

**Fanonian Practices and the politics of space in postapartheid South Africa: The
Challenge of the Shack Dwellers Movement (Abahlali baseMjondolo)**

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*The nation does not exist in the program which has been worked out by revolutionary
leaders ... [but] in the muscles and intelligences of men and women.*

Fanon, *Les damnés*

Je vous remercie de m'avoir invité à ce colloque, je suis absolument ravi et honoré d'être ici, parmi ces personnalités, ainsi que les personnes qui ont un lieu l'historique avec Fanon. Ce document fait partie d'un projet plus vaste appelé pratiques "Fanonian en Afrique du Sud." Une partie de l'idée est de reconnaître la pertinence du vécu de Fanon, les mouvements entre les damnés de la terre.

To speak about Fanonian practices in postapartheid South Africa one first needs to think about the question of method in two not necessarily opposite directions. First, as an engagement with Fanon's critique of decolonization in its contemporary South African context; and second, from the perspective of new emergent movements of the damned of the earth that challenge philosophy. At the same time, since philosophy—not simply practical philosophy but an elemental philosophy of liberation—is always already present in the strivings of liberation of the

damned of the earth,¹ a philosophic moment makes itself heard when the exchange of ideas becomes grounded in both the strivings for freedom and lived experience from those excluded, marginalized and dehumanized and when, as Marx puts it, philosophy grips the masses. These dialogues—often hidden, underground and subjugated—make up what could also be called a philosophy of liberation.

Since his death, practicing Fanon's philosophy of liberation has taken many forms. For example, one could consider the resonances of James Cone's "Black Theology of Liberation" in the U.S. or Paulo Friere's "Pedagogy of Liberation" in Brazil² (Cone 1986, 1997; Friere 1970). Each drew significantly upon Fanon as a liberation theorist. But on the African continent it was Steve Biko in South Africa who was perhaps the most significant practitioner of Fanon.³ In a new context Biko extended Fanon's project and developed "Black consciousness" as a philosophy of liberation. In this paper I want to consider how Fanon's philosophy of liberation is being challenged by new movements from below, specifically the shack dweller movement, Abahlali baseMjondolo and how such a movement has made concrete the importance Fanon places on the politics of space.

¹ I use the phrase "the damned" rather than "The wretched" because I think it better emphasizes the philosophical, existential and material being of those people who are damned, outside, and silenced. However, throughout I use the standard English translation of Fanon's book *Les Damnés de la Terre*, *The Wretched of the Earth*.

² Friere's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* has been viewed as an extensive reply to *The Wretched*. Friere's relationship to Africa, specifically to post independence Guinee-Bissau should also be noted. See Friere (1978).

³ This is certainly not to downplay the significant influence of Fanon on the revolutionary theorist Amilcar Cabral (1969) or on writers such as Ayi Kwei Armah (1968) or on African political theorists and philosophers beginning perhaps with Emmanuel Hansen (see Gibson 1999). The point here is that Biko's debt to Fanon in his creation of a philosophy of liberation. On the continuing legacy of Fanon's thought see Gibson 1999.

While Fanon's philosophy of liberation emerges from a specific physical space, "reality" has a proper time and the form of his work is therefore "rooted in the temporal" (1967 104, 14). "Every human problem," Fanon adds, "must be considered from the standpoint of time" (1967 14-15). Yet, we are stuck in time, a neocolonial/postcolonial time. At the same time the present also seems far away from Fanonian invention. Indeed, so much has changed since Fanon's day that it is fashionable to remark that Fanon is no longer relevant.⁴ And, certainly, in today's globalized, "post-race" liberal "cosmopolitan" world, the colonial world that Fanon described so vividly seems no longer applicable. After all, in South Africa, apartheid, that bulwark of colonial terrorism, has officially ended. We can date that "ending" to April 1994, when the African National Congress (ANC) won the first fully franchised election. We could even create a timeline which would include the date of Mandela's release from Victor Verster Prison on February 11th, 1990, the repeal of the pass laws in 1986 and so on. We could review the new constitution of South Africa and its guarantees of rights and freedoms, we could look at successful governmental elections and at South Africa's economy, all of which seem to prove Fanon wrong. The question is, is Fanon's critique simply outdated? Indeed some might wonder whether Fanon's philosophy of liberation is still relevant to contemporary realities.

