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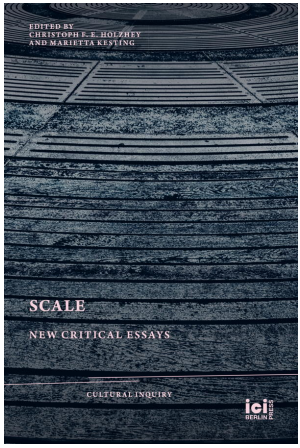

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TOBI HASLETT

Fanon Degree Zero

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ABSTRACT: This essay investigates 'writing' as a motif in Frantz Fanon's oeuvre. From the critique of *négritude* and Sartre in *Black Skin, White Masks* to the figure of the native intellectual in *The Wretched of the Earth*, writing both possesses an elevated class character and dramatizes the antinomies of racial existence. The native petty bourgeoisie, equipped with 'intellectual and technical capital' bestowed upon it by the colonizer, must redirect those capacities towards emancipatory ends. Fanon's own texts, which synthesize psychiatry, existentialism, phenomenology, political economy, and literary criticism, issue from precisely the petty bourgeois stratum that he subjects to ruthless examination. His writing thus performs its own historical predicament, as well as the various spatial and temporal scales at which anticolonial revolt transpires.

KEYWORDS: Fanon, Frantz; Barthes, Roland; writing; petty bourgeoisie; colonialism; anticolonial revolt

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Fanon Degree Zero

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1.

It was not an open letter: at first, this point seems pointless, too obvious to bother noting. When Frantz Fanon vacated his position at the Blida-Joinville psychiatric hospital in December 1956, two years into the Algerian Revolution, he did so, unremarkably, with a letter of resignation. It landed on the desk of Robert Lacoste, then Resident Minister of French Algeria. Since Blida-Joinville was a colonial hospital, Lacoste was Fanon's boss. The text was published only posthumously; it was *not* an open letter.

What, then, explains the rhetorical vehemence of the text itself? A letter of resignation is usually tight-lipped and pro forma. In Fanon's hands it became a bracing, sonorous, paradoxical performance of both defiance and regality, vigour and exasperation, triumphant pathos and frank despair. In short, the text is *Fanonian* — almost unnecessarily so. It expressed not only his refusal to take part in the French occupation as a physician, but also a total, if succinct, condemnation of colonialism as a form of rule: 'A society that forces its members into desperate solutions is a non-viable society, a society that needs replacing.'[1] We know

1 Frantz Fanon, 'Letter to the Resident Minister', in Fanon, *Alienation and Freedom*, ed. by Jean Khalfa and Robert J. C. Young, trans. by Steven Corcoran (Bloomsbury, 2018), pp. 433–36 (p. 435).

very few details about his flight from Blida — mostly that Lacoste responded to his letter, predictably, by ordering Fanon's expulsion from Algeria. In any case, it was time to leave. His anticolonial sympathies were by that point well known. He had also begun to exploit his post as *médecin-chef de service* to provide assistance to the Front de Libération National (FLN): supplying the field hospital with morphine and bandages, and even treating and concealing fighters on the Blida-Joinville premises. Just before his departure, the house he shared with his wife and son was struck by a small bomb, likely planted by white settlers who had heard about Dr. Fanon.[2] He could have expressed himself more discreetly, then. He must have known that his message would be shared with the police.

Yet 'Letter to the Resident Minister' presents, with diagrammatic explicitness, a picture of Blida-Joinville hospital as an objective impossibility: a project negated by its placement in the matrix of colonial force. Psychiatry could not be practised under conditions secured by violence and refreshed by violence. The distinctly Fanonian flavour of the letter isn't just a matter of its passionate elegance, then, but also how it runs arpeggio-like through theoretical registers and disciplinary categories. It advances claims that are logical, historical, ethical, and, crucially, clinical — a variety and juxtaposition made more striking by the brevity of the text. (When it was at last published in the posthumous collection *Toward the African Revolution*, the letter came to just three pages.) There are the appeals to rationality: 'The troubles in Algeria are the logical consequence of an abortive attempt to decerebralize a people.' There are harsh clarifications of the French colonial past: 'This is neither an accident nor a breakdown in the mechanism.' There is an invocation of values: 'For long months, my conscience has been the seat of unpardonable debates.' And there is the functional, practical assessment of the status of mental treatment in the midst of racial-supremacist counterrevolution — a political predicament that effectively mandates madness: 'If psychiatry is the medical technique that sets out to enable individuals no longer to be foreign to their environment, I owe it to myself to state that the Arab, permanently alienated in his own country, lives in a state of absolute depersonalization.'[3]

2 David Macey, *Frantz Fanon: A Biography* (Picador, 2000), p. 300.

3 Fanon, 'Letter', pp. 434–35.

That year, the FLN had called a one-day general strike, prompting brutal retribution by the colonial regime, which in turn compelled Fanon to present his departure, in his letter, as a reaction to the authorities' 'literally irrational' response. Quitting would, famously, mark the start of Fanon's deepened and direct participation in the resistance, albeit from exile in Tunisia. To continue fighting for Algeria, he had to flee it. Faced with the general strike's shuttering of shops and mass withdrawal of labour, the doctor elected to leave his job. This was fitting for a man who five years later wrote that the revolutionary task of the colonized bourgeoisie was to 'betray the vocation to which it is destined' — a mission, he stated clearly, that it would almost always fail.[4]

2.

Why start here, with Fanon's letter, a text cited with such reverent frequency? For one thing, its idiosyncrasies stun the reader: the simultaneous renunciation and denunciation; the mixture of philosophical intensity and bureaucratic functionality; the authoritative invocation of his middle-class profession at the very point when he decides to forfeit that calling indefinitely; and Fanon's attempt to be faithful to the general strike, revolutionary praxis in its most popular form, despite the fact that his own text is pitched at no real public (it was *not* an open letter). Then there's the fact that, as a resignation that prompts an expulsion order, the letter is a speech act that triggers another speech act, inviting us to examine the operations Fanon performs both with — and upon — writing itself.

