On Crystallization

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ABSTRACT This essay considers the various meanings of the word “crystallization” in Frantz Fanon’s main theses on national culture and his political philosophy more generally. It also further considers the implications of crystallization alongside Fanon’s notion of the “nation to come” for an understanding of his approach to art, history, philosophy, and religion. This philosophy of crystallization, of which there has been little or no mention in Fanonian studies, is also contrasted with and compared to works by the Guinean poet Keita Fodéba and the Iranian critic Ali Shari’ati.

KEYWORDS crystallization, Frantz Fanon, Ali Shari’ati, Keita Fodéba, national culture, decolonial poetics

If you throw a hornbeam bough, stripped of its leaves by winter, into the depths of a salt-mine, two or three months later you will find it covered in glistening diamonds, as “the crystallization of the salt has covered its blackened surface with diamonds so brilliant and so numerous that it is only here and there that you can catch a glimpse of the real twig.”

This, then, is how Stendhal introduces the word crystallization (in “The Salzburg Bough”), to illustrate the imaginary nature of love: “the continual acts of folly which make a lover see every perfection in the woman he is beginning to love.”

For the beloved is seen not “as she really is, but as you want her to be”; and the more beautiful and removed from reality she appears to be, the more endowed she is with perfection.

Let this essay therefore be, among other things, a study of the exquisite exaggerations separating the real from the unseen in the discourse and politics of love. With a focus on the idealizing metaphors by which crystallization allows us access to the hidden, obscure depths of such folies de l’amour, we will ask how it is that the real is hidden and imprinted in the heart of delusion. We shall also ask why we are accustomed, being so conditioned by truth, to accept the real as the only thing that can disabuse us of our imaginary perfection.
Fanon, in his first book, *Black Skin, White Masks*, wondered why being loved by a white woman, or the fantasy of being the object of white love, which, elsewhere, he describes as an ur-fantasy of the colony, crystallized a certain phantasmal relation to blackness in which the subject bears witness to nothing but its own misrecognition. (His reference here was to various fables, legends, and texts, including René Maran’s novel *Un homme pareil aux autres*, where a reference to Stendhal’s concept does indeed occur.) But *crystallization*—the process by which an imaginary identification misrecognizes what is real—also comes to be reversed, or converted, in his later texts, so that what is unseen, or seen askance, or only barely, hidden by racist delusion, is unveiled in a most profound manner.

Our concern will not be with the inversion, delusory or revelatory, of interracial love, but with the logic that continues to link delusion and identification in Fanon’s discussion of the politics of revolutionary decolonial culture.

Quite the contrary: this study is about another kind of fantasy, about a political theme that runs through Fanon’s whole thought on national culture, and that he believes is necessarily contested and repressed as soon as it is stated: a political love that is not supported by white ideals (of religion, or philosophy), but is sustained by the belief that no ideal exists (of identity, faith, community, or nationality). Moreover, crystallization here denotes a certain poetics of the *nothing, or n’est pas*.

That is the first point that—revealing my main thesis from the start—I would like to bring out: how blackness is first taken hold of as an imaginary (let us call this the first crystallization), which produces a politics of imitation, or duplicity, which prevents the self from truly seeing itself as it is, and a certain quality of self-blinding that discourages any belief in blackness as a figure of force, power, and possibility. To simplify matters, let us say, for now, crystallization signifies a self-knowing that, because of this schism, sustains a multiplicity of errors, and that is itself unable to imagine the connection between delusion and error, which it holds onto in order to exclude the other that it both accuses and loves. Here to embrace blackness means to embrace two apparently opposing truths: to refuse it so as to affirm one’s humanity and to do so in ignorance of its real presence which remains heretical to the humanism of its truth. This knowledge is opposed, as a totally different mode of thought, to the various humanisms by which whiteness defines the ideal of universal community, including that of the Orient, or the West, which, like every other humanism in the European tradition, is a humanism of natural necessity and teleology, that is to say, a narrative or fantasy of racial superiority.

The fact that crystallization has been overlooked in readings of Fanon does not mean that it has been repressed; but the tendency, from very early on, to read Fanonism as a humanism, to exclude or pervert it into an idealism is a tendency to read it as a white philosophical text, rather than the black radical text I take it to be. If Fanonian crystallization, so to speak, unveils the black underbelly of whiteness,
it is in order to bring out, in the guise of an abyssal opening, a politics beyond that of racial community. Indeed, it denotes a mobilization of those who have nothing, and for whom nothing is their only possession, and who, to that extent, remain untouched by the glittering promises of humanism (at the level of law, the nation-state, and the subject). What triumphs with the wretched (les damnés), who come into being from nothing, as nothing, or what shines forth, witness to nothing, is a certain postulation of the depths, of being thrown into the abyssal depths, as the place where blackness, or what has never before been called blackness, is both formed and disfigured by racism. Any thought of blackness that continues to delusorily think it as a racial concept cannot think the priority of its invention, or what Fanon calls its “new law of expression.”

To free blackness into this poetics; to discover, if possible, its implications for both politics and philosophy; and to ascertain its revolutionary juncture or antagonism—such is the task that I have set myself here.

1.

Let us start with the famous chapter on national culture and Fanon’s reading of Keita Fodéba’s prose poem “Aube africaine,” first published in Présence africaine in 1951. “Aube africaine” tells the story of a peasant farmer, Naman, who, in response to a request from the colonial district, is selected by his village and sent to the front during the Second World War, and who, after having fought in both Europe and Africa, is killed on his way home, by white French soldiers. It is based on a real event: the massacre, by the French, of West African troops at Tiaroye in 1944.

Fanon tells us: “The reason I have chosen this long poem is because of its undeniable pedagogical value. Here things are clear. It is a meticulous account that develops progressively” (WEp, 167).

This implies that meaning and form do not stand opposed but meticulously unfold in a progressive way. It also implies that to read this poem is “to understand the role we have to play, to identify our approach and fight” (WEp, 167). For to understand “the poem is not only an intellectual act, but also a political one” (WEp, 167; my emphasis). To read “Aube africaine” is thus to profess a role, to identify one’s practice, by virtue of the fact that the poem contests, disputes, fights over a certain politics of reading. For what is made negatively explicit by the poem is a scene of instruction that is also a scene of struggle: the first shows how colonial violence is often misrecognized out of loyalty or obedience; the second shows how this obedience often results in wretchedness, because the necessity of struggle or combat is so little recognized by the people. To learn from such a poem is thus to understand that understanding is itself the history of a historical struggle, or what we might call the (always violent) transformation of reading into pedagogy. Then crystallization supervenes. “Aube africaine” is an indispensable manifestation of a
certain “logic” by which Fanon illustrates his main theses. What does Fanon mean by this word? Crystallization does not so much denote nucleation or solidification as a transfiguration. No one knows when, or where, or how it occurs, or what causes it to emerge after meaning (and being) have been thrown into the void. In opposition to the obstinacy or fanaticism by which a certain racialization of thought is lived, crystallization makes the underlying form of such thought—that is to say, the overidealization of whiteness induced, in the colony, by various forms of cultural imposition—appear by transgressing the order by which race is associated with truth and morality. For those who do not know that this order is the effect of force, crystallization removes the illusion since it is, on the contrary, the effect of being plunged into an abyssal opening beyond both race and humanism.

The idea that the revolutionary hopes of a people may be crystallized (cristalisés) by new forms, and “with the intention of opening up the future,” is due to an abyssal thrownness, and it is this thrownness, and not reason or ideology, that is the beginning of the postcolony, and that gives some sense of the audacity of Fanon’s thesis (WEp, 167). What other decolonial philosophy, in the history of colonialism, has argued that blackness is the mine where form is made crystalline? We must, however, go further still. In order for crystallization to give rise to a revolution from which the postcolony is born, that encounter must not rest in form; it must be not a new claim to knowledge, but a sudden cut or fracture in being itself, which then becomes the basis for a new reality in which the people can see their own fear and wretchedness and are amazed at their own weakness, since they alone are capable of the most extravagant reinvention of all necessity and conviction. But crystallization cannot last; it too must be contested (WEp, 171; contestée). What is more, it is clear that the struggle over misrecognition is part of a larger merciless war, which is nothing but a struggle over the reality of the postcolonial world, which, without crystallization and this thrownness, would be nothing but abstract, idealistic elements, lacking all consistency and existence. So much so that we can say that the very existence of blackness is due to nothing but its crystallization prior to which it has led only a subjugated existence.

All this may be stated differently. It may be said that “Aube africaine” allows Fanon to conceive of a struggle that is felt but not recognized, for nothing is more wretched than those who mistake delusion for truth, and who are all the more deceived by their belief in the infallibility—the crystal purity—of their ignorance. I am not speaking of the poem as truth, but of its critique of power and truth in the postcolony in which, once these new laws of expression have been accomplished, the idealism of race philosophy is established and brought to an end. That is why the shortest way to prevent delusion is to contest its truth, and the surest way of refuting it is to expose what it excludes. Before crystallization can be accomplished, before it unveils delusion, there is only the fantasy of its accomplishment as an ideal of art, philosophy, and politics.
What becomes of race philosophy under these circumstances? It is no longer a statement of blackness as ideal or origin (as in négritude), but a theory of its impossible becoming and a recognition of the nothing, the nothing that blackness both is and is not, and the nothing which “gives form” to the effect of its crystallization. It is now no more than a masking that is itself masked: a form that crystallizes all those elements by which blackness remains alter, wretched, n’est pas. All questions of black authenticity are rejected, as are all the questions of race philosophy: Is blackness part of the logos? Does blackness belong to the history of spirit? What is its fate or destiny as Dasein? and so on. I repeat: what gets crystallized in the depths is, historically, the audacious refusal of such questions and fantasies.

This is why Fanon’s reading of “Aube africaine” is so singular. One finds, precisely, a reading of decolonial culture as mask that differs significantly from that of négritude, but also from that of other decolonial philosophers. In his 1954 preface to Les hommes de la danse, for example, Fodéba also invokes the metaphor of the mask, but with obvious differences:

I will never forget the impression made on me by the visit to the ethnographic collections of a Paris museum. Of all the objects which adorned one of the rooms, two masks in particular grabbed my attention. They had such an incredibly human expression! They seemed to be impregnated with such melancholy in this setting which was not their own, such simple wooden figurines had never before seemed to me to be endowed with such a great power of evocation. Since my arrival in France, I had never discovered an image of Africa at once so concrete and so pathetic. In spite of the difference in their forms and the particular signs which characterized them, both of them evoked in my eyes so many memories of my country, that even at night I seemed to hear in a kind of half-sleep the nostalgic voice of the most venerable of the two of them telling me his story.

The remainder of the preface takes the form of a long series of apostrophes centered on stories told by the mask—its sacred role in community life, a role that converged with the language of dance, music, and celebration, a role that was social and utilitarian (utilitaire) and not aesthetic nor commercial (Les hommes, 8). It is well known that Fodéba rejects the language of aesthetics for that of sacred authenticity: “I was often saddened to hear visitors exclaim as they contemplate me, ‘What a beautiful dancing mask!’ As though a divinity could serve as an ornament of dance! The truth is that through a complicated network of steps, the dancer conjures the god who is represented upon his mask, to thank him for a blessing or to ask him for a wish” (13). The mask may be a beautiful object, but what makes us respect and revere it as sacred are those rituals and beliefs in which its bearer actually becomes one with the divinity. Such an object is thus transubstantiated into that of a living...
divinity: this is one of its truths and is really present in it; it is the living embodiment of a truth that must not be abandoned “to chance and the vicissitudes of history” (14). It’s a point of view repeated in the 1957 article, “La danse africaine et la scene”:

For us, authenticity is synonymous with reality. To the extent where folklore is a set of traditions, poems, songs, dances and popular legends of a country, it can only be the reflection of the life of this country. And if this life evolves, there is no reason why the folklore which is its living expression does not evolve. This is why the modern folklore of present-day Africa is as authentic as that of ancient Africa, both of which are the real expression of life in our country at two different periods in its history.10

And what these masks, statuettes, puppets, and other ritualistic figures represent is not reason but faith, which in turn points to the disclosure of an African spirit, the “original language” (langage original) of its music and dance, beyond which there is nothing but capitalism and alienation (Les hommes, 14). Thus African modernity is an ongoing struggle between revelation and commemoration, and precisely because people are no longer able to distinguish the sacred from the paltry world of commerce, or belief from that of profit, the mask has become a mere ornament, “coated with a vulgar polish” (13). Everything depends here on the meaning of the masque as origin. The mask is both “the conscious work of man” and a guardian of sacred tradition (8). For Fanon, however, what remains of precolonial culture in the colony is only the narrative of its transcendental loss. Thus instead of concluding that there is no sacred truth because there is only a false sense of the sacred, we must on the contrary say that the idea of a truth somehow repressed by colonialism can only be believed because of this transcendental delusion that there is only one true or genuine vision of what sacred life is. Once again—but from the sense of its loss—what is true can only be recognized because its deluded imitation exists. Moreover, such a truth can only be borne witness to in France—in a Paris museum—where it carries infinitely more weight than in Africa.

