



What Happened to the “Promised Land”? A Fanonian Perspective on Post-Apartheid South Africa

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Abstract: This paper reviews post-apartheid South Africa through Fanon’s critical analysis of decolonization. Since, for Fanon, apartheid represented the purest form of the Manichean politics of space that characterizes colonialism, a Fanonian perspective on South Africa asks to what extent has the geographical layout of apartheid been remapped? Addressing this question necessitates shifting the “geography of reason” from technical discourses of policy-makers to the lived reality of the “damned of the earth”. From this perspective, Fanon’s critique becomes relevant in two ways, first as a prism to understand the rise of xenophobic violence as a symptom of the degeneration of the idea of South Africa’s “promised land” and second as a way to listen to a new grassroots shack dweller movement, Abahlali baseMjondolo, that is challenging both neoliberal and progressive assumptions by advocating a quite different geographic layout for a “truly democratic” society.

Keywords: South Africa, Fanon, shack dwellers, Abahlali baseMjondolo, apartheid

The force of intellect increases and becomes more elaborate as the struggle goes on (Fanon 2004, *Les damnés de la terre*).

In the 1970s, at the height of apartheid Frantz Fanon was an important source for Steve Biko’s conceptualization of Black Consciousness. Today Fanon continues to be a relevant¹ thinker for those developing critical analyses of postapartheid South Africa (see Hart 2008; Neocosmos 2010; Pithouse 2003, 2009). This paper considers how contemporary South African politics continue to be refracted through articulations of national liberation and how grassroot movements challenge the postapartheid government with claims of betrayal and broken promises that Fanon calls social treason (Fanon 1968:167, 204). Prescient in his critique of post-independence Africa, Fanon concluded *Les damnés de la terre* (hereafter *Les damnés*) with the injunction to work out new concepts toward the total liberation of the continent. He was not particularly clear what form those new concepts would take, but in terms of his dialectic, their source would be those who did not

count: those who were not recognized and who were outside the class system (see Fanon 1968:61). But he was certain that at some point the people would realize that their struggle for freedom had been betrayed: “Once the hours of effusion and enthusiasm before the spectacle of the national flag floating in the wind are past, the people rediscovers the first dimension of its requirement: bread, clothing, shelter,” and, of course, dignity (Fanon 1967b:122; 1968:44). In South Africa the rumblings of discontent that began around the turn of the century and erupted into a popular rebellion in 2004 continue to gain momentum (Alexander 2010). Abahlali baseMjondolo (AbM), an organization of people who live in shacks, emerged out of this rebellion in 2005. It began by questioning why land that had been promised to build houses for shack dwellers in the city of Durban was being cleared for another and altogether more elitist kind of development. Five years later the movement claims to have 10,000 paid-up members and to represent up to 35000 people. Although this is only a small fraction of the 800,000 people who live in Durban’s shack lands, AbM has, nevertheless, come to articulate a new politics of the poor which it calls a “living politics”:

[O]ur living politics was founded on a rejection of many ways of controlling the poor and one of those was what we first called the “zim zims”—people that come to the poor and pretend to be the experts on our struggles by talking about neo-liberalism, socialism and all the other isms and schisms without ever talking to us about our lives, our struggles, what we really want, what we can really do and how we can really do it. We always felt that this way of doing politics is just another way for another elite to keep us in our place (AbM 2010b).

AbM has begun to develop a new critique of the situation that, as recommended by Fanon, begins from the shack dwellers’ lived experience of postapartheid society and moves from there to challenge postapartheid and neoliberal discourses of development.

When we looked back over our list of ideas that had come up, we saw that it reflects a way of critical thinking about the life of the people, starting to uncover and name the contradictions this [sic] shows against what the powerful want us to believe about our situation. We also see that our ideas about freedom go much deeper than the way our struggles are presented when they are described as “service delivery protest”. If the heart of our struggle was just for houses and services to be delivered, we would be just like beggars with our hands out, waiting for someone to help us. No, what we are struggling for, a real freedom, goes much further than that! And so we started our discussion of these things together (Figlan et al 2009:25–26).

As a movement from practice that is itself a form of theory (Dunayevskaya 2002:205), AbM challenges intellectuals who are

committed to social change to help it develop new concepts. Though the movement didn't begin with a plan it “has always been shaped by daily activities of the people that make it, by their daily thinking . . . [and] togetherness” (Zikode 2009). Indeed, taking thinking seriously, AbM argues in a letter of solidarity with the Middlesex University Philosophy Department (which was threatened with closure) that anything calling itself a radical philosophy should do two things: “pay close attention to the presence of human beings in the world and to the equal dignity of all human beings . . . [and look] for ways to change the world in a way that puts human dignity at the centre of the world.” Therefore, AbM continues, “the attempt to close down the Philosophy Department at your university is an attack on one part of the struggle to humanize the world” (AbM 2010).

Thus AbM takes on the Fanonian call at the conclusion of *Les damnés* to struggle to humanize the world. But it does this from its own situation, a situation that is increasingly characterized by the violence and political repression that Fanon diagnoses at the heart of the postcolonial condition. AbM's “living politics” is one response to the postapartheid condition, another response is the “death in life” (Fanon 1967b:13) expressed by xenophobia. Fanon's discussion of the “lumpenproletariat” (1968:136–140), which is intimately connected to the “ideological weakness” of the liberation forces, indicates that there is no guarantee that a “legitimate desire for revenge” (Fanon 1968:139) is not channeled in a reactionary direction. Since shack settlements have become one of the focal points for communitarian violence in contemporary South Africa—the national, regional, and ethnic chauvinism, which in Fanon's view seriously undermines the project of national liberation—we shall turn to AbM as a source and consider the practice of its grassroots organization as an expression of its social conception of citizenship: acutely aware that as a *movement* of people who live in shacks it is not synonymous with the millions of South Africans who live in shacks.²

This paper is engaged, in Fanon's sense, with both activist intellectuals involved with the AbM (see and Bryant 2008; Gibson 2007; Neocosmos, 2008, 2009; Patel, 2008; Pithouse 2006, 2008a, 2008b; Zikode 2006a, 2007, 2008³), and with AbM's “living politics”. Fanon's critique of the social treason of the newly independent nation is framed within what I consider to be AbM's Fanonian concerns, namely, the importance of the politics of space, the importance of popular control over communities and movements, and the importance of its criticism of how elites, in and out of the state, on the right and on the left, habitually fail to accept the agency of those who are, in Fanon's terms, the damned of the earth. The coincidence of AbM's analysis of the South African situation to Fanon's analysis of the danger of the degeneration of the liberation struggle bodes ill for the future of South Africa. It is to this coincidence that the analysis now turns.

