Is it justified to claim that violence is one of the most fundamental and ubiquitous themes in contemporary Continental philosophy? Or that it is the exploration, diagnosis, and critique of violence in all of its guises that motivates so much of recent theory? Here I’d like to rest on these questions for a moment, with an eye toward the dangers that come with the conflation of the various types of violence in which philosophy traffics, as much as with the ready parsing apart of the different species of violence, and the consonant refusal to recognize their co-implication.

To theorize violence these days is to touch on a figure that appears everywhere in the contemporary theoretical landscape. Bracketing, for the moment, the multiple forms which violence assumes, the recent indictments of the ideology of recognition would seem to imply that its ubiquity is not unproblematic. Taking neo-Hegelian accounts of intersubjectivity to task for their inherently conflictual and violent tenor, various authors have suggested that the very model of recognition grounds identity in hostility towards others.1 Moreover, in failing to allow for any radical disruption of the power imbalances implied in the scheme of recognition—that is the fact that one is compelled to seek recognition from the very people loath to confer it in the first place—the model only perpetuates inequity and oppression.2 In this sense, the paradigm of recognition may reenact the very social inequities it hopes to ameliorate.

**Violence and Philosophy**

Among the various guises that violence assumes in recent Continental philosophy, there is the violence that Derrida names pre-ethical in “Violence and Metaphysics,” the violence of the transcendental subject and the sense with which it illumines the world, imposing continuity and order. Such an analysis demands our complicity in an “original, transcendental violence, previous to any ethical choice, even supposed by ethical non-violence” (WD, 125).3 This allusion to transcendental violence as the violence of phenomenality, the violence embedded in the intentional action of mind upon world, acknowledges the violence implicit in perception. Its rendering as “pre-ethical” simply calls forth the acknowledgment that it is unavoidable, a function of knowledge as it is rendered in the phenomenological tradition. In this sense, pre-ethical violence is unintentional, embodied as it is in intention itself. The criticism of transcendental violence is shared with Michel Foucault; it was in *The Order of Things* that Foucault claimed that all thought is essentially practical, a mode of action fraught with force. Foucault writes of reason: “As soon as it functions it offends or reconciles, attracts or repels, breaks, dissociates, unites, or reunites; it cannot help but liberate or enslave” (OT, 278).4 Hence the claim that all knowledge rests upon a certain violence or injustice. Derrida, too, wrote that philosophy itself may be described as a “violence . . . returned against violence within knowledge” (WD, 131). It is philosophy’s charge, then, to use this violence against itself, to temper, as best it can, this injustice and violence that rests at the heart of reason.

In accord with Derrida’s description of transcendental violence as “pre-ethical” is the correlative understanding of violence and nonviolence alike as related to those actions exercised in the domain belonging to ethics. Hence set apart from this “original, transcendent violence” is the violence of torture, abuse, rape, and colonization. For those working in existential phenomenology—in particular Frantz Fanon, Simone de Beauvoir, and Jean Paul Sartre—this “ethical” violence frequently connotes the actual enactment of physical force, with revolutionary violence—the taking up of arms in
the colonial context—being of chief concern. Insofar as these analyses of violence bear a debt to the Marxist paradigm wherein action is motivated by scarcity and need, the violence referred to here is material through and through.