Fanon deliberately reads “Aube africaine” as taking up a position outside the divisions and terminology of both négritude and race philosophy. But then why is this reading itself dismissed as “massively ethnocentric”? This phrase, taken from Christopher Miller’s 1990 book Theories of Africans, is clearly enough aimed at Fanon: it forms a critique refuting what he sees as Fanon’s violent, totalizing vision of cultural liberation (or the belief that the nation has, as its ground and condition of emergence, violent liberation), whose first response, when confronted with tradition, is to “call out the firing squad.”11 Doubtless, on the condition that we accept this relation between “Fanon’s theories” and firing squads, the view that ethnic traditions have to be “liquidated” for a revolutionary culture to emerge (a charge of fanaticism that is itself fanatic), sets out from an idealism that produces the deeply
scurrilous claim that Fanon’s theories directly influenced “the reign of terror in Guinea.” But even if we accept the idea of collusion (which we do not)—between Fanon’s theories and the policies later pursued by Fodéba and Sékou Touré—Fanon’s sustained discussion of precolonial culture, in “On National Culture,” never refers to liquidation other than when it refers to the practices and intent of the colonial power, which imprints itself on indigenous culture like an imperial stamp on coinage: tails I win, heads you lose. This is also why Fanon identifies Fodéba’s admission that European culture should never simply be imitated (specifically in relation to an African avant-garde, but with much broader consequences) as an example of crystallization. In other words, the very opposition between ethnicity and universalism that Miller tries to impose on Fanon’s reading of “Aube africaine” is already stamped by the imperial logic it ostensibly refuses, a collusion of fanaticism and mimicry (this collusion itself produces a fanatical discourse) to which we shall return in the conclusion of this study.

As we continue to insist on the importance of crystallization for Fanon’s understanding of national culture, we should bear in mind that his chapter includes a reading of Fodéba which explores the criteria by which decolonial art can embody the revolutionary hopes of the people. In doing so, we shall see why crystallization, as taken up by Fanon, consists in trying to separate the mendacious, delusory nature of neocolonialism from the new configurations of decolonialism. The desire here is to show how the black bough of the real, so to speak, opens onto a future that is contingent, uncertain, and without representation, but whose existence is so obscured by its abyssal descent into form it is hard to tell apart the love that claims it from the delusion that never recognizes it. Let us say that the relation between crystallization and form here is infinitely-finite. Let us also say that it is impossible to conceive crystallization abstractly as either false or genuine. For to do so is to impose on it an imaginary identity that can only be abstractly (that is to say, falsely) denied or attested. Similarly, the belief that blackness can only be given credence in the whiteness of its form (in the attempt to separate it from wretchedness), must also necessarily exclude it from the deluded nature of such truth. But to contest such knowledge one cannot simply refer to a more genuine truth. That opposition remains abstract, ludic, purely ideological. This is why it is necessary to take a different route from that of dialectic, and to arrive at a more speculative understanding. The difficulty of that opposition recurs throughout Fanon’s many readings of the decolonial avant-garde. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, for example, Fanon essentially condemns négritude for being unable to distinguish the false forms of cultural inertia from its own deluded belief in a more genuine black cultural authenticity. In the colony, it is the former which presides. But after this period of inertia (in which culture has become rigid, congealed, petrified), Fanon introduces the following (distinctly enigmatic) thesis:
The crystallization of the national consciousness will not only radically change the literary genres and themes but also create a completely new audience. Whereas the colonized intellectual started out producing work exclusively with the oppressor in mind—either in order to charm him or to denounce him by using ethnic or subjectivist categories—he gradually switches over to addressing himself to his people [via] “a will to particularize” [se fait volonté particularisante]. (WEP, 173)

So even though inertia is displaced, and its ethnic, subjectivist forms are exposed for what they are as bourgeois, neocolonial forms, the question remains whether this will to particularize (and what it radically crystallizes) establishes the nation to come or is something that gives form to its recognition because it is true or to its misrecognition because it is false.

Again, from a slightly different angle, Fanon writes in a letter sent to the Iranian critic Ali Shariʿati (from 1961, but published in English only in 2018), “Nevertheless, I think that reviving sectarian and religious mindsets could impede this necessary unification [of Algerian nationhood]—already difficult enough to attain—and divert that nation yet to come, which is at best a ‘nation in becoming,’ from its ideal future, bringing it instead closer to its past.” In a later lecture addressing Fanon’s critique, Shariʿati explains why a return (bazgasht) to Islam is a necessary condition of postcolonial sovereignty: “It is for our fortification and growth then that, in the same Third World, we return to religion. And we see that a return to a conscious Islam and a reliance upon it not only does not produce schisms in the opposition to a unified colonialism, but also is a predestined and inevitable necessity in the formation of a unified anti-colonial front on a global scale.” These references to the nation to come (which become no less curious when one notices that at the end of the chapter on national culture, the chapter in which he introduces crystallization, Fanon says that that nation will be “surrounded, vulnerable, and in permanent danger” [WEP, 180]) reprise the question with which we began: namely, how can a crystallizing encounter be understood (read) as a return to an origin (no matter how infinitely elaborated this origin is as the authentic form of culture)? Shariʿati, by contrast, whatever his real relation to Fanon’s thinking, and taking (at least in the 1960s) an apparently more religious stance on these questions, opens some difficult issues for the Fanonian position. Even as he too tends to close off the dimensions of what we are calling crystallization, he asks some uncomfortable questions of anyone trying to think about religion and politics today. In sum, can a crystallizing encounter be thought without representing it as a teleology, and thus as an idealism? Shariʿati poses the problem in all its rigor and stark simplicity, as we shall see. Fanon’s project is, however, well known: there can be no return prior to the act (the utterly transformative precipitation) that crystallizes its uttering. To be thrown into the void, the black depths, is to experience the necessity of
contingency, and it is this infinite saturation of the finite that precisely designates the relation between delusion and reality in the postcolonial; moreover, it is only by going beyond this relation that the people can overcome the opposition between conscious, mimetic forms and racial authenticity (for that opposition is precisely what crystallization counters, as Fanon tells us). All the circumstances favorable to the notion of a nation to come exist in the here and now, but without teleology: the people may or may not know these circumstances, but it is their latent aspiration to unity, an aspiration to which all cultural forms, including poetry, bear witness, that will precipitate a crisis in the colony that may or may not lead to new fidelity or faith.

To return to the question of pedagogy: what crystallizes is not knowledge, but its interpretation. Another very specific example will help us here (to be pursued in the larger context of the book from which this article is drawn). Recent investigations have shed some light on political philosophical readings of postcolonialism, which continues to be cast dogmatically or at least morally as a cohesive humanism. (This precise misreading is precisely what we now call the “postcolonial,” whether we are referring to Edward Said or Homi Bhabha, Partha Chatterjee or Achille Mbembe, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak or Jasbir Puar.) That is to say, readings in which blackness is not recognized except as a metaphor of humanism, which is their real concern, and that, in fact, fail to grasp how blackness alters the very meaning and fate of humanism.) There is, however, a different understanding of postcolonialism, one that further understands the whole relationship between politics and philosophy rather differently: an understanding that does not share this dogmatism and moralism. This reading is Fanonian, but what it crystallizes—perpetually misunderstood as history, biography, meaning, identity, or knowledge—has yet to be determined. This is why it is absurd to condemn Fanon in the name of a humanism (or antihumanism) that claims to know the meaning of the Fanonian text. We are no longer so willing to be the dupes of such criticism, a criticism that has never been concerned with the difficulty of reading a black decolonial text; for that criticism, there is no other task than that of knowledge, an emphasis that precisely discards, ignores, muffles the reading that tries to restore blackness to its future to come, a future that is always called into question, contested, and is itself always already the trace of an unthought violence.

Some such reformulation is what Fanon seems at least to be turning around, in the many fascinating attempts in his late work (essentially those works published just before his death in 1961, from the Rome address on “Mutual Foundations for National Culture and Liberation Struggles” through to the chapters “Misadventures of National Consciousness” and “On National Culture,” in The Wretched of the Earth) to isolate and define the value of crystallization for the people’s liberation struggle. Fanon, no doubt, saw and foresaw that his appeal to this term was
entangled not only with a history of philosophy, but more especially with the image of strife, rebellion, and disorder, and he returns to it many times, elaborating and sometimes subverting his earlier formulations in the attempt to clarify the terms of the struggle, and to invent new “laws” for its expression.

2.

The task begins in “Misadventures of National Consciousness.” Once the colonial power and its forces—that is, the police, the army—have been rejected, Fanon, using the example of the colonial bourgeoisie, moves onto the idea that they also need to be radically contested, and, starting out from the point that power in the postcolony is corrupt, he begins to say that neocolonialism is what founds the postcolonial nation-state. “Seen through its eyes, its mission has nothing to do with transforming the nation; it consists, prosaically, of being the transmission line between the nation and a capitalism, rampant though camouflaged, which today puts on the masque of neo-colonialism” (WEf, 122). This pact—between race, nation, and capital—is complex due to the fact that the bourgeoisie, who, Fanon maintains, represent an inferior copy of the European bourgeoisie, also use nationalist ideology to mask their corruption, and so disguise the fact that they are politically “decadent,” “bereft,” “narcissistic,” and “ultra-nationalist,” not to say “racist” (123, 120, 125). Thus the crystallizing element of the new nation is divided between a mass and a bourgeois form established by corruption in which the people, after the terror of civil war, are now subjugated to an ideology based on “the resurgence of tribal parties and federalism” (165).

Fanon is one of the first to think the role of ideological domination in the post-colony. It is here that we find his analysis of the limits of nationalism. He thought that for crystallization to take hold, national consciousness had to become “the all-embracing crystallization of the innermost hopes of the whole people,” instead of “an empty shell, a crude and fragile travesty of what it might have been” (WEf, 148). Politically conscious of the fact that revolution must mean a more authentic realization, Fanon says nothing of how a second, antibourgeois crystallization is to reveal the mask beneath the masque, so to speak, or how those innermost hopes are to reveal the latent or disguised meaning of the colonial elites, which must be unmasked (as a travesty) for those hopes to become manifest. But let us not be too hasty. The emergence of what is innermost to the people is the political condition for the nation’s emergence. Fanon’s wish is simply that, in the postcolony, the masquerade by which the elites maintain power should be exposed in order for it not to be confused with those crystallizing elements that are essential to the nation to come. That is why he is plainly obsessed with the opposition between an empty, inert, “stereotypical formalism” based on religious nationalism and race, and a mobilization that demystifies and contests, not so much ideological illusion,
or subterfuge, but *the racialization of the symbolic* itself, in its bourgeois transfor-
mation. Yet nothing here is certain: the distinction between the stereotypical and
what perturbs it is itself in danger of becoming delusory, idealistic. This is why
Fanon suggests that the nation to come has no assignable place, or authentic form,
but must nonetheless be opposed to “the modern form of the dictatorship of the
bourgeoisie,” which he says has to be seen for what it is: “unmasked, unpainted,
unscrupulous and cynical” (132).

In order for the second crystallization to take place, however, another encoun-
ter must come about, and here he turns to the question of the power and will
of the leader. “The leader, who has behind him a lifetime of political action and
devoted patriotism, constitutes a screen between the people and the rapacious
bourgeoisie since he stands surety for the ventures of that caste and closes his eyes
to their insolence, their mediocrity and their fundamental immorality. He acts as
a braking-power on the awakening consciousness of the people” (135). This then
turns out to be the real crux of this first approach to the problem of power: it is no
longer just a struggle between the elites and the masses, but, far beyond it, an unde-
cidable relation between ideology and power in which imaginary delusion, in its
first phase, corresponds to the meanings and practices of the leader-dictator in his
bewildering mystification of the masses. The question of displacement is thereby
extended: power is in fact now the representative of a certain kind of jouissance (or
drive to mastery) rather than just the authentic realization of the nation (134, 208).
This insight contributes a second caution: national consciousness, which we might
once have been tempted to associate with the manifestation of a pure presence,
with the outer realization of what is inner, also reveals, says Fanon, the enigmatic
enjoyment (by the powerful) of what is perversely hidden, and that is unknown,
infinity so. Here the sovereign is not he who decides, but he who lulls and paci-
fies, he who seduces and violates; in short, he who urges the people to “fall back
into the past and to become drunk on the remembrance of the epoch which led up
to independence” (136). Thanks to this seduction, the postcolony occupies a wholly
different relation to the state of exception, for, if this is a state of exception, it is one
defined by a complicit unawareness, or even by a kind of enjoyment that compels
(is itself compelled) to ignore, and to leave undeciphered all the signifiers—ethical,
didactic, propagandistic, political, and so on—that have come to a halt and are
“completely demobilized” (137). In such apathy no crystallizing encounter can take
place in a community that is not so much abandoned or disavowed as lulled, and
one in which the decision to interiorize a world, or to ease one’s wretchedness, is
unable to move beyond the consolations of ideological conformity. The postcolony
would then name not an impropriety of being and consciousness, but an enjoy-
ment that is unrecognized because it makes a show of power when, in the absence
of all inhibition, it descends into the realm of the drive.”
Because the people can be made to conform to this “spectacular lethargy” by which they remain inured to their exploitation, Fanon has to further clarify the concept of national culture in his letter to Shariʿati and the chapter from _The Wretched of the Earth_ (WEf, 137). Now he says that crystallization has two opponents against which it must struggle: mimesis (the subterfuge of power) and apathy (its existential adversary). He has to make this distinction in order to try to separate revolt (which sees the people wake up from delusion) from the kind of enigmatic enjoyment (of the darkness of the drive) that, as we have just seen, Fanon says cannot simply be renounced. (The national bourgeoisie names, after all, the more or less secret aspiration of independence itself, which typically does not seek to announce or signal itself as a subterfuge but as a truthful realization of the revolution: nothing is more cynical than the claim to be against the former colonial power while mimicking its thought and institutions, or masking the masque.) He has to try to make these awkward and perhaps even contradictory distinctions if he is to maintain the opposition between revolution and cultural inertia. I leave aside the question of whether Fanon’s desire for the distinction may itself be a symptom of revolutionary, idealistic love, or whether the theory of crystallization is itself the sign of a phantasmatic seduction. But if apathy is the enemy of crystallization, things are not so straightforward with the supposed opposition between the masses and leadership, which turns out to involve a more complicitous relation between drive and the desire to be driven:

We have many times indicated the very often detrimental role of the leader. This is because in certain regions the party is organized like a gang whose toughest member takes over the leadership. The leader’s ancestry and powers are readily mentioned, and in a knowing and slightly admiring tone it is quickly pointed out that he inspires awe in his close collaborators. In order to avoid these many pitfalls a persistent battle has to be waged to prevent the party from becoming a compliant instrument in the hands of a leader. _Leader_ comes from the English verb “to lead,” meaning “to drive” in French [conduire]. The driver of people no longer exists today. People are no longer a herd and do not need to be driven. If the leader drives me I want him to know that at the same time I am driving him. The nation should not be an affair run by a big boss. Hence the panic that grips government circles every time one of their leaders falls ill, because they are obsessed with the question of succession: What will happen to the country if the leader dies? The influential circles, who in their irresponsibility are more concerned with safeguarding their lifestyle, their cocktail parties, their paid travel and their profitable racketeering, have abdicated in favor of a leader and occasionally discover the spiritual void at the heart of the nation. (WEf, 127)

Is the leader admired because he is feared, or feared because he is so admired? He has to be tough, but he also knows how to appear to be awe-inspiring, to possess
the moral qualities that will win the people over to his side, even if they also earn him the envy of the elites, whom he despises, for, for them, power is something to be either envied or feared. On closer inspection, what is being described here is a kind of irreducible ambiguity: the leader is both an ambiguous opponent of the political elites because of this drive to mastery and an ambiguous partner of those elites because of this selfsame drive to mastery by which they are driven to form the party. This drive to drive is what founds sovereignty, be it in the form of the people or the party. It follows that the leader’s relation to his own drivenness (as a driver of power) therefore entails a persistent battle with himself and with others. This is why the age-old distinction between sovereignty defined as that which leads or as that which governs solely at its own behest is dismissed as inadequate in the postcolony. For although sovereignty arises from or is already determined by this drive to drive (conduire), its actions are never adequate to it insofar as it is bound by it. Or the sovereign is never purely or simply sovereign, for to lead is merely the effect of being led. This is why, in Fanon’s theory of power in the postcolony, the leader is driven to fabricate a popular (ideological) image of himself as the subject who drives the interests of the masses because he is bound to them.