Just as the drive to 'unleash the man' trapped within the fact of blackness compels Fanon to fashion a new concept, *sociogeny* — denoting how the psychology of racial existence must be bound to 'a brutal awareness of social and economic realities' — Fanon's textual corpus acts out, again and again, a series of ferocious collisions: between writing's metaphysics *and* its pragmatics, its formalism *and* its situated specificity, as it revokes and revises the images it flashes before our eyes. Fanon's texts pose problems, perform inquiries, trace the

4 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. by Richard Philcox (Grove Press, 2004), p. 99.

silhouette of (non-)being; his texts also splinter against the opacity of historical cataclysm, and bare themselves to the jaggedness of political contingency and revolt. These twinned functions produce a distinct form of reflexivity. This is a mode of writing that routinely crashes against the limits of its own capacities, only to be revivified, electrified, propelled by the force of the crash, as these moments of blockage and incomprehension amount, paradoxically, to a further unveiling of the colonial predicament. As he writes in *A Dying Colonialism*, 'every time we do not understand, we must tell ourselves that we are at the heart of the drama — that of the impossibility of finding a meeting ground in any colonial situation.'[5] *The impossibility of finding a meeting ground*: this image of non-mediation and aborted overcoming should make clear that in discussing the relentless movement of Fanon's writing, we are registering more than his style. At stake in this essay is his specific debt to, adaptation of, and assaults on the Hegelian dialectic. The shattering of its assumptions and reinvention of its forms will bring us closer, as we shall see below, to the 'heart of the drama'.

In that colonial drama, writing itself plays a special role. As a practice, it is significant both for the European colonizer, who imposes his signs and forms of knowledge as a machinery of domination, as well as for the colonized, on the dark side of the 'Manichaean world'.[6] Among the wretched, writing is assigned a specific and exclusionary class character (though we will note the intriguing dimensions that 'class' assumes in Fanon's work). Writing belongs to the professions, to the universities: it is the 'intellectual and technical capital' that the native bourgeoisie fails to put to proper use, but which must be seized, *against that class's impulses and most immediate interests*, for revolutionary transformation. This seizure is crucial, and complex. When Fanon describes the anguish of the 'educated black man' in *Black Skin, White Masks*, or the dilemma of the 'native intellectual' in *The Wretched of the Earth*, it matters that he is, from a certain perspective, describing versions of himself. This social stratum, the object of such vituperative passion across his oeuvre, is the place from which his own texts

5 Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism*, trans. by Haakon Chevalier (Grove Press, 1965), p. 125.

6 Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, p. 6.

spring. This observation is meant neither as a sociological explanation of Fanon's texts, nor as a biographical reduction of them. Rather, this fact brings the Fanon reader face to face with his writing's vigorous performative procedures: how the work lives and moves in the blasted landscape of the colony.

3.

It is the contention of this essay that the figure of the colonial petty bourgeois that twists across Fanon's works as failure, traitor, blunderer, self-deceiver, but strangely vital player in the revelation of sociogeny and the dramaturgy of revolt is defined powerfully by that class's role as the bearer of writing. This will help us to reread Fanon's own. I say *writing*, not just to summon the aromatic theoretical Frenchness of *écriture* — though this essay will pass, somewhat perversely, through a consideration of Roland Barthes — but because Fanon's corpus is, among other things, a disaster from the standpoint of genre. His first book, often read as philosophy, was a rejected dissertation in psychiatry. His second book might be considered a dialectical species of political journalism, though after his death his French publisher Maspero retitled it *Sociologie d'une révolution*. Fanon's last book, unclassifiable, contains elements of each. And now we have the awesome task of reading all of these works again, in light of his recently published psychiatric texts, mostly from Blida-Joinville and Tunisia, presented for the first time in a volume that, notably, also includes his plays.

'Writing', then: this term will fit our purposes better than 'literature', 'philosophy', 'scholarship', or even 'theory'. That last might tempt us to presume too much about its revolutionary counterpart 'praxis', the dimensions of which Fanon hoped to reformulate and explode. We're told in *The Wretched of the Earth* that violence, since it constitutes the very 'atmosphere' for the colonized,[7] must also be their 'absolute praxis'.[8] What kind of textual production is adequate to this absolute? Not a handbook, not a pamphlet, not a bullet-pointed programme. Nor does Fanon insist on particular tactics or declare a new ideology. Like his letter to Lacoste, his writing will move between many

7 Ibid., p. 31.
8 Ibid., p. 44.

genres and disciplines, in the hope of conjuring the vastness and overdetermination of the colonial antagonism using the 'intellectual and technical capital' — psychiatry, existentialism, phenomenology, political economy, *négritude*, not to mention the specific brio of the French rhetorical tradition — that at the same time pins him, unmistakably, to his delimited class location.

The scalar aspect of writing thus comes into view. In fact, the question of scale becomes central. The activity of the colonized intellectual is presented as confined to a minoritarian niche, subject to sequestration in the city, and — like a private resignation letter penned with the declamatory brilliance of an open one — running the perpetual risk of having no appropriate audience for its exertions, ambitions, or manifestations of crisis. But through a series of distinctly Fanonian negations, the petty bourgeois intellectual's fumbles and stutters manage to illuminate and intervene in a *total* colonial scene. Discerning the place of this minor, flailing figure in the national liberation process affords us special insight into the absolute atmosphere of annihilation that must be parsed through sociogenic analysis and eradicated through decolonizing praxis.

