

ARTICLE

The Humanism Effect: Fanon, Foucault, and Ethics without Subjects¹

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ABSTRACT: This article addresses a tendency within postcolonial studies to place the work of Michel Foucault and Frantz Fanon in opposition. This has obscured the real, and potentially very productive, similarities between them. The most important of these links has to do with their shared critique of the sovereign subject of humanism: for Fanon and Foucault, this critique of the traditional humanist subject provides a way of opposing what they both see as the dangerous nostalgia for a lost moment of origin. Furthermore, Fanon and Foucault both end in a moment of ethics, but it is an ethics without the sort of stable subjects assumed by humanism. I offer a consideration of some of the links that can be found in several texts by Fanon and Foucault. I then attempt to define the term I will be using to describe their shared strategy of an ethics without subjects: the “humanism effect.” I conclude by trying to suggest some of the strategic possibilities of an ethics without subjects in the postcolonial context.

Keywords: Ethics, humanism, posthumanism, postcolonial studies, Fanon, Foucault

The field of postcolonial studies has from its inception been the site of a debate about humanism. Wherever one wants to mark a point of emergence for this field, one inevitably encounters a problem, or rather a problematic: the end of humanism. There has been an ongoing and by now longstanding argument as to whether the end of humanism presents an opportunity for post-humanist theorizing, on the one hand; or, on the other hand, whether the end of humanism marks an event to be mourned or even resisted. The two figures that have time and again been made to represent these two positions, in an almost allegorical mode, are Michel Foucault and Frantz Fanon.

¹ I wish to thank the two anonymous readers from *Foucault Studies* for their comments on this article; their pointed and generous suggestions helped me to better articulate key aspects of my argument. I also would like to thank the students in the graduate seminar “Fanon and Foucault: Backgrounds to Postcolonial Theory” whom I taught at Kent State University, for reading and thinking through a number of these texts and issues with me.

In what follows, I am not interested in simply setting up a binary between these two positions on humanism in the interest of splitting the difference. I would want to characterize this ongoing debate about the end of humanism not as a binary, but rather a continuum, with critical positions being taken up all along the way. Furthermore, if Foucault and Fanon have been made to stand at opposite sides of this continuum, this is only because particular *versions* of their positions on humanism have been introduced into this debate for particular strategic purposes. Foucault has been used to bolster a position that would celebrate the end of humanism—which, from this position, is often equated with the “death of the subject,” more specifically with the rejection of a normative white male Western imperialist subject. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s formulation, first set out in an essay that has proven to be a foundational text for postcolonial studies, sums up this anti-humanist position nicely: “There is an affinity between the imperialist subject and the subject of humanism.”² What should be noted, however, is that the invocation of Foucault to support this position has generally been made in spite of his complex late writings on ethics and the question of Enlightenment; I will return to this point shortly.

The figure of Fanon, by contrast, has been used to bolster the opposite position, one that suggests that because colonialism is an inherently dehumanizing process, those who have suffered must have access to a form of subjectivity offered by traditional humanism. This is a position that equates being a “subject” with being fully “human.” Neil Lazarus has been one of the most eloquent defenders of Fanon’s humanism in this context: “where postmodernist theory has reacted to the perceived indefensibility of bourgeois humanism,” Lazarus argues, “a *genuinely* postcolonial strategy might be to move explicitly, as Fanon already did in concluding *The Wretched of the Earth*, to proclaim a ‘new’ humanism, predicated upon a formal repudiation of the degraded European form.”³ But this argument, in turn, has been made despite Fanon’s withering critique of humanism (particularly the Western European variety) and his declared antipathy for those who hold to a traditional humanist position. This is articulated most clearly in his challenge to his readers, at the end of *The Wretched of the Earth*, to “leave this Europe which never stops talking of man yet massacres him at every one of its street corners, at every corner of the world.”⁴

In other words, placing Fanon and Foucault at the opposite ends of the humanist/anti-humanist continuum leads to an oversimplification of their work. But my true dissatisfaction does not stem from the belief that we need to get back to the

² Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1987), 202.

³ Neil Lazarus, “Disavowing Decolonization: Fanon, Nationalism, and the Question of Representation in Postcolonial Theory,” in *Frantz Fanon: Critical Perspectives*, edited by Anthony C. Alessandrini (New York: Routledge, 1999), 189, emphasis in original.

⁴ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, translated by Richard Philcox (New York: Grove, 2004), 235.

“real” Fanon and Foucault lying behind these simplified versions, since strategic appropriations of their work are what we should be after in any case. That is, I am not attempting to argue for a true reading of their work, although I do think we can produce *better* readings of their texts. Instead, my dissatisfaction lies in the fact that in this particular argument around humanism, Fanon and Foucault have been set up in opposition to each other. The real problem is not with the ongoing argument, which is an important one, but with this opposition itself. Working against the grain of this ongoing argument, I will suggest that what *links* Fanon and Foucault is in fact more important than their admittedly very real theoretical differences. Indeed, drawing attention to these links will in turn help us to better understand what is at stake in the moments when they do in fact diverge.

The most important of these links has to do with their shared critique of the sovereign subject of humanism. I will argue that for Fanon and Foucault, this critique of the traditional humanist subject provides a way of opposing what they both see as the dangerous nostalgia for a lost moment of origin. While these critiques of humanism take quite different forms, I suggest that there is another link between them: Fanon and Foucault both end in a moment of ethics. But it is an ethics without the sort of stable subjects assumed by humanism. In what follows, I will offer a consideration of some of the links that can be found in several texts by Fanon and Foucault. I will then attempt to define the term I will be using to describe their shared strategy of an ethics without subjects—the term “humanism effect.” I will conclude by trying to suggest some of the strategic possibilities of an ethics without subjects in the postcolonial context.

