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The *Langue* of the Damned:  
Fanon and the Remnants of Europe

What I want is that Marxism and communism  
be placed in the service of black peoples, and not  
black peoples in the service of Marxism and  
communism.

—Aimé Césaire, “Lettre à Maurice Thorez”

**I**t is assumed that the title of Fanon’s third book alludes to “The Internationale.” David Macey suggests that the allusion is more complex than it appeared to Third Worldist common sense in the past. As Macey puts it: “It is one of the more militantly defiant assertions of *négritude* that provides Fanon with the title of his most famous book: *Les damnés de la terre* or *The Wretched of the Earth*. The obvious allusion to the ‘Internationale’ is mediated through a less obvious allusion. Written in either 1938 or 1939 by Jacques Roumain, founder of the Communist Party of Haiti, ‘Sales nègres’ is first cited by Fanon in 1958” (Macey 2000: 177–78; see also Roumain 2003).

I will explore what has been missed in the gap between *Les damnés* and the final English translation of *The Wretched*. The signifier *wretched* does not convey the same—apocalyptic, messianic, redemptive—meaning as *damnés*. What is missing is precisely that *mediation* of the wretched

through *les damnés* of Roumain's poem recalled by Macey. What is lost in translation here is nothing less than Fanon's *modernist* political imagination.

Fanon's mediation echoes the political-existential mood of Aimé Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism* (1972). Here Césaire condenses into the figure of the proletarian the same damned, apocalyptic, and redemptive mission that characterized Négritude in *Cahiers d'un retour au pays natal*: "The salvation of Europe is not a matter of revolution in methods. It is a matter of the Revolution—the one which, until such time as there is a classless society, will substitute for the narrow tyranny of a dehumanized bourgeoisie the preponderance of the only class that still has a universal mission, because it suffers in its flesh from all the wrongs of history, from all the universal wrongs: the proletariat" (1972: 61). From Césaire's modernist standpoint, as suggested also by Roumain's poem, salvation is intricately connected *only* to extreme dispossession and suffering. His contraction was also intended to mean that the proletariat, after world imperial-experience of dispossession, cannot be *simply* the traditional "communist" wretched (European industrial working classes) but those who Fanon would call later *les damnés de la terre*. As we shall see Césaire's *Discourse* can be considered as central as Roumain's poem in the configuration of the damned.

Focusing on what is "lacking" in translation, my aim here is to interrogate the existential grammar of the damned, namely, that minimal set of objective and subjective conditions within which the constitution of the *damned* as a (political) subject can occur. By appealing to a "linguistic metaphor," it becomes possible to locate the *langue* of the damned because Fanon's damned can emerge only from within a specific historical/symbolical discursive tissue that *transcends* them and becomes thus their peculiar living experience, or *erlebnis*.

This genealogical strategy may help determine both the political category of *damnés* and, important for a contemporary reading of Fanon's work, who can be considered today's damned.

### **The Damned and the Marxist Revolutionary Pantheon**

*Les damnés de la terre*, for Fanon, are Third World, slum-dwelling *lumpenproletariat* and Third World peasants. However, it is difficult to confine *les damnés* to a *sociological* category solely. But if its hybrid and literary nature appears now to be at the root of its political appeal, in the 1960s and 1970s it was considered the source of its theoretical weakness. Many studies in the "first wave" debate on Fanon, which was sociological and economic in

approach, emphasized the vagueness, the “nonworldliness” (retrieving in negative form Edward Said’s expression) of the damned as a political category. To this self-defined Marxist-Leninist scholarship produced by the likes of Jack Woddis (1972), Nghe (1963) and Nwafor (1975), Fanon’s damned was a flawed political category since it lacked any empirical or scientific base. But apart from the white Left’s dogmatism, there was a widespread sense among them that *The Wretched of the Earth* was not Marxist or Leninist enough and that Fanon’s work was in no way based on an objective Marxist analysis of class struggle and world capitalism. Even an author such as Pierre Bourdieu, hardly the definitive Marxist-Leninist, criticized Fanon’s assumptions because the “peasantry and *lumpenproletariat* could never be revolutionary forces in themselves” (1977: 80).