Yet also, the Ghanaian Fanon scholar, Ato Sekyi-Otu, forcefully argues, Fanon's "slight revision of the Marxist analysis" is manifest in the elevation of spatial metaphors in the structure of dominance. Thus, added to a critique of inequality and the Manichean haves and have-nots, Sekyi-Otu's reading of Fanon's "stretched Marxism," emphasizes how the "absolute difference and radical irreciprocity" of the colonizer-colonized relation is made manifest spatially (Sekyi-

⁴ See Homi Bhabha's foreword to the new translation of *The Wretched of the Earth* (2005). For a critique of Bhabha see Gibson 2007.

Otu 72-73). In *the Wretched* Fanon argues that the oppressed is literally pressed from all sides and is only able to find freedom of movement in dreams of muscular prowess. Since Colonialism is also an experience of spatial confinement, of restraint and prohibition, a narrow world of poverty, oppression, and subjugation. Fanon's description of the open and strongly built colonial city, a town of light and plenty, on one hand and the cramped oppressive hungry "native town" on the other (1968 39); The Manicheanism of the colonial world—with its absolute difference between the colonizer and colonized, which finds its apogee in apartheid—is thus clearly expressed in spatial realities. In the colonial world "space and the politics of space 'express' social relationships and react against them" (Lefebvre 2003 15). Because the socio-economic spatial reality of the compartmentalized, divided colonial world can never mask human realities, an examination of this division—"the colonial world's ... ordering and its geographical layout"—Fanon argues, "will allow us to *mark out the lines* on which a decolonized society will be reorganized" (1968 38-40, my emphasis). In other words, since social relations are manifested in space, *one Fanonian test of post-apartheid society is to what extent South Africa has been spatially reorganized*. On this score, it is quite clear that "deracialization" of the city has been an essentially "bourgeois" phenomenon with full membership and rights now accessed by money and consequentially with urban policy—under the guise of providing "housing"—geared mainly toward the *removal* of the poor from urban areas .⁵

⁵ In 2000, Mrs. Grootboom successfully brought a case before the South African Constitutional Court on behalf of 510 children and 290 adults living in deplorable conditions in Wallacedene, Cape Town. The judgment called upon the state to design and implement "a comprehensive and coordinated program to realize the right of access to adequate housing." The case, as liberal lawyers argued, highlighted the potential radicalism of the South African constitution. But, as Marie Huchzermeyer argues (2004: 4), the judgment did not reform the system of access to

In other words, by creating urban settlements, the shack dwellers had created some freedom for themselves as apartheid began to crumble but with plans to remove these urban settlements, post-apartheid policy has returned to the Manicheanism of the earlier period.⁶ A fixation on creating “formal” structures—the government has built around two million housing units since 1994 tells us very little since the new housing for the poor. Those frightfully small and poorly built structures called houses⁷ are based on the removal of the poor from city centers and built far away from bourgeois eyes and fears outside urban spaces: The poor are othered, “temporary land” but was a request for “disaster management, i.e. temporary relief for those living in desperate or life threatening conditions Ms. Grootboom never got her house. The temporal realities intervened to thwart the “victory.” On 30 July, 2008 she died in a shack, still waiting for the South African government to meet her constitutional right to a home.