I. Early and Late Foucault: Refusing the Blackmail of the Enlightenment

I want to begin with a problem that confronts anyone attempting to deal with the work of these two theorists, what we might call the problem of the early and late Fanon and the early and late Foucault. To begin with Foucault: the reception of Foucault’s late writings, at least in the American context, has been hugely influenced by Judith Butler’s analysis in *Gender Trouble*, first published in 1990.⁵ While Butler’s argument, in this text as elsewhere, is often an explicitly Foucaultian one, she also points to a significant contradiction in Foucault’s late texts on sexuality, especially his introduction to the journals of the nineteenth-century French hermaphrodite Herculine Barbin, which Foucault edited and published in 1978. In the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault insists upon a definition of sexuality as a complex historical system of discourse saturated with power. As Butler puts it, Foucault’s strategy is to “treat ‘sex’ as an *effect* rather than an origin.”⁶ But in his writings on Barbin, as well as in the later volumes of *The History of Sexuality* itself, Butler locates a contradictory impulse, “an unacknowledged emancipatory ideal that proves

⁵ A slightly earlier version of some of Butler’s key arguments regarding Foucault’s work appear in her article “Foucault and the Paradox of Bodily Inscriptions,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 86 (1989), 601-07.

⁶ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 123.

increasingly difficult to maintain, even within the strictures of his own critical apparatus.” She continues:

On the one hand, Foucault wants to argue that there is no “sex” in itself which is not produced by complex interactions of discourse and power, and yet there does seem to be a “multiplicity of pleasures” *in itself* which is not the effect of any specific discourse/power exchange. In other words, Foucault invokes a trope of prediscursive libidinal multiplicity that effectively presupposes a sexuality . . . waiting for emancipation from the shackles of “sex.”⁷

In this sense, Butler concludes, a romanticized version of sex in the form of a lost moment of libidinal multiplicity *does* return as a moment of lost origin towards which the historian of sexuality might strive. Butler’s unsparingly constructivist argument cannot countenance this quasi-utopian nostalgia.

Now it is worth noting that Butler’s subsequent writings on Foucault have returned to his work in a nuanced way that complicates this earlier (and already quite nuanced) reading. A key text is her article “What Is Critique? An Essay on Foucault’s Virtue,” published in 2002, which revisits Foucault’s late essay “What Is Critique?” as well as the second volume of *The History of Sexuality*.⁸ Unlike her reading of Foucault in *Gender Trouble*, Butler’s more recent work resists the impulse to find a contradictory form of nostalgia in Foucault’s later writings, which may seem at first glance to suggest the existence of an originary freedom. Instead, Butler suggests that we might read Foucault’s strategy in “What Is Critique?” and perhaps in his late writings in general, as one of continually holding out and continually retracting this potential founding moment.⁹ As she notes, when Foucault first delivered “What Is Critique?” as a lecture in 1978, in response to an audience question, Foucault refused to ground what he referred to as “the will not to be governed” in an originary moment of freedom, but at the same time, he insisted upon holding out this originary moment that he simultaneously denied: “I did not say it,”

⁷ Ibid., 123.

⁸ Judith Butler, “What Is Critique? An Essay on Foucault’s Virtue,” in *The Political*, edited by David Ingram (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 2002), 212-27. Some of the points Butler raises in this essay are reiterated and refined in her later essay “Against Ethical Violence,” in *Giving an Account of Oneself: A Critique of Ethical Violence* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 41-82. For an account of Foucault’s notion of critique that resonates with Butler’s reading, see Matthew Sharpe, “‘Critique’ as Technology of the Self,” *Foucault Studies* 2 (2005), 97-116.

⁹ Butler compares Foucault’s method here to that of Nietzsche in *The Genealogy of Morals*, where, in place of locating the “origin” of morality, Nietzsche instead notes the varieties of fictional accounts that have given birth to our conception of where morality “comes from.” See Butler, “What Is Critique?”, 219. Compare also Foucault’s statement in the introduction to *The Uses of Pleasure* that his project is “an analysis of the ‘games of truth,’ the games of truth and error through which being is historically constituted as experience; that is, as something that can and must be thought.” (Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 2: The Uses of Pleasure*, translated by Robert Hurley [New York: Vintage, 1990], 6-7.)

Foucault declared, “but this does not mean that I absolutely exclude it.”¹⁰ For Butler, this unending movement back and forth, the continual process of looking towards an originary moment in order to continually reject it, is no longer seen as a simple contradiction or theoretical confusion; it is, instead, precisely Foucault’s answer to the question, “What is critique?” This seemingly contradictory strategy, in other words, might be considered a critique of the moment of origin in the fullest sense of the word “critique.”¹¹

But there have also been some rather more reductive readings—in some cases, “dismissals” would be the more accurate term—of Foucault that have been influenced by Butler’s original analysis of Foucault’s work in *Gender Trouble*. Such dismissals essentially accuse Foucault of a humanist nostalgia in his late writings on ethics. A passage from Cary Wolfe’s book *Critical Environments* provides an exemplary instance:

In Foucault, however, this call for a posthumanist critique is more often than not accompanied . . . by a dystopianism that imagines the end of the humanist subject as the beginning of the total saturation of the social field by power, domination, and oppression. And the later Foucault, as if compensating for his early dystopianism,

¹⁰ Butler, “What Is Critique?”, 221; the quote itself is from Michel Foucault, “What Is Critique?” in *The Politics of Truth*, edited by Sylvère Lotringer (Cambridge, MA: Semiotext(e), 1997), 72.

