Frantz Fanon and the enigma of cultural translation

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The writings of Frantz Fanon were very quickly subjected to a form of cultural translation, not only in some of the more esoteric interpretations of his work, which take it very far from his own historical concerns, but also more literally: for today, for the most part, he is read in translation. Sales of his books in English far outnumber those of his original texts in French.

When the first English translation of *Les damnés de la terre* was published by Présence Africaine in Paris in 1963, it was called simply *The Damned* (Fanon 1963; Figure 1).

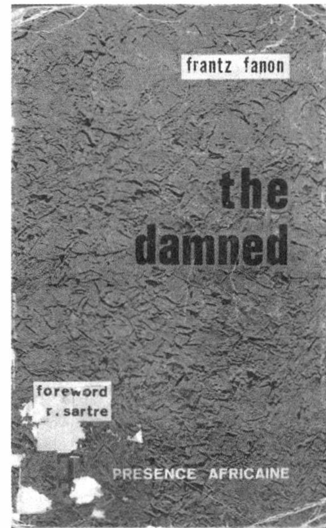

Figure 1

When it was published in London two years later, it was renamed, and given the title by which it is now known, *The Wretched of the Earth* (Fanon 1965; Figure 2).

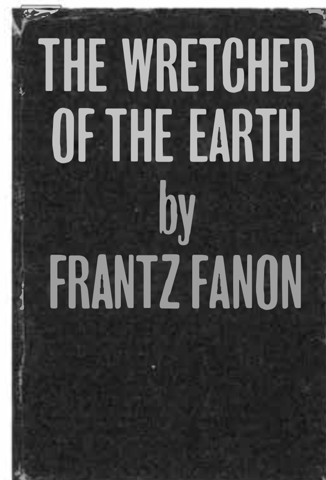

Figure 2

The following year, it was published in the USA, with the same title, but now with a subtitle, which ran, 'A Negro Psychoanalyst's Study Of The Problems Of Racism & Colonialism In The World Today' (Fanon 1966; Figure 3).

This was, no doubt the origin of the misconception in English-speaking countries that Fanon was a psychoanalyst. When the book was reissued two years later in 1968 as an 'African-American mass market paperback', the subtitle was changed. Now it was *The Handbook For The Black Revolution That Is Changing The Shape Of The World* (Fanon 1968; Figure 4)—an oblique reference to the fact that Fanon had become the favourite writer of the Black Panthers.

Think of the reversal of agency that the book, and its constituency, the wretched of the earth, achieved in five years: from *The Damned* to '*The Handbook For The Black Revolution That Is Changing The Shape Of The World*'. As it happens, this turnaround with respect to agency is the very reversal that Fanon himself proposes as a form of psy-

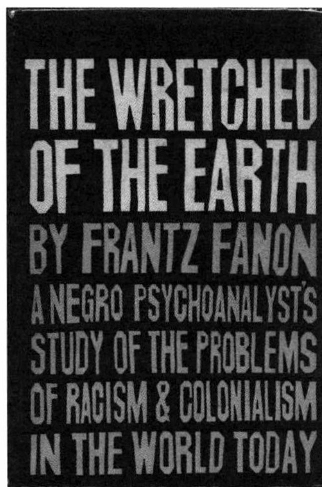

Figure 3

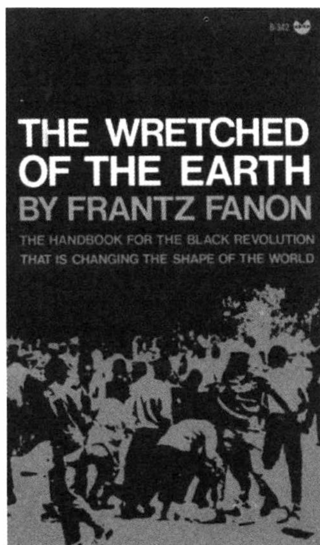

Figure 4

chological self-translation that was central to his life and writings. In my *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction* (2003), I suggested that:

> Fanon's two best-known books are themselves about translation, or more accurately, retranslation. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, he argues that the black man and woman have already been translated not only as colonial subjects in the regime of French imperialism, but also internally, psychologically: their desires have been changed into another form, carried across into the desire for whiteness through a kind of metempsychosis. Their very desires have been transposed, though they have never, of course, actually become white. They have black skin, with a white mask.
>
> They have been made to see themselves as other, alienated from their own culture, language, land. Fanon's project is to understand this so as to find a way to translate them back again. This begins with a refusal of translation, of black into the values of white.
>
> In *Wretched of the Earth* the task he sets himself is the gaining of self-respect through revolutionary anti-colonial violence, where violence for the colonised native is a form of self-translation, the act, the grasping of agency (for Gandhi, in a similar way, it would be non-violence). As a doctor, Fanon was equally emphatic about the possibilities of auto translation through a dynamic, dialogic model of education, a pedagogy of the oppressed, so that the translated became themselves, translators, activist writers. The subjects, not objects, of history. With Fanon, translation becomes a synonym for performative, activist writing, which seeks to produce direct bodily effects on the reader—of which his own writing is one of the greatest examples.

Fanon's 'combat literature' both represents and enacts a total commitment to cultural translation as a strategy for subaltern empowerment. This was achieved through a strong emphasis on speech as therapy. As director of psychiatric hospital, Fanon considered speech as a therapy of primary therapeutic value. Language produced psychic health by translating the self.

Having stressed the importance of translation for Fanon I should now confess that, as far as I am aware, Fanon himself never actually wrote about translation as a topic in itself. He only uses the word very occasionally, if at all. Fanon was not someone who moved easily among languages. His letter to Richard Wright suggests that he knew some English (Wright 1973, 150). When in Algeria, he largely relied on interpreters to communicate with his Algerian patients who knew no French. He seems to have made very little effort to learn Arabic, though his later writings interweave some Arabic words into his prose, rather in the way that his passionate French interleaves Martinican slang and enfolds the medicalised language of the body within its own distinctive verbal texture. If interlingual translation does not appear to have been an issue that particularly interested Fanon, intralingual translation, to use

the first of Roman Jakobson's famous three types of translation—intralingual, interlingual, intersemiotic— (Jakobson 1959) thus figures quite prominently in the mode of his writing, beginning with the ways in which he inflects his own powerful prose through a range of dialects and discourses to produce intense somatic effects. In this practice, he was drawing on the example of Aimé Césaire in his poetry. Fanon himself, however, never theorized explicitly about the possibility of the local language offering a form of cultural resistance to the standard imperial language, notably the authority of the Academie Française.

When we move from language to the realm of culture, it seems that Fanon was more actively preoccupied with translation, considered from this metaphorical point of view. Of course, translation can never stop turning to metaphors to express itself. In turn, it cannot stop itself being used itself as a metaphor for other kinds of translation, for example what we have now come to call cultural translation. Cultural translation is not an alternative term for Jakobson's third type of translation, intersemiotic translation, for it does not involve the translation of language into a different sign system, or even translations between sign systems. Jakobson always assumes that translation treats of relations of exact equivalence, as if translation was a kind of switch box, smoothly making equivalence between differences, rather like switching a light on or off. It is hard to deploy a concept of translation without assuming some such kind of fixed equivalence, of persistent stability. Even if we abandon the notion of translating text A into text B, and think of translation as more performative—a process in which text B also reflects the experience of reading A in a foreign language, and bears, as Friedrich Schleiermacher suggests, the haunting marks of its foreignness—text A will always remain a text, that is, something fixed on the page, unless we factor in the ambiguities of the reading process, after which all texts become less stable than they look. Cultural translation, for its part, is always concerned with translations between words, categories, and practices that hover in the realm of the untranslatable and the incommensurable, bluntly juxtaposing the foreign against the foreign. Cultural translation is always concerned with the stuttering uncertainties that 'stick in the gullet', the translations that occur between non-equivalences that remain obstinately non-equivalent and thus mediate the creation of new forms.[1]