Whether the violence one refers to is material, revolutionary, transcendental, or immanent to the formation of the subject, it is clear that the ubiquity of this motif is not unproblematic, and this is not even to mention debates concerning various manifestations of aesthetic violence, the violence embedded in certain conceptions of the social contract, or the violence of subjection according to which the subject is itself the effect of a prior violence without which it could not have emerged. Indeed, it may even be fair to say that the different strands of thought in the Continental tradition differentiate themselves according to which type of violence is found to be most salient or originary in relation to others. Of course, this way of thinking presents certain dangers. The suggestion that one type of violence supercedes others, or the claim that the address of one type of violence is more politically urgent, has spawned debate on the left. Reticence surrounding the post-phenomenological elaborations of subjectivity, for instance, has lead to criticisms of so-called postmodern and poststructuralist approaches, criticisms grounded in the worry that such a model of the subject is intrinsically apolitical and counterproductive. At its most hyperbolic, this line of criticism justifies itself by arguing that the focus on the violence of subjection somehow vitiates or diminishes the efforts that should be devoted to remedying more “concrete” species of violence. In some of the most polemic of these responses, for instance, certain elaborations of subjectivity are indicted as defeatist and amoral. Further contention has been generated between theorists maintaining loyalties to a materialist paradigm, whereby redistribution is the more efficacious means by which to address oppression, and those who would instead argue that recognition is the liberating ideology of our day. But such debates depend for their existence on a problematic parsing apart of different species of violence. To give a brutally materialist account of classism, or likewise to reduce homophobia to a purely specular evil, is to deny the radical ties that bind the mechanism of distributive justice to the cultural schema of recognition that are operative at any given cultural moment. One cannot coherently claim that material violence is more “real,” more “concrete” than the violence of subjection. To do so would be to presuppose a naïve relation between matter and the symbolic and likewise fail to acknowledge the manner in which cultural matrices of intelligibility delineate in a very real sense the contours of the flesh.

Apart from the tendency to artificially wrest different figures of violence free from each other is the equally as vexing tendency to conflate them. Hence the worry that violence has become problematically normalized in contemporary theory. The notion of violence is dangerously vague when the very same word is used to define transcendental subjectivity, abuse, intentionality, revolution, rape, sense, and even theory itself. When all of this is called to mind by the very same figure—this singular motif—there is the danger of failing to adequately dissociate these dimensions of conflict. More precisely, there are worries that the normalization of violence has rendered ineffectual those efforts to dissociate the violence of the subjection that precedes desire from the violence of material oppression, abuse, or torture. When the coming to be of the subject is rendered always already in terms of violence (whether enacted against the subject or by it), its various dimensions may be dissociated with insufficient care. The danger would be the ready conflation of these various conceptions in the claim that political oppression or material violence is simply the iteration of the originary violence that founds subjectivity. It is too tempting, however, to reduce social oppression and domination to manifestations or repetitions of the very same violence that is at the heart of subjectivity itself. Such an approach altogether elides the complexities of this relationship.

The result is an uncomfortable vacillation between the worrisome conflation of the various types of violence, and the equally as
troubled willingness to wrest them apart from each other for the sake of clarity. It falls to philosophers, then, to honor the incommensurability of the various forms of violence and at the same time acknowledge the complexity of their interconnection.

Of particular interest here will be Fanon’s brief discussion of the intra-group violence in the context of colonialism in Wretched of the Earth and its resonance with his earlier work. More specifically, the call for revolutionary violence in Wretched of the Earth may be understood as following from the phenomenological analysis of racism in Black Skin White Masks, to the degree that it is the racist ideology that comes to inform colonial reason that ultimately, according to Fanon, requires rupture in material violence. Moreover, the cultural mystification of racism that Fanon probes in his early work foreshadows his analysis of violence amongst the colonized, a movement that correlates with anti-colonial violence. If Fanon was compelled to speak, in Black Skin White Masks, of the experience of being sealed or enclosed in one’s skin—over-determined from without—and the victim of racial stereotyping, the later Fanon is interested in how the shame and self contempt that result from this experience may manifest as intra-group violence. Fanon’s discussion of intra-group violence in Wretched of the Earth betrays the investment that the colonizer has in eradicating the community of the colonized, and not simply the colonized as individuals. Thus even as colonialism justifies itself by collectively categorizing and dehumanizing the colonized, the colonial mindset must paradoxically refuse that such a collective exists, and do its best to resist the concretization of these bonds, even as it justifies itself so often in reference to them. For this reason, Fanon claims that the first facet of the colonial mindset to be rejected by the colonized in the event of revolution is individualism (WE, 47/DT, 14). “Brother, sister, friend—these are words outlawed by the colonialis bourgeoise, because for them, my brother is my purse, my friend is part of my scheme for getting on” (WE, 47/DT, 14). Even as the colonial regime justifies its inhumanity with reference to a collective stereo-

type of the colonized as other, savage, inhuman, it must simultaneously refuse the concrete bonds existing between group members, bonds for which the regime itself is in some sense responsible. Hence one of the evils of colonialism is the eradication of the community of the colonized.