¹¹ This is, of course, hardly the final word on Butler’s reading of Foucault. For one thing, her analysis in her essay of Foucault’s “speech acts” in the discussion following his presentation of the lecture “What Is Critique?” reveals a very fundamental methodological difference in their approaches, and indeed, it has been suggested by some critics that Butler is working with a completely different understanding of “discourse” than Foucault. There has been a large body of work that discusses Butler’s reading of Foucault; much, though not all, of this work attempts to refute or refuse her reading. However, very few critics (with the recent and laudable exception of John Carvalho) have examined Butler’s recent writings on Foucault and her evolving analysis of his work, preferring instead to reify her earlier reading into her “position” on Foucault’s work. It is the purpose of my essay to work against this form of critical reification, and my admiration for Butler’s readings of Foucault stem not from my belief that they represent the “correct” interpretation of his work, but rather simply because they reflect some of the critical flexibility that is one of the most important of Foucault’s legacies. For some sense of the critical background on Butler’s readings of Foucault, see: John Carvalho, “Subtle Bodies and the Other *Jouissance*,” *SubStance* 118 (2009), 112-28; Samuel A. Chambers, “‘Sex’ and the Problem of the Body: Reconstructing Judith Butler’s Theory of Sex/Gender,” *Body and Society* 13 (2007), 47-75; David Dudrick, “Foucault, Butler, and the Body,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 13 (2005), 226-46; Jeremy Moss, “Foucault and Left Conservatism,” *Foucault Studies* 1 (2004), 34-54; Catherine Mills, “Contesting the Political: Butler and Foucault on Power and Resistance,” *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 11 (2003), 253-72; Alan D. Schiff, “Foucault’s Reconfiguration of the Subject: From Nietzsche to Butler, Laclau/Mouffe, and Beyond,” *Philosophy Today* 41 (1997), 153-60; David Weberman, “Are Freedom and Anti-humanism Compatible? The Case of Foucault and Butler,” *Constellations* 7 (2000), 255-71; Deborah Youdell, “Subjectivation and Performative Politics—Butler Thinking Althusser and Foucault,” *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 27 (2006), 511-28.

evinces a kind of nostalgia for the Enlightenment humanism powerfully critiqued in his early and middle work.¹²

Wolfe's concern in this book is with the question of posthumanist theory, not with doing an exhaustive reading of Foucault, so my intention is not to set him up as a straw man. Indeed, this quote is most noteworthy for the fact that it expresses a contemporary theoretical position so widespread that it is beginning to assume the consistency of a common sense assumption about Foucault's work (especially for those anxious to find a basis to disparage or dismiss his work).

In response, we can question both halves of this division into early and late Foucault as set up by Wolfe (and others). For example, in terms of his supposed dystopianism, Foucault himself worked to clarify what he means by a phrase like "the omnipresence of power": not, or not simply, as "the total saturation of the social field by power, domination, and oppression," as Wolfe would have it, but rather, as Foucault puts it in the chapter on "Method" in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*:

The omnipresence of power: not because it has the privilege of consolidating everything under its invincible unity, but because it is produced from one moment to the next, at every point, or rather in relation from one point to another. Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere. . . . [power] is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society.¹³

As for the nostalgia that Wolfe and others find in the later writings of Foucault, that is a point to which I will return; but for the moment I will simply endorse Butler's suggestion that Foucault's move, in his late texts, to a critical analysis of Enlightenment humanism is not the same as a nostalgia for or endorsement of this humanism. Indeed, one of the important conclusions of Foucault's late essay "What Is Enlightenment?" is that as analysts

¹² Cary Wolfe, *Critical Environments: Postmodern Theory and the Pragmatics of the "Outside"* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 122.

¹³ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*, translated by Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990), 93. For an analysis of the uses of the Foucauldian notion of power, see Jeffrey Nealon, *Foucault Beyond Foucault: Power and its Intensifications since 1984* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007). It should be noted that in his lectures at the Collège de France, Foucault explicitly refused to pose (never mind answer) the question "What is power?" since "the question 'What is power?' is obviously a theoretical question that would provide an answer to everything, which is just what I don't want to do"; instead, he insisted, "the issue is to determine what are, in their mechanisms, effects, their relations, the various power apparatuses that operate at various levels of society." (Michel Foucault, *"Society Must Be Defended": Lectures at the Collège de France 1975-1976*, edited by Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana, translated by David Macey [New York: Picador, 2003], 13).

of modern society we must refuse the “blackmail” of the Enlightenment: that is, the demand that one declare oneself once and for all “for” or “against” the Enlightenment.¹⁴