But the nation is not simply spatial. The perilous particularity of the native intellectual's writing also corresponds to a sense of lurching between plural *temporal* scales. One of these scales is brutal, punctual: the ruthless tempo of liberation war. Another scale is marked by lag: the long process of tending to the psychic lacerations wrought by colonialism. This is what Fanon refers to, introducing his chapter on 'Colonial War and Mental Disorders', as the 'many years to come [in which] we shall be bandaging the countless and sometimes indelible wounds inflicted on our people'.[9] But even insurrectionary punctuality is shot through with untimeliness — the typical revolutionary mixture of premature and overdue actions — and the extended process of healing is slashed by the immediacy of psychotic symptoms. In Fanon's texts, then, colonial domination is shown both to exacerbate the burden of history and assert its harrowing openness. His writing must therefore deploy the vast reserves of petty bourgeois 'intellectual and technical capital' to find new ways of expressing history's antinomic

9 Ibid., p. 181.

impasses *and* its irrepressible surges, its homicidal urgency *and* its constitutive dislocations, from the vantage of a Janus-faced moment of self-invention and complete destruction — what he refers to in *The Wretched of the Earth*'s first paragraph as a 'tabula rasa'.[10] A clean slate: a metaphor for overthrow, and an image of the erasure of writing.

4.

When Cedric Robinson decried the 'petit-bourgeois stink' of *Black Skin, White Masks* in an essay from 1993, he meant to throw into relief the triumph that is *The Wretched of the Earth*. The revolutionary character of Fanon's final work supposedly neutralizes the preciousness of his first one, a book that for Robinson lingers too long in the fetid ambiance of psychoanalysis — hence the 'stink'.[11] This is an insult, of course, as well as one particular way of approaching a more general riddle. How to read *across* Fanon's works? How to chart the links and discontinuities that mark an oeuvre and life often seen, however vulgarly, as sliced into 'Martinican' and 'Algerian' halves? For Françoise Vergès, the interpretive road from the Black Caribbean to Arab North Africa is to some degree psychosexual. The embrace of Algeria works like a family romance: Fanon can swap out the effeminate anguish of Antillean complexes for the virile spectacle of a people in revolution.[12] For Albert Memmi, it is precisely this capacity for wilful displacement that exposes the messianic fantasy that all but invalidates Fanon's politics, as explained in Memmi's polemic 'The Impossible Life of Frantz Fanon'.[13]

Ato Sekyi-Otu has suggested yet another path: 'We need to read these texts and scenes within texts *dialectically* rather than *sequentially* or as discrete entities.'[14] The value of this mode of reading, which encompasses all of Fanon's major works but takes *The Wretched of the*

10 Ibid., p. 1.

11 Cedric J. Robinson, 'The Appropriation of Frantz Fanon', in Robinson, *On Racial Capitalism, Black Internationalism, and Cultures of Resistance*, ed. by H. L. T. Quan (Pluto Press, 2019), pp. 295–307 (p. 298).

12 Françoise Vergès, 'Creole Skin, Black Mask: Fanon and Disavowal', *Critical Inquiry*, 23.3 (1997), pp. 578–95 <https://doi.org/10.1086/448844>.

13 Albert Memmi, 'The Impossible Life of Frantz Fanon', trans. by Thomas Cassirer and G. Michael Twomey, *Massachusetts Review*, 14.1 (1973), pp. 9–39 (p. 22).

14 Ato Sekyi-Otu, *Fanon's Dialectic of Experience* (Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 22.

Earth as its central text, is its suspension of the need to reconcile different Fanons, or to note the impossibility of doing so. Non-dialectical interpretations presume that a given passage in Fanon's works can be brandished as a propositional statement or a crystal of positivity — even a teaching. This produces serious distortions. It also threatens to vitiate the dynamism that propels Fanon's specific mode of exposition: the torrent of images, archetypes, and scenes that thrusts his prose forward to expose new contradictions. The pitfalls of misrecognizing this may be clearest in the interpretations of the chapter 'On Violence' in *The Wretched of the Earth* as a simple celebration of bloodshed — as opposed to a stylized moment that gives rise to further dilemmas. As Robyn Marasco has noted,

> On the question of violence, Fanon has been judged too harshly and read too carelessly. *The Wretched of the Earth* proffers a powerful and notorious argument for the role of violence in transforming the colonial subject and destroying the colonial system. But Fanon's approach to the question of violence cannot be considered in abstraction from the colonial system that lives on it — and this includes the practice of colonial medicine, in which he played a part. Fanon also treats violence as colonial symptom. What *Wretched* offers is neither a defense of violence (as if violence ceases once we cease in defending it) nor a denunciation (as if denouncing violence will not ensure that some remain its permanent victims), but an analytic of violence.[15]

Reading Fanon's works as a string of instructive aphorisms thus blots out the larger, contradictory picture of the racial-colonial paradigm. In a world-shaping irony, the colonial system's endless, streaming energies are devoted to manufacturing solidity, ensuring stoppage. The result is the absolute division between two species, two zones, two realms of being linked by 'pure violence'.[16] This is a racialized form of life that Fanon describes, repeatedly, as 'petrified'. Only the most dynamic, reflexive reading can make sense of this vicious stasis.

A reading of Fanon's texts as comprising a *single dialectical narrative* — fuelled by negativity, both given form and threatened with

15 Robyn Marasco, *The Highway of Despair: Critical Theory after Hegel* (Columbia University Press, 2015), p. 141.

16 Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, p. 4.

formlessness by a series of pitiless displacements — allows for a more complete encounter with the colony's many petrified surfaces. The point, for Sekyi-Otu, is to grasp *then reappraise them* as manifestations of the very immediacy that the colonizer imposes at gunpoint. This is the immediacy of apartheid, the immediacy of occupation, and of course the obliterating immediacy of inscribing catastrophic meanings on the blank fact of black skin. The surpassing of mere immediacy may rhyme with the journey of Hegel's Spirit. Sekyi-Otu, however, lays emphasis on the particular figures and disfigurations that make up the Fanonian dialectic: 'Fanon's coquetting with Hegel stops short of a homonoetic consummation.'[17] The Hegelian model 'is not fundamentally and specifically *political*,' but Fanon's, incontrovertibly, is:

> Like the 'black soul' which, according to Fanon, is but a 'white artifact', the effects of these power relations and contestations in psyche, economy, polity, and culture are radically contingent products of political history, not the self-generated manifestations or 'moments' of Spirit's transcendental itinerary. And the modes of the colonized subject's relations to these effects of power — modes of self-alienation and self-affirmation — these are also definitively political situations, occasions of finite and contested acts of political judgment rather than recognizable determinations of the 'concept'.[18]

Sekyi-Otu insists that among these 'definitively political situations' we must include the technics and hydraulics of hierarchy *among* the colonized — chiefly gender, ethnicity, and class — though our focus will be on the latter and its relation to writing in Fanon's work: class anxiety among black Antilleans, uneven development among the wretched, and the contests over privilege that plow through the newborn nation. In a petrified, Manichean world, what analytic status do these intragroup contradictions merit? No programmatic statement by Fanon clarifies this matter. These intramural conflicts go darting through the narrative; they announce themselves on the move. It is only, as Sekyi-Otu argues, '[b]y virtue of such a dialectical reading of scenes' that

17 Sekyi-Otu, *Fanon's Dialectic of Experience*, p. 28.

18 Ibid., p. 29.

'we are led to "perceive a change", to borrow Marx's language, "in the physiognomy of our dramatis personae"'.[19]

We shall note below how in *The Wretched of the Earth*, the colonized intellectual assumes a particularly, even scandalously, labile shape. But an ability to recognize the modulations and ambivalences traversing the Manichean world strikes Sekyi-Otu as the crux of the Fanonian mission, the heart of his explicit, ineradicable revolutionary humanism. There can be no achievement of a 'human world',[20] 'a new humanity',[21] or 'a new man'[22] — to quote the closing passages of *Black Skin, White Masks*, *A Dying Colonialism*, and *The Wretched of the Earth*, respectively — without seeing, as Sekyi-Otu does,

> that race is the tomb wherein the historical consciousness is interred, alive; that try as it might, the empire can never wholly erase intimations of possibilities native to the very idea of humanity; that there is life after apartheid — no, that there is life, human, all-too-human life, palpitating within the peculiar institution of apartheid.[23]

Human, all too human: Sekyi-Otu's allusion to Nietzsche, though glancing, is telling. It draws a proleptic picture of the human not as a warehouse of luminous virtues, but as a figure criss-crossed by frailties and miserable self-deceits — the kind of contradiction and involution that to Robinson might give off a 'petit bourgeois stink', but which for Sekyi-Otu proves the presence, even the necessity, of politics.

5.

It may be fruitful to concede Robinson's point about Fanon's class orientation, then, without striking the same note of dismissal, or pretending to say anything that Fanon isn't telling us himself. 'The educated black man,' he writes in the introduction to *Black Skin, White Masks*, with a malice that suggests that he, like Robinson, has smelled the stink,

19 Ibid., pp. 22–23.
20 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. by Richard Philcox (Penguin, 2021), p. 206.
21 Fanon, *Dying Colonialism*, p. 181.
22 Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, p. 239.
23 Ibid., p. 25.

> slave of the myth of the spontaneous and cosmic Negro, feels at some point in time that his race no longer understands him.
>
> Or that he no longer understands his race.
>
> He is only too pleased about this, and by developing further this difference, this incomprehension and discord, he discovers the meaning of his true humanity. Less commonly he wants to feel a part of his people. And with feverish lips and frenzied heart he plunges into the great black hole. We shall see that his wonderfully generous attitude rejects the present and future in the name of a mystical past.[24]

Fanon is giving us a glimpse of the critique of *négritude* that will come later in the book and resound in *The Wretched of the Earth*'s chapter on national culture. The charge, here, is that the 'mystical past' beloved by Aimé Césaire and Léopold Senghor amounts to an aesthetic and intellectual collusion in the petrification of blackness. Dreaming up a halcyon history means sealing yourself in an archetype, turning yourself to stone. This metaphysical freezing is a form of cowardice. It refuses the essential disorientations of historical experience. How is this error possible? By what process do these 'educated black m[e]n' in thrall to the 'myth of the spontaneous [...] Negro' ironically consign their own people to an impossible fixity? This division between *négritude* writers and the people, between middle-class poets and the subject group they hope to redeem, is *among the first* of Fanon's many scenes of non-recognition and sabotaged reciprocity. And this dilemma slices, instantly, through the precinct of blackness itself.

Non-recognition, sabotaged reciprocity: George Cicciariello-Maher has referred to moments such as these as Fanon's way of 'decolonizing dialectics';[25] Sekyi-Otu anoints this Fanon's 'deformed dialectic'.[26] The most famous of these will be his revision of the master-slave allegory in 'The Black Man and Hegel' — in which blackness is deprived of the possibility of recognition — but everywhere he seems to be defacing the dialectic method.[27] This is clear both in the

24 Fanon, *Black Skin*, p. xiv.

25 See George Cicciariello-Maher, *Decolonizing Dialectics* (Duke University Press, 2017) <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822373704>.

26 Sekyi-Otu, *Fanon's Dialectic of Experience*, p. 61.

27 For an illuminating new interpretation of Fanon's critique of Hegel in *Black Skin, White Masks*, which clarifies the use of Fanon's phrase 'zone of non-being', see Daniel

account of the native and European sectors as confronting each other, 'but not in the service of a higher unity'.[28] We may also see it in his revision of Marx to explicate the violence that suffuses the fight for national consciousness. In *Capital*'s chapter on the working day, the contradiction of 'right against right' propels both capitalist and worker into the specious formal equality of the marketplace that is really a theatre of domination: 'Between equal rights, force decides.'[29] For Fanon, however, the 'bloodbath in the colonies' does not follow from a hypocritical parity (*right against right*) but from explicit ranking and opposition: 'between oppressors and oppressed, force is the only solution.'[30] Even his adaptation of his teacher Francesc Tosquelles's *socialthérapie* allows Fanon to see his clinical work with psychotics — who cannot partake in the taut transferential dance of analyst and analysand — as requiring what Tosquelles called a 'burst transference', a notion that Fanon will refashion in Blida, in the midst of colonial war.[31] In light of these repeated scenes of non-mediation, failed recognition, disordered transmission, and impossible exchange, the line from *A Dying Colonialism* bears repeating: 'every time we do not understand, we must tell ourselves that we are at the heart of the drama.' Fanon's books hang frame after luminous frame around this fundamental obscurity. Presenting and interpreting these instances of non-understanding allow him to assemble his own form of dialectical writing. In the place of Hegel's well-known 'speculative sentences', Fanon gives us a form of writing that draws succour and vigour from its failed attempts to portray *Aufhebung*. This dialectic — which contains massive, insoluble chunks of merciless immediacy — implies a unique approach to negativity. In fact, this approach may be clearest in a moment of literary-critical polemic.

