*(This paper is intended to be given as a 20 minute presentation at a conference on
"Cultures of Violence" to be held in Oxford at the end of the month. The length is
obviously constrained by the time limits; likewise, as this conference is an explicitly inter-
disciplinary event, this paper is also constrained by my reluctance to make it a purely
historical work: it is, successfully or not, intended to bridge, or at least blur, disciplinary
boundaries. It thus lacks the rigour I would expect of a proper, discipline-bound paper.
I trust that you will forgive me these necessary flaws, and hopefully suggest some ways in
which I can take this project further. Oh, and of course, this is a very early work: please
do not quote from it without permission. . .)*

"The Rules of Violence"

Julian Brown

In this paper I would like to suggest the following things: (1) that, in the period

between 1960 and 1990, the liberation movements in exile attempted to play a significant

role in shaping South Africa's anti-apartheid 'fighting culture'[1]; (2) that, in the same

period, while the liberation movements struggled to shape this culture, the Apartheid state

was making a similar attempt to shape its own consensus, a similarly oppositional, if

conservative and anti-revolutionary, 'fighting culture'; and (3) that the effect of these

simultaneous efforts on the part of the liberation movements and the Apartheid state was

to create a shared field of cultural and ideological presumptions about the nature and role

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[1] I am indebted to Nigel Gibson's work on Frantz Fanon for this term. See, Gibson, *Fanon: The
Postcolonial Imagination* (London, Polity: 2003)

of violence within South African politics and society. All later political and social

negotiation, from 1990 on, has taken place within this (broadly-speaking) cultural field

Due to length, I will not be able to explore any one of these points in the depth

which it requires. Rather, I first intend to spend some time outlining the theoretical

framework within which these points are made, drawing heavily on new interpretations

of Frantz Fanon's anti-colonial cultural philosophy; from there, I will attempt to give

some substance to each of my points by presenting some brief illustrative examples; and

finally, I will turn to indicate certain possible consequences of this historical argument.

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Turning, then, to the theoretical frame of my argument:

For the last half-century, Jean-Paul Sartre's preface to Fanon's last book, *The

Wretched of the Earth*, has seemed to offer a privileged interpretation of the author's

words: Sartre emphasised the centrality of violence to Fanon's thought, and declared that,

for Fanon, "violence, like Achilles' lance, can heal the wounds it has inflicted. . ."

"This," Sartre concluded, "is the end of the dialectic."[2]

Recently, this interpretation of Fanon's work has been steadily rebuffed, and a

new consensus appears to be emerging among (broadly-speaking) Africanist and activist

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[2] J-P Sartre, "Preface" in Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth,* trans. by Constance Farrington.
(London, Penguin: 2001) 26.

readers of Fanon. This consensus revolves around Fanon's use of the dialectic and argues that, for Fanon if not for Sartre, violence certainly is **not** the end of the dialectic.[3]

Rather, it is an essential stage in the dialectical process of transforming the colonized native – a mute and reified subject – into a new kind of human – an agent of his or her own history: "the 'thing' which has been colonized becomes man during the same process by which it frees itself."[4] This is the role of violence: as a necessary stage in this process, the stage which allows the native to discover, through the ultimate breaching of human bodies, "that his life, his breath, his beating heart are the same as those of the settler. He finds out that the settler's skin is not of any more value than a native's skin."[5]

It is not too far a stretch from this point to argue that, implicit in this process, and perhaps explicit in Fanon's concepts of the dialectic and of the new humanism that it can bring into being, is the possibility of a mutual *rapprochement* between those-who-were-colonised and those-who-were-colonisers through the violent process of decolonisation: "The colonial world is a Manichean world," Fanon argued and, while the process of decolonisation might require the anti-colonial movements to accept, by inverting, the Manichaeism of that world, the dialectic nature of the process means that both the original thesis and the anti-colonial antithesis must be subsumed into a new synthesis.[6]