But my ultimate purpose is not simply to disagree with readings that, like Wolfe’s, posit a difference between early and late Foucault. There is a difference, and sometimes this difference takes the form of contradiction. There is, for example, a moment in “What Is Enlightenment?” when Foucault argues that analysts of contemporary society “have three axes whose specificity and whose interconnections have to be analyzed: the axis of knowledge, the axis of power, the axis of ethics.”¹⁵ The introduction of *ethics* into the Foucaultian system of power/knowledge does indeed mark a difference. But here is my larger question: what if we refuse the sort of chronological reading that would attempt to demarcate an early or a late Foucault in the first place? One of the great insights of Foucault’s writings on history resides in the challenge with which he presents us: to replace the emphasis on a continuous version of history, one that becomes a story of inevitable progress, with an emphasis on the discontinuity of historical events (as in “The Order of Discourse,” where the call is to replace “consciousness” and “continuity” with “event” and “series.”)¹⁶ I’m thinking in particular of the often-cited first chapter of *Discipline and Punish*, where Foucault explicitly refuses a narrative that would attribute the transformations of the penal system in France to a process of humanization. Instead, Foucault insists that these changes simply mark different sets of strategies enacted by disciplinary institutions at different historical moments. The goal of this text, as Foucault states explicitly, is to begin an effort to write “the history of the present.”¹⁷ This means producing an analysis of the present that is cold-eyed enough to refuse the very choice that would limit one’s options either to rejection or endorsement. It is along these lines that Foucault approvingly quotes Baudelaire’s precept: “You have no right to despise the present.”¹⁸

This is where Foucault’s critique of the nostalgia for lost origins connects to his critique of the myth of emergence as the final term in an uninterrupted historical development. As he argues in “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History”: “As it is wrong to search for descent in an uninterrupted continuity, we should avoid thinking of emergence as the final term of a historical development; the eye was not always intended for contemplation,

¹⁴ Michel Foucault, “What Is Enlightenment?” translated by Catherine Porter, in *The Foucault Reader*, edited by Paul Rabinow (New York: Vintage, 1984), 42-43.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹⁶ Michel Foucault, “The Order of Discourse,” translated by Ian McLeod, in *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*, edited by Robert Young (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 67-68.

¹⁷ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, translated by Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1995), 31. Teaching this chapter, especially in the undergraduate classroom, provides one of the great pedagogical challenges to be found in Foucault’s work: that is, trying to get students to interpret the progression from the gory execution of Damiens, described in the opening pages, to the timetable for young prisoners drawn up by Léon Faucher, which follows immediately afterwards, without resorting to an explanation along the lines of “we became more humane.”

¹⁸ Foucault, “What Is Enlightenment?” 40.

and punishment had other purposes than setting an example.”¹⁹ In light of this double critique of a unitary descent, on the one hand, and a single moment of emergence as the final term, on the other hand, *Discipline and Punish* must be read as an attempt to produce a form of genealogy in which the subject of the present is not seen (in either celebratory or accusatory mode) as the inevitable inheritor of a single, progressive, continuous history. Given Foucault’s emphasis on discontinuity in writing the history of the present, then, why would we attempt to impose a continuity on his own body of work? What if we instead attempted to read his early critique of the nostalgia for lost origins through an emphasis on the nexes of power/knowledge and his late writings on ethics and Enlightenment together, as part of an ongoing, overlapping project of critique?

II. Early and Late Fanon: The Impossibility of Ontology

I believe that Fanon’s work allows for the same move. A similar split in the perceptions of Fanon’s early and late writing that we have traced in work on Foucault exists among those critics who have addressed Fanon’s texts. Those who wish to see Fanon as a precursor of poststructuralism, or who particularly value his insights into the psychic formations of racism, tend to privilege *Black Skin, White Masks*, his first book (the work of Homi Bhabha, Rey Chow, and Kobena Mercer has been most influential in this respect). On the other hand, those who look to Fanon as the theorist of a new form of post-colonial humanism, critics such as Lazarus, Lewis Gordon, Nigel Gibson, and Ato Sekyi-Otu, tend towards a dialectical reading of Fanon and consequently see his last book, *The Wretched of the Earth*, as the privileged site of analysis. I should make it clear that I am not refusing either set of arguments; indeed, I want to keep the insights provided by both sets of theorists in play.²⁰

Certainly it is true that the conclusion of *The Wretched of the Earth* contains a call for a new humanism (though it is hardly an unambiguous call). But what happens if we read it together with the opening lines of *Black Skin, White Masks*, those famously acerbic lines in which Fanon addresses the question of why he wrote the book:

Why write this book? No one has asked me for it. Especially those to whom it is directed. Well? Well, I reply quite calmly that there are too many idiots in this world. And having said it, I have the burden of proving it.²¹

Fanon immediately follows this statement by taking note of the “dozens and hundreds of pages” that “assail me and try to impose their wills on me.” The first of these voices, a

¹⁹ Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” translated by Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon, in *The Foucault Reader*, edited by Paul Rabinow (New York: Vintage, 1984), 83.

²⁰ For an overview of these theoretical debates, see Anthony C. Alessandrini, “Introduction: Fanon Studies, Cultural Studies, Cultural Politics,” in *Frantz Fanon: Critical Perspectives*, edited by Anthony C. Alessandrini (New York: Routledge, 1999), 1-17.

²¹ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, translated by Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove, 1967), 7.

voice to which we cannot help but attribute some small share of the “idiocy” Fanon has just mentioned, states: “Toward a new humanism . . .”²²

It seems imperative to keep this initial moment in mind, even as Fanon, from his deathbed, sets out his challenge to the readers of *The Wretched of the Earth* in the book’s last sentence: “For Europe, for ourselves and for humanity, comrades, we must make a new start, develop a new way of thinking, and endeavor to create a new man.”²³ I want to call attention to the part of this sentence that Richard Philcox, in his English translation, renders as “we must make a new start” and that Constance Farrington, in her earlier translation, translated as “we must turn over a new leaf.” It seems to me that “*il faut faire peau neuve*” is better rendered as “we must grow a new skin”²⁴; such a rendering suggests the ways in which the final sentence of Fanon’s body of work looks back to the title of his first book, *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs*.