Analyzing postapartheid reality

A Fanonian analysis of postapartheid South Africa could begin by testing Fanon's bold stretching of Marxism in a formula from *Les damnés*: in the colonies, "you are rich because you are white you are white because you are rich" (Fanon 1968:40). At first blush this binary seems to describe apartheid rather than "rainbow" South Africa, where a powerful new black elite has emerged. Indeed, South Africa is producing three times more dollar millionaires than the global average and the fourth most in the world (see SA Goodnews 2008). Even in the context of the global crisis, luxury cars are continually on demand and gated communities for the new black elites and the old white national and international bourgeoisie are still springing up like mushrooms—eerily echoing Fanon (1967a:43–44; 1968:155). And yet, behind the glitz and sheen lurks quite a different reality, one that is evident even in UN and World Bank data.⁴

Briefly put, despite the promises of the Freedom Charter, South Africa's transition from apartheid has not seen a radical transfer of wealth or the creation of social programs based on human needs. Instead it has seen, as Steve Biko predicted, the creation of a "black capitalist society" with South Africa putting "across to the world a pretty convincing, integrated picture, with still 70 percent of the population being underdogs" (Biko 2008:41–42). With the elite pact negotiated between corporate capital and the ANC leadership in the early 1990s, the hallmark "opening" of the country to free elections also meant the rolling-out of neoliberal economic policies and neoliberalism's attendant ideologies.⁵ As Neocosmos (2008:587) observes:

There is little doubt that the politics of grabbing and enrichment among the postapartheid elite have been both brazen and extensive. So-called Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) has enabled the development of a new class of "black diamonds" whose new-found wealth is not particularly geared towards national accumulation and development but primarily towards short-term, quick profits . . . in a hegemonic culture that extols the virtues of free-market capitalism, equating private enrichment with the public good and quick profit with development.

Ato Sekyi-Otu's reading of Fanon's "stretched Marxism" emphasizes, the "absolute difference and radical irreciprocity" (Sekyi-Otu 1996:72–73) of the colonizer–colonized relation is made manifest spatially. In *Les damnés* Fanon argues that colonialism is totalitarian. There is no space outside it; there is no colonization of the land without the colonization of the people. The "native's" every daily movement in space is constrained. Colonization, he argues, follows the "native" home, invades the "native's" space, body and motion. In *Black Skin, White Masks* Fanon (1967a) says that the black is walled in; in *Les damnés* he

says that the “native” is hemmed in, pressed from all sides—oppressed—only able to find freedom of movement in dreams of muscular prowess. Colonialism is, then, an experience of spatial confinement, of restraint and prohibition, a narrow world of poverty, oppression, and subjugation. In *Les damnés*, Fanon describes the open and strongly built colonial city, a place of light and food, as against the cramped, oppressive, hungry “native town” (1968:39). In the colonial situation “space and the politics of space ‘express’ social relationships and react against them” (Lefebvre 2003:15).⁶

Because the socio-economic spatial reality of the compartmentalized, divided, colonial world can never mask human realities, an examination of this division—“the colonial world’s . . . ordering and its geographical layout,” Fanon argues—“will allow us to *mark out the lines* on which a decolonized society will be reorganized” (1968:38–40, my emphasis). Since social relations are manifested in space, *one Fanonian test of postapartheid society is the extent to which South Africa has been spatially reorganized*. On this score, it is quite clear that the “deracialization” of the urban areas has been an essentially “bourgeois” phenomenon, with full membership and rights to South Africa’s cities now accessed by money. Consequently, with urban policy—under the guise of providing “upgrades” to shack settlements—geared mainly toward the *removal* of the poor from urban areas, postapartheid policy remains Manichean and zero-sum.⁷ Fixated on creating “formal” structures, the government has built around 2 million housing units since 1994, but the new housing for the poor—those frightfully small and poorly built structures called houses⁸—is based on the removal of the poor from city centers, far away from bourgeois eyes. Housing policy thus reinforces spatial segregation.⁹ In the minds of urban policy technicians and real estate speculators, shack settlements and middle class housing cannot be left side by side. These “forced removals” of “surplus populations”—to use the language of apartheid—are the outcome of the ANC’s promotions of “slum clearance” as well as legal and illegal evictions in urban areas, which threaten millions of people who live in urban shack settlements with removal to “transit camps” and other “temporary” housing, far away from the urban centers.¹⁰ So what is at stake in a Fanonian perspective is not simply a critique of the government’s inability to keep up with housing needs (let alone the need for a deeper critique of what should constitute a decent house), but the ways the “ordering and geographical layout” of postapartheid South Africa remap apartheid.¹¹

Additionally, one cannot talk about ethnic or xenophobic violence in South Africa without thinking about the “geographical layout” of postapartheid society as an expression of what Fanon calls an “incomplete liberation”. For Fanon, challenging the “geographical layout” was interconnected to the pitfalls of national consciousness

and its conception of citizenship, which turns on the *creation* of a political subject—the coming-to-be of subjectivity—in the struggle against colonialism and the process of decolonization. For Fanon, decolonization is at once liberation of space, a dismantling of the restrictions of colonialism and apartheid, and a solidarity born of radical commitment (Hallward 2002:128). Decolonization is incomplete, therefore, if it is not waged on all levels: political, socioeconomic, geographical, and psychological; in short, at the objective and subjective levels (Fanon 1967a:13). One symptom of this incompleteness—of the literal exclusion of people from full citizenship of the city—is the rise of ethnic chauvinism and nativism, which is legitimized via claims of indigeneity while simultaneously reproducing a politics of political, social and spatial exclusion rooted in apartheid racial classifications. This incompleteness marks postapartheid society, turning the project of liberation backwards so that rather than creating a new history, it marks time in *neoapartheid* and violence.

South Africa's "incomplete liberation" is evident in the xenophobic violence (or "pogrom") of May 2008, which quickly spread across South Africa's urban shack lands, leaving 62 people dead and thousands homeless and destitute. The specific grievances that led up to anti-foreigner attacks might have been unemployment, lack of housing, electricity, and toilets, as well as frustration with failed government policies and perceived corruption and favoritism.¹² But as John Sharp (2008:3) argues, perhaps the issue was not "foreigners" or "otherness" but the narcissism of minor differences: unable to attack the source of oppression—the government and the employers—"foreigners became victims of this struggle because they were close at hand" (Human Sciences Research Council 2008:45). At the same time, studies indicate that a wide range of attitudes toward "foreigners" exist in the shack settlements which makes it absurd to suggest that the relationship between South African and Africans is chronically hostile (see Sichone 2008). However, just as frustration did not simply arrive "out of the blue", neither did the discourses of ethnic and national chauvinism. Rather, since the birth of the "new" South Africa, politicians and media have continued to blame "illegal aliens" for the country's problems, while the government has launched annual "crackdowns" on "illegal immigrants" (see Neocosmos, 2008; COHRE 2008). Every year the South African Human Rights Commission reports on the following: state agencies harassing and detaining so-called "illegal aliens"; people being apprehended by the police for being "too dark" or "walking like a black foreigner"; and people being rounded up and sent to deportation centers, such as Lindela on the outskirts of Johannesburg where the undocumented are systematically denied basic rights (IRIN 2008). Neocosmos (2008:588–589) notes that the government and recent legal decisions have been reinforcing a discourse of xenophobia, of

foreigners taking “our jobs”, “our houses” and “our women”, while African migrants are “fair game for those in power to make a quick buck”. Officials are given such excessive powers over “extremely vulnerable people”, adds Neocosmos, “that bribery, extortion and corruption become not only possible but regular practices”. So one could argue along with Fanon that xenophobic violence is not simply an elemental expression of mass rage, but a politics promoted or at least channeled by factions of the local and also government elites as well as their civil servants. At the same time, it would be reductive to think that postapartheid South African politics has simply become narrowly economic. In fact, the economic structure of South Africa has not fundamentally changed since the end of apartheid, and the life of black poor people remains conditioned by unemployment, landlessness, spatial exclusion, inferior education and violence.