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[3] On this new consensus, see: Nigel Gibson, *Fanon*, and Ato Sekyi-Otu, *Fanon's Dialectic of Experience* (Cambridge, Mass, Harvard University Press: 1996), as well as two edited collections: Nigel Gibson (ed) *Rethinking Fanon: The Continuing Legacy* (Amherst, Humanity Books: 1999) and Lewis R. Gordon, T Denean Sharpley-Whiting and Renée White (eds) *Fanon: A Critical Reader* (Oxford, Blackwell: 1996). For a recent South African contribution, see Richard Pithouse, "'That the Tool Never Possess the Man': Taking Fanon's Humanism Seriously," first presented at History and African Studies Seminar, 2003.
[4] Fanon, *The Wretched*, 28.
[5] Fanon, *The Wretched*, 35.
[6] Fanon, *The Wretched*, 31.

There will be no colonisers – not necessarily because those-who-were-colonisers have been killed, but possibly simply because there are no longer any colonised subjects. . .

Fanon's dialectic contains the possibility (although it also states that it is perhaps rare in practice) of a mutual recognition: for a new humanism to come into being it is not sufficient only for the native to recognise that "his life, his breath, his beating heart are the same as those of the settler" – it is also necessary for those settlers who wish to become human to recognise the same: my life, my breath, my beating heart are the same.

I have emphasised this possibility here, not because it is necessarily the only or the best reading of Fanon's work, but because it is useful in two ways. First, to touch on a point to which I will return at the end of this paper, it provides us with a means of evaluating the successes and failures of our post-Apartheid society while, at the same time, suggesting the endlessness of the transition. Second, and more immediately for this work, it allows me to generalise another one of Fanon's arguments beyond his own text.

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In Fanon's Mali logbook, written in 1960 and published in *Toward the African Revolution*, a collection of his political essays, he writes that the commando's role is to rouse the population: "to reassure them as to the future, to show the armament of the

ALN, to detach them psychologically and mentally from enemy ascendancy." The role of the commando is not merely to fight violently, but also to create a new 'fighting culture'.[7]

In his penultimate book, *Studies in a Dying Colonialism*, Fanon presents an account of the revolutionary impact of an underground anti-colonial radio station, the Voice of Algeria, on the country's still-colonized population. The station performed the commando's role: it presented ordinary Algerians with information about the ongoing anti-colonial struggle and allowed them to participate imaginatively in this battle, thus, in a way, bringing about the essential decolonization of their minds. The war was no longer being fought only in the countryside, but was now also being fought in every household.

The radio station was used by the liberation movements in Algeria to forge a national consciousness, a broad base of support for the revolution that could permit Fanon to say, along with the country's populace: "The Algerian nation is no longer in a future heaven. It is no longer the product of hazy and phantasy-ridden imaginations. It is at the very center of the new Algerian man. *There is a new kind of Algerian man . . .*"[8]

This consent is by no means simply manufactured, though. Fanon is largely interested in revealing how, once the liberation movements have created this imaginative space, it is perpetually mediated by local concerns and local interpretations. These local

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[7] Frantz Fanon, *Toward the African Revolution: Political Essays*, translated by Haakon Chevalier (New York, Grove Press: 1967)189. For a far richer discussion, see Gibson, *Fanon*, 127-157.
[8] Frantz Fanon, *Studies in a Dying Colonialism*, translated by Haakon Chevalier (London, Earthscan Publications: 1989) 30. See both Nigel Gibson's article, "Jammin' the Airwaves and Tuning into the Revolution: The Dialectics of the Radio in *L'An V de la revolution algeriénne*" in Gordon et al (ed), *Fanon: A Critical Reader*, and Gibson's later book, *Fanon: The Postcolonial Imagination*.

concerns, though, do not undercut the national importance of the Voice of Algeria; rather, they in fact strengthen it by making the national consciousness the seal of their concerns.