In the struggle to come to terms with what it might mean to think collective identity in a way that was not reductive, attention must be granted to those experience that testify to the particular type of terror that comes with proximity, the violence embedded in the volatile ties of group identity and the weight of communal expectation. Implicit in Fanon’s discussion of group identity is a notion of collectivity that implies proximity and terror at once. This fact not only complicates his vulnerability to recent critiques of the paradigm of recognition, but also lends itself to an innovative conception of community. This much becomes clear with the acknowledgment that intra-group violence is integral to Fanon’s discussion of violence more broadly construed. This dimension of Fanon’s theory, however, has been obscured somewhat by the ways in which Fanon’s thinking on violence has been received.

**Violence in Fanon**

Arguably, the dimension of Fanon’s thinking on violence to have attracted the most attention is his justification of violence in the name of anti-colonial revolution. However, in the absence of any mention of how Fanon’s justification of violence is linked to the commencement of a new, anti-colonial ethics, his discussion runs the risk of being interpreted as a glorification of violence, and not as a measured analysis of those instances—the colonial situation among them—where violence may be ethically warranted. I will not be concerned here with that justification, which he shared in common with Beauvoir and Sartre, though it may suffice to note that Fanon’s analysis of intra-group violence relies, in part, on the belief that there are indeed occasions when violence may be requisite, particularly those situations in which the means of subjugation and subsistence appear as one, or when acts
of charity and subjugation are indissociable. The refusal to contemplate the possibility of violence in situations such as these amounts to a commendation of already operative forms of violence. It follows that in a colonial context, where the violence of oppression has been mystified, oftentimes to the point of invisibility, counter-violence is defensible.

Commentary on Fanon’s discussion of violence refers most often to The Wretched of the Earth, frequently thought of as his masterpiece in liberation theory. But it is in reading that text together with the earlier Black Skin White Masks that the complexity of Fanon’s thinking on violence comes to light. In her recent work Critique of Violence, Beatrice Hansen claims that “Black Skin White Mask’s muted call for counter violence still remained framed by a pacifist poetry that yearned for an unmediated encounter with the other.” The caricature of a text like Black Skin White Masks as framed by a “pacifist poetry” is troublesome, however, in light of Fanon’s frequent recourse to Negritude poet Césaire, whose poem Fanon cites as a call for “the end of the world” (BSWM, 96/PN 77). The apocalyptic language deployed in Fanon’s cry for a new humanism is not accurately portrayed as pacifist poetry. It is not the case that Black Skin White Masks represents a plea for peace and unmediated compassion and that Wretched of the Earth represents the relinquishment of this dream in the demand for revolutionary violence.

Hansen claims that Fanon’s attempt to articulate a postcolonial ethics is concealed somewhat by what she describes as his “incendiary” embrace of revolutionary violence. But to the contrary, there is little to suggest that Fanon’s interest in violence was meant to preclude or diminish his discussion of ethics. While Fanon may have been popularized as an advocate of violence, his greater concern was with humanism. Indeed, his justification of violence is always and only understood as connected to the inauguration of an enigmatic new humanism. Violence is described by Fanon, and other existential phenomenologists, as the condition for the possibility of ethics at all. In isolating violence as the transcendental ground for ethics, Fanon doubtless remains reluctant to prescribe the parameters of the “new humanism” that he champions. What is salient even at this point, however, is that this new humanism can only be born of violence.

This is particularly apparent given Fanon’s discussion of Hegel in Black Skin White Masks. In Fanon’s engagement with Hegel, he stresses the importance of conflict for recognition, claiming that recognition without struggle is disingenuous. Should the master in the dialectic recognize the slave (other) without conflict, this recognition is not authentic. (BSWM, 219/PN 177) In Fanon as in Hegel, it is only by risking life that freedom is attained. When this risk motivates the revolutionary violence of which Fanon writes there is little question that violence does not compromise recognition, but, for Fanon, is requisite for it. “Thus human reality in-itself-for-itself can be accomplished only through conflict and through the risk that conflict implies” (BSWM, 218/PN 177). Fanon founds desire in this structure, a subjectivity always “for somewhere else and for something else,” transcendent through violence.

