substance rather than subject long separated from the transforming processes of the anti-colonial struggles. In this changed world, in what sense can Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* be relevant?

The question of Fanon's relevancy today is immediately a political question. *The Wretched* is a deeply political book and has a hotly contested life. There is no such thing as a neutral translation and thus to translate Fanon is a political act. Yet not every translation is a mistranslation or simply an approximation; some translations (even at the level of sentence) capture the original text better than others and on the whole Philcox does a good job. Much more questionable is the new material added to the book.

In the 2005 edition, Fanon's work is introduced with a foreword, 'Framing Fanon', by the Harvard Professor Homi K. Bhabha, a leading postcolonial theorist best known for his Lacanian readings of Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* and his introduction to the 1986 British edition of *Black Skin*. But why does *The Wretched* need a new introductory text? Not to mention an introductory text which, when added to Sartre's preface, takes up more than 50 pages before we even get to Fanon's text? To be sure, the last decade has seen a number of critical volumes that the student of Fanon could consult, so why bog down and frame *The Wretched* with more

prologues? If Sartre's introduction was a kind of guarantor of authenticity, might we read Bhabha's 2005 foreword as a guarantor of relevance?¹⁴ After all the title of Bhabha's foreword, excerpted in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, is 'Is Frantz Fanon still relevant?'

When I first read the excerpt of Bhabha's foreword,¹⁵ I found Bhabha's apparently more political approach welcome. Bhabha argues that *The Wretched* keeps on re-emerging in struggles around the world and in that sense transcends its time and allows us to look 'toward a critique of contemporary globalization'. He adds that *The Wretched* foreshadows 'the ethnonationalist switchbacks of our own times, [and] the charnel houses of ethnic cleansing'. While these claims seem like endorsements, assuring the reader of Fanon's continued relevance, Bhabha's language, casting forth big catch-all issues like globalization, inequality, and ethnic cleansing, remains vastly general, nonspecific, and for this reason relatively empty. As we read on, we realize, despite Bhabha's own active engagement with the question, that relevance may not be Bhabha's concern at all; even his key question, 'what might be saved from Fanon's ethics and politics of decolonization' (B, p. xi) turns out to be operative in a different register. In fact the tone of Bhabha's foreword is one of historical distance and he speaks to us about Fanon as if Fanon's voice is 'relatively opaque' and can no longer really be heard or understood today.¹⁶ To be sure *The Wretched* is a product of its time and place grounded in human experience that is finite and takes place within a temporal world. But Fanon meant the book to engage with the ongoing contemporary anti-colonial movements of his time but also with the newly emerging 'decolonized' world, the legacies of which remain with us today. So what of Fanon's relevance?

Fanon's relevance is invoked, maintains Bhabha, 'repeatedly by liberal students, radical activists, human rights workers, cultural historians' and by 'international civil society *in the making*'. He speaks critically of the IMF and World Bank and suggests that globalization has created '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, except Bhabha, for one, positions Fanon too neatly with the international NGOs, wrongly contending that Fanon puts a critical value on 'economic and technological support for "underdeveloped regions"' (B, p. xxvii). Indeed Fanon might have argued for reparations but he shunned technicist answers to the issue of what postcolonial 'development' would be and was utterly dismissive of economic plans for support dreamed up at Columbia University or the London School of Economics. Yet Bhabha has little interest in this kind of debate since

Fanon transforms [the] economic terms of reference [and places] the problem of development in the context of 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, p. xvii)¹⁷

So the issue of ‘technological support’ belies a larger problem in Bhabha’s foreword, namely, the grounding of political and ethical issues in what he calls ‘the psycho-affective realm’. This means that not only concrete political analysis are subverted, but that Fanon’s politics are relegated to the realm of ‘dreams, psychic inversions and displacements, [and] phantasmatic political identification’—in short to the

the nervous conditions and political agitations of psycho-affectivity [that] compose and decompose the compartmentalized worlds of colonialism and metropolitan racism. (B, p. xix)

The irony of Bhabha’s frontispiece quote from Fanon—‘the colonized, undeveloped man is a political creature in the most global sense of the term’—becomes apparent when we think of ‘global sense’ as the psycho-affective realm. For Bhabha the exploration

insistently frames [Fanon’s] reflections on violence, decolonization, national consciousness, and humanism, in terms of the psycho-affective realm. (B, p. xix)

And he continues that

Fanon’s style of thinking and writing operates by creating disjunctions—followed by proximate juxtapositions—between the will of the political agent and desire of the psycho-affective subject.

Operating from the psycho-affective realm—a realm of desire, which in the colonial context amounts to the desire to survive—the struggle is neither subjective nor objective (B, p. xix). Thus for Bhabha Fanon’s juxtaposition of political will and psycho-affective desire means that psycho-affectivity ‘shadows’ political agency. In the colonial world, the native’s psycho-affective struggle, which is always a fight for survival, ‘echo[es] the horrifying call to violence [and makes] Fanon for our times’ (B, p. xxviii). Moreover because violence results not from a political cause but from a ‘psychic and affective curse’ (B, p. xxxix), guilt and shame play an important role. Alongside desire, guilt, or ‘false guilt’, as Bhabha names it, is a product of the colonized assuming a powerless position. In fact, for Bhabha, it is the very psycho-affective force that hangs over the colonized, debilitating and/or demobilizing political action. But it is a guilt and inferiority that, Fanon points out, the colonized does not accept nor interiorize (RP, p. 16).