This is all taken as evidence that sovereignty cannot establish itself without in some sense being driven by the other that confirms it, for this is the law of its own nature. Or sovereignty cannot determine itself without being mediated by this drivenness which it cannot do without and so depends on, and which, ultimately, it has to perform as masked. This may also be why Fanon flags up the question of translation, that is, of a certain English definition of sovereignty as a war of all against all. For insofar as sovereignty is always more than and less than its concept, and government always more and less than its capacity to govern, any lust for power that is absolute will prove to be absolutely ruinous. Consequently, when this drivenness is mistaken for the phantasm of its concept, the attempt to determine it as will results in a sovereignty that is nothing more than the effect of its appetites; or as governed by nothing but appetite, even when it appears to be not so. And when this confusion of drive and decision takes place, what is called a decision is essentially a kind of perversion in which politics may or may not enter into a crisis, for there is no decision that is not the venal, irremediable effect of an arbitrary, perverse spontaneity. At least, this seems to be one of the results of the bourgeois seizure of power in the postcolony. The image of sovereignty that emerges is one thus defined by delirious decisionism. Consequently, national life becomes a nightmare from which the people dare not awake lest they should wake up to something worse. This nightmare also shows us that neocolonial sovereignty remains haunted by its insecurity, or is no more than the fearful insecurity that founds it. This is a fear that cannot be calmed and that takes the form of a persecutory, merciless cruelty toward the people. Such at first glance are the reasons why Fanon describes the leader as a big boss.
and the party as gangsters. Such description also defines politics as a series of warring ideologies: woven out of narratives, stereotypes, and keywords, and obligatory and arbitrary rewards and punishments, each one of which makes it impossible to distinguish between a wholehearted acceptance of corruption (which would inevitably compromise independence with its true enemy, subterfuge) and a merely passive, external, and expedient apathy that also exposes a spiritual void at the heart of the nation. In the light of all this, the leader can embody the popular will, but only if he appears to be led. But insofar as the leader does not permit this inhibition, he becomes one with the drive that both founds and crystallizes the desire for absolute mastery—that is, insofar as the leader gives form to the people, institutionally, his relation to power is in a sense even more apathetic and deceitful than that of the bourgeoisie. What he reveals is the void at the heart of neocolonial mastery, but on the absolute condition that he appears to be no more than a sovereignty up against its limit, or that founds itself as the limit of both drive and the desire to be driven, or, better still, the masquerade that presents itself wheresoever it can as a cultural revolution that luxuriates in the jouissance of its own excessive prohibition (in the perverse sense of these expressions).

Fanon summarizes this quite hard-won but perhaps notorious position as follows:

The crystallization of the caste spirit must be avoided. We have seen in the preceding pages that nationalism, that magnificent song that made the people rise against their oppressors, stops short, falters and dies away on the day that independence is proclaimed. Nationalism is not a political doctrine, nor a programme. If you really wish your country to avoid repression, or at best halts and uncertainties, a rapid step must be taken from national consciousness to political and social consciousness. (WEf, 163)

Indeed, this is almost as far as Fanon gets with the politics of crystallization in The Wretched of the Earth. We might summarize it by saying that there is a kind of general drive-structure dimension to decolonial power whose form is that of apathy and violence, that is therefore driven to realize (disguise) itself as a kind of absolute perversity but one that is opposed to sovereignty in the more restrictive sense of party or government in that its point is not exactly to be repressive or representative (that is, telling the masses what they want to hear). Here, drive decides everything: the leader creates memory, justice, and happiness, but is at his most refined when he leads the people inevitably into error and can enjoy the evil he contains. Such, more or less, are the effects of this deceptive drive to power: it can only manifest itself as sovereignly inhibited for a cynical and manipulative purpose, for example that of racial-ethnic or religious rivalry, or stereotypical forms of repression and perversion more generally.
We need to add one further element, however, to the picture of crystallization that emerges, an element that might help us understand the relation between politics and the philosophy of complicity that is being thought by way of politics, and which, as such, is crucial to Fanon's theory of decolonial culture.

This further element, which I passed over earlier in the general and complicated attempt to separate out crystallization from mimesis and apathy, has to do with art, with the nation as a form of art that is “conscious and sovereign” (WEf, 165). Whereas the leader always might be telling a lie, crystallization reveals what appears to be concealed but that was never actually concealed, for it reveals how truth, as it were, is being cynically manipulated and expressed, and how, postindependence, there is no longer a “colonial” or “anti-colonial” truth to be expressed, but rather a metamorphosis in the very language of truth in the colony, which gives way to a series of malevolent discontinuities. These transformations are accompanied, conversely and necessarily, by new forms of paranoia and clarity. It is easy to see why: crystallization does not produce truth but shows how it comes into view as racial truth and falsity; as such, crystallization does not reveal or distort either term but gathers together what is hidden and unhidden by both truth and falsity; or, it is the moment at which the people’s avenir is given form and density: “the living expression of the nation is the collective consciousness in motion of the entire people,” Fanon declares (WEf, 144). Accordingly, crystallization, in Fanon’s political philosophy, is not solely marked by a dialectical progression from, say, work to knowledge, as in Hegel, or from alienated life to a life liberated, but to a being opened up by its own concession (a word that we will keep on coming back to) and one that knows that the path of revolt will also be the path of delirium, of an uncompromising refusal, which it embraces as the very force of its being. (One thinks here of a being descending into the depths as it falls from a political to a philosophical void in its struggles with idealism, corruption, and power.) This is why Fanon presents crystallization as a poetics that doesn’t merely revise (or correct) delusory desire, separating the pure from the impure, but that changes desire itself by engendering new forms of force and power.

This is more than a program; perhaps it is no more than a desire. But this motif of absolute revolt should not be confused with morality, theology, or teleology (as in the works of Shari’ati or Fodéba). To take just one example: the role of literary culture in the political education of the masses. Here we will see Fanon attempting to work out the residual problems in the relation between philosophy, politics, and aesthetics, in the attempt to formulate a new object and point of departure for a new politico-philosophical position, and to engender a shift in his own discourse.

The task to be accomplished here is not politics, but the philosophical form of what politics crystallizes, such that philosophy as a whole for Fanon just is or
should be what crystallizes, at least insofar as it has a relation to politics and/or revolutionary culture. This generalization of the problem will then see Fanon grappling with a black antihumanist text as it appears in Fodéba, and it has him, perhaps surprisingly for the postcolonial pessimist we thought he was, endorsing a fundamentally vanguardist position for the poet-philosopher, who will be explicitly and even militantly defined in opposition to the bourgeoisie and the leader. This move is then linked to pedagogy (or at least its inadequacies), as Fanon has to accept that in fact crystallization is more implicated in practices of mystification than he at first allowed. I cite the following, crucial passage, at some length:

Sooner or later, however, the colonized intellectual realizes the existence of a nation is not proved by culture, but in the people’s struggle against the forces of occupation. No colonialism draws its justification from the fact that the territories it occupies are culturally nonexistent. Colonialism will never be put to shame by exhibiting unknown cultural treasures under its nose. The colonized intellectual, at the very moment when he undertakes a work of art, fails to realize he is using techniques and a language borrowed from the occupier. He is content to cloak these instruments in a style that is meant to be national but which is strangely reminiscent of exoticism. The colonized intellectual who returns to his people through works of art behaves in fact like a foreigner. Sometimes he will not hesitate to use the local dialects to demonstrate his desire to be as close to the people as possible, but the ideas he expresses, the preoccupations that haunt him are in no way related to the daily lot of the men and women of his country. The culture with which the intellectual is preoccupied is very often nothing but an inventory of particularisms. Seeking to cling close to the people, he clings merely to a visible veneer. This veneer, however, is merely a reflection of a dense, subterranean life in perpetual renewal. This reification, which seems all too obvious and characteristic of the people, is in fact but the inert, already invalidated outcome of the many, and not always coherent, adaptations of a more fundamental substance beset with radical changes. Instead of seeking out this substance, the intellectual lets himself be mesmerized by these mummified fragments which, now consolidated, signify, on the contrary, negation, obsolescence, and fabrication. Culture never has the translucency of custom. Culture eminently eludes any form of simplification. In its essence it is the very opposite of custom, which is always a deterioration of culture. Seeking to stick to tradition or reviving neglected traditions is not only going against history, but against one’s people. When a people support an armed or even political struggle against a merciless colonialism, tradition changes meaning. What was a technique of passive resistance may, in this phase, be radically doomed. Traditions in an underdeveloped country undergoing armed struggle are fundamentally unstable and crisscrossed by centrifugal forces. This is why the intellectual often risks being out of step. The peoples who have waged the struggle are increasingly impermeable to demagoguery, and by seeking to follow them
too closely, the intellectual turns out be nothing better than a vulgar opportunist, even behind the times. (WEp, 159–61; my emphasis)

It will have been noticed that, in the above passage, the metaphor of secrecy, of a restless curiosity about hidden depths, is generalized: it now defines the relation between rhetoric and politics, or the consequences of what it means to confuse truth for falsehood, custom for armed struggle, style for invention, or at least (for the colonial intellectual) why the recourse to nativism reflects, or is part of, reification itself. Decolonial art is thus read as a crystallization of several elements, and one whose allusive metaphorical meaning reveals the vein beneath the ligature: the return to the precolonial is thus essentially the circulation of bloody delusory truths (already assimilated), in which a whole masochistic thought-structure is expressed. It is not an encounter with truth, but, to be sure, bespeaks a permanent fixation on what cannot be known; a position that continues to perform the wish “to be a ‘nigger,’ not an exceptional ‘nigger,’ but a real ‘nigger,’ a ‘dirty nigger,’ the sort defined by the white man” (WEp, 158). Just as the phantasmatic violence of such thought conceals the self-injury it performs, and is a martyr to what it reifies, the attack on the colonizer’s language is itself the result of an extreme—masochistic—secret that inevitably confuses dismemberment of language with the dismemberment of colonialism. Here, the wish to depict the endless screams of the tortured, the cutting, the oozing, the vomiting of blood, however well believed this paroxysm may be as a discourse, leaves the impression of a delusion strengthened by fantasy; and, just as this lust for revenge secretly venerates what it publicly despises, it is tricked in turn by its inability to look upon what is hidden by these venerations: the jouissance that confuses masochism for revenge. Such fantasy, regardless of whether it defines itself as accusation or justice, or as an “anamorphic transformation” of history, is the ultimate trap of colonialism, for it can only confirm native life as one lived in lies and deception, and so unable to reach self-understanding. Accordingly, any decolonial aesthetic, however radically defined it may be as anticolonial, can never free itself from its own deception if the aesthetic, believed to offer a vision of the past that is wholly more enjoyable than the sufferings of the present, is declared to be the true end of politics. The point here is not to eradicate error, but to show how the aesthetic is still being thought in racial, metaphysical terms, in the sense of traditions that can give no support to the future, and in the form of a racial seduction that remains blindly free in its own deception, and so can never be sure of the wretchedness that inevitably follows in its wake.