⁶ Central to the removal (or “relocation”) is the KwaZulu-Natal Elimination and Prevention of Re-Emergence of Slums Act which Marie Huchzermeyer (2008) argues is “not only reminiscent of apartheid policy [but] it reintroduces measures from the 1951 Prevention of Illegal Squatting Act, which was repealed in 1998.” The underlying assumption of the act is that all informal settlements should be removed and replaced by formal. This is, Huchzermeyer continues, despite admissions, even by the government, that RDP housing has removed people from their livelihoods, imposed transport burdens and made poverty worse. The 2004 “breaking new ground” policy of the national housing department sought to redress this by introducing an “upgrading of informal settlements programme” (see Pithouse 2009).

⁷ The minimum standard for a house is 30 square meters (100 square feet) of floor space and the provision of water through a standpipe. The quality of houses has in fact declined not only from the apartheid period matchbox housing (over 250 square feet) but also from the post-apartheid “RDP” houses. Thus critics declare that “Mandela’s houses are half the size of Verwoerd’s.” Following the privatization model favored by the World Bank, houses are built through subsidies to private builders. The builders look to use the cheapest possible materials and construction to guarantee a profit. Inflation has squeezed developers’ profits who have in turn searched to make further cuts in the quality of the buildings.

uninvited, and the shack communities fragmented. Postapartheid housing, whether that be gated communities, or temporary tin shacks thus reinforces spatial segregation.⁸ In the minds of the city planners, urban policy technicians and real estate speculators, and FIFA (World Cup) administrators, a “world class” city cannot be built with shack settlements in the line of sight. Moreover, shack settlements and middle class housing cannot exist side by side. And just as with other gentrification schemes, under the guise of “upgrades” the poor are “removed” from the city. These “forced removals”—to use the language of apartheid—are the outcome of the ANC’s current promotions of “slum clearance” which threatens millions of people who live in urban shack settlements with removal to “transit camps” and other so called “temporary” tin-shack housing.⁹ So what is at stake in Fanonian practices is not simply a critique of government failures and its inability to keep up with housing needs in terms of sheer numbers but the ways the “ordering and geographical layout” of post-apartheid South Africa remaps apartheid (see Robinson 1997).

Since colonialism is about the expropriation of space it is immediately political. Addressing the politics of space, Fanon challenged the newly independent nations to deal with the legacies of colonialism by redistributing land and decentralizing political power, vertically and horizontally. This move seems counter-intuitive in the context of Fanon’s critique of regionalism and chauvinism, and the threat of xenophobia, but the point is that the degeneration

⁸ Policy has been contested and alternatives developed. However the more progressive “Breaking New Ground” which includes a proviso for “in-situ” upgrades of shacks has lain fallow (see Pithouse forthcoming). Even if lip-service is paid to it, the hegemonic position is that of removal and eradicating the shacks.

⁹ Since “slum clearance” has been largely been directed toward shack settlements in the center of the city (which under apartheid were areas designated for “white, “Indian” and “Coloured,”) rather than settlements in the urban periphery where conditions are worse, the policy also recapitulates the apartheid policy of separation.

of national liberation arises in part from the race to take over the seats of power, leaving intact the privileges of the centers of colonial administration and expropriation. Additionally, for South Africa, Fanon's critique is an important challenge to the centralistic and hierarchical culture of the ANC. As Fanon argues, decentralization is not simply an administrative or technical issue; it is connected with the goal of involving the damned of the earth in what Abahlali call a "living politics."¹⁰ And explaining to the formerly excluded but newly politicized people that the future belongs to them, that they cannot rely on an imaginary leader, prophet, or anybody else (1968, 197), necessitates a decentralization of politics. But also that emergent movements demand it and challenge intellectuals to break with their elitism and work out new concepts.

Born in Durban in 2005, the shack dweller movement, Abahlali baseMjondolo (Zulu for people who live in shacks) has become the largest autonomous grass-roots organization in South Africa with members across the country.¹¹ Propelled by those who have almost nothing, the shack dweller's movement, which lives in a daily state of emergency and contingency, represents a truth of postcoloniality and offers a critique of its ethics in the most Fanonian sense. After all, the damned of the earth judge wealth not only by indoor plumbing, taps and toilets, but also by human reciprocity and the relationships that develop through a rigorously democratic and

¹⁰ "Living politics" is a commitment to a politics that in Fanon's terms speak in the language that everyone can understand. As Zikode puts it, "we must – as we always do – start with a living politics, a politics of what's close and real to the people. This has been the basis of the movement's success" (Quoted in Ntseng and Butler).