Badenhorst, 'Fanon, Hegel, and the Problem of Reciprocity', *Hegel Bulletin*, 44.2 (2022), pp. 321–44 <https://doi.org/10.1017/hgl.2022.1>.

28 Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, p. 4.

29 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume One* [1867], trans. by Ben Fowkes (Penguin, 1976), p. 344.

30 Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, p. 32.

31 For an overview of Fanon's adaptation of Tosquelles's methods, see Camille Robcis, *Disalienation: Politics, Philosophy, and Radical Psychiatry in Postwar France* (Columbia University Press, 2021).

The critique of *négritude* quoted above from the first pages of *Black Skin, White Masks* will give way, by the volume's end, to a critique of Jean-Paul Sartre's own critique (or, really, backhanded compliment). In 'Black Orpheus', an essay from 1948, Sartre hymns the African and Antillean poets whose specific historical predicament as dominated, dehumanized subjects has yielded a new school of poetry. In fact, he claims that the bards of *négritude* alone redeem poetry's revolutionary potential — which he had dismissed the previous year in *What Is Literature?* — because their suffering is caused by a hatred that lies beyond the European proletarian's technical exploitation in production. Black poets, up against the wall, must assert the sheer fact of their subjectivity. They thus refresh the very form of the lyric. This is the writhing, trance-like, incantatory lyricism that Sartre deems 'Orphic' because it descends into the mystically sensuous underworld despised, but not rigidified, by metropolitan capital. The essay will then be spent reconciling racial and class oppression, in order to locate them both within a social totality defined by bourgeois domination. This requires a racial division of labour expressed in crude metaphysical terms. Race is simply 'concrete and particular', class is 'universal and abstract', meaning that *négritude* must be reduced to a mere 'upbeat' or 'weak stage' in a grander dialectical unfurling: a minor 'moment of negativity'.

Fanon rebuts this, famously. But he does so not by disputing that blackness is a bearer of the negative, but by reminding Sartre of the negative's fundamentality and indisputable force within the Hegelian schema that 'Black Orpheus' invokes. The negative manifests 'the seriousness, the suffering, the patience, and the labour' that in fact allows for the *overcoming* of abstract universality.[32] Negativity is the engine of dialectical movement, and affords access to the intoxicating textual sequence and intimation of totality that in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* is called 'absolute knowing'. Fanon can therefore say of Sartre: 'For once this friend, this born Hegelian, had forgotten that consciousness needs to get lost in the night of the absolute, the only condition for attaining self-consciousness.'[33] The moment is a triumph of insouciant reversal.

32 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* [1807], trans. by Terry Pinkard (Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 13.

33 Fanon, *Black Skin*, p. 112.

Fanon impugns Sartre's Eurocentric condescension by displaying a firmer grasp of Hegel, only to displace Europe as the brilliant centre of history and thought. But Fanon's comment also partakes, sharply, in a radicalization of negativity itself. In his hands, it is not the weak stage but the strong stage in the dialectical sequence; arguably going beyond Hegel's own ambivalence,[34] Fanon will imply that stumbling desperately through the night may actually be thought's irrepressible drive: 'Consciousness committed to experience knows nothing, has to know nothing, of the essence and determination of its being.'[35]

The symmetry is striking. *Négritude* first participates in petrification by rushing past its own petty bourgeois character; blackness is petrified again from without when *négritude* is confined to a minor moment in the story of proletarian emancipation. Sociogeny, which insists on the interlocking processes of consciousness and material domination, supplies a frame that neither ratchets blackness up to the point of myth nor sequesters it as world-historical weak stage. The question remains of how to *write* this sensuous particularity, how to voice this anguished consciousness wandering, lost, in the dialectical night. Who could *read* such writing — and if they did, how would it help? In Sartre's *What Is Literature?* — a treatise on writing whose notion of 'commitment' weighs heavily upon all of Fanon's books — the first chapters are 'Why Write?' and 'For Whom Does One Write?' The first page of *Black Skin, White Masks* declares that, unlike Sartre, Fanon will not venture answers to these questions. Like the excoriated 'educated black man' of *négritude* who 'feels that his race no longer understands him', Fanon will face the fear that he is writing for no reason, and to no one:

> Why am I writing this book? Nobody asked me to.
>
> Especially not those for whom it is intended.[36]

34 For a radical rereading of Hegel's absolute knowing that approaches Fanon's own in its dispelling of the charge that the absolute is a 'panlogicist' view from nowhere — though Hegel's own writing may sometimes suggest that interpretation — see Rebecca Comay and Frank Ruda, *The Dash — The Other Side of Absolute Knowing* (MIT Press, 2018) <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/10877.001.0001>.

35 Fanon, *Black Skin*, p. 113.

36 Ibid., p. vii.

6.