Sharp (2008:2) has also questioned the assumption that the violence was xenophobic. He argues that this presumes that the perpetrators of the violence made a distinction between foreigners and South Africans when a third of the people killed were “locals”. Yet the violence took a clearer xenophobic than class direction. The anger of the poor was not directed toward the rich, toward big supermarket chains or even small white or Indian traders. Violence was mostly limited to the shack lands, and the rich and middle class, white or black, were not singled out for attack. As Andile Mngxitama (2008) puts it: “xenophobia is the hatred of foreigners, but in South Africa, there are no white foreigners”, just tourists, investors and professionals, who live in quite different spaces to the mass of people and almost can’t be “illegal”. Just as “the poor in Africa have replaced the Dark Continent as the symbolic conceptual definition of the obstacle to civilization” (Depelchin 2005:134), in the “new” South Africa the racist attitudes formerly directed against all black people have been redirected toward the black poor. Yet one should also be wary of simply applying class as a category since the legacy of apartheid consists in the fact that class has “come to describe a spatial relation—a measure of proximity to or distance from colonial privilege” (Sekyi-Otu 1996:159). From a Fanonian standpoint, alongside the psycho-spatial divide between the poor masses and the cultured colonized elite, neoapartheid South Africa is built on a racial capitalism legitimized by the discourse of black economic empowerment.

In postapartheid South Africa, Biko’s critique of white liberals as the major barrier to black liberation (1978:19–26) takes on a new concreteness. Indeed, Grant Farred (2004:113) argues that one of the ANC’s greatest failures was not to call white South Africa to account for its hand in the atrocities, exploitations, violence and suffering of the disenfranchised during apartheid. Instead, white liberals and the black bourgeoisie have then gotten their wish: “white (capital

and cultural privilege) is protected and black (enfranchisement) is celebrated” (Farred 2004:115).

Just as the discourse of money with the rhetoric of a multicultural paradise has hidden apartheid’s racial discourse, South African “exceptionalism” and the apartheid fear of the “black peril” has been rechanneled toward the poor. As Richard Ballard argues, “the change from segregation to assimilation is not necessarily a weakening of the white social agenda but a shrewd move that ensures the sustainability of white social control” (2005:7–8). One obvious example is the postapartheid property market, which has been central to a class-based assimilation. The market is merely a representation of a larger economic process, where, as Ballard points out (2004:69–70), racially coded fears about falling prices are fixated on the proximity of shack settlements, whose presence is always already a threat. At the same time, the discourse of politics based on party political patronage has become increasingly nativist and competitive. It is in this Manichean context, then, that the 2008 pogrom against Africans takes on a “negrophobic” character (Mngxitama 2008).¹³ Black economic empowerment has simply become the legitimating veneer that masks the multinational presence of capital investors and top executives of multinational corporations (read white); the “foreigners” are found only among the poor, and since there are, by definition, no poor whites,¹⁴ the targets are poor Africans.

Yet in the new South Africa, one cannot escape the double process, “primarily, economic; subsequently the internalization—or rather epidermalization—of this inferiority” (Fanon 1967a:11), in which the poor are continually told that African “aliens” are to blame for their situation and the lack of development poses a threat to their country. “Xenophobia” thus repeats the psychological economy of violence and poverty around which Fanon structured his analysis of colonial and postcolonial repression. Deflected from its *real* sources and channeled inward, the violence of the lived experience of the poor must be allowed expression. For Fanon, it is allowed release in the restricted urban spaces where “natives” are permitted to live, in the form of “black on black” violence. The ease with which the violence spread across the shack lands of South African cities in May 2008 indicated that however much it was decried, this kind of violence, if contained, is acceptable to the elites.¹⁵ Thus Fanon’s assertion that one is white beyond a certain financial level is expressed spatially.

Fanon’s notion that exploitation can wear a “black mask”, and the importance he places on the rise of xenophobia, has an ideological as well as material dimension. In *Black Skin*, Fanon (1967a) argues that middle class white society is suffocating and sterile and the guiding point in *Les damnés* is to warn against mimicking a bourgeois society that is fundamentally racist. But where that society is able to mask its

racism, which allows it to preserve its humanist pretensions, the sole motto of the nationalist bourgeoisie is “Replace the foreigner” (Fanon 1968:158). With the absence of a liberatory alternative, he adds, “the working class of the towns, the masses of the unemployed, the small artisans and craftsmen for their part line up behind this [ultra] nationalist attitude; but in all justice let it be said, they only follow in the steps of their bourgeoisie” (1968:156).¹⁶

The bigger issue, then, is the logic of the degeneration of the idea of liberation and the capitulation of the left within the ANC-aligned elites and intelligentsia to what they considered “objective forces”. Indeed, the capitulation to the post-cold war “Washington Consensus” (and its authoritarian economism that proclaimed neoliberal capitalism the “end of history”) was bolstered by a homegrown authoritarianism and anti-intellectualism which was produced by the necessity of a united front against apartheid on one hand and the continued dominance of the Stalinist SACP among the left on the other.¹⁷ As Fanon predicted, during the transition from apartheid, critical voices in the ANC (let alone those outside the organization) were outmaneuvered, co-opted, told to keep quiet, or expelled into the political wilderness.¹⁸ This virtual silencing of debate for the “sake of unity” continued even as the consequences of a homegrown neoliberal structural adjustment was plain to see. Even the small intellectual elite outside the ANC and South African Communist Party were finally unwilling to break with the dominant paradigm (see Nash 1999). Without significant ideological opposition, the mass movements were essentially demobilized and, where possible, incorporated into systems of governance. Fanon had already criticized an earlier version of this scripted transition in *Les damnés*.¹⁹ But by the 1980s, the promotion of a discourse of polyarchic democracy by the United States became part of what Peter Hallward (2006) calls the “politics of containment” and was often aided by a social democratic leaning or a populist and hierarchical party led by a charismatic figure, and fully linked up with multinational, especially American interests. Though the ANC and Mandela would later play these roles, in response to the gathering crisis in apartheid South Africa, a key element of US policy in the later 1980s was the creation of a program designed to support moderate black leadership and marginalize radical black leadership. William Robinson’s summary of the goals of the various coordinated democracy promotion projects reads as a roadmap of postapartheid South African “development” (though widely contested at the time) and includes supporting the emergent black middle class; developing a nationwide network of grassroots community leaders amongst the black population that could win leadership positions in diverse organs in civil society and compete with more radical leadership; and cultivating a black business class that would have a stake in stable South African capitalism, develop economic power, and view the white

transnationalized fraction of South African capital as allies and leaders (Robinson 1996:331).

Thus brokered, the South African transition followed this elite transition scenario almost to a T. Yet, it should be remembered that the silencing of the mass movements had to be homegrown. Trading on its claims to be the sole representative of the national liberation struggle, the moderate ANC elite successfully subsumed alternative discourses of struggle into an ANC “tradition”, thus rendering any movement that denied or challenged this “out of order”. In terms of housing, ANC policymakers ignored the great moment of popular democratization in the 1980s and argued that shack settlements were often run on patronage lines and tended to be undemocratic. But rather than organizing to entrench popular democratization, the ANC leadership decided that the civics associated with shack settlements needed to concentrate on delivering community support to the new state rather than encouraging debate on the development process (McCarthy, Hindon and Oelofse in Huchzermeyer 2004:152). The South African National Civics Organization (SANCO) swiftly became co-opted into the ANC patron–client political structure.