¹¹ By November 2009 the paid up membership of AbM was just over 10,000 in 53 settlements. In 2008, AbM together with the Landless People's Movement (Gauteng), the Rural Network (KwaZulu-Natal) and the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign Anti-Eviction formed the Poor People's Alliance, a national network of democratic membership based poor people's movements .

inclusive movement. It is a wealth that builds on and emphasizes thinking, namely the thinking that is done collectively and on a continuing basis in the shack communities. There is a politics of the lived experience of scale that begins at the bottom. It challenges policy-makers “up there” to come down to the settlements and listen to the poorest of the poor and thus by doing encourages a new language of dialogue. The shack dweller movement represents a clear and emergent case that makes the intertwining of household and community scale explicit with national politics and responds to Fanon’s critique and call to realize the radically humanist, decentralized national scale of postcolonial struggle. Fanon’s revolutionary theory also necessitates that space is produced differently. Abahlali may not equal Fanon’s “future heaven,”¹² but in its participatory democratic, decentralized and inclusive form, it is implicitly the idea of “new society.” At the very least, it is a challenge to theoreticians to engage with it and rethink philosophies of liberation to help create cognitive leap. What is significant about this new organization is that it expresses a new beginning in the daily struggle, and its brilliance lies in its grassroots democracy and “living politics” that is its “own working existence.”¹³ For example, while land and housing are essential elements to the struggle for a decolonized society, they understand that the struggle is ultimately about building spaces that recognize the humanity of all.

In short, the shack dwellers are voicing their right to live in the city, challenging the idea of citizenship and insisting on an active democratic polity. In this sense, these organized shack dwellers are expressing a new kind of inclusive politics from the ground up, one which appears

¹² Jovel Kovel remarks that AbM has opted “to recreate commons ... [and] have organized themselves into a modern simulacrum of the Paris Commune (Kovel 2007, 251).

¹³ A phrase Marx uses, referring to the Paris Commune. One could add today that the brilliance of the shack dwellers grassroots democracy and “living politics” is its “own working existence.”

local and reformist, such as providing services to settlements, but is also radical and national. They do not speak in terms of a critique of “the state,” nor in terms of a critique of political economy, but they do address the politics of the state and the spatial political economy of postcolonialism that concerned Fanon: If the shacks dweller’s demand for housing in the city is won—and in Durban negotiations are currently taking place between AbM and the city¹⁴—and if housing policy is based in fully democratic and open discussions with the poor, the spatial and political economy of the city could be radically altered, and a fundamental shift in post-apartheid social consciousness and a decisive intervention in its spatial economy could occur. Crucial to this shift, and toward the “reconceptualization of the urban” (Lefebvre 2003 15), would be a move from technocratic state planning toward “grassroots urban planning” (Souza 2006). Such a radical change of consciousness, where “the last would be first and the first last” (quoted in Fanon 1968 37), would encourage a shift in the geography of reason¹⁵ from the elitist and technical discussion of service delivery—mediated “between those who decide on behalf of ‘private’ interests and those who decide on behalf of higher institutions and power” (Lefebvre 2003 157)—to people’s needs mediated by the minds of those who were so recently reified as dirty, uneducated, poor, violent, criminal, not fully human, named the damned of the earth. This double movement—the decommodification of the city and “the new rights of the citizen, tied in to the demands of everyday life” (Lefebvre 2006 250) would amount to a defetishization of the

¹⁴ It should be noted that at the same time, the movement in Cape Town is being criminalized and shot with rubber bullets - especially since the Constitutional Court approved the “removal” of residents of the Joe Slovo settlement to make way for a housing project that will not be affordable for the poor.