This is why decolonial literature cannot be one with the people “until it first realize[s] our alienation” (WEa, 163). “It is not enough,” Fanon continues, “to try and disengage ourselves by accumulating proclamations and denials. It is not enough to reunite with the people in a past where they no longer exist. . . . We must focus
on that zone of hidden fluctuation where the people can be found, for let there be no mistake about it, it is here that their souls are crystallized and their perception and respiration transfigured” (163). This is why Fanon turns to Fodéba, whose poetic work is less about negation than “identifying the exact historical moment of the struggle, with defining the place of action and the ideas around which the will of the people will crystallize” (163). In other words, what allows the people both to interiorize and to move beyond apathy and alienation is not the negation, or mutilation of colonial representation, but the thought that allows what is secretly hidden to be manifested, that is to say, that point or zone at which the colonizer’s language suddenly fluctuates and disperses, and its alienating subterfuges are no longer read as the restoration of reason, but as an unstable, monumental pressure to form the nation to come. In other words, for Fanon there is no guarantee that tradition can give form or shape to armed struggle, or even be the essential element of it, for such a position, which he attributes to Shariʿati, can only view culture as the transcendental locus of eternal “laws” that are somehow invisible, and yet endure, sustained by the idealizing metaphors of the nation. Quite the opposite is true: the subterranean life that is to be perpetually renewed by armed struggle, by custom, is no more than an inventory of particularisms, an unutterable black Das­ein that is ideal and universal. What matters here is the criterion by which tradition is interpreted: tradition here is nothing but the permanent delusion of a universal culture that has been repressed, forgotten, or lost, but that no longer exists, is only an abstract ideal, a principle determined by white humanism.

The conclusion that inevitably follows from this—that such universalism is secular, Western, capitalist—perhaps explains Fanon’s reluctance to endorse Shariʿati’s belief that an Islamic version of a revolutionary culture should be conceived, institutionally, as the same substance as the nation to come. Everything turns here on the question of interpretation. For Fanon, crystallization is, in sum, the philosophy that both represses and exposes the void of cultural nationalism. It is not only the philosophy that bears witness (as shahid) to the pious nation obscured by decadence or corruption, only to be restored through shahadat, but a philosophy that goes fishing22 in the black abyssal depths in order to endow wretchedness with existence: a philosophy which, rather than returning from the void with a message for the masses (a message contrary to bourgeois, secular deception), begins by evacu­ating all such philosophical idealism, and hence by refusing to align itself with any colonial object whatsoever (Fanonism is not a philosophy of negation) in order to set out from nothing but the fall, from abyss to infinitesimal abyss, and from infinity to nothingness. Is there a more radical critique of revolutionary idealism, with its pretension to restore the truth of things? Is there a more striking way of saying that Fanon’s “object” par excellence is nothing but the n’est pas, or the void, the blackest depths that remain incommensurable with the world?
In Shariʿati’s reading of Fanonism, which he repeatedly presents as an example of shahid, or witness (which also plays a significant role in Abolhasan Banisadr’s 1971 preface to Duzokhian-e Zamin, his Persian translation of The Wretched of the Earth, “About Fanon and His Thoughts”), what is introduced is a confusion between the veneer of the text, so to speak, and the dark subterranean life that is its philosophical object. Accordingly, in thinking Fanonism, it becomes all the more necessary for Banisadr and, to a lesser extent, Shariʿati, to classify Western bourgeois, secular deception as a form of antihumanism, which Banisadr says (contrary to his general presentation of the “revolutionary creativeness” of the young and the oppressed) is now in crisis in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, as well as in Europe:

The translation of this book [The Wretched of the Earth], which is from start to end a rejection of the bourgeois values and culture of the West, has become available exactly when the bourgeoisie is in crisis in its own stronghold, which is to say, in Europe, and violence [ghahr] is pervading this society too. The young generation that is worried about its future, a generation that will make the future, has lost hope in the values of a society based on a consumption economy, values that are presumed eternal. Wherever able, this generation has raised the flag of rebellion [shuresh] around the world against a culture that exhibits one response, that is, force [zur], to the totality of humanity’s issues.

Here, too, what distinguishes this fighting (razmande) humanity from the colonial bourgeoisie (and thus what comes under the rubric of revolutionary creativity) is shahadat, which channels the “violence and power of the people through the swamp of confusion.” Indeed, what inhibits this power is nothing but imitation, which cannot liberate thought from its neocolonial constraints. But insofar as Fanonism is itself both “a mirror and a floodlight,” how is one to know true exposure from narcissistic delusion? If shahadat is also what crystallizes, undecidably both what inhibits (self-alienation) and what galvanizes (new ways of thinking and action), isn’t this also exemplarily the case with neocolonialism? Banisadr continues: “Fanon’s art is that he understands the mechanisms underlying these shifts and transformations [from imitation to revolution] and articulates them. His art is that he illustrates how a concrete process by which new customs are imposed upon the colonized engender new ways of thinking and doing.” Yet how do we distinguish this art from the very thing it is most supposed not to be, its very opposite, namely, Western reification?

In Shariʿati, for example, decolonialism is truly inventive not when it represents, but when it shows how revolutionary thought suddenly takes on form in the nation state. Without this relevé, so to speak, there is no crystallizing return. These notions go along with what Shariʿati elsewhere describes as an illumination that
is of the order of an unveiling, and which will lead him, ambiguously perhaps, to
attribute this view to Fanon too, as though all that needed to be done was to *uncon-
cel* the forms of a new crystallization. In this he remains a thinker of ontology-as-
illumination. Yet this thought of revelation cannot be known in itself; it can only be
seen in what it illumines, for what is authentic and eternal must be hidden so as to
prevent its corruption. Anyone wishing to return to such knowledge must thereby
be able to recognize it irrevocably, for as soon as they discover it they must also
throw off the yoke of established thought and custom. For the truth that brings us
freedom also shows how we lack authority and justice. But what if, momentarily,
we cannot tell apart the veneer from the life taking form in the field of this crys-
tallizing vision: at the very least, by dint of the fact that true invention must, at
the same time, appear to be originary? For Fanon, the time—the moment—of revolu-
tion always involves a necessary exposure to instability and irresolution, a moment
to which no *Vorstellung* is identical, but which bears witness to a void in the real
to which the revolutionary moment attests, or, in some respects, opens, by allow-
ing people to see *as if for the first time*, or to see from the wrong side as it were. By
contrast, in Shariʿati’s illumination what is unveiled is a common enterprise lead-
ning each and all to see anew their common precarity, poverty, and wretchedness.
Here the connection of the wretched with what Shariʿati famously calls illumina-
tion becomes clear, but via a key difference: in Fanon what is repeatedly expressed,
and increasingly worried over, is the difficulty of being able to tell apart what illu-
mines from the fantasy of its unveiling, especially in the way that the politics of
illuminism is expressed and communicated to others, and regardless of whether
this communication is received as truth or revelation. The way Shariʿati bypasses
this is to say that only the *shahid* can lay claim to truth, and he does so in his res-
olute opposition to secular rhetoric and representation. Crystallization already is,
in a certain sense, the alethic-ludic shadow of illumination. And what it reveals
is the *I* that is never anything but a pedagogical self-relation (so as to abolish the
distance between faith and its teaching), and that is itself the advent that “returns”
to the pedagogical practices that produce it. But the *I* thereby knows itself as illu-
mination, to which it gives life, which it is made of, for what is comprehended by
the people is the true life of spirit; it is their understanding that allows what was
hidden to be found, and it is they who discover its authority and justice. Could it be
said then that return takes place as the effect of a mutual illumination in which the
past casts its light on the present, and via a faith that is felt to be more imperious
than doubt or deception? An illumination that is thus perpetually—dialectically—
revealed as the truth of delusion?

The foregoing is clearly only brief notes on the preface, and does not claim to
represent Shariʿati’s vast corpus on *bazgasht* or *shahadat*.

But if Fanonism is read along these lines, that is, as a “mold” waiting to be filled by Islamic content, then
how is it possible to imagine Fanonism, under its philosophical veneer, as anything other than an idealized beginning that must itself be returned from? And how is it possible to imagine that the fascination exerted by the mirror that Fanon holds up to the masses—a mirror allowing them to see themselves for the first time, without alienation or fear—is purely centered on truth rather than on the delusion of its unveiling, or that the philosophical form of that unveiling can only be accomplished by taking religion as the essence of the political, and one whose message is achieved through shahadat? In brief, there seems to be no suspicion, in Banisadr, for example, that what appears to be the most revolutionary illumination might also be the most convincing imitation (politically); or that what is revealed as secret, hidden, might also illumine what has been effaced, forgotten, dissimulated (philosophically). I would like to suggest that this is not less a political decision than a philosophical question, and one that allows Shariʿati to displace the problem or possibility that what crystallization ultimately reveals is, as it were, nothing, and rightly so—for why should the passage from politics to religion be any less unstable than the passage from desire to delusion? Perhaps this question is too simple. I am well aware that Shariʿati is thinking of something different than delusion, or the imaginary, when he says that bazgashht also reveals something ungraspable, unnameable, and unsayable—namely, the great revolt of Being that is absolutely heterogeneous to the world, and, as such, lies beyond reason, dialectic, philosophy, and representation.

Beyond a shadow of a doubt, it is this shared insistence on an unassimilable, severe refusal that brings Shariʿati closer to Fanon; hence, their notion of revolt as something abrupt, unprecedented, untimely, and in which the only wager is against all forms of power and domination. And yet Shariʿati’s project remains one of ideology and of reformation; the possibility of liberation is not that of a pure wager, for Islam remains the figure of reconciliation and desire. (This more orthodox version of bazgashht is very different from Fanon’s refusal to see cultural revolution as ideological war, and precisely because what it crystallizes has neither object nor image nor form.) This is why we must understand, contra Miller and others, that neither is Fanonism just a reprise of the universal as understood by philosophy, nor is it merely an idealism masquerading as an ever purer form of the general will, and thereby condemned to repeat the impasses of colonial sovereignty. But neither does Fanon, in spite of Shariʿati’s reading, reproduce the language of authenticity under the guise of religion, nor does he see in religion an ethical response to the politics of neocolonialism, with culture seen as the locus of shahadat.27 Even if the latter is understood as the most severe form of renunciation—of life, value, difference, and desire—Fanon’s belief is not so much that such resistance must not enter the form of a clerical, institutional reasoning (which is the world of politics and deception [tazvir]) but, on the contrary, that the people must also resist the imagi-
nary fantasy of absolute resistance. Hence the essential role of an abyssal opening, and the economic and political role of the wretched, the nothing that cannot be negated and that is recognized as a void within discourse—whether that of revolt or that of inertia. Shari'ati wants to say that Fanonism is shahadat, but the choice of metaphors—of an exposure of what is being secretly hidden or denied—continues to plague his discussion in a way that he never entirely deals with, and this shows up symptomatically, I suggest, in his repeated discussion of shahadat as the place where philosophy crystallizes itself as religion.28

Shahadat exposes what has been hidden, which means that it is clearly not synonymous with jihad and may be in some considerable tension with it as a means. That shahadat gathers these differing attributes is perhaps what leads Banisadr, in “About Fanon and His Thoughts” (and Shari'ati in the later lectures), to make a distinction between a good crystallization and a bad crystallization. Banisadr is provoked into doing so by just the persuasive, antimimetic features of shahadat he has now recognized, features that are in fact inseparable from, and indeed fundamental to, a revolutionary model of Islamic community: in shahadat, in brief, martyrdom completes the “exposure of what is being denied.” But the ethical character of Islam will mean that shahadat comes to be affected by an essential uncertainty (Shari'ati calls it rather oddly an “invitation”), such that the effect of shahadat always might be exposed in its truth or veridicity by what is said, paradoxically, to be the true form of the duplicity that designates it. Shari'ati identifies in the exposure of bourgeois secular elites a struggle to gain the upper hand when it comes to lying about lying. (This is why everything that the corrupt say is undeniably true, and why politics is always a matter of thinking the truth without being able to say it.) A successfully religious performance of shahadat within the frame provided it by the elites is thus the means, despite what Shari'ati says at several times, which allows him to think the purity of revolt, and thus to think through the whole question of religion as a revelation that leads us to truth. (Given the importance of these notions in late Fanon, one might measure the stakes of this question of shahadat or crystallization in terms of whether a revolutionary will is or is not allowed to appear, by way of art, philosophy, or politics.) Under the pressure of this uncertainty, in a 1960s lecture on Bazgasht, Shari'ati identifies a return to Islam not as a return to tradition, or a “line of inheritance,” but a return to “Islam as an ideology.”29 In Sociology of Islam, Shari'ati defines this ideology not as “a return [bazgasht] to the past, but the revival of the past in the present.”30 (It should be noted here how this refusal of historical time, of traditionalism, is similar to Fanon's concept of a tabula rasa, but the latter notion is irreconcilable with that of return and reformation; indeed, Fanon uses this word in The Wretched of the Earth to represent the necessity of disorder in any revolutionary moment—for that which is disclosed may soon be covered up, and there is no straight path from event to revolution.) But the bad crystallization
actually wins the argument, for shahadat is now defined as the essence of bazgasht. That is to say, in order for shahadat to found and awaken in us a new sense of umma (political community), it has to return to a source higher than itself, a source that leaves us free only insofar as we accept its absolute heterogeneity, and which is different from the void and its infinitely-finite fall within meaning.

What constitutes shahadat is, then, a reading of exemplarity that is itself martyr to its own exemplary reading; but this reading, however veritable or inventive, only acquires the weight of truth insofar as it becomes politically effective as ideology (insofar as being is unreadable, or readable in its unreadability). If this is true—or, at a minimum, true of shahadat as Shariʿati defines it—then it makes sense to say that it is essentially through the presence of a revolutionary illumination, differentiating truth from simulacra, being from artefact, that shahadat becomes the readable truth of decolonial struggle, with Islam being the ideological form—and, I would add, the decision, the decree—that discloses shahadat as the crystallizing origin and paradigm. The return to ideology is also the true end of politics in the “real” of being. But if shahadat is structured by bazgasht, by a return that exposes deception, this is a return that is always rebegun and undone as the unending negation of exposure and deception. Suffice it to say, this is not the same thing as the nation to come whose avenir has no predestined end, and no foundation, for its revival is a wager against history, desire, fantasy, and law.