The betrayal of South Africa’s liberation is realized at the moment when “the people find out the ubiquitous fact that exploitation can wear a black face” and that, indeed, blacks can be “whiter than white” (Fanon 1968:145, 144). Fanon adds, “In the weary road toward rational knowledge . . . the people awaken to the unutterable treason of their leaders” (1968:145, 167). Implicit to Fanon’s perspective is the practice of having one’s ears and mind open to thinking coming from unexpected spaces, new movements from below, the rationality of their practices and to the language of the ideas of freedom and dignity expressed by the grassroots mobilizations of the marginalized, excluded and “damned” of the world, those faceless people dismissed so quickly as narrow-minded and desperate. While this openness is often absent in the discourse of the left, and even more so in its practice, shifting the geography of reason²⁰ from the “enlightened” metropole to the “dark side” of the revolt of the postcolonial world also necessitates not an uncritical celebration of the social actions of emergent poor people’s movements but a revolution in listening. The point was to keep a critical ear open to new voices from below. By the late 1990s, new revolts began sporadically erupting²¹ and in the 2000s a new generation of movements emerged. It is toward one such movement in urban South Africa, the shack dwellers movement in Durban, AbM, that I now turn.

A New Beginning: Fanon and the Shack Dwellers

The shantytown sanctions the native’s biological decision to invade, at whatever cost and if necessary by the most cryptic

methods, the enemy fortress (Fanon 1968, *Les damnés de la terre*).

Historically the shantytowns in South Africa were the result of the contradictory forces of capitalism’s need for cheap labor and the colonizer’s fear of Africans on one hand and people’s desire for an urban life on the other. Wars, taxes, and the expropriation of land, formalized by the 1913 *South African Native Land Act*, created debilitating poverty in the rural areas and helped produce a class of landless laborers who wanted an urban life and developed ways to circumvent the state to maintain it. The first shack settlements in Durban emerged after the “destruction of the Zulu kingdom” (see COHRE 2008:20–21) and the loss of land in the late nineteenth century. As Durban became a major port in the twentieth century, the African urban population grew and, with it, white fears of contagion and the consequential implementation of urban segregation. Urban policy and the practices and discourses of public health became the vehicles for controlling African populations. By the early 1900s it became clear that the long-term solution to the purported “medical crisis” articulated by colonial public health officials was the mass removal of the black population. Thus, “in the name of medical crisis, a radical plan of racial segregation was passed under the emergency provisions of the Public Health Act” (Comaroff 1993:322). Indeed, what Fanon calls the “native’s biological decision” to move to the urban area was countered by the colonialist’s attempt to stem the tide of Africans to the cities by legislating “influx control” and “pass laws”. In the 1930s, white public health concerns were manifested in “slum” acts systematically destroying African housing, yet the growth of shantytowns continued in the margins of urban areas and was further encouraged by the demands for labor power during the Second World War.

Once the war ended, the socio-economic/political threat and the repressed white fear of Africans taking over the cities found a new expression, providing the basis for apartheid and a new period of forced removal of urban Africans. With its detailed planning, apartheid South Africa became one of the largest builders of housing in the world,²² forcing Africans from cities, relocating “townships” in peripheral areas or removing Africans to far off “homelands”. In the context of the new stage of revolt in the 1980s, the decision by millions of people to create shack settlements, to remain in or move to urban areas, helped create the crisis that brought down the apartheid government.²³ But the deep structural contradictions of capitalist-colonial South Africa, on which postapartheid society has been built, have meant that the issues of space, housing and people’s livelihoods remain, despite the repeal of apartheid’s formal laws.²⁴

It is, therefore, not surprising that resistance to attacks on the means to basic necessities by the state and corporate power—disconnections from water and electricity and evictions from homes—remain, in Fanon's sense, biological (1968:130). Additionally, it is not surprising that major contestations in postapartheid South Africa would be around space and land and around the struggles of the poor to remain in the cities. It is also not surprising that a movement of urban shack dwellers would emerge in the twenty-first century in the face of the postapartheid government's attempt to "privatize" these issues—that is to say, shifting the "human rights" to land and housing, inscribed in the constitution, toward a free-market, an authoritarian economism of cost recovery backed by the state's force. In short, poor people in South Africa regularly do not have access to constitutional rights and are routinely subjected by local government to unlawful and illegal acts such as violent evictions, demolitions, forced removals and repression of poor people's organizations.

The development of AbM and the rise of xenophobic violence in shack settlements across South Africa's major cities are connected. Both are responses to increasing pauperization and spatial and political exclusion. The pogroms can be considered the result of the channeling of anger toward African "strangers" and the increasing importance of claims of indigeneity in politics;²⁵ but they are also a consequence of the criminalization and repression of shack and other poor people's revolts by the police and governmental authorities, on one hand, as well as depoliticalization of these revolts by NGOs on the other. The violence of 2008, in other words, is a product of pauperization but it is also a consequence of the state's and the NGOs' silencing of alternatives²⁶—what Fanon would consider a suppression of politics and oppositional discourses that allow the poor to organize and make their own demands.

AbM arose from a road blockade in 2005 organized from a settlement on the Kennedy Road in Durban, which was protesting the sale of land that had been promised by the local municipal councilor to shack dwellers for housing. Soon other shack settlements joined in demonstrations announcing their autonomy from local councilors and the launching of a "No Land, No House, No Vote" campaign in the 2006 local elections. AbM took two principled positions that marked it out as a new movement. First, in addition to embarking on a boycott of the elections, it refused to be associated with any political party, declaring itself for "anti-party politics" (Zikode 2006b). Having decided that the shack dwellers had been betrayed by the political system (which considered them only useful as a vote bank), AbM's first act was to symbolically bury the ward councilor, declaring that he did not represent the shack dwellers. Second, AbM also refused to be associated with any ethnic politics. Membership was based on living in the settlements without reference to background, ethnicity, language or citizenship. The

organization’s strength lies, in other words, in creating an inclusive and clear politics that built solidarity and opposes anything that would divide the settlement. Initially, the ANC councilors tried to represent AbM as unrepresentative—AbM insists on fully democratic annual elections as a condition for affiliation—and the city initially balked at dealing with AbM. But by late 2007 negotiations were entered into and by 2009 a memorandum of understanding (MOU—also known as the Abahlali Settlement Plan) was drawn up. It agreed to in-situ upgrading for the Kennedy Road and two other settlements as well as the provision of basic services to 14 other AbM-affiliated settlements. Though only a pilot project, the MOU was an important milestone in two ways. Upgrading represented a significant shift from the policy of removing shack settlements from the cities; and pushing and including a politically unaffiliated grassroots movement in policy discussions indicated that the poor had the right to organize outside of party–patronage structures (see Pithouse 2009)

In short, AbM is voicing the shack dwellers’ right to live in the city and insisting on an active democratic polity. In this sense, AbM shack dwellers are expressing a new kind of inclusive politics from the ground up, one which appears local and piecemeal, such as providing services to settlements, but is also radical and national. AbM does not speak in terms of a critique of “the state” or in terms of a critique of political economy, but it does address the politics of the state and the spatial political economy of postcolonialism that concerned Fanon.²⁷ Thus the shacks dwellers’ demand for housing in the city based on fully democratic and open discussions could radically alter the spatial and political economy of the city and fundamentally shift postapartheid social consciousness through a decisive intervention in its spatial economy. Crucial to this shift, and toward the “reconceptualization of the urban” (Lefebvre 2003:15), would be a move from technocratic state planning toward what Marcelo Lopes de Souza (2006:327) calls “grassroots urban planning”.