'Cultural translation', however, is something of an oxymoron, or a set of non-equivalents in itself. For it puts together two particularly problematic concepts: culture and translation. If we add the concept of the political, we have a morass of disputed subjects: culture, politics, and translation. Each term is so complex and widely debated, that it leaves us wondering what a politics of cultural translation could ever be? One problem is that the concept of cultural translation implicitly makes an analogy between texts and cultures. In the classical model, the translator transforms a text from one language to another, so that the translated text ideally reads as if it were originally written in the second language. Texts standing on their own on the page give the appearance of stability and fixity: translate 'vino' into 'wine' and you have one of Jakobson's equivalences, though even with a single word such as 'brot', 'bread', 'pain', 'pane', as Walter Benjamin pointed out, the equivalence is not as exact

[1] Cf. Mukherjee, Ankhi. 2007. 'Stuck in the Gullet of the Signifier'. In *Aesthetic Hysteria—The Great Neurosis in Victorian Melodrama and Contemporary Fiction*, 1–24. London and New York: Routledge.

as it might seem—there is a whole panoply of cultural-historical baggage attached to the different roles that bread plays and has played in different societies (Benjamin 1996, 257). Move from the realm of a single word into the scale of the sentence, the paragraph, the chapter, or the canto, and any imagined fixity of the text becomes definitively undermined by the uncertainties of interpretation and the production of meaning. In a similar way, culture at first represents something that appears relatively stable. Think of French culture, and you think of objects and consumables—wine again, the baguette, the beret, the Eiffel Tower. But culture has less to do with objects than a common experience of a society in the present—even its past has to be continuously reproduced. Culture becomes a form of struggle, a process of making meaning, and in so doing destroying the old meanings of the past. Whereas texts primarily function as part of the production of meaning, a large part of culture involves the evanescence of meaning, its fading away into history. Forgetting, as Ernest Renan observed (Renan 1990, 11), is an essential process for any nation.

Fanon's contribution in his great essay, or two essays in fact, 'On National Culture', was to develop this idea (Fanon 1966, 165–200). He begins by criticizing the nationalist account of culture which always looks back to retrieve the past, trying to repopulate the living present with its faded ghosts. In doing so, he develops a critique of the assumptions of *négritude*. One assumption behind *négritude* was that the absence of a nation could be compensated for by the rediscovery of a culture. Sometimes this was figured as a national culture. That culture makes and produces the nation is the assumption behind all forms of nationalism: the nation becomes the expression, the soul, in Renan's formulation, of the common culture (Renan 1990, 19). This was essentially the kind of view being expressed in Fanon's own time, for example, in Diop's essay on 'Colonialism and Cultural Nationalism' of 1955 (Diop 1955). But Fanon dismisses this, criticizing such accounts of culture as essentially comprising the realm of the mortician and the pathologist. He suggests that far from being a pre-existing culture that makes or defines the nation, it is the struggle for the nation that makes and defines its culture. 'The existence of a nation is not proved by culture, but in the people's struggle against the forces of occupation' (Fanon 2004, 159). Culture becomes an expression of the dynamic process through which the nation is fighting for itself and creating itself in doing so, a set of popular practices in the present rather than an academic retrieval of a past that has to be remembered and memorialized through the dead and the institutions devoted to them.

> It is not enough to reunite with the people in a past where they no longer exist. We must rather reunite with them in their recent counter move which will suddenly call everything into question; we must focus on that zone of hidden fluctuation where the people can be found. (Fanon 2004, 163)

With the new English translation of *The Wretched of the Earth* (Fanon 2004), whose greater accuracy also loses something, one loss is the evocative phrase in the old, which describes not a zone of hidden fluctuation but a 'zone of occult instability' (Fanon 1966, 182). Although in fact this phrase literally describes a muscle disability, a subluxation, or partial dislocation in the shoulder, Fanon employs these evocative words, which we could retranslate as 'this place of unobservable disequilibrium', to describe the transformative process, the struggling beneath the surface, of a national culture in formation as a part of the popular liberation struggle.