However, if Fanon embraces components of the Hegelian model of recognition, he breaks with others, specifically in his reluctance to describe intersubjectivity solely in the language of negation. This is because in a colonial world whose racist logic dictates that only the embrace of an oppressive and inferior cultural stereotype or the adoption of the colonizer’s culture is sufficient to secure identity, other options must be generated to rupture this “infernal circle.” In such a context, Fanon claims that it is only the power to create meaning and value for oneself that provides a remedy to what he names the “collective autodestruction” of the colonized. And it is in this context specifically that revolutionary violence emerges as a means to this affirmation and a refusal of the interminable negation of dialectic. In this sense, revolutionary violence may be necessary in order to overturn the politics of reactivity and negativity that may indeed respond to or critique the ideology of colonialism, but ultimately fail to truly break
with it. Thus Fanon’s advocacy of “active meaning making and self creation”—as opposed to the brute negation of colonial values—is not a wholesale dismissal of the politics of recognition, but the expression of a worry that anticipates more current indictments of that ideology.

When Fanon claims that every ontology is made unattainable in a colonized society, or that “ontology . . . does not permit us to understand the being of the black man,” he indict the philosophical tradition for failing to recognize the psychological fragmentation and evisceration of the racialized self. In an indictment of the unity that subtends Hegel’s account of recognition—and arguably Merleau-Ponty’s elaboration of embodiment as well—Fanon claims that when one’s being is encumbered by an over-determined racist imaginary that refuses subjectivity to the colonized and imposes shame and destitution, the resulting rift in the self forbids the ready synthesis of self-consciousness. Such violence may evenly be described as pre-ethical to the degree that it comes to inform the very shape that reason assumes in colonial society.

It is this double bind—what Fanon names an “infernal circle”—that motivates his description of double alienation, where one is faced with the equally deplorable options of embracing the culture of the colonizer or falling back into an identity that has been dehumanized and denigrated. Yet as the alienation is double, its terms are indissociable. Every exasperated contraction of the self only enacts its further erosion. Cognizant of the inescapability of this double bind, Fanon insisted that reactive politics, and the brute negation of colonial values, were not in themselves sufficient for liberation. Fanon’s analysis can be extended beyond the realm of the individual to take note of the affect that this double alienation has on the fabric of group identity.

**Colonialism and Collectivity**

While Fanon may have been concerned with the pathology of recognition as it is experienced by the individual, he does maintain a persistent interest in the effect that colonialism has on one’s experience of community. When wrested free from the terrain of the individualist phenomenology of *Black Skin White Masks*, the notion of this spontaneous contraction and evisceration of identity that occurs in colonial society might be broadened to consider the dynamics of the group. Consistent with Fanon’s earlier criticism of the ideology of resentment, in *The Wretched of the Earth*, he describes violence amongst the colonized as reactive, in relation to the originary violence of colonization. Fanon’s reticence surrounding resentment and negation in the construction of revolutionary values anticipates his discussion of violence amongst the colonized. At first glance, it appears as though violence amongst the colonized is, for Fanon, a postponement of the decision to raise arms against the oppressor. It is this willful avoidance, according to Fanon, that motivates the enactment of violence against those with whom one most closely identifies: “for the last resort of the native is to defend his personality vis-à-vis his brother” (WE, 54/DT 20). In the face of colonial violence, there is an attempt to avenge rage in proximity. “It is as if plunging into a fraternal blood-bath allowed them to ignore the obstacle, and to put off later the choice, nevertheless inevitable, which opens up the question of armed resistance to colonialism” (WE, 54/DT 20). In this way, Fanon is compelled to look to proximity as an essential dimension of violence. The “collective autodestruction” of which Fanon writes is here rendered as a symptom of the violence originally enacted against the colonized. In this sense, there is a reflexive destruction of community. Fanon’s critique of reactive politics and resentment is thus grounded as much in his worry surrounding intra-group violence as it is in his concern that reactive politics cannot yield a new and more liberated conception of humanity. But it would not be sufficient to argue that Fanon’s discussion of intra-group violence was intended strictly as a lamentation for the alleged reactivity that motivates such acts. It is not simply that the racialized subject is eviscerated through the imposition of oppressive cultural stereotypes, but that the very bonds necessary for the survival of the
group are desecrated by such an ideology. In grounding the dehumanization and oppression of the colonized in their collective identity, the violence of colonialism consists not only in the indictment of individuals through their ties to the group, but in the very fact that as a consequence these ties are themselves subject to abuse. This is not to argue for the resurgence of some species of essentialism, but rather to draw attention to the fact that the violence in group being is not simply a function of the individual's thematization within the group, but the consequent disavowal and denigration of these collective ties that is accomplished in the colonizer's insistence on propagating the alleged virtue of individualism. Beyond the violence that is enacted through the pernicious categorization, stereotyping, and denigration of the colonized, there is the violence that occurs when the very bonds of collectivity are eroded, manipulated and abused at the hands of the colonizer.