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        I want to suggest, first, that a similar process occurs in South Africa between 1960, when our liberation movements are exiled, and 1990, when they legally return.

        The immediate effect of the Apartheid state's criminalisation of these movements was to remove the national dimension from public protest. Although local protests continued throughout the 1960s, most restricted themselves to the languages of cultural and economic protest, temporarily eschewing claims to a national consciousness; as the decade progressed and the remaining leaders of the national organisations were either imprisoned or exiled, it thus seemed for a while as though the state had been successful.

        In the seventies, though, moves began to reclaim this consciousness. The most significant internal movement in this period was Black Consciousness, associated with Steve Biko's work, collected in *I Write What I Like.*[9] At the same time, outside the country, the liberation movements in exile began to address their calls for action not only at an international audience, but also at an internal South African public: speeches to the

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[9] Steve Biko, *I Write What I Like* (London, Heinemann: 1978). Biko, of course, was also much influenced by Fanon (as well as other writers, themselves influenced by him, such as Eldridge Cleaver): it is certainly possible to argue, although there is no space to do so here, that Biko's project was not so different from the Fanonist project described in Gibson's and Sekyi-Otu's works.

United Nations were increasingly supplemented by radio broadcasts, underground publications, and 'pamphlet-bombs' in an series of attempts to nationalise consciousness.

By the late 1980s, as internal dissent reached its violent climax in a series of township revolts, it is possible to hear the formulas of the liberation movements' propaganda echoed in statements made by many insurgents. Some drew attention to connection between State and Capital, while others used the African National Congress's stock-phrase: "Apartheid is a colonialism of a special type." Most significantly, though, all of these local revolts demonstrated a clearly national consciousness: they no longer claimed to act solely in response to community crises, but now claimed to act for the long-promised, about-to-exist, Nation, our Azania.

I want to suggest, here, that Fanon's account of the impact of the Voice of Algeria can help us to understand the nature of these statements: the cultural efforts of the liberation movements in exile shaped, but did not determine, the nature of our transition. A new kind of South African was born, and at his centre was the South African nation.

A haze of nationalist goodwill should not obscure, though, Serote's phrase: "to every birth, its blood."[10] Our transition, while more peaceful than some, was not bloodless: the 80s were years of violent protest and of even more violent repression. The negotiations of the 1990s were founded on fifteen years of violence; the importance of this period for the making of the new South African citizen, and of our national culture, cannot be overstated. Violence, both actual and symbolic, has shaped our cultural field.

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[10] Mongane Wally Serote, *To Every Birth Its Blood* (Johannesburg, Ravan Press: 1981)

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Turning now to my second suggestion:

The liberation movements in exile, and at home, were not the only parties interested in creating a combative consensus; nor were they the only parties with an interest in creating a broad consensus on the nature and form of the South African nation. The Apartheid state, as it became increasingly embattled through the seventies and eighties, also began to place an emphasis on its own efforts to create such a consensus.

Violent action clearly was a central instrument in this effort: the indoctrination of young, white South African men through conscription, and the use of these conscripts as repressive agents, both on the 'Border' and in the townships, were both clearly part of the mix of symbolic and actual violence that formed the cultural basis of an Apartheid nation.[11]

Also important to this process was the state's control of the public broadcaster. The South African Broadcasting Corporation served the same function as the liberation movements' scattered pamphlet-bombs, illegal publications, and radio broadcasts: the SABC disseminated the government's attempts to shape its own fighting consensus.

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[11] See Jacklyn Cock and Laurie Nathan, *War and Society: The Militarisation of South Africa*. (Johannesburg, David Phillip: 1989.