Since *les damnés* could not become the communist wretched at all and as the damned translated as the wretched lost all its political power, Fanon’s term was not allowed to enter the (European) pantheon of revolutionary subjects.<sup>1</sup> For most of the Euro-American Left the debate on Fanon centered exclusively on the question of whether he was a Marxist.<sup>2</sup> An affirmative response would simply confirm the political knowledge not of Marxism itself but of Western Marxism (Anderson 1976). A negative one would simply ban Fanon from the Marxist pantheon. What was not acknowledged in dominant Marxism was the radical challenge to its traditional Eurocentrism and historicism posed by Fanon’s anticolonial revolutionary modernism. The damned was the peculiar outcome of a modernist and anticolonial condensation of extremely heterogeneous suggestions: literary, artistic, psychoanalytical, psychiatric, philosophical, anthropological, and autobiographical (Fanon’s experience of racism and anticolonial war). *The Wretched of the Earth* could thus be the reduction of a mere sociological imagination. This does not involve any diminution in its political power or reliability, unless, of course, we decide that only the field of knowledge can unveil those emerging subjectivities through which we perceive the political drives of different historical periods.

In fact, quite another state of things characterized the reception of Fanon’s book both within the Black Power movement but also on the Latin American political scene. In a continent fully permeated by revolutionary turmoil, where *foquismo* and other forms of armed struggle were real political options, after the Cuban Revolution, and given the role of postcolonial occupation assigned to the national armies by US imperialist politics, *Les damnés de la terre* immediately became a prominent political point of reference. The content of Octavio Getino and Fernando E. Solanas’s *La hora de los*

*hornos* (1968), one of the most popular militant films of that time in which Fanon is abundantly quoted, illustrates the kind of political *weltanschauung* that had begun to dominate the Latin-American Left. In Latin America, from the beginning Fanon's theories took their place next to Guevara's: here the figure of the damned stood out in the revolutionary pantheon. This sympathetic reception was not due simply to its Third Worldist view or to its deposition of the Western working classes as the proletarian vanguard but was due mainly to the great affinities between the revolutionary subjectivity as it was emerging and what I call, drawing from Ferdinand de Saussure's notorious term, the *langue* of Fanon's damned. To a revolutionary *habitus*, deeply impregnated with radical humanism and entirely "consecrated" to a real personal sacrifice in the name of collective reparation—that is, to the good or heroic death—the *langue* of the damned was perceived as a kind of mother tongue.

Some of the key connotations of the *langue* of the damned, as the refusal of the master-slave dialectic (posed by G. W. F. Hegel as the very ground of modernity and citizenship) or the assumption of risk (of life itself) and struggle as unavoidable premises for the emergence of authentically free subjects and societies, had become a sort of "political realism" in Latin America. In Latin America, as in black America and in Africa and Asia long before the wars of decolonization, there was greater awareness of the necropolitical (Mbembe 2003) side of modernity, of the fact that modernity had manifested itself to wide segments of the world population under the master signifier of "race." In the colonial world, modernity meant not simply emancipation, as it did on the whole for "white" Marxism, but it also meant violence, terror, and (both social and physical) death. Genocide, slavery, and limitless exploitation were experienced as part of the modern "ratio," not as mere deviation, of what Fanon called "Europe": a monstrous combination of capitalism and race. In sum, the calling of the damned found *fertile* ground in Latin America, infinitely capable of anchoring to "real politics." Latin American political radicalism and *The Wretched of the Earth* joined in their refusal of enslavement as a precondition of modern citizenship. In a sense, it was the most striking denial of white Western-Hegelian Marxist theories and their historicist/sociological reductionism.

### **The *Langue* of the Damned or Fanon's Modernist Habitus**

The damned, then, is the result of a modernist imagination. It was a figure deeply rooted in a structure of feeling that permeated revolutionary mod-

ernism from its emergence at the end of the nineteenth century to the late 1960s, when it was politically defeated. Elsewhere I have suggested rereading Fanon in the light of not only the black modernism literary movement but also Marxist modernism (Mellino 2011), that is, through critiques of historicism, progress, Hegelian dialectics, reification, power, and subjectivity developed by György Lukács, Theodor Adorno, Bertolt Brecht, Herbert Marcuse, and Walter Benjamin. However, traces of such revolutionary modernism are still clearly active in Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophy and literary production.