The native may not accept the authority of the colonizer, *but* his complex and contradictory fate—where rejected guilt feels like shame—hangs over him like a Damoclean sword; it threatens him with an imminent disaster that may collapse both the internal life and the external world. (B, p. xxxix, my emphasis)

To no longer be debilitated by this psychic split, Bhabha says, the colonized has to violently wrest free of guilt. ‘The origins of violence lie in a presumptive “false guilt”’.

Guilt and desire produce anxiety in the psycho-affective subject that ‘erupts from the act of masking’ and thus ‘emerges as a guerrilla in camouflage’ (B, p. xxxviii).

For Bhabha, retributive violence becomes the key to the possibility of positive and productive psycho-affective relations. Bhabha insists that ‘there is more to the psycho-affective realm than the subject of violence’ (B, p. xxi) and notes that ‘much of the book is devoted to exploring the processes by which decolonization turns into a project of nation building’ (B, p. xxv); a project which opens up ‘positive and productive psycho-affective relations’ (B, p. xxv). Indeed he maintains that ‘the psycho-affective relation is also’—and he quotes Fanon taking, he adds, the quote ‘out of context’—‘the glowing focal point where citizen and individual develop and grow’ (B, p. xxi; RP, p. 40).

There are a couple of problems here. First, even if he acknowledges that the quote is taken out of context, it is hard to ignore the fact that Fanon is talking of a situation that does not exist yet. Certainly, Bhabha could justify the use of the quote by a ‘lack’ of individual development but it is a rather odd way to use a line from Fanon’s text which has little to do with psycho-affective relations. Second, despite his claim that ‘there is more to the psycho-affective realm than the subject of violence’, Bhabha spends almost half of his introduction spinning around the issue of violence and almost nothing on the politics of decolonization. However, as noted earlier, emphasizing violence as the key to *The Wretched* can be justified on a reading of the first chapter of the book. But Bhabha never unpacks Fanon’s idea of violence; it is never politicized¹⁸ so that violence’s origin, rooted in ‘false guilt’, remains abstract and ultimately reductive since Fanon’s idea of violence undergoes change and becomes mediated by a political movement.

Bhabha’s introduction of the guilt complex as the origin of violence and thus of anti-colonial action is not simply snatched from thin air. But Fanon makes a reference to the guilt complex not in *The Wretched* but in his paper, ‘Racism and culture’, which he presented to the First Congress of Black Writers in 1956. The passage reads:

Exploitation, torture, raids, racism and liquidations . . . [all] make of the native an object in the hands of occupying nation. This object man, without means of existing, without *raison d’être*, is broken in the very depth of his substance. The desire to live, to continue, becomes more and more indecisive, more and more phantom-like. It is at this stage that the well-known guilt complex appears. (1967, p. 35)

The ‘stage’ Fanon is talking about is an earlier period of colonial domination and its relation to racism so brilliantly summed up in chapter one of *The Wretched*. But in ‘Racism and culture’ he does not conclude with the guilt complex, but moves on to speak about the period of decolonization, which is a central concern of *The Wretched*.

Bhabha does not feel the need to give his readers this context. Later in ‘Racism and culture’, Fanon warns that in response to ‘guilt and inferiority . . . the native intellectual’s vigilance must . . . be doubly on the alert’ and in *The Wretched*, he

does not make guilt an essential part of the decolonization process. In fact, for Fanon, it is the ‘native’ intellectual—in a certain sense a product of colonialism—who has to be self-critical about inferiority and guilt complexes. For the struggle against colonialism has to be ‘total’, and it is out of this ‘absolute’ struggle that the colonized decide “‘with full knowledge of what is involved” to fight all forms exploitation and alienation of man’ (Fanon, 1967, pp. 39n1, 43). With Bhabha guilt overshadows other forms of colonial exploitation and alienation, and thus effective action in Bhabha’s reading can *only* come from wresting oneself free from that paralyzing or crippling guilt. Not surprisingly, therefore, Bhabha connects this guilt complex and the violence against it to Fanon’s infamous statement in *The Wretched* that anti-colonial violence should be understood as ‘la médiation royale’ (D, p. 82), translated by Philcox as ‘perfect mediation’ (RP, p. 44) and Constance Farrington as ‘royal pardon’.¹⁹ Bhabha then rhetorically asks, is ‘violence ever a *perfect* mediation?’ (B, p. xl). Bhabha leaves it there, and we are again left imagining Fanon as a Sorelian advocate of violence.

Armed struggles were an important part of the struggle against settler colonialism in Africa, and one could say that Kenya and Algeria, the two examples that Fanon had in mind when he wrote of violence as ‘la médiation royale’, represented an ‘absolute praxis’ against an intransigent settler rule. In the Manichean reality of colonial settler rule, taking up arms against colonialism was not taken lightly. To become a trusted fighter meant proving to the underground political organization, the group, the cell, the secret society, that you were willing to fight to the death. In the face of torture—whether that be French (in Algeria) or British (in Kenya)—to take such an oath meant breaking with society and becoming an outlaw. Thus, for example, in Kenya, those accused of being Mau Mau rebels were sent to concentration camps, the object of which was to break them (by torture) and make them publicly retract their Mau Mau vows so they could be ‘reintegrated’ into colonial society. To take up violence, therefore, meant a willingness not only to be mercilessly tortured to death for the cause but also to put one’s family and community at risk. This practice was not limited to resistance during the early colonial period but re-emerged in the post-World War II period of decolonization and anti-colonial struggles.²⁰ The colonist response to the liberation struggle was to launch a ‘counter-insurgency’ that included the destruction of homes and a massive expulsion of people to ‘resettlement camps’. Though asymmetrical, violence became reciprocal.