Such a radical change of consciousness, in which “the last would be first and the first last” (Fanon 1968:37), would see a shift in the geography of reason from the elitist and technical discussion of services—mediated “between those who decide on behalf of ‘private’ interests and those who decide on behalf of higher institutions and power” (Lefebvre 2003:157)—to a discussion of people’s needs mediated by the minds of exactly those who were so recently reified as dirty, uneducated, poor, violent, criminal, not fully human. This double movement—the decommodification of the city and “the new rights of the citizen, tied in to the demands of everyday life” (Lefebvre 2006:250) would amount to a defetishization of the city:²⁸ a shift away from the northern-focused elite discourse of creating “world class” citadels in South Africa. Certainly AbM thought that the MOU with the city opened

up new possibilities, believing that it was a strategic breakthrough with national significance:

[I]t commits the city to developing settlements in the city instead of forcing people out to rural human dumping grounds. [And i]t is a major breakthrough for the country because if followed up it would be the first time that the BNG [Breaking New Ground] policy would actually have been implemented (Kennedy Road Development Committee et al 2009).

The memorandum was not only an agreement on policy but also an agreement that the poorest of the poor could have a say in the city's housing policy.

Communitarian violence did not spread to any settlement that was affiliated with AbM during the pogroms of May 2008. Like Fanon, AbM (2008) understood that the "anger of the poor can go in many directions" and insisted that all who live in a shack settlement have equal voice irrespective of their origins or ancestors. The organization responded immediately when the pogrom first broke by holding a long and careful discussion with elected leaders from settlements across Durban. Out of this careful process they produced a press statement, "Xenophobic attacks in Johannesburg", which highlighted the important principle of solidarity and the unity of the oppressed. This was not mere rhetoric. Emphasizing the importance of maintaining a strong political organization, and with undocumented migrants in key positions within the movement, the shack dwellers' political leadership was eloquent and direct:

We have been warning for years that the anger of the poor can go in many directions. That warning, like our warnings about the rats and the fires and the lack of toilets, the human dumping grounds called relocation sites, the new concentration camps called transit camps and corrupt, cruel, violent and racist police, has gone unheeded (AbM 2008).

Demonstrating the political self-education acquired in their discussions in the shack settlements, AbM insists that the issue is not educating the poor about xenophobia. Instead it challenges society to educate itself about the real situation in the settlements "so we can take action":

Always the solution is to "educate the poor." When we get cholera we must be educated about washing our hands when in fact we need clear water. When we get burnt we must be educated about fire when in fact we need electricity. This is just a way of blaming the poor for our suffering. We want land and housing in the cities, we want to go to university, we want water and electricity—we don't want to be educated to be good at surviving poverty on our own. The solution

is not to educate the poor about xenophobia. The solution is to give the poor what they need to survive so that it becomes easier to be welcoming and generous. The solution is to stop the xenophobia at all levels of our society. It is time to ask serious questions about why it is that money and rich people can move freely around the world while everywhere the poor must confront razor wire, corrupt and violent police, queues and relocation or deportation . . . Let us all educate ourselves on these questions so that we can all take action (AbM 2008).

The philosophy is simple: “a person cannot be illegal. A person is a person wherever they find themselves.” Personhood, in other words, was not dependent on who your ancestors were and where you are from. The concept drew from the notion of “Ubuntu”, the idea of sharing based not only on respect for others but on interdependency expressed in the expression that “a person is a person through other persons” and that “I am because we are.” Yet ubuntu has become overdetermined in postapartheid South Africa: just as it can be a source of humanistic critique, it is also used to justify Africanization and black economic empowerment and age and gender hierarchies. AbM’s new spirit of ubuntu expresses the idea of respect and dignity of every human, but it is also firmly grounded in the common lived experience of the poor, where they live now in the cities. Rather than being reified, ubuntu is refashioned in the everyday lifeworld of the shack dwellers’ movement and thus not narrowly conceived in terms of language, ethnicity, age or gender. Grounded in a radically democratic practice, AbM radically reconfigures ubuntu by consistently refusing ethnic, national, or age grade as the basis for leadership. Indeed, the inclusion among the AbM leadership of young people in their twenties, of Indian as well as Pondo and Xhosa descent, reflects AbM’s vision of a politics of ubuntu based on the diversity of the cosmopolitan realities of the urban shack settlements.

In Permanent Danger: The coup at Kennedy

The nation does not exist in the program which has been worked out by revolutionary leaders . . . [but] in the muscles and intelligences of men and women (Fanon 1968, *Les damnés de la terre*).

Our mistake, the mistake we Africans made, was to have forgotten that the enemy never withdraws sincerely (Fanon 1967b, *Toward the African Revolution*).

By 2009 AbM had become the largest autonomous grassroots organization of the poor in South Africa, with members and active alliances with other movements across the country.²⁹ But it has also angered the government, as well as local and regional elites, by challenging local relations of patronage, taking the provincial

government to the constitutional court over the constitutionality of the Elimination of Slums Bill, and arguing its case in the international press. At the same time AbM's growth and success against evictions has come at a price. Its new membership has tended to be "largely passive" (Pithouse 2009:265), with many viewing the organization like a trade union. In other words, shack settlements began to join AbM simply to stop evictions and not to become active participants of its culture of grassroots democratic participation.

Fanon argues in *Les damnés* (1968:247) that the newly independent nation in Africa is fragile and in permanent danger. The same could be said of a democratic poor people's movement in a postcolonial nation. As I revised this article, the Kennedy Road shack settlement, affiliated with AbM, was under attack by armed thugs supported by the police and orchestrated by local ANC bosses (see Gibson and Patel 2009).

On 26 September 2009, a group of armed men—among them some disgruntled shebeen owners³⁰—attacked an AbM Youth League camp in the Kennedy Road settlement. They were chanting the slogans of the most reactionary and vulgar kind of Zulu chauvinism and threatened to kill S'bu Zikode (who is Zulu), and Mashumi Figlan (who is Xhosa).³¹ The police refused all calls for help, but when unarmed but spontaneous resistance began to repel the attack, the police stepped in to break the resistance. In the presence of the police and local ANC politicians the homes of more than 30 AbM leaders as well as the movement's office and library were systematically destroyed. Thousands of people were displaced from their homes and over the next few days after the attacks, 21 AbM activists were arrested and 13 were jailed on murder charges.³² At the time of preparing final revisions to this article, five of them remain in jail, without a bail hearing, after 8 months.