The government's use of this medium meant that its message, unlike those of the liberation movements, was clearly over-determined. The violence of the State was repeatedly displayed – "to reassure them as to the future, to show the armament of the [state]", its strength and its vigour. Instead of attempting to "detach" its audience "from enemy ascendancy", the government's propaganda attempted to attach its audience to the state's current ascendancy, and to make them complicit in the use of state violence.[12]

The use of this violence, however, was repeatedly justified through reference to the violence of the liberation movements: if the state did not act to resist their actions, then a violent racial apocalypse threatened.[13] Now, as Fanon's analysis of the Algerian situation may suggest, this tactic had the potential to undercut the state's propagandist intentions: by dramatising the violence of the liberation movements so excessively, the government ceased merely to display its own strength and vigour and began, inadvertently, to argue for the greater strength and vigour of the liberation movements.

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If I were to hazard a guess at the reason for the (relative) failure of the Apartheid state's attempt to construct a complicit public, I would point to this over-determination of its message: the essence of Fanon's argument is that individuals, although strongly

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[12] The quotes are, again, from Fanon, *Toward the African Revolution*, 189.

[13] For an example of this belief, see the interviews conducted in Jacques Pauw, *Into the Heart of Darkness: Confessions of Apartheid's Assassins* (Johannesburg, Jonathan Ball: 1997) and a great many of the amnesty applications received by the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. (Some of this logic is dealt with extensively in my unpublished Master's thesis: *'The End of the Future': South Africa's Chemical and Biological Weapons Research Programme, 1981-1991* (University of Natal: 2002)

influenced by the content of propaganda, are far more likely to use the form in which that

propaganda is presented to mediate their local concerns in terms of the new national

consciousness. By reducing the possibility of mediation, the Apartheid state failed to

produce the conditions within which a genuinely complicit consciousness could emerge.

The liberation movements' attempts, by contrast, were necessarily multiple,

contingent and incomplete; and, because of this, inadvertently provided their publics with

the indeterminacy necessary for interpretive complicity. Thus it became possible for

small groups and individuals, scattered across the country, acting independently from

each other and in response to local crises, to each claim, sincerely, that they were acting

on behalf of the coming nation: and that that nation, a new South Africa, would arise

from the increasingly prevalent revolutionary violence of this current transition period.

The third suggestion I want to emphasise, then, is that this last assumption was

shared by all sides of the conflict: the various liberation movements disagreed about the

nature of the coming nation, but all agreed that it would have to come into being through

a difficult period of transition; the Apartheid state's notion of the national consensus it

was attempting to forge was as fractured as those of the liberation movements, but it too

depicted itself as working towards the recreation, the renovation, of the Apartheid nation.

This nation was almost never coherently described; certainly, it never had the

clarity of any of the liberation movements' various calls for a new imagined nation:

rather, it was as fragmentary, as contested, and as provisional as those of the liberation

movements. The reason for this was simple: the Apartheid state, in the 1980s, was no more of a coherent body than its opposition: like the liberation movements, at home and in exile, the Apartheid state was divided by internal discord, political and ideological contestation, and personal conflict.[14] Its own pose as a total institution should not be mistaken for an accurate reflection of its functioning: nonetheless, I am suggesting that these notions of a new nation shared as much as did those of the liberation movements.

And that at least one assumption was shared by all parties in our conflict: the new South African nation, liberated or not, could only emerge in the bright crucible of a violent transition. Only within this heat could the old be reforged into something new.

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Now, if these suggestions are accepted, certain consequences become apparent:

First, and most significantly for the argument I am making in this paper, it seems possible to argue, as I have implicitly done, that this sense of an incipient national revitalisation, about to be achieved through the dialectical processes of violence, was broadly shared in this country through the 1980s and into the next decade. It formed the shared cultural and ideological field within which individuals and groups attempted to

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[14] Dan O'Meara's, *Forty Lost Years*: *The Apartheid State and the Politics of the National Party, 1948-1994* (Cleveland, Ohio University Press: 1998) makes this point far more concrete by describing the internal conflicts of the National Party during its years of governance.

act. The written literature, visual arts, film and theatre productions of the era all reflect

this field: whether it was Serote's poetry, Fugard's plays, or Ngema's musical scores.[15]

But it is not only the literate and popular cultures of the time (nor either the

material culture, which I can do no more than mention here) that were shaped with this

field: the day to day decisions of ordinary people took place within this field, and were

influenced by its presumptions: and no decision was more urgently influenced than that

of political allegiance. And, if what I am suggesting is true, within this culture of

transitional violence, the most compelling proof of political allegiance was violent action.