Let us briefly conclude this section. First, and crucially: Shariʿati does not pursue the possibility, already indicated by Fanon, that crystallization cannot be conceived as a logic (of exemplarity) without making it express a metonymy (or phantasm) of displacement. This notion is not rhetorical, but refers to how, in the postcolony, doxa can literally become the true enjoyment of error. And Fanon gives two further reasons for why this is so: the first has to do with the revolutionary appearance of those who have nothing, an appearance that is situated at the limit of doxa due to their inimitable exclusion and censorship; and the second (which must in fact take logical priority) is what we (what I, at least, from a black perspective) would have to call the necessary possibility of there being a (blackness of) being without being, and what Fanon rather strikingly calls a n’est pas, whose figure is that of a tabula rasa. This figure also denotes a limit of what can be figured, precisely because its finite infinitude decenters the symbolic work of all structure.

The impossibility of this n’est pas, and the extent to which it infiltrates the very concept of being itself, is what interests me here: we shall see it resonate throughout the discussions of Fodéba in the next section, in the form of a pas or relevé that cannot be figured, conceived, or perceived as the symbolic work of culture. And although Shariʿati’s discussion of Fanon does indeed capture something of this impossibility, he does not seem inclined to stress this point, namely that a cultural revolution may indeed be driven by delusion, may even underscore another con-
cealment, whereby the model it offers is not the actual truth but rather the cunning imitation that appears as truth. To reduce the work of revolt to that of ideology, in short, one also has to be aware that all ideology is subject to mastery and law, that is, that it consolidates imaginary delusion in the space of the void. In order to avoid this impasse (which is not easy), Fanon recognizes that what makes crystallization crystallizing is not what is said to be true but what the masses believe to be true, whatever the facts of the matter. This means that the truth has become (has always already become) undecidable as truth, which is why the relationship between politics and truth does not rest upon one “metaphysical principle,” as Fanon tells us, and why, too, he insists that the future to come makes visible an opening that has no arche, telos, or predestined end (WEp, 179).

Finally, I would like to defend the thesis that Shariʿati’s use of the word crystallization is noticeably different from Fanon’s. Indeed, when Shariʿati uses the term he is, in many ways, highlighting these differences, and in a way that recasts his entire relationship to Fanonism. It occurs in a context in which he is contrasting authentic and inauthentic existence: “But real or authentic being lasts for many centuries—over the entire course of history as culture, civilization, and art take shape. It crystallizes in me.” Here, once again, what crystallizes (without origin or author) is the desire for a sublime historicity that, paradoxically, ends up denying time and alterity: here no real break occurs between Dasein and its historicity, since what crystallizes is an essence that is prior to its temporalization as time; no new break occurs since, over many centuries, what crystallizes is the ideal utterance of my will. This is a paradoxical discovery, in view of the fact that the I is always in advance of what crystallizes it as Dasein, by way of an anticipatory, belated rediscovery of what completes it in the absence of any relation. But what difference is there between real or authentic being and this fantasy of its accomplishment? How is one “given” this experience, and on what basis is the I imprinted by its realization? And are we not back, once again, in an economy of good (authentic) and bad (inauthentic) crystallization? This is perhaps the inevitable result of a point of view that sees in crystallization an exemplarity that only becomes meaningful when it is linked to an eschatology, however nuanced or dialectical, whose self-presence relies upon its unambiguousness. This is why Shariʿati states, by antiphrasis, that being is what it crystallizes, for what crystallizes it is the experience of authenticity, and via a path that leads back to God. What does this signify, if not an attempt to think not only the political limits of being and becoming, but also the subject as the (prevailing) legitimate form of religious community? It is unfortunate, however, that this historicity—which attains its end in the subject—is noticeably different from that moment of shahadat that makes visible an aporia between reality and delusion, history and revelation, between the world of experience and the moment of encounter, when the agon becomes the thought of infinite life, and there is no
way of attaining that thought without the necessary death of the subject, or, more precisely, its reinvention. But what I am claiming is the real paradox—the undecidability of crystallization as pedagogy, which entails a fundamental undecidability of good and bad crystallization and, thereby, a politics of truth that is always duped, or that dupes itself—this real paradox is curiously elided in the belief that authentic *Dasein* does not need to be founded (crystallized), for it is what founds (crystallizes) authenticity.

This comes down to saying that it may well be impossible to decide whether what crystallizes is a literary metaphor or figural metonymy, whether it consists in the desire for a literally revealed truth (of being) regardless of order or sense, or whether it reveals the figure of a truth that symbolizes nothing but a void or gap that is infinitely veiled by its unveiling. In both cases, we delude ourselves if we think that what crystallizes must be exemplary (of a truth that is literally understood), and that it can thus be taken as a model of an illuminating pedagogy (whose figure is that of a transcendental hypotyposis, whose function is to impart to the I this model of exemplarity). Nothing is more deluded than the desire to reveal a truth whose essence, we assume, brings to an end all that deceives us, but only insofar as we follow it and take it as a model of an exemplarity that enthralls or marks us, for as soon as we recognize its authority we know how we in turn have been deceived—by what?—by the truths by which we deceive ourselves. Only as such can *shahadat*—or the politics of its truth—be crystallized. But a question immediately arises from these two ways of understanding exemplarity, one that has considerable implications for Shariʿati’s reading of Fanon: does *shahadat* (the process by which redemption is transformed into a message for the masses who then embody it through struggle) necessarily end in cultural revolution, or does it, like the rhetoricization of authenticity (the politics of duplicity), remain suspended in the purely rhetorical—and ultimately delusionary—desire for a totalizing reconciliation of the ego and the masses with God? This question suggests, as a corollary, that an ability to tell apart referential from revealed truth is the true task of cultural revolution, albeit by the negative road of exposing error and deception. Language and the world cannot be redeemed, therefore, until bad crystallization can be rewritten as authentic historicity. As such, even if revolution cannot occur without *shahadat*, what has to be grasped is the model that links them, the model of a passage from error to truth, or from unbelief to a message that will have been totally, unequivocally understood as law or light and illumination. The message must pass from deception to nonequivocation, for only then will the masses know why they lack authority and justice and so ensure their correct version. For only the message which is the most persuasive, or stays longest in the memory, can be affirmed and obeyed in its exemplary truth (for to know it is proof of one’s receptiveness to error). Be that as it may, it is painfully clear that Sharʿati has to distin-
guish illumination from mere delusion, or political error, for the light being cast can only take hold as an “image” of the infinite lost in the shadows of particularity.

Now, Fanon, when concerning himself with national culture, does not reject the idea that crystallization marks a concern with rhetoric and with ideology. But even though this rhetoric is born very specifically in neocolonial society, what distinguishes it are necessarily unforeseen forms of expression that acquire new significations. What crystallizes rhetoric—negrophobic, bourgeois, decolonial—is not a “translucency” of style, but the subterranean renewal of language that cannot be rendered as philosophy, and that is without political-religious definition. To be sure, this is why cultural revolution is defined as a will to capture the particularity of things without nostalgia, history, or tradition. Hence Fanon’s audacious refusal of all meaning and all thought derived from the sacred, the figural, or the ineffable. There is no talk here of an unequivocal meaning, for there always will be a thousand detours, a thousand artifices by which the forms (the rhetorical codes) of the nation can be confused, nay, hijacked by the language of authenticity. Consequently, there is simply no easy way of avoiding these eventualities. In fact, the nation to come does not presuppose a final affirmation or message, simply because its definition is always already surrounded by irreducible dangers. This is the impasse in which any cultural criticism cut off from the realities of political power finds itself. But rather than return to a notion of origin or the absolute—with its whiff of transcendentalism—the challenge Fanon set himself was to envisage an infinite series of encounters falling across multiple tabulae rasae, but with no assignable order or hierarchy. This is why the exact historical moment of struggle matters for Fanon—and I would suggest not so much for Shariʿati—for it is the precise point at which the will of the people constitutes a new inventive relationship to the world.

This is why, as we know, Fanon, in his dispute with Shariʿati, agrees that, in the absence of liberation, the “rebirth of religious spirit” can become a “great power” for alienated humanity, but, so, too, he suggests that religion should never declare itself to be the political truth of that invention, however persuasive it appears. For, even if the truth were to become present through shahadat, there still need to be readers who can recognize its exemplarity in order to possess its message in society. We might thus quite precisely approach the problem of the division between good crystallization and others, whose political importance is considerable, especially at times of crisis, as a division between an imaginary form of the state and the real of its nonidentity. But here, too, our task is not to oppose blackness, say, to religion; it is rather to understand the void that opens as nothingness, and in which there is no subject, no cogito, no authenticity, and no necessary moment of revelation. It may be recognized, or it may not. And experience shows us that this relevé is one forever poised between nothingness and delusion, and that it is undecidable, irreversible, wretched. This will be clear enough to all who have followed Fanon's
reading of blackness and the imaginary, an account that conceives of it as something more and something less than politics, and thereby as the limit-condition of political philosophy itself (as I believe it in fact must be). And although Fanon does not formulate the problem in this way, I want to suggest that this is why crystallization can be summarily and abstractly presented as the unresolved relation between politics and philosophy in his account. It is an account whose project is not new, but its reading of black texts offers renewed possibilities for learning and exploration, to which I now turn.

4.

And in the scorched blue of the sky, right above the body of Naman, a gigantic vulture slowly hovered. It seemed to say to him: “Naman! You have not danced the dance that bears my name. Others will dance it [D’autres la danseront].”

—Fodéba, “Aube africaine”

“Aube africaine” will serve, insofar as it presents itself as an incomplete dance (that is, as a pas—a relevé—that never quite performs or presents itself), as our transition from Shariʿati back to Fodéba. The poem will also allow us to return to the role, despite Fanon’s reluctance to consider it, played by religion in national culture, because what is in question is, above all, the resonances of sacred tradition buried and then revived, resonances which must be registered in the struggle for decolonial culture.

In my opening remarks, I drew attention to Fanon’s reading of “Aube africaine” in terms of the poem’s “undeniable pedagogical value” (WEp, 167): in its depiction of the Tiaroye massacre, the poem not only brings to an abrupt end any idealism about independence; it also shows how traditionalism, in itself, is the cultural equivalent of idealism. How does the poem achieve this? By doing the opposite of what Fanon criticizes Shariʿati for: in other words, by showing how religion “risks being out of step” with the struggle against colonialism—including the war against fascism—and by showing that struggle in its real historical significance (WEp, 160). Clearly, what is at stake here has something to do with how race continues to define the politics of independence and how the suppression of that fact presupposes racism. What the poem crystallizes, then, is the politics of a missed encounter, that is to say, the confusion of struggle for hermeneutics, tradition for the reality of culture, and of history for the aporias of the present. Fanon’s point here is a subtle one and should not be mistaken: the value of the poem lies not in what it represents, but in how it makes visible the violence of antiblack representation (that is often not read as such). This is why Fanon describes the poem as an “authentic invitation,” or, in his Rome address, a “real invocation [réelle invocation],” which means: a “demystification” that crystallizes the struggle over national culture (WEf, 163;
This is why the reading of “Aube africaine” constitutes a fundamental moment in Fanon’s chapter on national culture, and why through it (and its modes of expression) he discovers that the question of the poetic is also the problem of crystallization—a problem which turns on the complex relation between the pas (or what it means to be in step with the struggle or be subjugated) and the relevé (what is required for art to become the real of an encounter or be reduced to mere formalism). To perhaps understand why, let us briefly return, in conclusion, to the final lines of the poem (quoted above).

Others will dance it, Fodéba says, for the one who was chosen to dance the Douga—the dance of the vulture god—can no longer dance it. But what is this dance for? And what does it mean to dance or not to dance it? To be chosen to dance this dance, we are told, is a rare honor, and for a peasant to be so chosen doubly so, for the Douga is the dance of emperors. “Every step represents a period in the history of the Mandingos” that has been performed down through the centuries (“Aube africaine,” cited in WEp, 166). In other words, every pas unifies in one and the same metonymic movement a metaphorical history; and every step is absorbed into the eternity that comes before and after—as remembrance is swallowed up by infinity, and glory is allotted its place in history, since to perform the dance is to see “thought transposed into the world of bodies.”

"To dance the Douga is thus to be transformed: from the ordinary to the heroic, the finite to the infinite, from substance to spirit. From this simple ancestral ritual, which deserves a richer analysis than I can offer here, Fodéba draws a whole philosophy: namely, to observe these pas is to witness origin become image and world become spirit, for what is required, in sum, is the ability to see how each step marks out the rule of kings and performs, in turn, the law of spirit.

A dialectic comes into play at this point: in it, the failure to dance the dance becomes a metaphor for something out of reach, deferred, suspended. Along with these deferred elements, the poetic narrative literally becomes an asymptote of doubt and suspension. For if others can dance the Douga, that is because no one can. In fact, what circulates here are not so much acts of heroic judgment or interpretation, but the substitutability of tropes; deferrals that elliptically signify—without saying so—a parabasis; a continuous motion between recognition and aporia that appears in the poem as a pas that has no meaning in either city or kingdom, and that we know nothing of except as quotes from misread letters that signify a common unawareness (of Naman’s inglorious death at the hands of white officers) that the kingdom’s elders and villagers are equally incapable of knowing and have no desire to know. The dance of the vulture thus reveals a death’s head (both literally and allegorically) that reveals not eternity, but just everyday errors, which never bring the parabasis to a rest. Why? Because the death of Naman, whose life has to come to an abrupt end after years of long and arduous toil, was not only pointless,
but amounts to saying: the law of spirit no longer has any power, for unjust force is
the new law of the land, in which right is denied and racist knowledge is the only
arbiter of judgment. All of these questions are just a prelude to what Fanon calls
attention to in his reading, namely, how this truth (at the heart of the postcolony)
is covered over—by denial and repression, but also condemnation—and how the
ignorance deriving from cultural inertia is itself the result of religious rituals and
judgements that are pointless, in suspense, uncertain. Hence the poem’s pedagog-
ical value resides in its radical rejection of such inertias in favor of the n’est pas
and tabula rasa, and this rejection represents a synecdoche of the political even
though it has no semantic destination as politics. So how does this missed encoun-
ter make community possible? No doubt it is because these various pas or missteps
carry within themselves the crystallizing capacity of the nation to come—hence
the significance of Naman’s death, which allows us to see how imperial violence
enjoys dominion over the rights of custom. Its relevé only becomes readable as the
effect of power, not of custom, and not because he was not a king, but because he
was the strongest, the bravest, and the humblest, and even then was refused honor
or recognition. In response to such injustice, the poem does not return to custom
but to the necessity of struggle, which, as a response to the negative impact of not
being able to bear witness, crystallizes how political community exists by virtue
of those who have nothing, who exist as nothing, wretchedly in the depths. But
all this, which is posed from the beginning as a dispute between philosophy and
revolt, still does not explain Fanon’s reading of the poem.