The attack was led by a small group of armed men fired up by alcohol and ethnic bravado. But the ethnic taunting has quite a different context to the battles between the ANC and the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) or between township and hostel dwellers in the Natal of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Those battles took place in the context of revolution and counter-revolution, the latter often directed by state security forces against the liberation movement. The attack on AbM was modeled to fit the new situation that became apparent at the ANC conference in December 2007 at Polokwane when Mbeki was removed as leader and replaced by Jacob Zuma. Throughout his corruption and rape trials Zuma used Zulu "culture" as part of his defense. While he painted his accusers as politically motivated, he appealed to cultural chauvinism and bussed in crowds to support him and to chant derogatory slogans against his opponents. "The vision of a 'non-racist, 'non-sexist' (and as some had optimistically mentioned 'non-class'!) democratic society," argues Neocosmos (2009), is gradually disappearing apart from in its crude formalistic sense. In its place, Neocosmos adds:

The emphasis on nativism . . . and the tying of a nationalist project to accumulation by a chosen few, rather than to a popular conception wherein all the people could be brought together to engage in more communal schemes of a national character, not only provided the conditions for increased poverty but also for an impoverished communitarian nationalism which was regularly directed against non-nationals and which finally exploded massively in May 2008 (Neocosmos 2009).

As I mentioned earlier, AbM was proactive during pogroms in May 2008. Communitarian violence did not spread to any AbM-affiliated settlement. But Zuma’s election at Polokwane tapped into the discontent and gave a boost to the practice of clientelism as the legitimate way of conducting politics at a local level with local politics—involving councilors, regional and sometimes national MPs—being “run by local mafias” (Neocosmos 2009) buttressed by an increasingly militarized police,³³ which quickly criminalizes perceived political threat. “Serious attempts to develop a local politics founded on basic democratic norms,” adds Neocosmos, “constantly butts against these repressive relations with which it comes into conflict”.

The increased political tension and expectations created with Zuma’s election were also felt in the shack settlements. With the belief that “now is our time”, Zuma’s election boosted the confidence of those who traded in reactionary communitarian ideology. At the Kennedy Road settlement, reactionary and debased ideas of “Zulufication”, and outbreaks of violence and nativism (often aided by goodly amounts of alcohol), began to be more commonly heard late into the night. In response, the AbM-affiliated and settlement elected Kennedy Road safety and security committee (with support from the local police) decided that closing the shebeens at 10 pm would calm the situation. Angry at the loss of business, the shebeen owners reacted by targeting the security committee. Shouts of ethnic cleansing became the rallying call to goad the initial attack. But it wasn’t simply the shebeen owners who were behind it. The local ANC patrons seized the opportunity to politically take over the settlement. In other words, the decision to close the shebeens gave the local ANC patrons an opportunity to mobilize shebeen owners to attack. The Kennedy Road Development Committee was replaced by an ANC committee appointed by the ward councilor, the local ANC chairperson, and the Provincial minister for Safety and Security. They nominally run the settlement, but in practice, it has been left to the shebeen owners. While the operation to evict anyone associated with AbM continues, shebeens are open 24 hours a day.

The attacks on the AbM at Kennedy Road in September 2009 represented the concatenation of different ideological positions.³⁴ First, provincial ANC leaders were particularly angry that the movement had derailed the *Elimination of Slums Act* by taking the provisional

government to the Constitutional court³⁵ and viewed AbM as a direct threat to their “development” plans and the economic and political interests behind them. Second, AbM’s “outing” of local ANC leaders and businessmen as corrupt and joining in the campaign not to vote in elections constituted a direct threat to the power of the ANC at the local and branch level, which relied on unelected or at best authoritarian leaders to “deliver” settlements en masse as vote banks. Third, the success of negotiations between AbM and the city about shack upgrades at Kennedy Road threatened those same leaders’ access to the purse strings. The local ANC viewed AbM as it viewed themselves, a patronage organization and thus an absolute political threat. Thus AbM was viewed as an oppositional political organization and a direct opponent which had to be eliminated.

Just as AbM had to battle xenophobic violence, it would be foolish to believe that AbM’s existence put an end to socially conservative ideologies in the settlements, including those that gestured toward “traditionalism” as a criticism of local government corruption and favoritism. AbM is, of course, critical of corruption and favoritism and its practice of democracy, including everyone in decision-making and elections to leadership, is made without reference to age, gender, ethnicity or legality. While it respects people’s cultures and histories, it rejects “traditional” ideas of respect based on age or patriarchy and contends that such beliefs, as well as those based on chauvinism and other ideas that could divide the community, were best tackled in open meetings where everyone could speak their mind and reason things out. These issues came to a head in Kennedy Road in 2009 just as spaces for discussion were quickly closed down as the attacks continued into 2010, and anyone associated with AbM was forced to renounce their membership or leave the settlement. The attacks were not limited to Kennedy Road. The ANC stepped up its campaign against AbM and mobilized buses of supporters to the court bail hearings to harass and counter the AbM and church led supporters.³⁶ AbM was accused of being a counter-revolutionary force, a (anti-Zulu) front for COPE or a (anti-ANC) front for the IFP³⁷ and counter demonstrations outside the court pressed the judge to deny bail to those arrested at Kennedy Road. In short, violence and the threat of violence, intimidation and criminalization, and the fragmentation of its seasoned militants had the effect of forcing the movement underground. The question is how will these external challenges affect AbM’s “living politics”? Based on collective discussion and patiently working out issues,³⁸ Abahlalisms requires openness and space but also an active and engaged membership.

AbM had to struggle for this kind of space, but it can never be taken for granted. It has continued to meet and exist after the attack, but unprotected, indeed harassed by the police and by state secret services, and with rumor and provocation rife, the organization has been

seriously disrupted. When a movement that breathed its life through open meetings and collectivity was scattered³⁹ and forced into a semi-clandestine situation, all sorts of new problems as well as sinister intrigues emerged. The period of 2009–2010 marks a nodal point. AbM’s strength should not be overestimated; it is a movement that has developed out of the daily state of emergency for shack dwellers, but it has also matured as an organization in response to new challenges and crises, whether that be the banning of demonstrations and marches, the imprisonment of its members and leaders, or the xenophobic violence of 2008. AbM’s continuing existence, of course, depends on its ability, especially in the World Cup year, to organize, in the face of forced removals, a democratic and critical grassroots movement in the shack settlements.

In Place of a Conclusion

Our struggle and every real struggle is to put the human being at the center of society, starting off with the worst off (AbM 2008, Statement on xenophobic attacks in Johannesburg).

AbM has developed an infrastructure for self-organization insistent on decentralization, autonomy, grassroots democracy and accountability.⁴⁰ To be sure, AbM may not equal Fanon’s “future heaven”, or be the simulacrum of the Paris Commune as Kovel (2007:251) asserts.⁴¹ But with its participatory democratic, decentralized and inclusive form, it encourages an alternative politics where, as Rancière (quoted in Hallward 2005:771), echoing Marx’s “Critique of the Gotha Program,” puts it, “equality is not a goal to be attained but a point of departure, a supposition to be maintained in all circumstances”.

The organization appreciates acts of living solidarity but shuns money and political power from government and most nongovernmental groups. It is an organization, as Fanon understood it, a “living organism” (see 1968:170). As I have already mentioned, its militants call it a *living* politics, and it represents the kind of challenge to committed intellectuals and activists that Fanon mapped out in *Les damnés*, namely that intellectuals need to put themselves in “the school of the people”. After experiencing the elitism of some left, often northern, intellectuals who actively deny that poor people can think their own politics, AbM demands that intellectuals who really want to dialogue and work with them should first come to the settlements and listen to what they have to say, and to be a part of what Fanon calls the politics of “living inside history” (1968:147). Zikode (2008), the elected chair of AbM, expresses the problematic of intellectuals very concisely:

We have always thought that the work of the intellectual was to think and to struggle with the poor. It is clear that for [some] the work of

the intellectual is to determine our intelligence by trying to undermine our intelligence. This is their politics. Its result is clear. We are shown to the world to not be competent to think or speak for ourselves.