Reconstructing the figures of the black or colonized intellectual is a fraught task — not least because of Fanon's own habit of vaulting between conceptual registers or even levels of abstraction. This, of course, is the great analytic value, promise, and challenge of sociogeny. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, blackness, seemingly phrased in ontological terms or presented as an ethical and epistemic challenge to Freudian and Adlerian psychology, comes slamming against the socioeconomic mechanism displayed hatefully on the skin. And in the colony evoked by *The Wretched of the Earth*, concretion and abstraction look different under the annihilating regime of race. The colony condenses, distorts, and foreshortens the basic categories of political economy. This gives rise to a bourgeoisie without real capital, and proletarians with *just* a bit more to lose than their chains. '[T]he proletariat in the colonies is embryonic and represents the most privileged fraction of the population',[37] Fanon writes in the chapter on spontaneity; in the chapter on national consciousness, he insists that 'the bourgeoisie is incapable of forming a class'.[38] This, too, is petrification. The blockage of historical development that race terror reinforces does more than simply subordinate the periphery to the core. It stages carnivalesque parodies of class domination itself. In the face of a forcibly stagnant history, colonial society acts out its ossification, its void of recognition, its lack of access to mediation, in the tragicomedy of the petty bourgeoisie, theorized by others, ironically, as intermediate class. This is a class that longs for recognition but never actually gets it: a class that perpetually risks misrecognizing itself.

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, that antic, frantic self-deception comprises a source of freakish dynamism. This class even achieves a bizarre vitality. But the strangeness is only perceptible in light of the work's more prototypical mass heroes: one of the great controversial interventions of that work is its nomination of the peasants as the base of the revolution. The spontaneous avant-garde, able to inflame the political conjuncture and bring the dispossessed to boiling point, goes

37 Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, p. 73.
38 Ibid., p. 112.

by the name 'lumpenproletariat' — a technical Marxist term that had fallen out of fashion in virtually all of socialist discourse by the time of Fanon's writing.[39] Peasants, rooted to the land of the remote interior; lumpenproletarians, seething and starving on the city's outskirts: these are the subjectivities formed and hardened on one side, absolutely sequestered, of the clogged dialectical transfer — amounting to an antinomy — that makes up the colony's bifurcated world. Fanon has chosen his protagonists, deposited them in a landscape, and set the scene for insurrection.

Enter the colonized intellectual. Or rather, the intellectual never fully enters, or exits. This figure's role in this work is glancing, refracted, almost suspiciously underdetermined. That is, despite his [*sic*] odd ubiquity. Absent, here, are the long debates about the place and purchase of 'theory' in the revolutionary struggle (as we find in Lenin and his political inheritors). Also missing are strong claims about how the petty bourgeoisie's objective, if contradictory, interests fit into the mosaic of social struggle. In Cedric Robinson's own landmark work *Black Marxism*, an entire chapter is devoted to the Black Radical Intelligentsia; Ghassan Kanafani's study of the Great Palestinian Revolt of 1936–39 includes a section consecrated to 'The Intellectuals'. It's different here. Before the chapter on national culture, the intellectual dashes into and out of the scene mid-insurrection, only to feel the sting of usurpation. Burdened by a handful of complexes, this class experiences the progress of the revolt largely as an undoing, not empowering activation. But there is *activity* — almost too much. There he is, the native intellectual, advocating for peace, for nonviolence as a matter of principle, then (after independence) for the takeover of national industries by his ilk and stratum. In the heat of insurrection, he undergoes a kind of affective bonfire: 'witnessing the destruction of his idols: egoism, arrogant recrimination, and the idiotic childish need to have the last word'.[40] Often he is seen as a kind of academic accomplice — being petty bourgeois himself — to the colonial bourgeoisie, who, given their mediocrity and uncertain place, in many ways

39 For a succinct exposition of the history of the lumpenproletariat and the category of the unemployed, see Michael Denning, 'Wageless Life', *New Left Review*, 66 (2010), pp. 79–97 <https://doi.org/10.64590/pit>.

40 Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, p. 11.

resemble a petty bourgeoisie. This class at different points anoints itself as a safety valve for radical energies, or a spokesperson in a dialogue that's either a sham or simply not happening. As Fanon writes of the petty bourgeois leader: 'In the best of cases, he barricades himself in a *no-man's-land* between the terrorists and the colonists and offers his services as "mediator"'.[41]

But Fanon soon informs us that violence itself plays that role. In the same paragraph where he refers to violence as absolute praxis — itself the seeming flipside of Hegelian 'absolute knowing' — he also describes violence as 'la médiation royale': translated as 'royal pardon', but also as 'perfect mediation'.[42] The issue arises, then, of how the petty bourgeoisie and the European-educated intellectuals who are its chief ideological emblems relate to this bare fact: how these loquacious would-be mediators address themselves to the 'perfect' mediation of open or submerged war on their people. Fanon's chapter on spontaneity, in which the lumpenproletariat comes into its own as political force and historical actor, is embroidered throughout by an epistemic motif of the colonized intellectual. Fanon tells us that the preceding reflections on violence have alerted him to the 'frequent discrepancy between the cadres of the nationalist party and the masses, and the way they are out of step with each other'.[43] Over that chapter and the next one, *a specific version of that out-of-step-ness will come to be the engine of the idiosyncratic, dilapidated dialectic* that Fanon gets going before our eyes. The colonized intellectual is never on time — too early, too late, conveying a message that nobody listens to, and when they do, it turns out poorly. (Fanon spends some time warning the reader about the perils of the petty bourgeois potential for 'demagoguery'.) To grasp the syncopated rhythm of this sequence, it may be worth doing a bit of ethico-political plot summary.

41 Ibid., p. 24.
42 Ibid., p. 44.
43 Ibid., p. 63.

7.