As previously mentioned, Fanon distinguishes Fodéba’s work for its historical
exactitude (with respect to the revolutionary moment), and because it is also in step
(à la même cadence) with the people:

We should not therefore be content to delve into the people’s past to find concrete
examples to counter colonialism’s endeavors to distort and depreciate. We must work
and struggle in step [à la même cadence] with the people so as to shape the future and
prepare the ground where vigorous shoots are already sprouting. National culture is
no folklore where an abstract populism is convinced that it has uncovered the popular
truth. (WEP, 168)

The phrase à la même cadence should give us pause here: it doesn’t say at what speed
or pace this work or struggle should occur (or even whether it can occur), but it
does oscillate between two themes, considered as totalities in their respective rela-
tion to national culture, from which Fanon deduces an essential feature of crys-
tallization. Abstract populism, and what it takes or believes to be the true form of
the people’s past, “risks being out of step” and “behind the times,” inasmuch as it
cannot develop that will to particularize that is the essential feature of cultural rev-
olution (WEp, 160, 161). Thus, the importance to Fanon of knowing what it means to be politically in step with the struggle, and thus also his notion of crystallization as what reveals the most telling concealment; a principle that cannot be prejudged without being reduced to an abstract, pedagogical presupposition (which is neither memorial nor just).

This clearly gives Fodéba’s poetic philosophy a political dimension, even though the form of its expression has yet to be elaborated, and Fanon is keen to specify that dimension by distinguishing it from an abstract idea of struggle or philosophy, and still less a propositional truth about history. If it thus becomes impossible to determine what “à la même cadence” should be or is, it is also impossible to know or specify how it is to be essentially defined as a praxis (the explicit discussion of which is here necessarily deferred). Whereas abstract populism reduces combat to hermeneutics and substitutes present alienation with the efficacious rediscovery of the past, which replaces a popular truth with one that is narcissistically reassuring (that is, the image of the people substituted for a mutilated self-identity), the nation to come is characterized by an emphasis on the people’s capacity to know the difference between justice and power. Indeed, he says, they alone see the conceit by which custom is used to disguise the neocolonial enjoyment of power.

This also explains why Fanon uses the word détraquer (meaning to wreck, to put out of use) to show how this relevé becomes necessary, and via writing that can, at any one moment, become déchirure (meaning a rupture or tear that is also a moment of danger), subverting and so transforming both time and historical judgment. If this remark is not wrong, it would explain why, in his reading of literature, Fanon avoids paraphrase but remains loyal to referentiality. It would also explain his refusal to oppose antiblack genocide to a humanistic, aesthetic-ethical ideal that is above race since it is racism itself. In passing, Fanon seems to be expressing a disagreement with Fodéba on the question of the dangers of abstract populism, at least as the latter appears in the article on “La danse africaine et la scène,” where Fodéba writes: “For us, authenticity is synonymous with reality . . . with living expression.” And insofar as “Aube africaine” stages itself as a dance performed by its reading, we are forced to engage with reading itself as a metaphor of the performative political power of the aesthetic.

On the one hand, all this still leaves the exact nature of the relation à la même cadence to cultural revolution implicit, and, on the other, it has to defer the problem introduced into the whole argument by trying to think justice as a moment of cristallisation. Decolonial politics, on this description, does not tell the people its truth, nor does it provide them with recognition (that is: the black thought of struggle is not to be confused with revelation), but it introduces a note of radical discontinuity into what people believe and understand to be the truth. What is in play here is a movement that exposes truth as a system of antiblack tropes. On Fanon’s account,
there is, then, nowhere else to go: we can continue to study the passage from myth into history—or, in the language of the poem, the passage from dance to war—in the hope that we can overcome, or prevent, the return of history into myth (or the slide back into the language of reification). Or we can choose not only to unmask the mystifications of racial discourse, but to contest its mode of communicability—that is to say, the very system of its semiology, its representational meaning, but also the political power of its aesthetic. The struggle over national culture, in fact, has as its aim to discard the mythic reading of black culture, and to take a text such as “Aube africaine” and make it the expression of a counterpolitical thought. Not only, however, is this speculative thinking the object of Fanon’s attention; it is also an integral part of his own écriture, his attempt to resituate the rhetorical code (or codes) by which blackness is made racially, referentially meaningful as a mimetic function of the text. The blackest dance, to continue the metaphor, whose pas is nothing but the immense infinity of its deadly repose, thereby performs nothing but the restless impossibility of its meaning.

These themes, which, from Shariʿati to Fanon to Fodéba, have become familiar to us by now, are crucial for any understanding not only of Fanon’s political philosophy, but also one of his more obscure “objects”: the drive—or crystallizing power—of subjects carried forward by a relentless, but imperious, general will during times of crisis. It is of the essence of this trope that what suffuses all movement is irre- mediably outside presence and resolution. Far from inviting the subject to become, to manifest what it is, to take a step (where each step is the span of centuries), it makes appear instead that which annuls it, and simply because the future work of the nation is still to be danced (or read) as justice. For to dance this dance—as piety or knowledge—is to risk the nation to come being disfigured in turn by the mythical (racial) violence that founds it. Admitting that the struggle for national independence necessarily includes these ambiguities—recognizing, in other words, the problems raised around the extremely complex relations between form, praxis, and being—Fanon invokes, with extreme irony, the image of the colonial intellectual who mutilates popular culture as a substitute for his own existential anguish. Here, cultural politics is shown to be confused with masochism and relinquishes any control over its reading by the colonial authorities—which is another way of saying that there is no straightforward way to distinguish between spontaneity and resistance, especially if we take into account that spontaneity is itself delusory, and that resistance can only repeat the language of spontaneity as its own revolutionary alibi. This is why Fanon says that Fodéba sees further and does so by dint of the fact that he reveals the obscure paths by which speaking the truth to power can also conceal political repression as the true fate of cultural revolution and of civil war. This is, thus, a vision that is not guided by higher light but is able to reveal without compromising the constant oscillation between, on the one hand, a struggle that
is resolute in its opposition to colonialism, as exemplified by “Aube africaine,” and, on the other, a poetics that Fanon concedes is itself a concession to what subverts all truth and illusion, and which itself manifests a courageously strange solicitude that opens up the masses to a profoundly disfiguring improvisation.

What is conceded, in other words, is not that truth is illusion, or that truth is located where it is not, but that there is certainly some truth in the way the people refute colonialism.

I want to say that these affirmations could betray a blind faith and even belief in heroism (and Fanon’s image of national culture has seemed entirely idealized to certain critics). But the problematic raised by crystallization resists such moralizing precisely because it refuses to surrender to seduction. For it is already clear that the notion commits Fanon to an irredeemably pessimistic view of independence and what it lays bare, namely, a negatively explicit return to colonialism, as we have seen.

5.

We need to move slowly, and the problem lies in having to gradually expose mechanisms that reveal themselves in their totality.

— Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*

In conclusion, I would like briefly to return to Fanon’s theory of a crystallizing aporia. The most difficult thing in Fanon is doubtless the attempt to have a vision of the nation to come that doesn’t end up reifying it into a concept; it’s a caution that represents a major effort by him not to repeat the situation of racial philosophy. That struggle makes itself felt in the radical opposition to all forms of imaginary delusion, but in ways that disallows the conversion of negation into some kind of central, unshakeable certitude or faith, or what Fanon famously calls in the chapter on violence a thought that is “literally disarmed” by its own integrity (*WEf*, 13). This repeats what is in fact a constant worry in Fanon: namely, that to have faith is to concede that one may be undone, irreparably so, by that concession and, more unsettlingly, be possessed by roles that one doesn’t know that one is unconsciously playing. Any attempt to break out of delusion must thereby resist the historical illusion of its unveiling.

Throughout the discussion of national culture, this problem has showed up in the way that what is provisionally called the real can never be a figure of dialectical resolution, whatever its “form.” In that context, Fanon’s manifest attempt to find recognition in delusion, on the basis, explicit or implicit, that any act of lucidity can itself be a form of blindness, and precisely because intelligibility can be masked as truth, remains an ongoing concern. Or we could recall Fanon’s declaration, again in the text on violence, that the wretched “do not lay claim to [represent the] truth . . . because they are the truth in their very being,” which shows how Fanon’s reasoning
often relies on a series of diremptions that transform, in unpredictable ways, any common meeting ground between meaning and context (*WEf*, 13). We could say that if such truth is not simply antithetical to colonialism, no more can it be represented by it, for such truth manifests nothing less than the *nontruth* of the colonised.

This is why it makes no sense to claim, as Miller does in his *Theories of Africans*, that Fanon ignores or avoids textual particularities in favor of metatheoretical description. In a general way, these problems come down to whether Fanon substitutes praxis for theory (with “theory” criticized for itself becoming the locus and focus of a “relativizing [of] truth and ethics”).

In a slightly different configuration of the same problem, Fanon's analysis of “Aube africaine” is thus accused of imposing an idea of the nation “in places where it may need reappraising,” an accusation that, in the context of the chapters on national consciousness, is simply magical. But Miller’s criticism is more complicated and indeed delusory than this implies, for, when analyzing the future of the theory (Fanon’s own) he adopts, as it were, an opposition between theory and practice which, paradoxically, ends up reading the aesthetic as the model for the postcolonial state.

The assumption that theory cannot see its own ethnocentrism—hence the assumption that *ethnos* must be hidden for *theoria* to see itself—is based on a falsely objective notion of truth that is thus totalized into meaning. It is this blatant and highly revealing fudge that allows Miller to make the bold claim that what is “true in the theory and in the discourse of a naïve or oppressive politics” is only “true in quotation marks.” Miller makes this claim seemingly without realizing that his own ability to make such claims is absolute and repressive (with or without quotation marks), and that this blindness is itself a symptom of a failure to actually read what Fanon is saying. In fact, the only way that ethics can emerge in Miller’s discourse is through the illiberal dismissal of Fanon’s theory; and according to a logic in which Miller’s ability, as it were, to *tell the truth of truth* amounts to nothing more than a dogmatic presupposition that cannot fail, however, to become as tendentially absolute and violent as the supposed “truth” of a self-validating theory. And of course the confidence that allows him to put truth within quotation marks is also what blinds him to his own interpretative violence, in a reading that no longer simply repeats the violence done to literature by theory but that moralizes it as ethics.

Only statements that make explicit Fanon’s antinativism are then read at face value, and any statement which does not explicitly state that antinativism (especially the most general statements about national culture) becomes a mask for it, or a euphemistic or strategically calculated indirect or encrypted expression of a political terrorism that is assumed by Miller to be the true and sinister consequence of Fanonian theory. This fudging is a fairly typical example of a white idealist position, whereby black particularity is either disavowed or marginalized (as a universal claim to particularity), and which explains why Miller presents this, against his own
intentions, as a *theory* of reading, thus doubling the double-speak of what Fanon describes as *the racial form of truth in the colony*, a doubling that oscillates from simulacrum to simulacrum. This doubling shows up symptomatically, for example, in Miller's questionable claim that "Fanon's essays had a part to play both in [Sékou] Touré's discourse and in his [murderous] actions." (Here once again the violence of theory can literally be read in the form of real political violence, which shows up how ethics is itself being violently presupposed, and in ways that are ex hypothesi because the ethics of the accusation cannot be dealt with simply as a question of meaning. This is why Miller's reading of Fanon comes across as so unethically violent.) The true target of Fanon's reading of national culture is the oppressiveness of postindependence regimes such as that of Touré's Guinea, which Fodéba's ministerial and cultural work helped frame, both through the designation of the nation as a struggle for truth in a sea of uncertainty and through an *aesthetics of enmity* in which power expresses and enjoys its own transgressive perversity. This target is lost sight of as soon as it is raised as a question of reading.

I want to say: this claim about Fanonism as a *model* for a "bad" postindependence politics (1) ought to make Miller aware of how the claim that "*there is no real ethics without ethnicity*" —a claim that he argues Fanon denies—is not really opposed to theory, insofar as the latter is conceived as unethical. It is in truth the sign of someone who is quite certain that he knows what the ethical limits of theory are, but who then unwittingly repeats the theoretical structure that, according to him, necessarily imposes itself as violence. Moreover, (2) it ought to lead him to ask why the same meaning and topos—of the violent exclusion of black particularity by theory—that he attributes to Fanon occurs in his own work, and (3) to recast the analysis more generally beyond ethics and indeed truth. Consequently, since the only thing that makes us sure that Fanon's views of national culture are oppressive is the evidence of his theory, we are taken aback to discover that only a theory that opposes that theory is truly ethical, and presumably because we are obliged to prefer its recognition of black particularity to that of a particular black theory. The idea that Fanonian theory entails the liquidation of the particular by the universal, the local by the global, thus necessarily makes it impossible for Miller to see how Fanon's text, in regard to both Fodéba and cultural revolution, problematizes these oppositions. All the more so when we know that there is no attempt in Fanon to make racist culture into a philosophical claim (as we have shown), precisely because what passes for truth in the colony puts truth in question. And how was this conclusion reached? To a large extent by recounting the force—the pedagogy—of a poem in which the truth of the nation has become its fundamental question. That is, by following the function—and not the themes—of a literature in which revolution is not the signified but the signifier of a nation to come.
This is why aesthetics is not a mirror of the nation but that which reveals its unfolding. Similarly, ethnicity, far from being the true form of culture (its signified)—and what could this possibly mean in a racist system of truth?—is shown to be part of the same mendacity defining the colonial bourgeoisie, in respect of both culture and the pursuit of power, for it simply cannot be the case that ethnic rivalry plays no role in the struggle for independence. Miller’s analysis errs not in opposing ethnos to theory but in not following the consequences of its own insight, which should have made it impossible for him to tendentially know the true form of independence from its cynical dissimulation as history or fate. In that analysis, Miller views relativism as on the side of tolerance, but this tolerance is presented in an essentially illiberal way, namely, as a moralism that can only hide (and thereby expose) its own intolerances. Here the true other (that is, the one who objects to being relativistic) is excluded as inauthentic.