The point here is that Fanon's radical humanism, although it stands as a further anticolonial decentering of the Eurocentric perspectives of these thinkers (Young 1990), appears intricately connected to the moment of this revolutionary modernism. Yet Fanon's involvement with revolutionary modernism could also be traced from the *langue* of the damned, since for Fanon the damned is the result—the *parole*—of a very peculiar *langue*. In fact, what makes of the wretched the damned is, in Michel de Certeau's term (1997), their potential *prise de parole*. By *prise de parole*, I mean the will of the biopolitical subject for desubjectification from power discourses, namely, the desire to re-reach the zero degree of human subjectivity: "decolonization is quite simply the substitution of one 'species' of mankind by another. The substitution is unconditional, absolute, total, and seamless" (Fanon 2005: 1). The moment of the *prise de parole* is defined, then, by the denial of all narrations instituted by power as master signifiers and hence the production of new subjectivities. In Fanon's existential-Sartrean language, the *prise de parole* is the moment of nothingness, of possibility and indetermination: the moment when one is the only foundation of oneself.

However, for Fanon, although it presupposes the breaking of all conditioning forces enclosing self-freedom, this *prise de parole* cannot be considered as a gratuitous act: it cannot occur freely or by chance; it is not an act available to all people. The damned of the earth, the condemned, *los condenados de la tierra*, as the Spanish translation clearly suggests, are by no means free subjects: as invoked by the signifier itself, the damned are essentially condemned people and not mere outcasts or pariahs. The damned are such because they have been expropriated by colonial primitive accumulation not only of all their material means but also from their past, history, and culture. Unlike Western working classes, which have been domesticated through integration within national imperial-hegemonic cultures, the colonized cannot even breathe on their own, since the colonial occupation is always accompanied by the physical occupation of colonized bodies. Colonial

and racial exploitation is thus a process of violence in its natural state. It is to this peculiar kind of expropriation that Fanon was referring when he assumed that colonization means dehumanization.

Yet nonbeing is only half the truth of the damned. They are condemned because, by virtue of their existential condition of total expropriation, they are driven by something that transcends them: a universal mission, the moral duty to redeem humanity. This is why the violence of the damned will never be like colonial master violence: in Benjaminian terms, it must be considered as a kind of divine violence. These are the modernist and the Sartrean ethical and moral imperatives that are lost in the gap between *les damnés* and the wretched.

Fanon then conceived the damned as privileged subjects. It is by virtue of their own dispossessed material existence (nakedness) that they have access to the deepest truth, to humanity itself. In Fanon's Hegelian words, the damned, unlike his Martiniquan black, are such because they decided to lose themselves in the "night of the absolute" (Fanon 1967: 133). They are emerging from "a situation of minority," to invoke Rancière's expression (2010: 167), as they no longer accept the narrations instituted by colonial power as master signifiers of their own world. This transformation is the main argument of Fanon's *L'an V de la révolution algérienne* (2001). The damned—like no others—have heaven close at hand as they can see the (non)essence of things. This is another leitmotif of (revolutionary) modernist imagination: the pursuit of purity or authenticity, which for Fanon meant both the emergence of a new revolutionary subject invested with total responsibility toward the world and the other, and the desire and possibility of human complete disalienation. Fanon describes the decolonization process as an "absolute beginning" and as a "tabula rasa" (2005: 2).<sup>3</sup>

It could be argued that the damned come into existence by virtue of their DuBoisian "double consciousness." Again, it is important to stress that this is neither a gratuitous condition nor a universal state of being. It is an embodied effect of the colonial mirror of race, the annihilating gaze of the white master, which dismembers the self of the colonized into a body in fragments impeding his or her constitution as a human subject: "'Dirty nigger!' Or simply, 'Look, a Negro!' . . . And then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects. Sealed into that crushing object-hood, I turned beseechingly to others" (Fanon 1967: 109).

Fanon summarizes this double condition of the damned—not human and also potentially total man—by one of the most modernist passages of

*Black Skin, White Masks*: “There is a zone of nonbeing, an extraordinarily sterile and arid region, an utter naked declivity where an authentic upheaval can be born. In most cases the black lacks the advantage of being able to accomplish this descent into a real hell” (10). This is one of Fanon’s most powerful descriptions of the *langue* of the damned. To be damned is living at the limit of suffering, exploitation, humanness. But living at the limit is, as Fanon put it, “straddling *nothingness* and *infinity*” (140; emphasis mine). In other words, blacks are next to infinity as they live in a state of nothingness. Their lives oscillate between physical and social annihilation and redemptive empowerment. However, blacks, the colonized—the wretched of the earth—could rise up as damned only if they decide to descend to that “utter naked declivity where an authentic upheaval can be born” (8).