Knowledge is not private property or the means for private advancement; it is to be shared and developed; a practical endeavor that begins by shifting the geography of reason.

Postscript

In June 2010, AbM members who had been meeting secretly collected 500 signatures, mainly from women, pledging to support the return to KRDC and AbM to the settlement. On 13 June, 120 people participated in the first democratic meeting at Kennedy Road.

Acknowledgements

This paper would not have seen the light of day without Deirdre Conlon's encouragement, Vinay Gidwani's patience, and Richard Pithouse's advice.

Endnotes

¹ I use the French title of Fanon's book, *Les damnés de la terre* ("the damned of the earth") throughout the text to better convey Fanon's sense of those people outside and excluded, damned by the social system.

² AbM's practice of their phrase "everyone who lives in the shacks is from the shacks" is seen in the election of people whose "descent" is Xhosa, Pondo, "Asian" as well as undocumented to a position of leadership in the organization. For example, Mashumi Figlan (with a Xhosa background), the chairperson of the Kennedy Road shack settlement was elected by a largely Zulu membership. Shamita Naidoo, of Indian descent, was elected as the chairperson of Motala Heights by largely African voters. Her election, in contrast to conservative ideas about the place of women, also highlights the importance of women in the leadership of the movement.

³ Though not a member of AbM, I have been an active supporter of the movement since its pre-founding action in March 2005 (see Gibson 2006:1–15). S'bu Zikode, the elected chairperson of AbM and philosopher of the movement, has become a public intellectual frequently appearing in print, audio and visual media. Richard Pithouse, an academic and public intellectual is a member of AbM as well as theorist of the movement. Raj Patel, author of the recently published *Value of Nothing* worked with the movement in its founding years and wrote one of the first academic articles on the movement. Michael Neocosmos is a political theorist allied with AbM who uses Fanon and Badiou to analyze contemporary South Africa. Jacob Bryant worked with AbM in 2005 and 2006.

⁴ Despite an average GDP per capita of above \$91,000, South Africa's Human Development Index ranks below Tajikistan, and its life expectancy is just below that of Chad, whose GDP per capita is a lowly \$1427 (see UNDP 2009). The percentage of the population living beneath the poverty line has not changed since the end of apartheid, but households living in poverty have sunk deeper into poverty, and the gap between rich and poor has been widening. Poverty remains acute in the rural areas, with over 80% of people living beneath the poverty line. The GINI coefficient has in fact grown since the end of apartheid as South Africa has overtaken Brazil as the country with the widest gap between rich and poor, and now is the most unequal society in the world (Pressly 2009).

While inequality in South Africa has become increasingly defined as inequality within “population groups” (defined by the apartheid categories of African, coloured, Indian and white—that these terms are still employed in census material speaks volumes about South Africa’s “rainbow nation”), it is worth remembering that because 90% of the population is black (in the Black Consciousness sense) and thus everything else being equal 90% of the population who are poor are black. But also since inequality among the African population has risen to almost 0.75, the percentage of African poor vis-à-vis other “population groups” is also higher. So while the number of middle class and rich black people has grown, poor black households have sunk deeper into poverty.

⁵ Terreblanche (2002:36) notes that 50% of South Africa’s population is mostly unemployed and very poor, earning a measly 3.3% of national income. It is reasonable to assume that these figures have not improved.

⁶ The resonance between Fanon’s focus on the racialized spaces of the colonial city and “Lefebvrian understandings of spatial interconnection and mutual processes of constitution” (Hart 2008:696) are also suggestive and have begun to be explored (see Hart 2008; also Kipfer 2007).

⁷ Central to the removal (or “relocation”) is the *KwaZulu-Natal Elimination and Prevention of Re-Emergence of Slums Act*, which Marie Huchzermeyer (2008) argues is “not only reminiscent of apartheid policy [but] it reintroduces measures from the 1951 Prevention of Illegal Squatting Act, which was repealed in 1998”. The underlying assumption of the act is that all informal settlements should be removed and replaced by formal housing. This is, Huchzermeyer continues, despite admissions, even by the government, that RDP housing has removed people from their livelihoods, imposed transport burdens and made poverty worse. The 2004 “Breaking New Ground” policy of the national housing department sought to redress this by introducing an “upgrading of informal settlements programme”.

⁸ The minimum standard for a house is 30 m² (100 ft²) of floor space and the provision of water through a standpipe. The quality of houses has in fact declined not only from the apartheid period “matchbox” housing (over 250 ft²) but also from the postapartheid “RDP” houses. Thus critics declare that “Mandela’s houses are half the size of Verwoerd’s”. Following the privatization model favored by the World Bank, houses are built through subsidies to private builders. The builders look to use the cheapest possible materials and construction to guarantee a profit. Inflation has squeezed developers’ profits, who have in turn searched to make further cuts in the quality of the buildings.

⁹ Policy has been contested and alternatives developed. However, the more progressive “Breaking New Ground”, which includes a proviso for “in-situ” upgrades of shacks, has lain fallow. Even if lip service is paid to it, the hegemonic position is to remove and eradicate the shacks (see Pithouse 2009).

¹⁰ Since “slum clearance” has largely been directed toward shack settlements in the center of the city (which under apartheid were areas designated for “white”, “Indian” and “coloured”) rather than settlements in the urban periphery where conditions are worse, the policy also recapitulates the apartheid policy of separation.

¹¹ There is a philosophical pedigree to this anti-economistic thinking of liberation in South Africa, which includes Steve Biko. A less well-known figure is the white philosopher activist, Rick Turner, who was banned and later murdered by the apartheid regime. In 1971 he articulated the notion of human liberation in contrast to that of the “old left” because “it accepted the capitalist human model of fulfillment through the consumption and possession of material goods” (1971:76). Influenced by Sartre, Turner shared a number of philosophical positions with Biko, who he met in the early 1970s. It is not widely known that Turner and Biko were in a reading group together in this period. A work comparing Turner and Biko still remains to be written.

¹² Such as the Zulu word for “elbow”, which became known as the “elbow test?”

¹³ Writers on the Western Cape Anti Eviction Campaign website used the term “Afrophobic”.

¹⁴ This is not empirically correct since there are now 1 million poor whites.

¹⁵ Dingani (2008) writes “Moral outrage turned to analysis of poverty and the frustrations of the poor. The killing, looting and raping continued nonetheless. By the end of the week, all that talk of poverty and marginalization was still present, and moral outrage too, but strains of prejudice, and ‘these foreigners bring this and do that’ began to creep into the callers’ contributions. And then it finally dawned on me that this damnable disease, xenophobia, infected the middle classes too.”

¹⁶ “From nationalism we have passed to ultra-nationalism, to chauvinism and finally to racism. These foreigners are called on to leave; their shops are burned, their street stalls wrecked” (Fanon 1968:156). The following statement, made by the leader of the National African Federated Chamber of Commerce and Industry, is a perfect example of Fanon’s point: “we are the ones who fought for freedom and democracy and now these Somalis are here eating our democracy”. Nafcoc’s Western Cape secretary, Mandise Njoli, adds that the Somalis “fight civil wars in their own countries and then come here and take away our livelihood. Maybe we should start a civil war so that they will leave our communities” (Joubert 2008).