It is with this in mind that Fanon uses the phrase, ‘la médiation royale’, and goes on to write of the suffocating conditions experienced at the beginning of the end of colonial rule when the colonists became more and more desperate and, consequently, more mercilessly repressive. Under these conditions, he continues,

it is understandable how in such an atmosphere everyday life becomes impossible. Being a fellow [Philcox translates ‘Fellah’ as fellow though it might be better translated as ‘peasant’²¹], a pimp, or an alcoholic is no longer an option. The violence of the colonial regime and the counterviolence balance each other out in an extraordinary reciprocal homogeneity. (RP, p. 46)

In other words, any notion of a perfect mediation is here simply mathematical, a logic and reasoning that reflects colonial Manicheanism, and in terms of force, is profoundly unequal.²²

Bhabha's collapsing of Fanon's analysis of the 'phases' of colonialism and 'timing' of decolonization, and his avoidance of Fanon's discussion of the different types of nationalist organization and their relationships to the urban and rural areas all speak to his reductive reading of *The Wretched*. In fact, for Bhabha, the militant ('mujahid') is 'psychically split and politically paralyzed between the command to "stay where you are" and the desire to "get ready and do the right thing"'. And the aspirations to 'do the right thing', Bhabha continues, 'might be felled by the fragility of the individual, by atavistic animosities, by the iron hand of history, or by indecision and uncertainty' (B, p. xl). Bhabha makes no mention of social and political organization, of the mutual education between the militant and the spontaneously anti-colonial rural people. Instead he conflates this discussion of the mujahid (the political militant) with Fanon's discussion of colonial domination and the 'native's' political paralysis. For sure, Fanon insists, the showdown between the 'settler' and the 'native' cannot be put off, but that is exactly why the colonial regime prefers to 'keep the colonized in a state of rage . . . [which] erupts into fighting between tribes, clans and individuals' (RP, p. 17). Bhabha quotes this as if Fanon is speaking about organized anti-colonial revolt but he is speaking of the period of colonial domination where 'everything is reduced to a permanent confrontation at the level of fantasy'. In Fanon's periodization of decolonization, it is exactly the channeling of this rage that marks the decolonization period: 'This people who were relegated to the realm of imagination, victims of unspeakable terrors . . . discovers reality', he says 'and [an] agenda for liberation' (RP, p. 21).

Of course reactive action, like reactive violence, is not enough to sustain a liberation movement. Anti-colonial violence can only be a 'perfect mediation'—if we want to use the phrase—in as much as it destroys the colonist and is part of a process that brings into being an actional citizen.²³ Fanon has enough to say about the terrible consequences of violence to convince us that he was not being cavalier. He understands the madness of colonial society, the paranoia and psychosis that the war of liberation can exacerbate in isolated and alienated individuals.²⁴ And he speaks from the standpoint of the anti-colonial *situation*, which is why 'antiracist racism' might be a sufficient condition to join the struggle but is not alone sufficient to achieve an 'authentic decolonization'. Action cannot remain ignorant; it is only with reflection that action finds its own content and becomes 'historical'. What remains ever so relevant in Fanon's critique is the insistence that the struggle for liberation includes both the mind and the muscles (RP, p. 96); thus, he insists, a 'desire for revenge' cannot 'nurture a war of liberation' (RP, p. 89). Fanon was interested in a true or 'authentic liberation' and *The Wretched*, as Philcox's translations also seems to acknowledge, is a work that attempts to reflect on the conditions and the real problems that authentic attempts at decolonization will face.

In this sense, one could argue that *The Wretched* as an unfolding drama is and is not about violence but about action and reflection, about a growing sense of intentionality in the phenomenological sense of a body in motion in the world and about ‘praxis’ in the Marxian sense that individuals change as they change the world, that they become social individuals and human protagonists through struggle.²⁵ Certainly Bhabha gestures to this when he argues that Fanon’s contribution to theories of black consciousness is in his ‘extension’ of ‘Marxism to a greater emphasis on the importance of the psychological and cultural liberation’ (B, p. xxix). Yet what he ends up insisting in ‘Framing Fanon’ is the centrality of the guilt complex to anti-colonial action, which means that what is important in *The Wretched* is how violence emerges at the point of the ‘splitting’ between the dominated and the domesticated (B, p. xxxix). Yet one wonders whether Bhabha is too narrowly drawing on his Lacanian interpretation of *Black Skin* to read *The Wretched*, privileging the issue of intellectual and cultural alienation, the contact between the black *évolué* and the white world, between domestication and domination, between assimilation and anguish—all of which may be important to Bhabha’s argument but, again, shift the focus of *The Wretched*.

For what gets lost in the shift between *Black Skin* (the story of the black colonial *évolué* in France) and *The Wretched* (the story of ‘the native’ and decolonization) is Fanon’s description of the open character of violence in the colonial world. Hegemony loses its nuanced character. In *Black Skin* Fanon maintains that the black ‘is a product of [the] cultural situation’ which ‘slowly and subtly—with the help of newspapers, schools and their texts, advertisements, films, radio—work their way into one’s mind’ (BS, p. 152); in *The Wretched*, culture as such has given way to sheer repressive force because ‘colonialism is not a thinking machine’ but, rather, ‘violence in its natural state’ (CF, p. 61). As he puts it in *The Wretched*, in contrast to the ‘capitalist countries’ where a whole series of moral reflexes taught through the family and education ‘instill in the exploited a mood of submission and inhibition’, in the colonial regions; the government doesn’t mask oppression but ‘displays and demonstrates’ it, bringing ‘violence into the homes and minds of the colonized subject’ (RP, pp. 3–4).