But making this connection entails more than simply taking note of the similarity of Fanon’s language in these two texts. I want to propose that Fanon’s project, like Foucault’s, was an attempt to write a history of the present, increasingly, in the course of his body of work, from inside the Algerian Revolution. As with Foucault, the critique of the subject as a critique of the nostalgia for lost origins is there, from the very beginning, in Fanon’s work. This critique is most clearly enunciated in the chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks* that has been translated into English as “The Fact of Blackness” (although a more literal translation would be “The Lived Experience of the Black Man”). Throughout the course of this chapter, Fanon continually invokes and continually rejects the sense of having “come too late,” of having the positions he attempts to take up in response to French racism always already claimed by this racism in advance. His most direct critique of this nostalgia for a lost past links this nostalgia quite directly to racism and anti-Semitism:

Since the time when someone first mourned the fact that he had arrived too late and everything had been said, a nostalgia for the past has seemed to persist. . . . It is this tradition to which the anti-Semites turn in order to ground the validity of their “point of view.” It is tradition, it is that long historical past, it is that blood relation between Pascal and Descartes, that is invoked when the Jew is told, “There is no possibility of your finding a place in society.” . . . The Jew and I: Since I was not satisfied to be racialized, by a lucky turn of fate I was humanized.²⁵

Similarly, I would argue that Fanon’s work, like Foucault’s, also contains a critique of the other end of this process, the tendency to posit an essential moment of emergence towards which history is progressively headed. If one reads only the first chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth*, the chapter entitled “On Violence,” it would be possible to conclude that Fanon is embracing a Hegelian version of history in which the colonized, through a spontaneous

²² Ibid., 7, ellipsis in original.

²³ Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 239.

²⁴ Frantz Fanon, *Les damnés de la terre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), 376.

²⁵ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 121-22.

violent uprising, will inevitably overturn colonialism and replace the colonizers. But the rest of the book is a patient reconsideration of this suggestion.²⁶ In fact, the chapter entitled “The Trials and Tribulations of National Consciousness,” which has proved particularly prescient in its predictions about the emergent middle class that came to rule over the newly independent nations of Africa, is written in a tense that suggests that, far from leading towards a triumphant emergence, post-colonial history will end badly. The language of the chapter insists, not that the new middle class may ruin everything, but that they *will* ruin everything.²⁷

The Fanon who engages in this critique of a narrative of a single moment of triumphant emergence is perhaps best represented by a line that appears almost exactly in the middle of *The Wretched of the Earth*, when those militants fighting against the colonial power discover that even the division between colonizer and colonized, which they had understood to be fundamental (Fanon actually uses the word “Manichean” in the “On Violence” chapter to describe the split between colonizer and colonized)—even this division cannot be trusted at a certain point, since, in Fanon’s words, “some blacks can be whiter than the whites,” and, similarly, there are Europeans who have gone over to the “native” side. In this context, Fanon suggests, there can be no single, simple narrative of emergence; he represents the bewilderment of this situation with one of his many moments of irony: “and yet everything used to be so simple before: the bad people were on one side, and the good on the other.”²⁸ Of course, Fanon’s point is that such a moment has never in fact existed. The nostalgia for an illusory moment of origin evinced here is similar to, as perhaps as harmful as, that expressed by the French racists and anti-Semites in *Black Skin, White Masks*.

Here we arrive at the heart of the matter: my argument is that there is not an essential subject of history in Fanon. This is bound to be a controversial suggestion, for it is hard not to see the many moments when Fanon’s resistance to racism and colonialism does take the form of asserting a more authentic form of identity that can emerge in the truly post-colonial moment. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, it is the moment of racial identification that freezes or “fixes” (to use Fanon’s term) identity that seems to prevent the full and authentic process of recognition from taking place. This is the moment of shock provided by Fanon at the opening of “The Fact of Blackness,” which begins with two spoken quotes that Fanon suggests are interchangeable: “‘Dirty nigger!’ Or simply: ‘Look, a black man!’”²⁹ In this moment, Fanon tells us, “the glances of the other fixed me there, in the sense in

²⁶ Ato Sekyi-Otu makes a similar point, albeit to a different effect. See *Fanon’s Dialectic of Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 72-87.

²⁷ Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 97-144.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 93-94.

²⁹ It is easier to get a sense of this interchangeability in Fanon’s original text: “‘Sale nègre! Ou simplement: ‘Tiens, un nègre!’” Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1995), 88.

which a chemical solution is fixed by a dye.”³⁰ This same form of fixing, of division without the possibility of recognition, can be found in Fanon’s description of colonialism in “On Violence,” in the opposition between the native city and the settler’s city, which “follow[s] the dictates of mutual exclusion: There is no conciliation possible, for one of them is superfluous.”³¹

It is tempting (and many do not even try to resist the temptation) to find in Fanon a process that leads away from this artificial fixing, to a more authentic process of recognition—we might label it a new humanism—that allows this frozen, truncated process to start up again. But against this tendency, I will simply pose one phrase from *Black Skin, White Masks*: “every ontology is made unattainable in a colonized and civilized society.” As the context of the quote suggests, this has to do with the lack of reciprocal recognition between the black man and the white man:

Ontology . . . does not permit us to understand the being of the black man. For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man. Some critics will take it on themselves to remind us that this proposition has a converse. I say that this is false. The black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man.³²

But allow me to suggest that there is a strand that runs through Fanon’s work that forces us to read the statement, “every ontology is made unattainable in a colonized and civilized society,” as meaning: for us, today, every ontology is unattainable. Let me, furthermore, bring this quote together with a moment from the end of Foucault’s essay “What Is Enlightenment?” in which he refers to the continuing challenge of Enlightenment as that of producing “the critical ontology of ourselves.” The challenge of such a critical ontology lies in differentiating it from “a theory, a doctrine, [or] a permanent body of knowledge that is accumulating”; instead, according to Foucault, “it has to be conceived as an attitude, an ethos.”³³ If Foucault and Fanon are linked by a shared project of writing a history of the present, they also share this movement towards a critical ontology of ourselves, a critical ontology that they both suspect to be impossible. I want to redescribe this impossible but necessary striving as the attempt to found an ethics without subjects.