What is of interest is the way in which Fanon's claim about the primacy of intra-group violence is cast alongside his indictment of the connection between individualism and colonialism. That the colonizers would be interested in propagating the virtues of individualism is consistent with their desire to eradicate the community of the colonized. Fanon's juxtaposition of the rise of communal spirit amongst the colonized with a consonant escalation of violence within that community is important in that it problematizes an account that would reductively account for intra-group violence only with reference to the originary violence of colonialism. If violence escalates as the ties of collectivity are made more salient, there is an implied tension in proximity. Indeed, when it is the very ties that bind one to others that are used to justify oppression, those bonds themselves become the source of anxiety and conflict. There is more at stake here than the internalization of oppressive norms and their reproduction. Beyond the racist denigration of a collectivity, the colonial celebration of individualism compromises the very fabric of collectivity, depriving the colonized of subjectivity not only via the deliberate proliferation of a racist imaginary, but also through the consonant destruction of the communal ties necessary for the survival of the subject. Through the eradication and the manipulation of those communal bonds, the colonizers essentially displaced the anxiety and rage that would rightfully have been directed against them. It was this transference that Fanon claimed warranted revolutionary violence. At stake was not simply the survival of black subjectivity, but community as well. It was one of colonialism's greatest evils that it made the ties of collective being—ties that are necessary for existence—the cause of such shame and destitution. Such manipulation, in Fanon's eyes, cried out for the radical rupture of power that only revolutionary violence could yield.

When read through this lens, Fanon's reference to intra-group violence in *Wretched of the Earth* cannot simply be understood as a discussion of the deferral of revolutionary violence, violence that would aim ultimately at the inauguration of a new humanism. If the escalation of violence amongst the colonized is read as the correlate of an increasing suspicion of individualism, then the dynamic at play exceeds one of mere deferral. Fanon is citing, in his engagement with community, a similar dynamic to the one at play in the phenomenological account in *Black Skin White Masks*. When the realization of community is commensurate with its undoing, the substantive ties necessary for collective subjectivity are the very bonds that are used to justify oppression. It was in part this inhuman bind that Fanon mourned in his call for revolutionary violence. In this sense, it is not only one's membership in a group or collective that may be deemed violent, but the dissolution of the community of the colonized as well. As insidious political agendas seek refuge in essentialist mythologies of group identity, they simultaneously erode the very fabric of collectivity.

The notion of proximal violence calls into question the naïve conception of community that assumes its reified borders, and admits to the inherent mutability and instability of collective life. When the ties that bind one to others are warped by shame, community suffers. If the early Fanon is compelled to speak
of being “overdetermined from without” in phenomenological terms, the liberation theory that follows is quite consistent with his early approach, to the degree that the descriptions of imprisonment within cultural stereotypes yield to a palpable frustration with community and subsequently to violence. But part of what justified anti-colonial violence for Fanon was the knowledge that there could be no just humanism in a world where the very bonds of collectivity were subject to such desecration.

ENDNOTES

1. See Kelly Oliver, Witnessing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).
5. See Nancy Fraser, Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections of the Post-Socialist Condition (New York: Routledge, 1997).
11. “The individual, who has not staked his life, may, no doubt, be recognized as a person, but he has not attained the truth of this recognition as an independent self-consciousness.” Hegel, Phenomenology of Spirit, cited in Black Skin White Masks (219).