Like the ‘hemmed in’ black in *Black Skin*, in *The Wretched* the ‘natives’ are unable to move and told to remain ‘in their place’. This spatial metaphor is realized in the constraining geography of the ‘native’ quarters. The ‘native’ is held in check by colonial violence (restricting their movement, repressing them), which brings human energy to a boil, and this energy, now pressurized and restless, becomes the raw material that can erupt into ‘ghetto violence’—gang and ethnic warfare—but can also, in the context of decolonization, be channeled toward the source of the violence, into an ‘authentic’ anti-colonial violence that can rise up and counter colonial violence and negate it. Thus anti-colonial violence is reciprocal: it is a product of colonial violence, but it is the only thing that will put an end to colonial violence. In the dialectical movement (namely development through contradiction and negativity) of *The Wretched*, anti-colonial violence is an absolute beginning as far as it brings

down to earth the power of the colonized, undermining its apparent invincibility. But anticolonial violence must also be channeled because in Fanon's economy, violence will always be released somewhere (either internally or externally). Certainly this can be understood psychoanalytically, as Bhabha's foreword makes clear, which is why we learn in chapter two ('The grandeur and weakness of spontaneity') that violence alone is not a political program; it must be organized politically. We also learn in chapter three ('The trials and tribulations of national consciousness') that violence, which puts an end to colonialism, is not the goal of decolonization. At the same time we learn that the political organization, which we assumed is the mediating body (organisme), cannot simply be an organizer of spontaneous action; it also has to be an organ where ideas are debated and allowed a free flow from the bottom up. In short, the centralizing trajectory of the nationalist organization has to be undermined. The organization has to be rigorously decentered and made accountable to the common people.

Unfortunately, what has happened in many cases is the opposite; after the colonialists' departure, the nationalist organizations oriented themselves to the colonial economy and set themselves up, looking to take over the colonial order and its rule; thus, the nationalist governments became empty shells. Once again, as Fanon predicted, the people are 'hemmed' in, beginning a post-colonial cycle of alienation, forcing people to wonder why they had bothered to fight and sacrifice so much in the struggle against colonialism. Decolonization has recaptured colonial 'control' and the violence of colonial rule. Opposition parties are banned, police attack demonstrators and the army is brought in; land is not redistributed to the people who are instead told to keep quiet and are 'pushed back to the caves'. Decolonization has become neocolonialism for a number of reasons, chief among them is that even where the economic relations set up by colonialism are not challenged, models of development continue to be based on some form of 'primitive accumulation'²⁶ with the poorest paying the largest price. For Fanon, postcolonial society is measured by its unwillingness to radically reorganize both the economic and the spatial ordering of colonial society. Indeed, he argues in *The Wretched* that by penetrating colonialism's 'geographical configuration and classification we shall be able to delineate the backbone on which the decolonized society is reorganized' (RP, p. 3). This notion brings us back to Fanon's conception of violence and the physicality of colonial rule. The spatial segregation, the hemming in, 'the native quarters', the slums, shacks, informal settlements, and dirt poor 'tribal' lands, the very configuration of living spaces in the postcolonial world express the degree to which decolonization has failed to address the legacy of colonialism and its violence. It is expressed most vividly in Fanon's contrast of the 'native town', the medina, the reservation, without spaciousness, starved of bread, meat, shoes, coal and light, to the settler's town, with its clean wide streets 'full of good things' (RP, p. 4), and the 'dividing line', the borders, the passbook, the points of contact between the colonial and native's world. And for Fanon, the challenge to and the dissolution of the fences, walls, police

stations, army barracks, that are central features of colonialism, become the measure of an authentic decolonized society.

Thus from a Fanonian point of view neoliberal post-apartheid South Africa, for example, is decolonized only in 'show' and appearance. The reality of failure is seen in the proliferation of gated communities and private security firms, which continue to separate the elite from the hordes. At the same time, Fanon's explanation that the 'shanty town is the consecration of the colonized biological decision to invade the enemy citadel at all costs' expresses a postcolonial reality which has seen an enormous growth in urban populations and an absolute growth of the poor over the past twenty years. These 'lumpenproletariat constitutes a serious threat to the "security" of the town' (RP, p. 83). Yet, Fanon's prognosis continues to be a threat in post-apartheid South Africa where the cities have been deracialized and re-segregated through privatization and liberalization and where the old colonial rhetoric of public health and the new rhetoric of economic liberalization continues to justify the removal of poor people from the urban areas²⁷ and where feudal-like bondage remains in the rural areas which continue to be dominated by white farmers and 'traditional chiefs'. For sure, Fanon understands that the lumpenproletariat constitutes a revolutionary force but he also understands that their dire situation means that 'their commitment is constantly threatened by the addictive cycle of physiological poverty' (RP, p. 87). He does not dismiss the lumpenproletariat as 'backward' and 'reactionary' nor celebrate them as progressive but argues that the national liberation movement must give this non-class 'class' of outsiders 'maximum attention' (RP, p. 87). Even if the term lumpenproletariat feels dated today, the massive migration from the rural areas over the past forty years underlines the importance Fanon gives the lumpenproletariat, and their 'hatred of politics and demagoguery'.²⁸