He illustrates this dynamic model of culture by citing a long poem, 'Aube Africaine', by the Guinean poet Keita Fodeba, who was also the Director of the famous 'Les Ballets Africains'. It tells the story of an African village who sends its strongest man, Naman, to fight in the French army against the Germans in World War II. Naman survives the war, even of being a prisoner of war, but is 'machine-gunned by the police force at the very moment he comes back to the country of his birth' (Fanon 1966, 187; Fanon 2004, 167). The poem powerfully presents the double standards of colonial cultures, the subluxation of local culture and its people, the hidden instabilities of the practices of colonial rule, and the repression of the independence movements after the war. What Fanon draws from the poem is the idea that national culture is in some sense not about culture at all:

> To fight for national culture first of all means fighting for the liberation of the nation, the tangible matrix from which culture can grow [*alternative translation*: that material keystone which makes the building of a culture possible (Fanon 1966, 187)]. One cannot divorce the combat for culture from the people's struggle for liberation. (Fanon 2004, 168)

Fanon's point is very clear: the popular struggle is the national culture, the culture is the struggle. In a memorable phrase, Fanon calls this the 'terrible stone crusher, the fierce mixing machine' of popular revolution. This culture is like a building. Popular struggle starts by crushing old stones, then mixing the mortar, in order to build the new culture of the revolution. In a comparable way, culture is also part of a healing process that in time will repair itself like the unstable, dislocated shoulder from the dislocation brought about by the violent intervention of colonialism—what Bourdieu calls 'deculturation' (Bourdieu 1958, 5). Does Fanon's description of a hidden instability and destructive-reconstructive struggle work for all ideas of cultural translation? In general, the notion of cultural translation seems to put any movement involved into the translation part, rather than the culture, which then becomes something more like a text, or the static culture of conventional cultural nationalism. But how do you translate a culture that is itself already in the process of being formed as the continuous product of struggle, and how do you translate between cultures if they themselves already consist of two different forms of struggle? How can we articulate these three simultaneous dynamic, unstable processes? How can we turn these instabilities into a political project beyond that of a total destabilisation? If culture is itself a form of translation, and if both sides of a cultural translation constitute dynamic practices of struggle, how can we think them all together as a common process, or a particular kind of

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intervention? Fanon's term for this process is not translation, but 'mutation' (in French as well as in its English translation), or more often, 'radical mutation'. He wrote a whole book about the process of radical cultural mutation, *L'An cinq de la révolution Algérienne*, 'Year V of the Algerian Revolution', a title which alludes to the history of the French Revolution, which is, perversely, translated into English as *A Dying Colonialism* (Fanon 2001, 1980). In the revolutionary year of 1968, Fanon's French publisher, Maspero, would seize the moment to retitle the French edition *Sociologie d'une revolution*. This is certainly an accurate description of the book, which Fanon had originally wanted to call *Réalité d'une nation* (Macey 398), and in which he confronts and denounces French colonial sociologists' accounts of Algeria. It is very possible in fact, that Fanon had Pierre Bourdieu directly in mind, given the appearance of his book, *L'Algérie*, the year before, in a popular paperback edition, *Que sais-je?* (Bourdieu 1958). Bourdieu writes:

> Il ne fait pas de doute que l'Algérie, isolée de l'ensemble maghrébin, ne constitue pas une unité culturelle véritable. ...c'est en Algérie, en effet, que s'est exercé avec toute sa force le choc entre la civilisation autochtone et la civilisation européenne, en sorte que l'unité d'objet est fonction de l'unité de la problématique. (Bourdieu 1958, 5)

Fanon's book was concerned to delineate an alternative sociology of Algerian revolutionary society with a portrait of a dynamic, changing society, very different from the heterogeneous traditional culture represented by the sociologists. Whatever the title by which it is known by, it remains the case that, aside from the opening essay, 'Algeria Unveiled', the book remains comparatively little read. When people do read it, they tend to discuss individual essays rather than the project of the book. Yet the book is remarkably cohesive. Indeed it is by far the most cohesive book that Fanon ever wrote, addressing a single issue, namely the intense cultural transformation brought about by the Algerian Revolution: 'we shall see in these pages what transformations the consciousness of the Algerian has undergone' (Fanon 1959, 10). Each chapter recounts a narrative of the transformation of a particular object, instrument, or practice, by the Revolution. Though the final chapter, on 'Algeria's European Minorities', which is the only part of the book that corresponds to the English title, *A Dying Colonialism*, may appear to take a different tack, describing 'the fissures that, as they have grown, have been the harbingers of Algeria's new European society' (Fanon 1980, 10), Fanon is showing the corresponding transformation in sympathetic Europeans to that of the rest of Algerian society. Nevertheless, the European transformation, which in many ways corresponds to his own, is rather different to the story that Fanon tells in the rest of the book.