III. Destroying the Subaltern: Strategic Essentialism and its Afterlife

To explain better what I might mean by this, and to come at last to the phrase “the humanism effect,” I want to turn to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s much-misunderstood essay “Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography,” and in particular her discussion of the strategic use of a “subject effect” by the Subaltern Studies Group. I say “misunderstood” because of the particular afterlife that has been enjoyed by the phrase

³⁰ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 109.

³¹ Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 39.

³² Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 109-10.

³³ Foucault, “What Is Enlightenment?”, 50.

“strategic essentialism,” which is quite different from Spivak’s original usage. Again, I don’t wish to defend a purer reading of Spivak’s essay for its own sake. Indeed, I believe that the appropriation of this term, particularly in feminist theory (and largely through Diana Fuss’s excellent book *Essentially Speaking*), has been extremely important.³⁴ The resulting use of the term should in no way be dismissed as a “misreading.” But one result of this appropriation has been to allow a too-easy dismissal of strategic essentialism: in a two-finger exercise, critics have been able to prove that it’s “really” still just essentialism after all. A return to Spivak’s text allows us to come to the issue with a bit more nuance.

Spivak’s essay addresses the problem faced by the Subaltern Studies historians: how to discover and represent the consciousness of those who have been left out of the official narratives of the post-colonial nation, narratives produced by members of the elite nationalist movement that first fought for independence and then took over the leadership of the nation. How can the historian “investigate, discover, and establish a subaltern or peasant consciousness” in this context?³⁵ As Spivak suggests, this looks at first to be a standard sort of positivistic project: just locate your archive. The problem is that this archive does not exist; subaltern voices can only be found second-hand, in the official reports of the colonizers or the narratives of the elite nationalist movement: “it is only the texts of counter-insurgency or elite documentation that give us the news of the consciousness of the subaltern.”³⁶

But this is simply the *effect* of a larger problem: subaltern studies cannot be empirical because there is no subaltern. The desired archive, by its very nature, cannot exist. The term “subaltern” is a negative one, defining all those who are not the “elite”:

The definitive accessibility of subaltern consciousness is counterpointed also by situating it in the place of a difference rather than an identity: “. . . The social groups and elements included in this category [i.e. subaltern classes] represent the *demographic difference* between the total Indian population and all those whom we have described as the ‘elite.’”³⁷

As Spivak takes pains to point out, the negative and differential nature of the term “subaltern” implies the need for other than positivistic methods: she notes “the specific counterpointing here: between the ostensible language of quantification—*demographic difference*—which is positivistic, and the discourse of a definitive difference— *demographic difference*—which opens the door to deconstructive gestures.”³⁸ One is reminded at this

³⁴ Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature, and Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1989).

³⁵ Spivak, *In Other Worlds*, 202.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 202.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 204, ellipsis and emphasis in original. The quote within the quote is from Ranajit Guha, “On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India,” in *Selected Subaltern Studies*, edited by Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 44.

³⁸ Spivak, *In Other Worlds*, 204. It should be noted that the term “subaltern,” although it is drawn from the work of Antonio Gramsci, has been adapted in a very particular way by the Subaltern Studies Group; for more on this point, see Guha, “On Some Aspects of the Historiography of

point of Fanon's remarks about the impossibility of ontology in the colonial situation, and the reasons for this impossibility. There is no reciprocity between the black man and the white man, Fanon insists, since "the black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man."³⁹ Ontology itself is thus called into question.⁴⁰ Similarly, it is possible to say that the subaltern has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the elite historian—or, put more simply, the subaltern does not exist in the demographics of elite narratives of the postcolonial nation. So the nature of positivism itself is similarly called into question through the work of the Subaltern Studies historians.

At this point, I must cite a long quote from Spivak's essay, since it will take us quickly to the heart of the matter:

I am progressively inclined, then, to read the retrieval of the subaltern consciousness as the charting of what in post-structuralist language would be called the subaltern subject-effect. A subject-effect can be briefly plotted as follows: that which seems to operate as a subject may be part of an immense discontinuous network ("text" in the general sense) of strands that may be termed politics, ideology, economics, history, sexuality, language, and so on. . . . Different knottings and configurations of these strands, determined by heterogeneous determinations . . . produce the effect of an operating subject. Yet [humanism] symptomatically requires a continuous and homogenous cause for this effect and thus posits a sovereign and determining subject. This latter is, then, the effect of an effect, and its positing a metalepsis, or the substitution of an effect for a cause.

Reading the work of Subaltern Studies from within but against the grain, I would suggest that elements in their text would warrant a reading of the project to retrieve the subaltern consciousness as the attempt to undo a massive historiographic metalepsis and

Colonial India," 43-44. R. Radhakrishnan provides an interesting gloss on the way Gramsci and Foucault have been used by Subaltern Studies practitioners, and by postcolonial theorists more generally; see "Toward an Effective Intellectual: Foucault or Gramsci?" in *Diasporic Mediations* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 27-61.