Instead of focusing on these postcolonial material 'realities' and the daily experiences of the majority of people in Africa, which are so important to Fanon, Bhabha shifts the subject from the rural masses and urban lumpenproletariat, to the petit-bourgeoisie and intellectuals who live in a world of domination, domestication and 'guilt complex'. Casting aside Fanon's critical political analysis of national consciousness, Bhabha narrows in on the psycho-affectivity of the postcolonial elite, leaving the vast majority of the 'people' hemmed in their place, but also in revolt. Their position is reminiscent of the contradictory situation that Bhabha highlights of the native under colonialism: stay in your place/get ready to act. However, in this postcolonial situation where class plays an increasingly important role—even more apparent during the period of neoliberal structural adjustment—the leaders try to instill a new sense of guilt by using rhetoric of 'nation' and 'the cause' and suggesting that those who oppose them are counter-revolutionaries backed by the former regime. It is a guilt that the movements of the dispossessed do not accept. For example, when the shack dwellers movement in Durban was labeled a 'third force' (a term used for clandestine apartheid-state support violence in the early 1990s), S'bu Zikode responded that he is indeed part of a third force,

The Third Force is all the pain and suffering that the poor are subjected to . . . Our betrayers are the Second Force. The First Force was our struggle against apartheid. The Third Force will stop when the Fourth Force comes. The Fourth Force is land, housing, water, electricity, healthcare, education and work. We are asking for the basics—not what is luxurious . . . The time has come for the poor to show themselves that we can be poor in life, but not in mind. (2006, pp. 187–89)

Humanism, National Consciousness and the Lazy Intellectual

The consciousness of self is not the closing of a door to communication. Philosophic thought teaches us, on the contrary, that it is its guarantee.²⁹ (Fanon)

Bhabha's polemical conjecture that Fanon is 'seriously outdated' (B, p. x) now bears a second look. For Bhabha, Fanon is seriously outdated because Fanon 'demands cultural homogeneity and the disappearance or dissolution of difference' (B, p. x) and this is asserted without further articulation of Fanon's notion of 'building national consciousness' or his critique of its misadventures and pitfalls: the rise of a postcolonial ethnonationalism that then produces reactive violence, tribalism and racism. The logic of this argument is that Fanon is 'framed' as an architect of postcolonial society and its atrocities rather than one of its sharpest and earliest critics.³⁰

In Fanon's view national consciousness is not the goal of national liberation movements but is a problematic, and consequently his critique of the colonial destruction of culture and its practice of divide and rule (invention and encouragement of 'tribal' and ethnic conflict) is connected to his critique of postcolonial ethnic chauvinism. 'The liberation struggle', argues Fanon, 'does not restore to national culture its former values and configurations' because the struggle seeks not only 'the demise of colonialism but also the demise of the colonized'. This struggle, he continues, 'which aims at a fundamental redistribution of relations between men, cannot leave intact either the form or substance of the people's culture' (RP, p. 178).

Indeed, there is in the later chapters of *The Wretched* a refusal to hypostatize difference and Fanon is especially critical of ethnic entrepreneurs, the purveyors of difference and those who sell the 'sacredness of the sari', who privilege difference for political and economic gain and become, in other words, the salespeople and beneficiaries of elite multiculturalism or more dangerously ethnic essentialism. Certainly one can find much more by Fanon on these issues.³¹ The point is that the political importance of the radical intellectuals being in the 'service of the people' was to comprehend the new humanism emerging from the struggle and articulate the deepening of national consciousness. As he argued in *The Wretched*, unless nationalism is explained, enriched and deepened, unless it is 'very quickly turn[ed] into a social and political consciousness, into humanism, then it leads to a dead end' (RP, p. 144; CF, p. 204). For Fanon, the new humanism is directly connected to the involvement of the dispossessed and to the building of an international

consciousness. For although national consciousness ‘is alone capable of giving us an international consciousness’, the issue is doubly important in Africa where national consciousness correlates with African consciousness

mindful of a simple rule which stipulates that any independent nation in Africa where colonialism still lingers is a nation surrounded, vulnerable, and in permanent danger. (RP, pp. 179–80)

The danger, of course, lurks not only from the outside but from within the competing interest and contradictions within the emergent nation.

Although Bhabha quotes the sentence about nationalism and humanism approvingly, his own dislike of Fanon’s humanism—which he calls ‘banal’ and ‘beatific’ in his introduction to *Black Skin*³²—seems to block him. But this blockage is not only conceptual; it also results from his concentration on the postcolonial elite as the real subject matter of the independence and postcolonial period rather than also considering the processes of disenfranchisement of the people as being a hallmark of postcolonial Africa. Thus the ‘Trials and tribulations’ (or ‘Pitfalls’) ‘of national consciousness’, full of warning about ‘cultural homogeneity’, are passed over and Fanon’s sharp critique of the laziness of the middle class nationalist intellectuals and the nationalist ‘bourgeoisie’—that ‘huckstering caste’ of ‘enfranchised slaves’ who simply want to take the place of the colonizer (the ‘elite’ that constitute the subject of postcolonial studies)—is ignored. Indeed, Fanon opens ‘Trials and tribulations’ with a clear warning that ‘history teaches us’, that the anticolonial struggle ‘is not written from a nationalist perspective’. In other words the demand for nationhood often becomes an empty shell because of the ‘apathy’—or as Farrington puts it ‘laziness’—and cowardice of the elite and intelligentsia, their lack of commitment to the national project, and the lack of real connection between them and the masses (RP, p. 97; CF, p. 148). Bhabha flattens this critique to the ‘indecision and uncertainty’ of the colonized (read nationalist middle class) that results from privileging of the ‘nervous conditions’ and guilt complexes created by colonialism. Indeed Bhabha goes as far as to collapse the anti-colonial fighter with the nationalist middle class arguing that ‘The mujahid . . . caught “in the tightly-knit web of colonialism” [is] psychically split and politically paralyzed’ (p. xxxix). Consequently Bhabha collapses Fanon’s crucial differentiations between the nationalist middle class, the militants, and the peasant and lumpenproletarian masses whose experiences of colonialism and after are quite different.³³