Fanon’s damned send us back to many of the most traditional figures of modernist dramas. The first are obviously Franz Kafka’s damned. In Fanon’s outline the colonial state works as the law machine Kafka describes in *The Trial* (1925): inducing colonized people to feel guilty about their own personae. The colonized, thereby, internalizing and naturalizing the inferiority complex, experience their condition more as a fatal punishment than as a mere material form of exploitation. What Benjamin saw in Kafka’s damned could be argued for Fanon’s damned: their beauty and purity (humanity’s hopes of redemption) arise precisely from their state of hopelessness (Benjamin 1967). Moreover, Fanon’s description of racial ordering in the colonial situation has much in common with descriptions of urban and modern experiences by modernists such as Kafka and Benjamin: the interruption of time and dialectics, the splitting of subjectivities, the atomization of social life, the impossibility of real (human) experience, and as Benjamin puts it, the dissolution of any aura (all leitmotiv in Sartre’s philosophy).

Fred Moten (2012) suggests that Fanon’s damned could be read through Gilles Deleuze’s “The Exhausted” (1995) that is, through Deleuze’s reading of Samuel Beckett’s damned. Moten poses a challenge: to think “Fanon’s calculus of im/possible in relation to Deleuze’s analytic of ‘The Exhausted’” (Moten 2012: 161). In fact, the exhausted person, like Beckett’s damned, “exhausts the whole of the possible” (Deleuze 1995: 3–8) and thus is able to perceive all the (im)possibilities covered up or rendered opaque by common language. In sum: the exhausted, as the damned, is the only one who can see, imagine, and feel beyond the limits of (his) language. As a state of being, exhaustion, like Fanon’s damnation, entails the dissolution of language into its own (im)possibilities.

In *La force des choses* (*The Force of Circumstance*), Simone de Beauvoir describes Fanon himself as an “exhausted” (1973: 429, 432). When she met Fanon in Rome, she got the impression that he was living in an apocalyptic moment all of his own. De Beauvoir adds that Fanon seemed to be “haunted by death,” which might explain “his loquacity, impatience and sense of an ‘impending catastrophe’” (432). Comments on Fanon as messianic/apocalyptic writer are now common: he has often been defined as an apostle of Third World revolution and *The Wretched of the Earth* as the bible of decolonization (Young 2003: 123). It is obvious that Fanon’s political urgency—as did Guevara’s—derived from his perception that the Third World, fueled by the struggle for decolonization in Asia and Africa and against United States-supported dictatorships in Latin America, was on the verge of a final battle against imperialism. However, this sense of living and thinking at the limit, in an “impending catastrophe,” has its roots in his modernist weltanschauung. Fanon’s epilogue to *The Wretched of the Earth* could be read as one of the last echoes of Edvard Munch’s modernist *Scream*: “So, my brothers, how is it that we do not understand that we have better things to do than to follow that same Europe? Come, then, comrades, the European game has finally ended. . . . Europe now lives at such a mad, reckless pace that she has shaken off all guidance and all reason, and she is running headlong into the abyss; we would do well to avoid it with all possible speed” (2005: 312).

In Fanon’s revolutionary weltanschauung, the moment of consciousness, the modernist awakening, is bound up with this self-perception of an imminent terminal point. An effective way to evoke this modernist structure of feeling is in Césaire’s phrase: “It is with their heads buried in the dunghill that dying societies utter their swan songs” (1972: 45). To put it in messianic, Fanonian terms, there cannot be any salvation without damnation.

It is precisely this peculiar mood of the damned—the redemptive and reparative mission that Fanon assigns to his subject in an *almost* finalistic manner—that gives to the first chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth* its messianic, Manichaean, and apocalyptic (almost biblical) tone: “The last shall be the first” (2004: 2) as “the violence which ordered the colonial world . . . will be vindicated and appropriated when, taking history into their own hands, the colonized swarm into the forbidden cities” (2005: 5–6).