The intellectual, enamoured of European tradition, forms political parties in Europe's image. For exactly that reason, he looks in all the wrong places for the sources of political dynamism that can blast the people out of the petrification that he can barely recognize himself. The most radical element, he assumes, will be the proletariat. He ignores the peasants. When he finally discovers the peasants, he has feudal rulers to contend with, who send him packing back to the city, where he's awaited by the colonial police. His precious political formation fractures and is repressed; a few courageous revolutionary elements break off, return to the countryside, and try again with the peasants. These petty bourgeois learn quickly upon their return to the rural context. The peasants have been waging periodic insurrections this whole time. And one fringe paradoxical benefit of their organized petrification turns out to be the intact memory of the attempt to beat back the colonizers when they first arrived from Europe. From their side, this restive peasantry sees the lettered, articulate, European-style petty bourgeois fleeing the police and wonders if something is happening in the capital. This final meeting is both a climactic union and a missed encounter — and at last sets the national uprising in motion: 'It is then they [the intellectuals] realize in a kind of intoxication that the peasant masses latch on to their every word and do not hesitate to ask them the question for which they are not prepared: "When do we start?"'.[44]

When do we start: a question about time that arrives at the wrong time. This intellectual is doomed to be out of step. But that out-of-stepness supplies the process with its own curious capacity for motion and endurance. Though this transpires in a context throttled by violence of every type, at every scale, there's a minorly comic rhythm here: that of a quixotic picaresque or Chaplin-like slapstick. One is tempted to see a parallel between the black person of *Black Skin, White Masks* who cannot 'unconsciousnessize'[45] (to use Fanon's curious neologism) suffering, but must act it out perpetually with his body, and the mad dash of the petty bourgeois in *The Wretched of the Earth*. Denied the

44 Ibid., p. 28.

45 Fanon, *Black Skin*, p. 129.

relatively elegant temporal displacements which provide one model for *Aufhebung*, the intellectual is compelled to zigzag across the hinterland, only to be confronted by questions they can't answer, despite what Fanon calls, disdainfully, the intellectual's 'theoretical analysis'.[46]

For Sekyi-Otu, the return of the petty bourgeois intellectual to the scene, on radically revised terms, is an intimation of a specifically political possibility. There is proof for this claim; indeed, there are many ways in which the transvaluation of the intellectual's European training is itself the foretaste of a fully disalienated humanity that has dissolved the barriers of the colonial paradigm: a process that Sekyi-Otu calls 'The Reprieve of Prodigal Reason'. But our interests here require us to note the distinctly *spatial* dimensions of the intellectual's journey. The intellectual's footloose scamper from city to interior and back again does not resemble the twirling upward spiral of *Aufhebung* but rather presents the obverse of the absolute Manichean compartments of the colonial world. His scandalous deracination and lack of place are really a refraction of colonial life's smothering fixity. The special capacities of the intellectual are not being gradually or regularly enriched by the encounters with the provinces and the police. Rather, the petty bourgeois, thrown hither and thither by failure, presents precisely the fragmentary evidence of that failure to those who will eclipse him completely.

In his 1966 address 'The Weapon of Theory', Amilcar Cabral pronounced that the revolutionary task of the petty bourgeoisie wasn't just to 'betray its vocation', as Fanon advised, but to commit suicide as a class. Suicide, for Fanon, feels too morally prestigious: too Euripidean, too Sophoclean. The petty bourgeois he knows have no business playing Antigone, and don't *get* to be Jocasta. They don't deserve the glory of entelechy — and in this dialectic without guarantees, they don't have a rendezvous with fate. *They must fully live the brittleness of their own unravelling. Paradoxically, this is a kind of building*. Roving the anti-dialectical, petrified landscape of utter spatiality, the intellectual's expulsions and reappearances amount to a repetitive, almost mechanical motion that constructs the national consciousness. Criss-crossing the country that is coming into being, they set the stage (to quote

46 Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, p. 68.

Fanon's title) for that consciousness's own 'misadventures'. This is a schematic picture that Fanon is giving us. It's also quite a vivid schema, one that ends with the petty bourgeois intellectual at last alighting on the lumpenproletarians. The reader may wonder if, by an astonishing situational irony, in the journeys into and out of the city, the intellectual runs right past the lumpenproletariat's shanty towns every single time. Supposedly, these oblivious figures shall be writing the nation's literature.

Fanon, writing with atypical didactic certainty, declares that the path towards national literature will comprise three stages, three ways for the colonized intellectual to maintain fidelity to the people and — one might say — contribute to disalienation by means of writing. First, by assimilating and mastering the colonizer's culture; second, by returning to the people, though 'the colonized writer is not integrated with his people'. The third and final stage is 'combat literature', in which 'the writer, after having tried to lose himself among the people, will rouse the people'.[47] The risk of self-exoticism stalks this portion of the text, recapitulating at length Fanon's earlier critiques of *négritude*:

> The culture with which the intellectual is preoccupied is very often nothing but an inventory of particularisms. Seeking to cling close to the people, he clings merely to a visible veneer. This veneer, however, is merely a reflection of a dense, subterranean life in perpetual renewal. This reification, which seems all too obvious and characteristic of the people, is in fact but the inert, already invalidated outcome of the many, and not always coherent, adaptations of a more fundamental substance beset with radical changes. [...] The peoples who have waged the struggle are increasingly impermeable to demagoguery, and by seeking to follow them too closely, the intellectual turns out to be nothing better than a vulgar opportunist, even behind the times.[48]

Fanon's clean tripartite schema, then, is stalked by the perpetual possibility of its own collapse. 'Combat literature' therefore often comes close to signifying the disintegration of literary endeavour. The radical force that propels the concept also precipitates, almost immediately,

47 Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, p. 159.

48 Ibid., pp. 160–61.

the scattering of writing's power into other forms of art. Notwithstanding the careful attention Fanon gives to the poem 'African Dawn' by Keita Fodeba in this chapter, the submergence of writing into a larger matrix of cultural practices — themselves subsumed immediately by the demands of colonial war — suggests that this section is not simply influenced by Sartre, but reads like a specific response to him.