In sum, Bhabha seems oblivious to the movement of *The Wretched*. A change in the ‘dramatis personae’ that goes beyond the certainty of the fight against colonialism to the uncertainty of the intellectuals and the corruption of the nationalist ‘bourgeoisie’. In this movement, Fanon heralds the ‘truth’ of the unemployed and discarded, the revolutionary potential of the peasantry, the radicalism of lumpenproletariat. But beyond the Manichean logic of colonialism and the reaction against it, we find Fanon’s warnings about blacks who betray and whites who support the revolution. Fanon’s dialectic of *The Wretched* is a deepening circle, always coming

back to the same problem as the ‘thing’ becomes ‘human’: 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’. In short, Fanon’s conception of the anti-colonial struggle and national consciousness are far more complex than Bhabha’s psychological reductionism.

Rather than seeing a critical and engaged intellectual, Bhabha sees Fanon as a ‘phantom of terror’, and a ‘poet of the vicissitudes of violence’. Supposedly fueled by anger, Fanon becomes ‘the poet-politician’, exercising his poetry ‘on behalf of the wretched of the earth’ (B, p. xl) rather than a serious revolutionary engaging in an ongoing revolutionary and political struggle. Fanon becomes a mythmaker rather than a participant-theoretician of the revolution, which does little to illuminate the continued relevance of Fanon’s politics and ethics of postcolonialism, but also adds to the trail of violence that has hemmed Fanon in.

Indeed the purpose of Bhabha’s essay seems to be quite literally to judge Fanon’s text, to subject the engaged intellectual to abstract (might I also say ‘bourgeois’) moral judgments. What particularly galls Bhabha (as it had Christopher Miller earlier (1990)) is Fanon’s idea that truth is in the service of that which breaks up the colonial regime and aids the emergent nation:

when we hear Fanon say that ‘for the people only fellow nationals are ever owed the truth’ we furiously object to such a narrow and dangerous definition of ‘the people’ and ‘the truth’. (B, pp. ix–x)

What the devil could Fanon have been thinking, talking about ‘truth’ and then speaking about it so pragmatically? The point again is that Fanon’s pronouncement has to be seen within the unfolding of the ‘drama’ of *The Wretched*. Far from a formalist claim, far from a rational discourse about points of view, the truth of the anti-colonial movement, as mentioned earlier, is posited as ‘an original idea posited as an absolute’. It is only by engaging in the dialectic of *The Wretched* that one can begin to appreciate the eventual mediations, nuances and negations such apparently ‘outrageous’ claims undergo.

In Bhabha’s hands, Fanon’s politics and *The Wretched* as a visionary and activist manifesto are reduced to dreams and nightmares. Fanon knew that by positing the unemployed Algerian as ‘the truth’ he would outrage many liberals in the colonial metropole. It wasn’t only a Manichean perspective—our truth against your truth—nor simply an understanding that truth was relative and situational—in the service of the revolution—but a more dialectical notion of truth developing as it emerged in dialogues and actions from within the struggle. For Fanon truth is intimately connected to the goal of the anti-colonial struggle, a ‘new humanism’, the becoming of a ‘new man and new woman’ who through the struggle begin their transformation into actional and self-conscious social individuals. Bhabha objects to Fanon’s humanism and his idea of human agency. With Bhabha, agency disappears into a psycho-affective chasm and politics are shadowed by the immediacy of a

violence driven by guilt. This, of course, is to shortchange Fanon who describes, in the painstaking growth of the people's consciousness beyond Manicheanism in 'The grandeur and weakness of spontaneity', the transformation of the 'native' to a historical protagonist and the creation of capable anti-colonial militants who further demystify and ultimately concretely topple colonial power.

Out of Joint? The Misadventures of the Dialectic

The state of emergency is also always a state of *emergence*. (Bhabha)

The rich speak about us as we get poorer. (Zikode)

To speak again of 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 identity. 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 book is out of place, or perhaps moreover out of joint with the world, the point is to find, in a Fanonian sense, the truth in social movements of lower and deeper segments of humanity.

Certainly, the fact that contemporary globalization is considered by many a new form of colonialism, the fact that the Manicheanism of the cold war has been replaced by the Manicheanism of the 'war on terror', gives credibility to Fanon's analysis of colonial Manicheanism as a global phenomenon. But Fanon's continued 'relevance' is not simply articulated in the Manichean statements of a Bush and a Bin Laden. Rather we should begin from the most critical of Fanon's insights into the postcolonial period and his critique of the nationalist bourgeoisie and the postcolonial petit bourgeoisie.