Such, at first glance, are the consequences of a certain distinction between philosophy and politics. Yet such a distinction risks being moralistic from the start, in its theoretical politics. To understand Fanon, however, other distinctions need to come into play, for Fanon’s reading of “Aube africaine” (whereby he is driven to describe ontologies of truth as cynical illusions) is in fact itself closer to poetics than it is to political philosophy in its traditional guise, at least as those terms are distributed here as cynical appropriations of insincerity and intolerance. Suffice it to say, Fanon does not go down this route: in analyzing “Aube africaine” in his chapter on national culture, he in fact ends up fundamentally rejecting moralism (and its petit-bourgeois versions). From “Aube africaine,” he also shows (contra Shari’ati) why one must refuse to see the infinite as restoration, saying that the poem is not a fable even if we respond to it as such, and saying that what it brings to mind as a moment of struggle and decision (as opposed to a certain politics and rhetoric of truth) is a crystallization (of the real) rather than a model for its figurative symbolization (and thus the figural truth of its unveiling). Admitting that these add up to criteria for cultural revolution rather than of truth—recognizing, in other words, the problem we raised around the relation between crystallization as subterfuge and crystallization as manifestation—Fanon, invokes, apparently rhetorically, “a national culture tak[ing] form and shape [via combat]” for those in prison, facing the guillotine, and fighting the French (WEP, 168). This interpretation goes along with the earlier figure of la même cadence as the locus of an asynchronous movement whose form is yet to be determined. This second postulate follows on from what Fodéba evokes as “this morning’s battle” (WEP, 166). There is also a relevé here in the manner in which the “aube” of independence is being conceived, that is, as a momentous struggle that is further divided between day and night, and which functions here as a figure of division that introduces a fundamental ambiguity into the question of what enlightens or darkens. The word aube thus occupies a specific
place of undecidability; let us say that what it illumines is necessarily shadowed by darkness. Illumination is thus paired with a profound blindness. Fanon—this is his key insight—thus grasps why division cannot be determined as dialectic or negation, for a warring struggle is also the locus of the poem’s own parabasis, to the extent that its form (represented in the poem by perpetual suspension) is itself suspended between nativism and the (political-national-theoretical) violence that founds it. Therefore if the dawn signifies a struggle in suspension—because of what it divides: that is, the night (of war) from the day (of independence)—that is because this equivocation is a kind of infinite, nonformalizable equivocation without resolution or end.

So when the poem opens with the phrase, “C’était l’aube,” a phrase that is repeated (but in a much more complicated way than through anaphora), what interests Fanon is how the dawn is not only a metaphor (of war or illumination), but a metalepsis that enacts a division between nativism and national culture that cannot be liquidated. Everything follows on from this contiguous, originary vacillation. I want to say that everything is clear here, and everything can be immediately recognized as true, and yet everything is in a frenetic dance of equivocation. Likewise, the notion of the nation to come mobilizes metalepsis to signify an equivocation at once revolutionary, perpetual, and ruinous. In the petit-bourgeois forms of capital and politics there is thus no security to be had. Perhaps this is why Fanon is finally unable to determine what the revolutionary moment is, or, more importantly, what it is not, a reluctance that goes along with a whole set of complicated refusals. In the course of these refusals, Fanon again virulently criticizes the idea of war as heroic sacrifice or custom, and, as is always the case in Fanon, the apparently simplistic take on the discursive practices he is discussing (the claim that everything is set down here in black and white, in broad daylight) becomes the most complex reflection on irreducible antagonisms, such that he ends up not only describing but endorsing the view that to read is to know that we can only dance blindly—at the risk of making all the wrong moves, and at the risk of corrupting the sequence—for the nation is as yet undefined. And this uncertainty, like it or not, has to be part of any black horizon of meaning. This declaration renounces the political-ontological codes of illumination precisely because they lack such clarity. The truth of this nonillumination therefore is this: unable to signify the coin (of secular resistance), or the sarcophagus (of religious, mythic transcendence), the horizon has no outline, for its opacity is not dark enough to be dialecticized, and its darkness is too blinding to be witnessed without aporia (WEp, 168). For what crystallization implies is not something brought to an ever-greater density of illumination, but the high pressure by which cultural particularity is transformed and becomes still more dense the more it is traversed. Think of it as a force that allows the establishment of both community and form, of community as form, but only...
insofar as each is the instance of a colossal manifestation at one moment or the very image of a deadening inertia at another.

The important word in these definitions is black. The reading of Fodéba follows Fanon’s other demonstrations in his work that blackness cannot be conceived as law or right, but nor can it be thematized as nonidentity; rather, the knowledge it transmits requires confronting an ongoing aporia that involves what we have just described as a nonformalizable equivocation, a n’est pas that has neither form nor name nor group nor identity, and from which a whole number of political positions become untenable. Struggle permeates the n’est pas: struggle is its mode and proposition, but struggle (by the same reasoning) does not determine it in a teleological sense. That is why Shariʿati was unable to grasp it. It must therefore follow that the n’est pas is not an attribute of being, whether understood as something lacking or possessed. But neither is it transcendent insofar as its truth lies elsewhere. This is why Fanon refers to it as an immanent flaw (tarde) that makes ontology impossible. This point allows us to understand why Fanon is critical of both race philosophy and of négritude. Race philosophy is unable to separate race from ontology or to fuse them completely. Hence its turn to a nativist definition, which is seemingly occupied by the thought of how blackness differs from its essence, because it now represents an ipseity whose historicity is understood. What can we conclude from this? That blackness is not simply identity or destiny, but an act—a praxis—that arises from a direct confrontation with the duplicities that thereby define it. To introduce the national struggle into the form of the poem is, then, for the colonized intellectual, the only effective response to the demand that both subject and poem perform the (racially mythic) dance (of interpretation) that liberates (or always fails to liberate) them. Blackness, then, as struggle, the fulfillment of a crystallizing futurity sans mimesis.

In a way, I believe that the entire debate between Shariʿati and Fanon concerning national culture is summarized in Fanon’s discussion of Fodéba’s poem. That debate returns us to the question of shahadat, or to what can never be read as a sequence of exemplarity, and so to the articulation of poetry as a politics-in-ruins. As we have seen, the relation between struggle, religion, and war, remains—intentionally or not—the key relation; it becomes for Fanon the question of Fodéba’s poetics. However uncomfortable this may be, it seems clear that there is no way to separate the good and bad forms of crystallization without violence, insofar as the indeterminacy of truth and untruth in the postcolony in its relation to the masses requires a decision, a decision that for Fanon also entails something like a struggle over national consciousness, but a decision, however supposedly violent, that is also the effect of an undecidability.

Indeed, it seems that in The Wretched of the Earth, Fanon could never say, as Shariʿati does, that we must choose: either being or becoming. Why? Because that opposition is still pious: and even if bazghast—unlike, say, jihad or revolution—is the enigmatic point of decision, such that it is not so much a return to tradition as the direct expres-
sion of the struggle—for the message is never simply given in itself—why is this opening to the future a concession to shahadat rather than a figure of radical disassociation? This undecidable struggle is to be found in Fanon’s vision of the nation to come, but the character of its avenir is not absolute, for it has nothing to do with what Hegel, in Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion, and I would argue Shari’ati later conceives of as “the surrender of an immediate finitude” to the spiritual discovery of an infinite truth (regardless of whether this spiritualization of finitude is conceived as the point of a crystallizing ecstasy or expiation).43 No, what we understand as the infinitely-finite is not sacrifice but the nothing that governs the world gone black: it is a void without which there can be no invention. We must therefore conclude that Shari’ati’s writing risks making religion the truth of independence and in a way that cannot allow ambiguity to define the manner and form of cultural authenticity. This inability, in turn, represents an attempt to free Islam from the logic of Western sovereignty while still in thrall to its figure and concept. How this relates to our problem of crystallization can, however, be made clearer still by returning to Fanon’s chapter on national culture: “A nation born of the concerted action of the people, which embodies the actual aspirations of the people and transforms the state, depends on exceptionally inventive cultural manifestations for its very existence” (WEp, 179). In The Wretched of the Earth, this goes along with the suggestion that decolonial resistance must itself resist (in the last and first resort) Western notions of resistance if it is to be inventive rather than to remain a slavish imitation of the various forces seeking to circumscribe it. One final point: it is difficult not to imagine this invention as violence, not because of its threat to reason or the state, but because it does not yet have a political definition nor a language of ontological embodiment. The name of this violence, if it can be given a name, is that of a n’est pas; its blackness cannot be recast as yet another, more sovereign thought (of being). Its wretchedness, in fact, admits to the dead no sacrifice or dwelling-place, especially as it shows up the fluctuating zones or limits of a degradation that cannot be easily rendered without being mutilated. That is why, instead of drawing up a platform for blackness as agency, we conclude by saying that black nonrepresentability is what Fanon’s politics never answers, and why Fanon answers as he does.


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Notes
4. “C’est elle enfin qui, en faisant naître en moi le phénomène que Stendhal appelle cristallisation, m’a enseigné à jouir délicieusement de toutes les délices que je découvre en celle que j’aime sans espoir” (“It is she, finally, who, bringing to birth in me the phenomenon that Stendhal called crystallization, taught me to enjoy deliciously all the delights/pleasures that I discover in one that I love without hope”; Maran, Un homme pareil aux autres, 80.) Note the inversion here: instead of the lover concocting an ideal image of the beloved, it is the ideal image (of whiteness) that allows blackness to be seen, that creates it, allowing the black lover to enjoy the imaginary image of its refracted perfectibility. I leave to one side the accuracy of this inversion in order to discuss its effects—the delight, the hopelessness, and therefore the delight in hopelessness—which will be my focus throughout.
5. Fanon, Wretched of the Earth, trans. Farrington, 239. Hereafter cited in the text as WEF. A different translation, by Richard Philcox, will be cited in the text as WEFp.
6. See also Fodéba, “Aube africaine.” This version of the poem differs slightly from the one collected in Poèmes africains (1950), and these textual differences will also, in fact, play a role in the history of its interpretation. As we shall see, when Christopher Miller is criticizing Fanon for supposedly misquoting the poem, it is to this later version he is referring. Accordingly, Miller’s analysis of Fanon can only pose the question of misquotation by misquoting (with seeming sincerity) the literal object of his analysis! See Miller, Theories of Africans, 48–63. Miller’s repetition of the very gestures he is criticizing does not in itself invalidate his criticism of Fanon’s interpretation, but it does problematize his larger statements about the ethics of a reading that totalizes, while suppressing, the unique contents of cultural difference. On the other hand, Miller’s own reading of Fanon’s text does not question, even for a moment, whether the latter’s reading can be characterized as an example of hermeneutics. The consequences of this blind spot will be explored in section 5 of the present article. On Fodéba’s work more generally, see Smith, “African Dawn”; MacDonald, “Guinea’s Political Prisoners”; and Parent, Cultural Representations of Massacre.
7. It will only one day be necessary to define the fundamental form and category of this term. It will also be necessary to try and retrace its path, to find out where it comes from and in what direction Fanon meant to move it. For now, let us simply say that it emerges out of Fanon’s discussion of the relation between revolutionary form and colonial disidentification: “Gradually, an attitude, a way of thinking and seeing that is basically white, forms and crystallizes in the young Antillean”; elsewhere, Fanon refers to “the moment of symbolic crystallization” (Black Skin, 126, 164). In both of these examples, what begins as a fairly routine metaphor of concretization tends, in the course of its elaboration, to move from something that is gradual to the sudden coalescence of a misrecognition that is also, simultaneously, the recognition of one’s image in the cultural imago it mirrors.
The concept of crystallization, which can be traced back to Stendhal’s *De l’amour* (1822), offers Fanon a frame for thinking the genesis of a narcissism (that is, a blackness haunted by its own negrophobic hallucination), out of a misrecognition that, insofar as the desire to become (white) coexists with a drive to not be (black), is imaginary and real, metastasizing and ruinous. This does not refer to a metaphoric fantasy of an ideal, but a narcissism destroyed by what it lacks. Now, insofar as Fanon does not oppose politics to self-love, but views narcissism as politics’ most intimate staging, his central concern in *Black Skin, White Masks* is with the racial politics of love: its subterfuges, schemas, and passions. If, according to Fanon, blackness must remain hidden for its whiteness to appear, that (white) virtuality can only be expressed as a symptom of time (that is, as something necessarily lost but preserved as such). Therefore, by saying that whiteness crystallizes a negrophobic misrecognition, Fanon does not mean that whiteness simply functions as an identity, but that it makes difference identifiable only as misrecognition. That is to say, while Fanon sees a direct relation between crystallization and political struggle, that relation also establishes a nonrelation to the political: what gets crystallized is a complex relation where thought—and consciousness—far from being a controlling center of being, is at odds with, and inseparable from, those misrecognized or rejected parts of the subject that it refuses to admit form part of its (black) individuation. Those rejected parts are connected to the systematic denigration of blackness as knowledge and being.