### **Remnants of Europe: Fanon as Witness**

Recovering the modernist mood of *The Wretched of the Earth* helps us interrogate Fanon’s actuality beyond postmodern and traditional Marxist view-

points. It could be argued that Fanon's writings convey the typical urgency of the "witness": his apocalyptic language appears as a means of making public some dramatic or terrifying testimony. As outlined by Giorgio Agamben, in his reading of Primo Levi's testimony on Nazi concentration camps, the witness comes into being whenever humanity is in danger. The essential meaning conveyed by the witness, then, is that humanity emerges in the moment of its imminent destruction. Humanity, thus, is not telos, not a given essence, but a mere contingency—in Agamben's terms, a "remnant." This is Agamben's lesson in *Remnants of Auschwitz*: the human occurs in the human nonplace. For Agamben, the human arises as survival; that is, "the human being is the one who can survive the human being" (Agamben 1999: 132). In other words, only those whose humanity has been totally destroyed can really be human; only those who have lost their humanity are able to witness. Fanon's urgency then derives clearly from his experience of human limits, of a historical situation that (for him) had reached a point of no return.

Fanon's world is no longer ours, but if we feel the calling of his writings, it is because we are still struggling with the specters of what he called Europe. His writings stand before us now as an interrogation: they challenge the "remnants of Europe." In this Fanonian instance, decolonization is experienced both as a colonial-racial catastrophe (the killing of man) and as the possibility of emancipation (the final emergence of postracial humanity) at the same time. The national liberation movements may have won or lost their struggles. Yet both possibilities suggest the same: to recall Fanon as a witness, to ensure the unarchivability of his texts, is mainly to recall his narration of the struggle for decolonization, his anti-postcolonial project, in its triple dimension, namely, in its insurrectional, constituent, and universal goals (Mbembe 2010). As Achille Mbembe suggests, leaving behind the "colonial night" for Fanon meant mainly a return to life: to struggle to take back life from all those forces aimed at its suffocation is to struggle for life beyond "exhaustion."

Fanon's integral man emerges as a remnant in every contemporary struggle aimed at the reappropriation of life, in every struggle aimed not merely at some ephemeral corporative (material or identity political) goal, but at the production of the common. Fanon's integral man could only be the result of self-management. As the pages of *The Wretched of the Earth* on mass political organization clearly show (2005: 63–96), for Fanon the project of decolonization as rehumanization can be accomplished not through the national bourgeoisie and its political institutions but by the constitution of the colonized in new self-organized constituencies. Curiously, this

altermodern, immanent, or “constituent power” of the damned has never been sufficiently emphasized by commentators.<sup>4</sup> These are all duties Fanon imposes on us if we are to consider the postcolonial present through the damned, those who are all too easily invoked and too seldom engaged in their full humanist possibility.

### Notes

- 1 The problem was not only linked to translation, since even in Italy (where *damnés* has been correctly translated as *dannati*) *The Wretched of the Earth* has not had, beyond Giovanni Pirelli's (1971) enthusiastic reception, any real impact on local Marxism.
- 2 For an extended analysis of this, see Immanuel Wallerstein (1979).
- 3 I am sympathetic with critics such as Lewis Gordon (1997) and Paul Gilroy (2010), who both emphasize the incompatibility of Fanon's radical humanism and poststructuralist theories. Yet I would like to add that this incompatibility lies mainly in Fanon's faith of the possibility of a (revolutionary) complete disalienation or absolute (re)beginning. Fanon's paradigm, as that of Sartrean philosophy and revolutionary modernism, was the pursuit of “authenticity.” The latter has become a dirty word in postcolonialism: we need to recall that in Fanon's modernism, authenticity had nothing to do with essentialism. Yet Jacques Lacan, just to take a poststructuralist example, would have defined Fanon's idea about a kind of zero degree of the human condition as just another projection of self's imaginary delirium or a mere metaphysical fantasy of the self's total return to itself. Having said this, some of Fanon's arguments run parallel to that of poststructuralism, as his oeuvre is also the result of the same French philosophical background dominated by figures such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Alexandre Kojève, and Jean Hyppolite.
- 4 Macey does bring into focus this aspect of Fanon's political thought. However, he easily dismisses it as just another of Fanon's “unrealistic” evaluations of the possibilities of the “Algerian Revolution” (2000: 487–88).

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