¹⁵ “Shifting the geography of reason” is the motto of the Caribbean Philosophical Association (CPA).

city:¹⁶ a shift away from the Northern-focused elite discourse of creating “world class” citadels in South Africa. But this movement from the praxis of “the underside” of humanity will not be easy nor will it come all at once. In July 2009 a new period of revolt and violent repression began. Alongside mass-arrests, a number of people have been shot dead. “Here,” writes Richard Pithouse (2009) in *Business Day*, “the lives of the black poor count for something between very little and nothing. When the fate of protesters killed or wounded by the police makes it into the elite public sphere, they are generally not even named.”

Indeed Abahlali emerged from an earlier period of revolt that has been ebbing and flowing since 2004. The revolts emerge from necessity—namely from the state of emergency that is its daily reality and a historical necessity—and in the challenge to thought about the post-apartheid city itself toward humanist geographies based in people’s needs. In 2008 when xenophobic violence spread through the shack settlements across the country, Abahlali’s response was to take action declaring quite simply, while others dithered, that no one is illegal: everyone counts, “a person cannot be illegal. A person is a person whether they find themselves.”

In place of a conclusion

The organized shack dwellers have developed an infrastructure for self-organization in what they call the “University of the Abahlali.” It is a new kind of organization: not outside, not above, not separate from the shack dwellers, but self-organized and insistent on decentralization, autonomy, grassroots democracy and accountability. It appreciates acts of solidarity but shuns

¹⁶ Since the commodity is a social relationship between things, it is important to maintain that defetishization is crucial to decommodification. Without a critique of alienation and thingification of human relations, decommodification is reduced to a critique of the market rather than the commodity form place and a new fetish is made of nationalized and public property.

money and political power from government and nongovernmental groups. It is an organization, as Fanon understood it, a “living organism.” The shack dwellers call it a *living* politics, and it represents the kind of challenge to committed intellectuals and activists that Fanon mapped out in *Les damnés*, namely that intellectuals need to put themselves in “the school of the people.” After experiences of the elitism of some left, often Northern, intellectuals who actively deny that poor people can think their own politics, S’bu Zikode, the elected chair of Abahlali argues:

We have always thought that the work of the intellectual was to think and to struggle with the poor. It is clear that for [some] the work of the intellectual is to determine our intelligence by trying to undermine our intelligence. This is their politics. Its result is clear. We are shown to the world to not be competent to think or speak for ourselves (Zikode 2008).¹⁷

In the discussions that Abahlali has named “Living Learning” what remains crucial is the principle that the usefulness of whatever is learnt from outside the shacks in schools and university courses is judged by the lived experiences of the struggle of people in the shacks. Knowledge is thus considered neither private property nor the means for private advancement; it is to be a shared endeavor that begins by shifting the geography of reason by putting “the worst off” at the center.

Fanon’s visionary critique of postcolonial elite politics mapped out a “living politics” based on a decentralized and democratic form of self-governing which opens up new spaces for the politics of the excluded from the ground up. Thus, Fanon’s project can be understood as

¹⁷ In other words, they reject the Trotskyist position that they are *lumpen* in need of leadership and also reject the autonomist and Maoist desire that they are the suffering poor, a blank slate upon which one can write the most beautiful characters.

building counter-hegemony from below that opens up spaces that fundamentally change the political status quo and contest the moral and intellectual leadership of the ruling elites. Recently Fanon conclusions to *Les damnés*--with its challenge to Europe and its call to work out a “new humanism” based on the inclusion, indeed centrality in the “enlightening and fruitful work” of nation building (1968 204)—has been concretely rearticulated by S’bu Zikode of Abahlali (2009): “It is one thing if we are beneficiaries who need delivery. It is another thing if we are citizens who want to shape the future of our cities, even our country. It is another thing if we are human beings who have decided that it is our duty to humanize the world.”

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