In *What Is Literature?*, Sartrean 'commitment' and 'literature of praxis' remain indistinguishable from the question of audience; no literary gesture can be evaluated apart from its constructed public. Sartre, limiting himself to the French context, never doubts that such a public is bourgeois. The objective, then, becomes to exploit and overcome the class character of writing to intervene decisively in the fight for human emancipation. His existentialist answer is both stridently heroic and dialectically circumspect. Concrete, liberatory literature relies on an avowal of both a Project (meaning a vision of the future) and Negativity: the capacity to uproot the immediacy of the given. The famous commitment that Sartre calls for is therefore not commitment to the masses, or commitment to an ideal of freedom, or even commitment to a specific and explicit vision of socialism; it is foremost a commitment to one's *situation*. For Sartre, the irreducible particularity of a situation is comprised of the determinations — meaning 'limits' — that both foreclose and promise a non-alienated form of life. His name for this classless society, despite the insistent Hegelianism of his argument, is Kantian: 'the City of Ends'. Commitment to one's situation means confronting the innumerable fortifications that exclude us from this city:

> I shall say that a writer is committed when he tries to achieve the most lucid and the most complete consciousness of being embarked, that is, when he causes the commitment of immediate spontaneity to advance, for himself and others, to the reflective. The writer is, *par excellence*, a mediator and his commitment is to mediation.[49]

For Sartre, this mediation must help to revive emancipatory possibility in a particular situation, France in 1947, which in his view lacks

49 Jean-Paul Sartre, "What Is Literature?", trans. by Bernard Frechtman, in Sartre, *What Is Literature? And Other Essays* (Harvard University Press, 1988), pp. 21–245 (p. 77).

a revolutionary aperture, and in which the advance of capitalism has fragmented and etiolated the bourgeoisie that once nurtured the institution of literature: 'All we can do is reflect their unhappy conscience in our mirrors, that is, advance a bit further the decomposition of their principles.'[50]

Fanon takes each of these terms and turns it on its ear. Fanon's vision of national literature must be constructed during an *ongoing* revolution. *His* committed writers must sacrifice their special claim to mediation — a function performed, in the colonies, by violence itself. And *his* petty bourgeois intellectuals, dreaming of leading and mediating, have no memory of a coherent audience for their writing. They are not decomposing as a result of the advancement of bourgeois society to a point of dissolute, decadent lateness, but in fact barely constitute a class, due to the enforced backwardness of underdevelopment. Their dissolution follows from petrification. Instead of engaged or committed literature, then, Fanon ventures, not a genre or a project, but a simple, underdetermined term: 'combat literature'. The best and first example of it may be his own hybrid texts.

8.

'[T]he last episode of Passion of writing, which recounts stage by stage the disintegration of bourgeois consciousness': Roland Barthes's *Writing Degree Zero* (1953), published just a year after *Black Skin, White Masks*, also issues a response to Sartre.[51] (Like Fanon's works, it ends with the then-common call for a 'new humanism'.) Barthes cleaves much closer to Sartre's *What Is Literature?* and even attempts to negate that text by adopting its method of re-narrating the history of French literature. Barthes's subject is writing and politics, writing and revolution; his contention is that the revolutionary-counterrevolutionary cycle of 1848 in France dislodged the notion that the bourgeoisie had a monopoly on truth. The result was successive attempts to manage the fraught traffic between Literature and History. Zero-degree writing is writing that dreams of freeing itself of history, presenting itself as trans-

50 Ibid., p. 204.

51 Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, trans. by Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (Hill and Wang, 2012), p. 5.

parent: abstract universality (though Barthes does not use this term), written in pared down prose. Barthes calls this 'colourless writing', or 'white writing'. It arrives at its most succinct expression in the blank style of Albert Camus's *The Stranger*: as it happens — though Barthes does not note this — a novel that turns on the slaughter of an Algerian lumpenproletarian by a settler.

White writing, indeed. But we might exploit the climactic and hypothetical character of Fanon's coinage, 'combat literature', to speculate about what kind of black writing he was imagining, and perhaps produced. In the absence of concrete examples, we might suggest that Fanon himself, confronted with combat's disparate spatial and temporal scales, arrived at his own version of zero-degree writing, which is the opposite of what Barthes described: not floating above history but wrenched by his conflicting motions; not aspiring towards an immaculate ideal of Literature, but so devastated by the phenomenology of the colony that he must — not unlike Sartre declaring that journalism would become a genuine branch of literature — traverse disciplines and splice genres to enact a kind of literary disalienation. This disalienation would need a writing that knows its place *and* its placelessness. It would be capable of recalling itself and revising itself, unravelling and obliterating itself. Fanon says of the colonial intellectual: 'He does not always see the overall picture. He introduces the notion of disciplines, specialized areas and fields into that awesome mixer and grinder called a people's revolution.' [52] The discrepant scales of these specialisms are overcome by the 'overall picture' both made and obscured by combat. One of Fanon's specialisms, of course, was psychiatry. We might close, then, with a return to Blida.

'To write means to want to be read,' Fanon wrote in an editorial of *Notre Journal*, the newsletter written by staff and patients at Blida-Joinville. 'In the same stroke it means to want to be understood. In the act of writing there is an effort being made; muddled and vague things are combatted, surpassed.' [53] The repetition of 'combat' in the clinical context is striking; it suggests yet another continuity between the psychic and material registers that Fanon's sociogeny was devised

52 Ibid., p. 13.

53 Frantz Fanon, 'Our Journal', in Fanon, *Alienation and Freedom*, pp. 311–48 (p. 325).

to parse. This short piece in *Notre Journal* was one of a few in which Fanon defended the inclusion of writing in the therapeutic regimen. In fact, he defends writing as a process that contains its own repetition and failures but that strives, irrepressibly, for lucidity. The poignancy of this psychic, therapeutic combat follows from the unique condition of the patients. They were psychotics, and thus uniquely incapable of the ordered linguistic signification that is the foundation of transference. 'The discovery of writing is certainly the most beautiful one,' reads Fanon's first contribution to *Notre Journal*, 'since it allows you to recall yourself, to present things that have happened in order and above all to communicate with others, even when they are absent.'[54] *Socialthérapie*, the method employed by Fanon at Blida during the Algerian Revolution, occupies a total therapeutic milieu that might account for and overcome these moments of repeatedly denied reciprocity and impossible transmission. In that way, this method resembles Fanon's texts, and insurrection itself.

54 Ibid., p. 315.

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