8. For an elaboration of this figure, see Marriott, *Whither Fanon?*; Marriott, “Blackness.”
11. Miller, *Theories of Africans*, 50. For contrasting, less tendentious accounts of Fanon’s relationship to Fodéba, and literature more generally, see Fyfe, “Specificity of the Literary”; Hiddleston, “Fanon and the Uses of Literature.”
13. *Infinitely-finite*: what I am trying to indicate with this phrase, albeit obscure, is Fanon’s writing of the event, which is written in three different ways: psychoanalytical, philosophical, and political. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, for example, he refers to a “will to particularize [volonté parti- cularisante],” whose speculative form is neither opposition nor mediation, neither perspicuous nor absolute, but occurs through and by aporia and suspension—an aporia that is also, so to speak, rigorous, corrective, and supremely vigilant (*WEF, 173*). The relation between this vigilance and what I call a black parabasis will be taken up and further explored in sections 4 and 5 of the present essay. On the meaning of the word “speculative,” see Rose, *Hegel contro Sociology*, 48–49.
16. For example, when Shari’ati writes “I speak of a religion which is not realized yet,” one does indeed hear echoes of Fanon’s nation to come; but that realization is immediately proposed as a “continuation of history” (*Collected Works*, 22:18).
Interestingly enough, when Fanon describes wretchedness in his final book, he also draws upon the language of strangeness and manifestation; or, more simply, what the wretched bring to light is an irremediable incompatibility between their being and consciousness and what passes for the self in its colonial identity; it is an experience of the unheralded which is not yet formalizable in the colonizer’s language. The wretched are literally unheimlich insofar as they reveal the gangrenous, obscene core that lies at the heart of Western notions of Heimat, heimisch, and political community. In that sense, by revealing what is hidden, the wretched expose the colony—its myths and its logos—to an abyssal reinscription that had long been invisible and that only appears with this fissure, this caesura, and that witnesses the disappearance of the colonial subject.

21. de Man, “Aesthetic Formalization,” 290. De Man’s famous reading of the aestheticization of politics is worth considering again here. On at least two occasions in his lecture on “Kant and Schiller,” included in Aesthetic Ideology, de Man makes a link between the “aesthetic state” and what he calls a certain “popularization of philosophy” that, in writers such as Schiller or Goebbels, reproduces a concept of art as a fundamental metaphor for politics (“Kant and Schiller,” 154). Even though he is careful to describe this use as itself an aesthetic “misreading” (of philosophy), de Man also says that it is a fundamental consequence of Schiller’s seductive vision of “the ideal of a beautiful society” as a “well-executed English dance.” In his essay on Kleist, de Man shows how such notions always conceal a violence that is mutilating, a mutilation that reveals how the aesthetic harmony of the state can only appear by settling scores with—that is to say mutilating, disfiguring, murdering—those forces that oppose it. (This situation, including the language used, is strikingly similar to Fanon’s account of the colonized intellectual and the bourgeoisie.)

Thus, hidden within the aesthetic appeal of state harmony—that Schiller calls the drive to form or the Formtrieb—is another drive—that of Erkenntnistrieb—which enjoys violating the very possibility of such individuation. This is also perhaps why de Man was keen to dispute Schiller’s formulations of chiasmic reversibility, because in formulating them Schiller could only disarm the disfiguring enjoyment he bore in writing them. And yet even as he settles scores with this aesthetic ideology, by revealing the limits of these various chiasms, was de Man not still compelled (or even “seduced”) by these very same forms at the level of reading and rhetoric? It could be objected that the true limit of the aesthetic for de Man was not the popular misreading of the philosophical, but his own unwillingness to depart from “the canonical principles of literary history” (in his own words). I have no further comment to make on this point, but I do note that Spivak, in her reading of de Man and Schiller on aesthetic education, does not fundamentally challenge this aestheticization, but rather encourages a shift in reading it to “subalternity” (Aesthetic Education). Neither truly independent of de Man—her “teacher”—nor immune to these forms of seduction, since they are also a political question for her generation, Spivak can only repeat them as the double bind of what she refers to as subalternity. But, for reasons that will become obvious, what she means by this word bears no relation to what Fanon refers to as “les damnés,” whose wretchedness has nothing at all to do with education, aesthetic aspiration, or the critical task of pursuing a reading that can only display—but not unmask—its own ideological complicity with what now passes for globalization (which is where, supposedly, any inquiry on the aesthetic must now be negotiated). I am reminded of Barbara Johnson’s chiding but powerfully resonant sentence: “His [de Man’s] unmasking of aberrant ideologies maintains a metaphorical, rather than a metonymical,
relationship to history” (“Paul de Man as Pharmakon,” 360). If unmasking here stands as the formal task of avoiding the “too easy leap from the linguistic to the aesthetic, [from the] ethical to political structures” (360), while at the same time remaining vigilant against such seduction, let us also recall that such a task also necessarily ignores the transcendental whiff of its own formalism (whether couched in generational terms or presented as a globalized ressentiment that, despite all its critical effort, remains devoted to the world of its own theory). To name this double bind subalternity does not so much escape it as confirm its transcendental delusion-dereliction.

22. The allusion here is to the final lines of Aimé Césaire’s Cahier d’un retour au pays natal: “and the great black hole where I wanted to drown a moon ago / this is where I now want to fish the night’s malevolent tongue in / its immobile revolution!” (Notebook, 135).

23. Fanon, Dozakhian; Banisadr, “About Fanon and His Thoughts.” For background on the translation, see Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, “Who Translated.”


26. For nuanced readings of Shari’ati’s philosophy, see Rahnema, Islamic Utopian; Yousefi, Religion and Revolution.

27. This does not mean, of course, that Fanon does not see religion as crystallization, but the point here is not to ontologize it as Shari’ati seems to do in these descriptions of an illumination, which comes to name a more general structure of communication that ontologically precedes the structures of lying and deception per se. My suggestion is that this naming retreats from the blurred uncertainties of Fanon’s position, and that its concept of truth can be (and is) mistaken for a political ontology. Consequently, I do not think that it is right to conclude, as Davari does, that Fanon is solely concerned with temporality and embodiment as lived, whereas Shari’ati’s position is recognized as a “new universal” that is concerned with futurity and infinitude. Not only is this opposition open to dispute; it misreads the dispute between Fanon and Shari’ati on the meaning of the nation to come and what it means to reach or imagine reaching it. See Davari, “Return to Which Self?,” 90.


31. The question of exemplarity also relates to that of a model to be followed. The Latin word habitus may be of some use here, as it specifically relates to repetition and performance. In Politics of Piety, Saba Mahmood evokes Islamic reformulations of the term to mean a specific pedagogical process by which “external performative acts (like prayer) are understood to create corresponding inward dispositions,” or how piety is formed through repeated practice (135). In other words, we are not pious because we have faith; we have faith because we are pious. At first glance, habitus might seem to bring mimesis into play, but it is quite significant, in this regard, that this process is prereflexive, or nonreflexive, and is based on repetition rather than on representation. First, and crucially, the act must be repeatedly performed en masse “until that practice leaves a permanent mark on the character of the person”; or, for methexis to work, and work well, it has to take place without egocic or mimetic identification (136). Secondly, habitus makes explicit what it enacts by the exact repetition of it: both Mahmood and, more importantly, Shari’ati tell us that habitus is the process through which cultural praxis acquires an authoritative
worldliness and one that at the same time closely relates cultural practices to pedagogy. In this sense, bazgasht is also habitus. This suggests, as a corollary, that an ability to articulate a new world and a new set of meanings, is, collectively, oriented around practices of iteration and participation that require an almost prereflexive form of realization, allied to a constant need to maintain vigilance (a key word for Fanon) if these new practices of iteration are not, by that very token, to be betrayed, that is to say, ossified or reified as knowledge-relations. Indeed, Fanon conceives of this vigilance as a kind of enraged precision (and no doubt something quite different, from not at all identical with, pedagogy), because it has to first move the (lyric, mortified) body with exactitude. We must in fact imagine a community of bodies, a “corps à corps,” suddenly finding itself moving in unison: at first tenuous, then sumptuously massive, where this massification is brought into being by its own unprecedented movement; but what precipitates this movement also problematizes the very concept of iteration as a performative mode.

34. On the reading of pas as aporia, see Derrida, Aporias. For a reading of repose as a speculative—rather than a dialectical—form, see Rose, “From Speculative to Dialectical Thinking.”
35. These two terms—déchirure, détraquer—if followed back to their sources (Georges Bataille and Fanon), reveal two different orientations to avant-garde writing. In L’impossible, Bataille, for example, writes: “Poetry which does not raise itself up to the level of the non-sense of poetry is only empty poetry” (220). Poetry (if we no longer identify it with style or literature) rejects all attempts to make this non-sens representable, grasppable, or reproducible, as knowledge; for poetry is not only contrary to meaning, law, discourse, politics, and philosophy, but it is not even poetry until it becomes an experience of the impossible. And yet its absolute audacity does seem to invoke a plenitude of another order. If poetry is to overcome the inert, empty structures of metaphysics, it must sacrifice itself to the there is, the void, or base matter that is its own organizing principle. However, if the essence of such sacrifice does not correspond to the inertia of bourgeois culture, it nonetheless remains coextensive with the singularity of its own sacrificial principle. Thus, poetry is not truly sovereign until it sacrifices itself to the nonsensical mastery of its own impossible truth, and only then does it open up to a being beyond all order and movement. Everything depends on the lifting up—the relevé—of base matter into an irreversible becoming. But then Fanon’s conception of the crystalline as a moment of precarious decision that is always on the road to ruination (détraquer) introduces a blackness that cannot be imitated or identified with because it is distant from all idioms, including that of the sacred and of sovereignty, doubtless because it is incommensurable, or in any event impossible. Bataille, by contrast, continues to talk about déchirure as a moment of sacrifice (of poetry to heterology). It should be borne in mind that even if the sovereign moment occurs as a cut or interruption that is discontinuous, unassimilable, inimitable, or disintegrative, any attempt to link it to what sacrifice is—as tribute or donation, say, sacrificium, or sacer—fails to ask why, in the idiom of sovereignty, sacrifice remains unsacrificable, or why the concept of sacrifice is linked to that of poesis; a logic that some would say leads back to an economy, a desire, that is still too theological.
37. Miller, Theories of Africans, 63.

39. It is worth pondering why the word “politics,” for Miller, represents the dialectic between ethnicity and ethics (*Theories of Africans*, 65); or why politics is the “means by which these seemingly exclusive terms can (and must) be worked out and brought into dialogue” (65; my emphasis). Miller himself reproaches mere theoreticist approaches to politics, in that they constitute a fundamentally abstract, or exclusionary and oppressive, approach to difference, and one that situates the other outside of history. If theory always might be unethical, it is clearly as a moralist that Miller condemns it, to the extent that theory “overlooks” or “liquidates” that which “deviates” from its absolutist truth (and all theory supposedly risks doing this). Theory, then, is a form of political terror, even as, as ethics, the demand that theory relativize itself is seen as a less naive or oppressive politics (64).

In other words, only politics can reveal, dialectically, the violent limit of politics, as—in the case of political ethics—only theory can reflect on this politics of politics. At this point, I would have to say that Miller, who declares this position to be more ethical, more dialectical, than, say, Fanon’s, displays what has been repressed by this “relativism,” which is no more than a theoretical dogmatism that can only compromise with relativism insofar as it is possible to theorize it. Thus, the importance for Miller of the notion of dialectics, and thus also his use of a thought of relativism to disguise his own decidedly ethnocentric intolerance. In any event, the theoretical claim that “there is no real ethics without ethnicity” (63) not only hides its own intolerance of theory, but denies any theory of blackness that refuses such espousal, and that remains untouched by such an account of the political (whose transcendental configurations are suspiciously absolute, but remain masked as such).

40. For a more recent example of this moralism that can only think blackness in antinomian, opposed terms (i.e., as a good vs. bad version of identity politics), see various Marxist responses to Afro-pessimism. Not only is the belief that blackness is in need of dialectical mediation dogmatically presupposed by these works; what they consider to be a reading of race and capital is often no more than a failure to go beyond the stereotypes of a “left” political culture.

41. Miller, *Theories of Africans*, 63.

42. If colonial culture thereby disguises and covers up native culture, the point here is not to conceive of an essence placed out of sight, or hidden by deception and illusion, but to know why, in each scene of crystallization, there is nothing beyond reality and so, by implication, nothing to be engaged with or disengaged from at the core. But it is the impossibility of ever knowing the point where the lines of history and truth meet that, in Fanon’s work, betrays an ironic attitude to any language of authenticity and inauthenticity, and which generates a decidedly more complex set of questions than the notion that true culture produces authentic being. (It is no coincidence that Shariʿati’s thought here reveals the influence of a certain Heideggerianism, which sees in *shahadat* something to be revived or retrieved as the alethic task of political ideology.) If, as I am suggesting, these distinctions are themselves consequences of a different understanding of truth and martyrdom, and thereby of liberation and politics in their differing accounts of revelation and redemption, this is not because Fanon lacks a proper account of universality (which is itself a reductive opposition), but because of the more subtle point wherein what is distorted is inherent to political decision as such, and because what is hidden may itself lead to a deceptive or misleading sense of concealment, thereby usurping any possibility of any authentic or
genuine decision. Whether that conviction is one based on historical truth or faith, Fanon’s argument is to say that the very possibility of crystallization is no more originary than delusion; nor does it reveal a more authentic essence, for what it discloses is an anessential essence of being.

43. Hegel, Lectures, 354.

Works Cited


