Explain and assess Fanon and Butler’s views on revolutionary violence. Your answer should include an engagement with a practical case of resistance which illustrates your view of these thinkers.

In this essay, I will explore Fanon and Butler’s views on revolutionary violence, noting where they agree and diverge. Butler’s perspective on revolutionary violence has evolved throughout her body of work and is most clearly developed in *The Force of Non-Violence* (Butler, 2020) but its roots can be traced back throughout various footnotes and past texts (Butler, 1990; 1993; 2008). Essentially, Butler recognises situations where violence may be necessary (Butler, 2020, p. 43), but argues in general terms that true self-invention requires “constitutive sociality” (Butler, 2008, p. 228), i.e., that existence requires social mutual recognition, and that by wielding violence we destroy this social constitution (Butler, 2020, p. 25) and at the same time allow violence to grow beyond the role of a “pure instrument” into a self-perpetuating affliction (Butler, 2008, p. 225; 2020, p. 22). Fanon’s view of colonial violence decomposes in two distinct parts: first, the colonist’s violence, both physical and structural, on the colonised and their psyche; second, the path-dependence inherent in violence, meaning a return to a pre-colonised state is impossible following violent struggle (Fanon, 1965, p. 21). Both thinkers, therefore, focus on how violence ingrains itself past its initial outburst. However, both diverge on the implications of this view: Fanon views violence as necessary, albeit scarring, whereas Butler contends that a strong commitment to equality cannot allow the dehumanisation which is necessarily imposed on the recipients of violence. Ultimately, I conclude that Fanon’s view likely overstates the primacy of violence in decolonial struggle – on the other hand, while I agree more with Butler, there are theoretical problems with her own arguments that I will tackle and discuss. As a practical example to illustrate my engagement with these two opposing views, I will analyse the case of violence in Haiti during the \_\_\_.

Beginning with Fanon’s conception of revolutionary violence, it is important to tackle both sides of his framework of colonial violence, wherein we start with the violence imparted by the colonist on the colonised. In the colonial era, the colonised are subordinate to the colonist, not only in the sense that they are economically inferior – with a society “divided in two”, wherein the higher sector is “built to last, all stone and steel” and the lower sector “hungry for bread, meat, shoes, coal, and light.” (Fanon, 2004, p. 57) – and legally inferior – where the representatives of the “regime of oppression” are the police and soldier (Fanon, 2004, p. 56) – but also in the sense that they are morally inferior: the colonised are dehumanised, reduced to the state of an animal, and their own religion, beliefs and values are seen as diametrically opposed to the colonists’ (Fanon, 2004, p. 59). In the context of this colonial violence, the desire for revolutionary violence is fostered, primarily because the social intercourse between the colonised subjects allows them to break away from the colonialist, bourgeois deference for individuality (Fanon, 2004, p. 62). Instead, struggle is socialised away from this “every man for himself” maxim into a broader solidarity with the rest of the colonised (*ibid*, p.63). In the same sense that the colonialist fabricates the colonised (Fanon, 2004, p. 55), this new form of social intercourse fabricates a new revolutionary stratum.

Fanon (2004, p. 56) argues that decolonisation “can only succeed by resorting to every means, including, of course, violence”. Ultimately, decolonisation is about the colonised taking the place of the colonists, and such an agenda requires violent intent as a pre-requisite (*ibid*). Indeed, this violent intent is, according to Fanon (2004, p. 90), a reflection of the colonial violence imparted on the oppressed peoples. However, the belief that Fanon glorifies violence (Jha, 1988), or that Fanon believes violent revolution will eradicate the effects of colonial oppression in the colonised (Butler, 2008), is misplaced. Instead, as Ewara (2020) convincingly argues, for Fanon, violence scars the new society which emerges out of it: even though the colonist fabricates the colonised, the removal of the colonial regime does not return the colonised people back to their original society nor psyche. Violence, committed both against colonial forces, but also against innocents, lives in the hearts and minds of the revolutionaries: “the old Algeria is dead. All the innocent blood that has flowed onto the national soil has produced a new humanity and no one must fail to recognise this fact” (Fanon, 1965, p. 27). Ewara (2020) aptly quotes Baldwin (1979, p. 375): “Hell is a staining place”. Nowhere is this seen more clearly than the presentation by Fanon (2004, p. 196) depicting the major depressive disorder and suicidality of a young soldier of the Algerian National Liberation Army (ALN) in *Case No. 3*. The soldier, now a patient of Fanon, killed a woman – the wife of an infamous white settler – and is haunted by her in his dreams every night. The journey of the colonised is, as such, a tragedy: violence is necessary for their freedom, but it will invariably scar their future.

Butler disagrees principally with Fanon’s view that violence is necessary, although she shares a similar attitude to violence’s dangerous outcomes. A core part of Butler’s broader philosophy is the idea that “that there can be no invention of oneself without the ‘you’ and that the ‘self’ is constituted precisely in a mode of address that avows its constitutive sociality.” (Butler, 2008, p. 228)[[1]](#footnote-1). This forms the basis of one of Butler’s arguments for non-violence: to be violent is to be violent against oneself. On the other hand, if the humanity of the Other is rejected, we can push those on the margins into the “zone of non-being” (Butler, 2020, p. 25 [*Quoting Fanon]*). To do so, however, is to abandon another core part of Butler’s philosophy – the belief in radical egalitarianism; this radical egalitarianism is itself a precondition for living interdependency (*ibid*). This constitutes another argument for non-violence: violence rejects egalitarian philosophy. Finally, Butler also argues that violence can become a self-perpetuating affliction when it is viewed instrumentally (Butler, 2020, p. 18).

Transferring these non-violent arguments in general to investigate revolutionary violence in particular is not straightforward. Butler (2020, p. 18) concedes that non-violence is not an “absolute” principle, and that there are cases where ‘intervention’ – based on context, we can safely read *violent* intervention – is necessary. Already in earlier work, we see Butler (2008, p. 221) grappling with propositions from Sartre and Fanon as to whether violence is really the only route to “psychoaffective survival” (Butler, 2008, [*Quoting Babha, 2004]*)

1. Fanon: colonised is emasculated and their lives are subordinated, both structurally and morally, to the colonist.
2. Violence fixes this but leaves the freed population with psychological problems which is why they are the *damned* – since the moment they were colonised, they were ‘stained by Hell’, and the price to buy freedom is costly but must be paid.
3. Butler: summarises Fanon as saying that violence allows space to be cleared for man to be made anew.
   1. Ignores the “fundamental philosophical truth”: that violence does not create.
4. Haitian revolution

of the spilling of “innocent blood” in the

but can trace its roots back through footnotes referencing Fanon in *Gender Trouble* (Butler, 1990, p. 196), the consideration of how the interaction between racist oppressor and the oppressed can tamper with self-perception and self-control in *Endangered/Endangering* (Butler, 1993), and most visibly in *Violence, Nonviolence: Sartre on Fanon* (Butler, 2008)where

I find that Butler and Fanon both criticise an instrumental approach to violence, mainly by pointing to how the end state which is often considered does not fully capture the total result of violence. However, Butler and Fanon diverge when considering violence as a whole: while Butler

finds that any theoretical defence of violence posits an unequal distribution of grievability, Fanon argues that resistance must first begin with an acknowledgement of existing inequality which means that separate groups, the colonised and coloniser, cannot be held to the same standards.

1. She takes this view as shared by Fanon, asserting this in contrast to the view that “there can be no self-creation without violence.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)