One place that Fanon's analysis has taken on a new life is in post-apartheid South Africa where it has been deemed directly applicable. In fact, it seems that the 'reality' of neoliberal post-apartheid South Africa has simply been following Fanon's text.³⁴ But rather than an ontological optimism based on the revolutionary potential of the peasantry or an ontological pessimism based on the 'betrayal' of the nationalist middle class,³⁵ the Fanonian dialectic not only details the counter-revolution within the revolution but also a new consciousness. As he writes of the intolerable poverty into which the people stagnate, Fanon adds that 'the masses . . . are never convinced

that their lives have changed, despite the festivities and the flags' (RP, p. 114). Indeed, they 'slowly become aware of the unspeakable treason of their leaders (RP, p. 112). This awareness is becoming apparent in South Africa where new social movements among the poor have emerged, directly criticizing the 'failures' of the leaders and government. The depth of 'Fanonian' critique articulated, for example, in the shack dwellers movements, by those who have absolutely nothing, whose lives are a daily state of emergency and, in the most Fanonian sense, represent the truth of bread and land, judging wealth not only by indoor plumbing, taps and toilets but also human dignity. As S'bu Zikode, one of the leaders of Abahli baseMjondolo (literally people who live in shacks), sees the history of South African liberation: 'the first Nelson Mandela was Jesus Christ. The second was Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela. The third Mandela was the poor people of the world' (quoted in Gibson, 2006, p. 13). In other words, 'the poors' (see Desai, 2002) are the truth, and have named the shackdweller's movement a university because they 'think their own struggles' and 'are not poor in mind' (Zikode, 2006). Some intellectuals understand this, some don't, continues Zikode. This is exactly one of the problematics Fanon articulates in *The Wretched*, which remains so pertinent today (see Gibson, 2003), and yet is so patently absent from Bhabha's foreword.

Bhabha concludes his foreword with a quote from page 135³⁶ from *The Wretched*: '[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 technicist solution. The process is long and painstaking but it is a wonderful articulation of Fanon's challenge to intellectuals, aid activists and policy makers that it is worth quoting in full:

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.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Katie Hunt, Kate Josephson, Richard Pithouse and especially Sox Serizawa for their critical comments and advice.

Notes

- [1] 'Philosophy, which once seemed obsolete, lives on because the moment of its realization was missed' (Adorno, 1973, p. 3). Translation slightly altered. Fanon's French is fairly straightforward especially in contrast to translating Adorno's German.
- [2] 'The explosion will not happen today. It is too soon . . . or too late', *Black Skin White Masks*, translated by Charles Lam Markmann, 1967, p. 7. Future citations will be in text as BS.
- [3] In text citations (D) will be to the 2002 La Découverte edition.
- [4] In text citations to the Farrington translation (CF) will be to this edition. RP designates the Philcox translation.
- [5] Because 'ideology' is often 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 Fanon had in mind a critique which involved thought, a clarification, enlightenment and consciousness. On Fanon's notion of ideology, see Gibson, 1999, pp. 337–64.
- [6] This is a good example of Farrington's awkwardness in contrast to the simplicity of Philcox's translation.
- [7] 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.
- [8] 'The writings of Malcolm X or Elridge Cleaver or Amiri Baraka or the Black Panther leaders reveal how profoundly they have been moved by the thoughts of Frantz Fanon.'
- [9] In mainstream postcolonial studies, more often than not, Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* is usually considered his master work, while *The Wretched* is reduced to an excerpt of 'Concerning violence' and 'On national culture'. This has begun to change. See, for example, Young, 2001.
- [10] For example, she translates 'masquer cette régression' (D, p. 160) as 'mark this regression' (CF, p. 165) rather than 'mask this regression' (RP, p. 111).
- [11] 'Lisez Fanon: vous saurez que, dans le temps de leur impuissance, la folie meurtrière est l'inconscient collectif de colonisés' (D, p. 26).
- [12] I must note Raymond Geuss' comment to me that if Sartre was born anything, it was a Cartesian! And perhaps Fanon's critique of Sartre's privileging of the intellect at the expense of lived experience is ultimately critiquing the Descartes in Sartre.
- [13] Fanon's conception of absolute is thus one of absolute diremption rather than synthesis. For example, decolonization as it is described on the very first page of *The Wretched* creates total disorder and thus is always violent because it creates a new consciousness out of nothing. That is to say, the non-being becomes being through action. The non-being becomes an historical protagonist through the transforming process of struggle. Through this process, the historical protagonists take on more nuanced views as they face 'the pitfalls' and 'misadventures' of national consciousness.
- [14] On the issue of guaranteeing authorial authenticity, see Stepto, 1991.
- [15] Homi Bhabha published an adaptation from his foreword to *The Wretched* entitled 'Is Frantz Fanon still relevant?' (2005). An excerpt of the Chronicle of Higher Education article can be found on the History News Network, hnn.us/roundup/entries/10762.html. Bhabha's foreword to *The Wretched* is cited in text as 'B'.
- [16] Bhabha has an easier time writing of 'Fanon for other times and places', such as the Black Panthers, Steve Biko, Bobby Sands (B, pp. xxviii–xxix) before his 'street fighting days came to an end in the 1970s and 1980s' (B, p. xxxi).
- [17] 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, p. xxix).