L'An cinq charts the cultural dislocation of the war, the wounding of the body of the Algerian people, for which the cure involves a willed transformation of social attitudes and practices. Fanon presents this as a consistent move from tradition to modernity. In each chapter, on the veil, the radio, the family, and on medicine, Fanon tells a version of the same story. In the first instance, the French oppose traditional Algerian practices and attempt to initiate the Algerian people into more modern ways: in every case, this fails. 'The phenomenon of resistance observed in the colonized must be related to an attitude of counter-assimilation, of maintenance of a cultural, hence national, originality' (Fanon 1980, 20).

Yet what failed when proposed as a form of cultural improvement by the conqueror, only strengthening 'the system of values by means of which the colonized person resists his

innumerable offensives' (19), develops a very different life in the context of the dislocation of the war. The unveiling of Algerian women, as a strategy for bringing the Algerian people into French modernity, fails miserably and only produces a counter-reaction of more insistent wearing of the haïk. Yet under the pressure of war, as shown in one of the most famous episodes of *The Battle of Algiers*, Algerian women unveil themselves and adopt European dress in order to evade French military control. 'The protective mantle of the Kasbah, the almost organic curtain of safety that the Arab town weaves round the native, withdrew, and the Algerian woman, exposed, was sent forth into the conqueror's city' (Fanon 1980, 29).

The chapter subsequently charts what Fanon calls 'the historic dynamism of the veil', a cat-and-mouse game by which Algerian women successively unveil and re-veil themselves in order to elude and evade the responses of the French. Underneath this narrative, however, there is little doubt that Fanon sees the unveiling of the Arab woman as a progressive move in the formation of a new Algerian society. His own essay follows a narrative in which he insistently returns to the figure of the Algerian woman and her relation to her body:

> We must come back to that young girl, unveiled only yesterday, who walks with sure steps down the streets of the European city teeming with policemen, parachutists, militiamen. She no longer slinks along the walls as she tended to do before the Revolution... The shoulders of the unveiled Algerian woman are thrust back with easy freedom. She walks with graceful, measured stride, neither too fast nor too slow. Her legs are bare, not confined by the veil, given back to themselves, and her hips are free...The Algerian woman who walks stark naked into the European city relearns her body, re-establishes it in a totally revolutionary fashion. This new dialectic of the body and of the world is primary in the case of the [one] revolutionary woman. (Fanon 1980, 36–7)

Fanon's point here is that this radical transformation of the Algerian woman has been effected as part of the creation of the new Algerian revolutionary society: the transformation has come from within, rather than through French cultural oppression, and has been made its own. In each instance in the book, he tells a story of how a modern practice is rejected, then internalised and reproduced in a mutated form from within as part of the necessities of the Algerian revolution (radio, the French language, non-patriarchal family structures, and Western medicine). In each case, French modernity is rejected, but then translated into something else by the Algerian people and transformed into something that is fully their own. This 'radical mutation' produces the new national culture that constitutes the resource of the revolution. :'The power of the Algerian Revolution resides in the radical mutation that the Algerian has undergone' (Fanon 1980, 10). If the deculturation and acculturation of colonialism could be seen as a form of 'foreignising translation', then the narrative of the radical mutation of Algerian society into its own form of modernity that Fanon tells could be seen as a form of domesticating cultural translation.

I want to close by juxtaposing and comparing Fanon's account of cultural translation as 'radical mutation' to those of the two most famous texts that described and analysed forms of cultural translation before him. The first is Walter Benjamin's famous essay, 'Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers' ['The Task of the Translator'] (Benjamin 1996). In this essay, Benjamin cheerfully discounts all normative notions of translation, to suggest that all texts contain within themselves, potentially, their own forms of translatability, and it is this effect that will continue in their afterlife, indeed so that their translations constitute their afterlife,

their repetition-as-difference through translation which enables them to live on beyond their own particular moment. A text becomes a kind of reproduction machine, or more accurately reproductive body, constantly producing translation effects, reproducing itself anew in new languages and at new historical moments. If we think of cultural translation according to Benjamin's dynamic historical model, we can think of it not as the transformation of one culture into another, or the intervention of one or more cultural agent into another culture, but of cultural translation comprising the historical after effects of an original culture in the language and practices of the second. This would allow for something more like a postcolonial concept of cultural translation, which no longer conceives of translation on a spatial model of transformation, but as a historical repetition effect—in which the translating colonial culture re-emerges as different, decades, centuries later, to find itself translated by its colonised other.