³⁹ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 110.

⁴⁰ This statement might seem like an overemphasis made in the service of critique, and it is true that Fanon is not dismissing ontology itself, but rather arguing that particular historical situations close down ontological possibilities. However, we also must recall Fanon's claim that a situation of ontological impossibility characterizes any "colonized and civilized society"—that is, any society that has participated in the process of colonization, as either colonizer or colonized. For better or worse, in our current context, this amounts to a universal condition. This point can also be found in Fanon's introduction to *Black Skin, White Masks*, when he states: "I believe that the fact of the juxtaposition of the white and black races [*du fait de la mise en présence des races blanche et noire*] has created a massive psychoexistential complex. I hope by analyzing it to destroy it." (Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 12) There is a fine Fanonian irony in the word "juxtaposition"; until the horrific historical events that brought the white and black races into this particular context—that is, the events of colonialism, slavery, and institutionalized racism—have been addressed, the context described by Fanon as causing this ontological crisis must be considered generalizable and, in effect, universal. This is not to say, however, that this situation might not be transformed in the future, and indeed, this is the goal of Fanon's text.

“situate” the effects of the subject as subaltern. I would read it, then, as a *strategic* use of positive essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest.⁴¹

I want to pull out two important threads from this passage. The first has to do with the specific strategy that Spivak sees as being operated by these historians. It is not simply a now you see it, now you don't form of essentialism—now I'm being essentialist, now I'm not. In many ways, it is a much more radical move: the positing of an effect as a cause. “Subaltern” names the effect produced by certain processes; and yet these historians, because they have no choice, will begin from this effect as though it provides a starting point for their work. And, as a result, it does.

But the second point—and once again, we sense a pattern similar to that found in the work of Fanon and Foucault, the critique of the moment of origin followed by the critique of the single moment of emergence—is that the strategy does not have the aim of locating, or for that matter producing, an authentic subaltern consciousness. And it certainly does not take as its goal the preserving of the category “subaltern.” The existence of such a category is what leads to the necessity of undertaking the project in the first place, and part of the goal of the project is the elimination of this term, and what it represents. Subaltern studies aims at the destruction of the category subaltern even as it is enabled by it. This is the crux of Spivak's equally misunderstood essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?”: it is not that we should wring our hands over our inability to hear the subaltern speak, but simply that we must acknowledge this fact and see what we can do about abolishing this state of affairs. “If the subaltern can speak,” as Spivak puts it pithily in a interview dealing specifically with this question, “then, thank goodness, she's not a subaltern any more.”⁴²

What I am proposing to call “the humanism effect” has these same two qualities: the strategy of intentionally substituting an effect for a cause, and of founding itself on a moment of origin that it sets out to destroy. It is also the name I want to apply to the ethics without subjects I have located in Fanon and Foucault. “Humanism” here does not mark the name of a discourse that underwrites the ethical relationship between two already-existing subjects. Rather, in the strategic ethics of Fanon and Foucault, something like an effect of “humanization” is the key, an effect that marks the impossible space of responsibility between subjects that have not yet come into existence. The critique of origins and of a single, progressive moment of emergence in both theorists is what underwrites this movement towards the humanism effect. This process thus provides a way of opening up an investigation, not just of the present as more than simply the product of an original and continuous past, but also of the future that has not yet (and may not) come. This ethics without subjects, this strategic production of a humanism effect, is

⁴¹ Spivak, *In Other Worlds*, 204-05, emphasis in original.

⁴² Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean, “Subaltern Talk: An Interview with the Editors,” in *The Spivak Reader*, edited by Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean (New York: Routledge, 1996), 212.

another way of describing the ethos that leads Fanon and Foucault to their impossible but necessary attempt to posit the ontology of ourselves.

But if it is true that this idea of the humanism effect may be a way of having our poststructuralism and our ethics too (to borrow a phrase from Kate McInturff)⁴³, why bother to hold on to humanism at all? Why not simply jettison it altogether? I can only respond by suggesting that if the production of the subaltern subject effect is part of the process of responding to the degradations that have resulted from the process of subalternization, then perhaps the production of the humanism effect can help postcolonial studies respond to the dehumanization that has occurred in the name of humanism. To put it another way: it is becoming increasingly difficult to find anyone within the field of postcolonial studies willing to defend humanism in its most traditional form. But similarly, I would imagine that few people concerned with postcolonial issues would be entirely willing to give up on a discourse that underwrites so powerful a strategy as that which allows us to speak of human rights.⁴⁴ Of course, much of the most productive debate around the discourse of human rights has had to do with questions about its basis: for example, the ongoing discussion of women's rights as human rights, or the suggestion that the global redistribution of wealth be seen as an essential part of the establishment of human rights. The question might be whether we need a form of humanism—in particular, a form that forces us to posit an essential conception of what “man” is—to have human rights. Perhaps not; perhaps what we need instead is a new concept of ethical relationships, not between “men,” or even between people, but between would-be subjects that have not yet come into existence. The ontology of ourselves might then represent, not a founding moment, but rather a horizon, in Husserl's sense.⁴⁵

IV. Responsibility after Humanism

What are the ramifications of this ethics without subjects for a postcolonial criticism that wants to come to terms with contemporary political and cultural situations? For one thing, it implies a need to rid such criticism once and for all of the benevolent nostalgia for a form of humanism that would allow for a re-enfranchisement of individuals subjected to colonial violence, the desire to give those who have suffered back their “humanity.” This means resisting the further desire (and here I quote David Scott) to “read Fanon as though we

⁴³ Kate McInturff, “Dark Continents: Postcolonial Encounters with Psychoanalysis,” presentation at Cornell University, July 2000.