¹⁷ In contrast, Andrew Nash (2009) provides a compelling account of the dialectical tradition in South Africa.

¹⁸ Frank Wilderson (2008) paints a useful picture of this period that emphasizes the importance of the death of Chris Hani.

¹⁹ Emphasizing their own (often military) weakness vis-à-vis the colonialists, the nationalist bourgeoisie, fearful that the masses would “destroy everything” (Fanon 1968:62), quickly compromise the goals of liberation for a narrowly conceived share of political power. Their ability to control popular participation was crucial.

²⁰ Shifting the geography of reason is the motto of the Caribbean Philosophical Association (CPA).

²¹ According to the Freedom of Expression Institute, over 5000 protests were official recorded during 2004–2005. This almost doubled to 10,000 the following year. The journalist, John Pilger (2008), said that South Africa is “the most protest rich country in the world”.

²² Building houses and a democratic polity are not synonymous. Postapartheid South Africa’s involvement in a massive building project is about removing the poor from cities, not including them in the creation of democratic cities.

²³ Africans were never simply passive victims in the urbanization process. Because settlements were free from municipal regulations and close to work, they offered a modicum of autonomy that included opportunities for activities in the “informal economy”.

²⁴ Slum clearance was stopped in the late 1980s due to the anti-apartheid struggle. It only began again in 2001. In other words there was a break during the early postapartheid years, then a return to repressive practices.

²⁵ Whether or not this “channeling” is a conscious political act, anti-foreigner violence is an “outlet” that is allowed (on this issue, see Fanon 1968:54).

²⁶ On the importance of NGOs in Africa, see Hearn (2007). In the South African context, one should note the importance of the Shack (Slum) Dwellers International (SDI) that has been funded by the Gates Foundation. SDI is not a grassroots democratic organization of shack dwellers but an elite organization that works as a gatekeeper with other NGO organizations and academic institutions (such as the Sustainability Institute at Stellenbosch University). Echoing World Bank “boot strap” programs for the poor as well as currently fashionable micro-financing programs, their major initiative is to encourage micro-saving and credit schemes which often pathologize the poor for their

“inability” to save. On AbM’s attitude toward working with NGOs, see “Supporting Abahlali” (2006); also see Souza (2006) for a Brazilian perspective.

²⁷ Indeed from 2007 onward Abahlali advocated a pro-poor “development in discussions with the city about “upgrading” settlements based in the government’s 2004 “Breaking New Ground” policy (see Huchzermeyer and Karam 2007; Pithouse 2009).

²⁸ Since the commodity is a social relationship between things, it is important to maintain that defetishization is crucial to decommodification. Without a critique of alienation and thingification of human relations, decommodification is reduced to a critique of the market rather than the commodity form and a new fetish is made of nationalized and public property.

²⁹ By 2009 the paid up membership of AbM was just over 10,000 in 53 settlements. In 2008, AbM together with the Landless People’s Movement (Gauteng), the Rural Network (KwaZulu-Natal) and the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign Anti-Eviction formed the Poor People’s Alliance, a national network of democratic membership based on poor people’s movements.

³⁰ According to their press release (Kennedy Road Development Committee 2009), the Kennedy Road Development Committee did impose a closing time on shebeens which had been running 24 hours a day: “There had been complaints about the noise for years and some of the women comrades in our movement had also argued that alcohol abuse is linked to domestic violence. Also, in a situation where there are so many fires, alcohol abuse can put the safety of the whole community at risk. But the main reason for instituting closing times was that since the national election campaign there have been ethnic tensions in Kennedy Road and in other nearby settlements too. There have been fights and even murders. These fights were all alcohol related and so for the safety of the community we thought that it was necessary to put limits on shebeen hours. The police were present at the meeting where this decision was taken.”

³¹ Figlan is the elected deputy to Zikode in AbM and also the elected chair of the Kennedy Road Development Committee.

³² Two people were killed, one of whom was one of the attackers. The police focused the entirety of their investigation on AbM members. A number of the 13 AbM members arrested were not at the settlement at the time of the attack and none of the attackers have been arrested. AbM felt that the police were simply not there to protect them at all. They were not given any protection against death threats publicly issued against AbM leaders, or protection of their homes in the settlement that continued to be destroyed.

³³ A term used by Professor Kader Asmal, a former government minister and drafter of the Constitution at a speech given in October 2009 (see Trehwela 2009). Such a notion of the police force (justified by rising “crime”) has a direct relation to the apartheid model of policing.

³⁴ Only the timing of the elimination remained in question. Nigel Gumede, the head of the city’s housing and infrastructure committee deride mocked AbM, accusing it of being against development and blaming them for the shack dwellers living in squalor. Niren Tolsi (2009) writes that Gumede “said the social movement had opposed government’s housing efforts and was anti-development, as continued deprivation guaranteed funding from academics and NGOs. Gumede said “one of the many obstacles” that had stopped government delivering houses to residents was AbM’s Constitutional Court case against the *KwaZulu-Natal Slums Act*. He added a dash of tribal hatred, saying that “in our [presumably Zulu] culture, this [Mfene] dance is associated with muthi (witchcraft) and needed to be investigated”.

³⁵ AbM’s appeal to the constitutional court over the *Slum Act* is one of a collection of cases where people have made human rights gains at the cost of the ANC.

³⁶ Throughout the period, church leaders, led by the Bishop of Kwa-Zulu Natal, Ruben Phillip (who was a deputy President of SASO in 1969 when Biko was President), gave

unyielding support to AbM and called on the government to make an independent inquiry into the coup at Kennedy. The church's action should be contrasted to the inactivity of the left.

³⁷ An interesting amalgam since COPE, because it was anti-Zuma, was conceived as being "anti-Zulu", while Inkatha Freedom Party is an ethnic Zulu party which was pretty well decimated by the ANC. Led by the Zuma, the ANC had more of an appeal as a party that would deliver than the IFP.

³⁸ The *Elimination of Slums Act*, for example, was read line by line in a series of meetings.

³⁹ In the period before Christmas 2009, many members found temporary accommodation across Durban or in rural areas.

⁴⁰ It should not be forgotten that this kind of democracy was evident in South Africa in the mass movements of the 1980s (both the UDF and National Forum were influenced by black consciousness), in the community "civics" and especially in workplaces, where, argues Steve Friedman, workers controlled their own organizations and demanded that civic associations be similarly controlled: "The battle in the factories has not only strengthened the movement for change, but has also given birth to a type of politics which has rarely been seen among the powerless: a grassroots politics which stresses the ability of ordinary men and women, rather than 'great leaders,' to act to change their world" (Friedman 1987:8–9).

⁴¹ When Raya Dunayevskaya ([1957] 2000:281) maintained that the greatness of the organization of the Montgomery Bus Boycott in the USA in 1955 was its "own working existence" (a phrase Marx uses, referring to the Paris Commune) and "contains our future", the claim was considered outrageous since, as it was argued, how could a bus boycott be put on the same level as the Paris Commune? To say the same about the shack dwellers organization today might be similarly dismissed. Yet, in retrospect, Dunayevskaya's claim seems quite reasonable. The brilliance of the shack dwellers grassroots democracy and "living politics" is indeed its "own working existence".

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