At this point, translation becomes an act of transformative reiteration, that which is recognizable but no longer the same, and which finds itself repeated in the language of the foreign, that itself in a contrapuntal way becomes mediated at the same time by untranslatability, and by the introduction of, or preservation of, foreignness. Again, it seems that what is central to this account of translation is a mode of instability, fluctuation, and oscillation. What this means for cultural translation is that it will always involve a two-way process—whereby the cultural translation of the other will also transform the one who is performing the translation, translating both cultures out of themselves, into new modes of operation. So cultural translation as the form of migrant minoritizing culture will not only intervene and make-over—make strange—the culture in which such migrants find themselves, but in time it will also ricochet back to transform their originals (Bhabha 1994). We can begin to think this through in relation to the dynamics of contemporary global politics, which are being seized by movements that resist the cultural transformations apparently being inflicted on them by Western interests. No one would deny that this in part happens according to the most obvious procedures of global economic and military power. But at the same time, the dynamics of cultural translation suggests that the very interventions that are in the process of taking place to transform the First World are also operating, often in dislocated temporalities, in the form of counterpoint, or transculturation, of the Third.

The second text is Fernando Ortiz's *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar* (1940) (Ortiz 1995). Here the Cuban anthropologist introduced the concept of transculturation in antithesis to the dominant model of acculturation that was currently in use by the Chicago School, and which referred to the assumed transparent process of assimilation of American culture by incoming immigrants. In fact, apart from the cultural politics that it proposes, there was another reason why Ortiz was reluctant to use the term acculturation, for in Spanish the prefix a potentially reverses the sense of the word in English—so that instead of describing the acquisition of culture, it evokes a loss of culture, thus secretly signaling the repressed other side of the Chicago School model. Ortiz primarily presents transculturation in terms of the successive waves of immigrants who became part of the dynamic processes of the material culture of Cuba—the tobacco and sugar industry—that, as Ortiz shows in his beautiful and haunting evocations, operate in a contrapuntal dialectic with respect to each other. The process he describes is one in which the new migrants affected Cuban culture at the same time as they were drawn into the doubled dynamics of

Cuban material economics. This transformation of and by the operatives on their arrival in Cuba is not hard to conceptualise. But in fact the book falls into two unequal halves. Unexpectedly, the longest story of Cuban transculturation is taken up with the way that the gift of tobacco—which the friendly indigenous natives of Guanahaní offered Columbus, in the very first moment of relations between Europe and America as he stepped onto American soil—created not just a new local social milieu of the soon-to-follow Spanish conquistadors, but also very rapidly transformed the whole social world of Europe, and as quickly, the Middle East and Africa, becoming a global cultural phenomenon—a process that Fanon would call 'counter-acculturation' (Fanon 1959, 41-2) [In *Algerian Unveiled*]. The first and most effective form of consumer globalisation, which makes McDonald's look minimal in comparison, was the gift of cigars through which the indigenous Caribs transformed the social practices of the world more radically than any people have done before, or since. Gifts, as we know, are a two-way process, which involves a return. And a cigarette, as Oscar Wilde observed, is the perfect form of pleasure: it is exquisite, and it leaves you unsatisfied. Ortiz himself comments, very accurately, that there was something radical in the doubled nature of this particular gift: 'In the fabrication, the fire and spiraling smoke of a cigar there was always something revolutionary, a kind of protest against oppression, the consuming flame and the liberating flight into the blue of dreams'. (Ortiz 1995, 14)

Cultural translation, likewise, involves a dialectical process in which the transforming processes move simultaneously in both directions: consuming the past so that it can release spiraling dreams of flight into the futurity of liberation.

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