- [18] Contrast this to Bhabha's (2002) insistence in 'Terror and after . . .' that 'the decision to implement and administer terror is a political decision not a civilizational or cultural practice'.
- [19] In this case, perhaps Farrington's translation is closer to Fanon's meaning, since Fanon does not use the word 'perfection' and a royal pardon does not imply perfection.
- [20] Contrast the international silence of the horrific suffocation of thousands of Algerians people in mountain caves in the 1840s under the orders of French 'civilizer' Field-Marshal Bugeaud (who had said, 'if the scoundrels retreat to their caves . . . smoke them out mercilessly, like foxes) with Fanon's point in 1961 that at a certain moment the beating up of people in Salisbury becomes an international event (see Djebbar, 1993).
- [21] As 'Fellaheen' it was used in a derogatory way by French to refer to partisans.
- [22] Interestingly Fanon uses the same quote from Césaires 'Les armes miraculeuses' (Et les chiens se taisaient) 'And the dogs were silent' (RP, p. 44) that he had in *Black Skin* (BS, p. 198) arguing that having killed the white master within himself, the Rebel killed the master 'after having driven himself to the limit of self-destruction, the Black is about to leap into the "black hole," and shake the pillars of the world (BS, p. 199).
- [23] That is to say, the Mau Mau oath was a secret yet social pledge to strike at the oppressor, to reclaim land, to put an end to the total atmosphere of violence that is colonialism. Indeed it was neither as thoughtless nor as brutal as the colonists made out. On the brutality of the British, see Elkins, 2004.
- [24] In this context one must take into consideration Fanon's chapter four of *The Wretched*, 'Colonial war and mental disorders'.
- [25] See BS p. 100 and the introduction to *A dying colonialism*.
- [26] 'Primitive accumulation' remains the rule under neoliberal structural adjustment. State-centric schemes of import-substitution which relied on cash crops and the expropriation of the peasantry and farm laborers also tended to provide basic health care and education. On the other hand, structural adjustment has seen the ending of all 'subsidies' and an open market which has meant increasing poverty and exploitation.
- [27] As can be seen from the massive removals in Zimbabwe last year (2005) which are simply a local expression of a global phenomenon. The common justification for the 'forced removal' is to fight crime and disease. Other events justify a 'clean up' just as the removal of residents in Hatcliffe Extension, West of Harare, in 1990 before a visit by Queen Elizabeth II. In South Africa, the forthcoming World Cup will 'justify' further removals. See Davis, 2006, pp. 111–14.
- [28] The simple truth expressed by poor is expressed by King in Chris Abani's novel *Graceland* set in Lagos' sprawling shantytown:

De Majority of our people are honest, hardworking people, but they are at the mercy of dese army bastards and dose tiefs in the IMF, de World Bank and de US . . . Let me tell you how the World Bank helps us. Say dey offer us a ten-million dollar loan for creating potable and clean water supply to rural areas . . . First dey tell us dat we have to use de expertise of their consultants, so dey remove two million for salaries and expenses. Den dey tell us dat de consultants need equipment to work, like computer, jeeps or bulldozers, and for hotel and so on, so dey take another two million. Den dey say we cannot build new boreholes but must service existing one, so dey take another two million to buy parts. All dis money, six million of it, never leave de US. Den dey use two million for de project, but is not enough, so dey abandon it, and den army bosses take de remaining two million. Now we, you and I and all dese poor people, owe de World Bank ten million dollars for nothing. Dey are all tiefs and I despise them—our people and de World Bank people. (Abani, 2004, p. 280)

- [29] Philcox's translation reads 'Self-awareness does not mean closing the door on communication. Philosophy teaches us on the contrary that it is its guarantee' (p. 179).
- [30] For example, see the criticisms of Fanon in Miller (1990) and LeSueur (2002).
- [31] For example, Fanon's essay 'Algeria's European minority' in his *Dying Colonialism*, a book completed just over a year before Fanon started work on *The Wretched*, discusses the 'multiracial reality of the Algerian Nation' in terms of language and religion. Of Algeria's Jewish minority, Fanon wrote, 'today, the Jewish lawyers and doctors who in the camps or in prison share the fate of millions of Algerians attest to the multiracial reality of the Algerian nation'. He quotes from a manifesto of one Jewish group in Constantine, 'one of the pernicious maneuvers of colonialism in Algeria was and remains the division between Jews and Moslems. The Jews have been in Algeria for more than two thousand years; they are an integral part of the Algerian people', *A Dying Colonialism*, 1965, pp. 155, 157. See Turner, 2001, pp. 37–46.
- [32] Reprinted in Gibson, 1999, p. 191.
- [33] Indeed, the 'colonization of the mind' was uneven beyond a small number of colonized elite and the colonizing mission was quite different in rural areas where colonialism supported 'customary rule'. On the issue of the legacy of late colonial rule see Mamdani (1996). Mamdani argues that the decolonization movements deracialized urban society but did little to undermine the legacy of 'indirect rule', namely the 'despotism' of customary rule in the rural areas.
- [34] For example, see Bond (2005) which could have taken the title of another of his books, *Fanon's Warning*. Contemporary engagements with Fanon in South Africa include Richard Pithouse (2003a), (2003b) and (2006). See also Gibson, 2005, pp. 89–118.
- [35] Fanon's dialectic of *The Wretched* is not a teleology toward certain freedom; even if Fanon believes that freedom is possible, it is not inevitable but in fact very difficult, and the African nation, in Fanon's words, is 'fragile and in permanent danger' (CF, p. 247).
- [36] This is incorrectly noted as p. 122 in Bhabha's text. A similar mistake is made with note number 101 which is to page 145 but is noted as page 132.

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