I do not mean to imply that only violent acts counted as *political* acts; rather, I am

trying to suggest that, within the cultural and ideological field of the transition period, as

I have described it, a violent act was a more obvious choice, a more naturalised recourse,

than it would be in a different context. And that, in addition to this, an act which, in a

different context, might appear innocuous could become, in this context, potentially

violent: the prime example of this process being the formation of a mass demonstration.

Violent acts, in a violent time, are the guarantees of history. In John Berger's

words, describing the violent suppression of a mass demonstration: "by attacking the

demonstration authority ensures that the symbolic event becomes an historical one: an

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[15] Here I am thinking of these works in particular: Serote's *To Every Birth Its Blood* (1981); Athol Fugard's *Master Harold and the Boys* (1987); Mbongeni Ngema's *Sarafina*. Each of these works gains its cathartic power through the eruption of violence, whether actual or symbolic, into the lives of its characters. Through these violent acts, the characters find their place in history.

event to be remembered, to be learnt from, to be avenged."[16] Violence, in our times, has

been the guarantor of memory; its scars have formed the embodied script of our past.[17]

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One more thing: within the cultural field I have described, acts of violence gain

also a transformative potential. Fanon, you will remember, argued that violence, in an

anti-colonial struggle, was a dialectical process, a process that transformed both its agents

and its subjects: the colonised native learns, through violence, that "his life, his breath,

his beating heart are the same as those of the settler." The 'thing' learns to be human.[18]

Within the context I have described, each act of violence has the potential to enter

both its agent and its subject into the annals of history; and each act of violence,

performed for the cause of the coming new nation, the coming new humanity, has the

potential to transform the world, change those annals even as its agents enter their pages.

 For this reason, if no other, I would suggest that we must attempt to understand

the 'fighting culture' of our country, in the 1980s and the next decade, if we are to

understand how our current national order came into being: what the constraints on its

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[16] John Berger, "The Nature of Mass Demonstrations" (1968) reprinted in his *Selected Essays,* edited by
Geoff Dyer (New York, Vintage: 2001) 249.
[17] See, in particular, Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford,
Oxford UP: 1985) and Allen Feldman, *Formations of Violence: The Narrative of the Body and Political
Terror in Northern Ireland* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press: 1991)
[18] Fanon, *The Wretched*, 35, 28.

origins were, how, in the early 1990s, a ceasefire could be brokered and adhered to, and, most pressingly, how we can continue to influence the unending recreation of that nation.

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By way of conclusion, let me return to my title: "The Rules of Violence."

I take this phrase from the title of an article written by Eric Hobsbawm, written in 1969, in which he tried to understand the resurgence of politicised violence in the period. Many of his conclusions would no doubt be of great benefit to this paper; I am only going to quote one, however, as a way of pointing both back to the origins of this project, and forwards, towards its eventual import. Hobsbawm wrote that:

> We had therefore better understand the social uses of violence, learn once again to distinguish between different types of violent activity, and above all construct or reconstruct systematic rules for it. Nothing is more difficult for people brought up in a liberal culture, with its belief that all violence is worse than non-violence, other things being equal (which they are not).[19]

In South Africa, in this ongoing time of transition, all things have not been equal and people have acted violently: if we are ever to be able to place these acts into our history, then we must understand why people have acted this way, understand the cultural rules within which these violent acts, and not others, were both legitimate and necessary.

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[19] Eric Hobsbawm, "The Rules of Violence," (1969) in *Uncommon People: Resistance Rebellion and Jazz.* (Abacus, London: 1998) 305.