⁴⁴ For more on this point, see Bruce Robbins, “Race, Gender, Class, Postcolonialism: Towards a New Humanistic Paradigm?” in *A Companion to Postcolonial Studies*, edited by Henry Schwarz and Sangeeta Ray (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 2000).

⁴⁵ Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, translated by Dorion Cairns (Dordrecht, NL: Martinus Nijhoff, 1960). My thinking about Husserl in this context owes a great debt to Lewis R. Gordon, *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man: An Essay on Philosophy and the Human Sciences* (New York: Routledge, 1995), and John E. Drabinski, *Sensibility and Singularity: The Problem of Phenomenology in Levinas* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001).

were about to join him in the trenches of the anti-colonial liberation struggle."⁴⁶ We are at a very different moment. For those of us inspired by Fanon's critical method and political commitments, this means responding to his call to "find something different" without necessarily falling back upon strategies that were formulated in the heat of the struggle forty years ago. It also means, as Stuart Hall has suggested, that we are required "to live with a much more radically incomplete Fanon; a Fanon who is somehow much more 'Other' to us than we would like, who is bound to unsettle us from whichever direction we read him."⁴⁷ This is a Fanon, in other words, much closer to Foucault than he has been made to seem.

Similarly, the strategy I have outlined entails refusing the supposed choice between "ethics" and "politics," since the latter, in this reading, might just as easily be the mistaking of a set of effects for a set of causes. This has particular consequences in the postcolonial context. Derek Attridge's analysis of the work of the South African writer J. M. Coetzee is worth noting here. As Attridge argues in his reading of Coetzee's novel *Age of Iron*, the relationship between ethics and politics has often been posited as a distinction between the general and the concrete, usually to the advantage of the latter. However, in Coetzee's work, something more complicated happens:

the ethical involves an always contextualized responsiveness and responsibility to the other (as unique) and to the future (as unknowable), while the political is the realm of generalizations, programs and predictions. It's worth noting the reversal that this implies in the way these terms are often used: here it is the ethical, not the political, which is concerned with concrete acts and persons, and the political which deals in general rules. My argument is that in the political arena we often think we are engaging with the concrete when we are imposing generalities and that the generalities on which philosophical ethics has usually rested are evasions of the genuinely ethical, which can be thought through only in relation to the singular and the contingent.⁴⁸

As Coetzee himself puts it, his attempts at representing the realities of apartheid (and, more recently, post-apartheid) South Africa involves a commitment to "irresponsibility, or better,

⁴⁶ David Scott, *Refashioning Futures: Criticism After Postcoloniality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 199. For a recent, and quite exciting, attempt to re-think Fanon's anticolonial politics in terms of our contemporary context, see John Edgar Wideman, *Fanon: A Novel* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2008). For a re-thinking of our moment of reading Foucault that resonates with Scott's reading of Fanon, see Todd May, "Foucault Now?" *Foucault Studies* 3 (2005), 65-76.

⁴⁷ Stuart Hall, "The After-life of Frantz Fanon," in *The Fact of Blackness: Frantz Fanon and Visual Representation*, edited by Alan Read (Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1996), 35.

⁴⁸ Derek Attridge, "Trusting the Other: Ethics and Politics in J. M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron*," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 93 (1994), 70-71.

of responsibility toward something that has not yet emerged."⁴⁹ This is the very ethos I am calling an ethics without subjects, the production of a humanism effect.

Most important, perhaps, espousing this strategy of an ethics without subjects means getting beyond many of the pieties of postcolonial studies—and as Foucault notes, genealogy is effective only when it is not pious.⁵⁰ I have in mind in particular the notion that too much interrogation of the investigating subject leads away from “politics” and ends in some sort of paralysis, an accusation that has too often been leveled at “theoretical” work dealing with colonialism and postcolonialism, regardless of the political commitments of its practitioners. Indeed, my hope would be that this strategy of an ethics without subjects would have the effect of calling into question the very division between investigator and investigated, seeing them both as subject to colonialism and its aftermath.

Challenging piety is always a dangerous game, for it can too easily sound like an attempt to drain passion from what some of us working in postcolonial studies still wish to view as a struggle against injustices. In response, I can only cite Fanon’s introduction to *Black Skin, White Masks*: “I do not trust fervor. . . . Fervor is the weapon of choice of the impotent.”⁵¹ As is so often the case, Fanon is trafficking in irony here, for there is certainly fervor enough throughout his writings, never more so than when he is denouncing the horrors that have been committed in the name of humanism. But perhaps Foucault gives us the simplest, seemingly least passionate but perhaps most important argument against traditional humanism (and one with which, I would suggest, Fanon would agree wholeheartedly). Humanism, which Foucault defines as a “set of themes that have reappeared on several occasions, over time, in European societies,” is a tautology: “Humanism serves to color and to justify the conceptions of man to which it is, after all, obliged to take recourse.”⁵² These conceptions of man—scientific, religious, political—have always, as Fanon constantly reminds us, entailed the dehumanization of certain categories of individuals, with genocidal results. To put it simply, we can do better. And, if we want not only to write the history of the present, but also to bring about a different kind of present altogether, we must do better.

⁴⁹ J. M. Coetzee, *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, edited by David Atwell (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 246; cited in Attridge, “Trusting the Other,” 82.

⁵⁰ Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” 81.

⁵¹ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 9.

⁵² Foucault, “What Is Enlightenment?”, 44.