



# ‘Aberrations of affect’, the critique of ontology and the specificity of the colonial relation in Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*

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## Abstract

In a decade deeply marked by renewed calls for racial equality and decolonisation culminating in the explosion of the Black Lives Matter movement globally, the thought of no single thinker has resonated more profoundly with our contemporary political moment than that of Frantz Fanon. I argue that the temptation, in the reception of Fanon’s thought since the 1980s, to ontologise aspects of Fanon’s analysis of colonialism—either in the name of the overarching ambivalence of all social identities or in the name of the absolute specificity of Blackness—obscures the ways in which Fanon claimed that his examination of the colonial situation breaks with traditional ontologies. Through an examination of Fanon’s deployment of the Sartrean concept of ‘the situation’ and the comparisons he draws in his psychiatric writings between workplace management techniques and racist societies, I show how Fanon sought to think simultaneously the specificity of anti-Black racism and the resolutely modern ways in which it is reproduced.

**Keywords** Fanon · Colonialism · Blackness · Ontology · Radical psychiatry

From the streets of Ferguson, Missouri to Solomon Mahlangu House in Johannesburg and the explosion of Black Lives Matter globally in response to extrajudicial murders of unarmed Black civilians by police across the United States and elsewhere, the thought of no single author has resonated more profoundly with renewed struggles for racial justice and decolonisation over the past decade than that of Frantz Fanon. Indeed, each chapter in the struggle for racial equality and

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decolonisation over the past six decades has a reading of Fanon proper to it. The urgency of our current conjuncture and the fact that recent years have seen the publication, for the first time in English, of the entirety of Fanon's artistic, psychiatric and political writings mean that we can begin to set to work on new readings of Fanon armed with fresh primary material, to address new political struggles and realities.

Since the late 1990s there has been a turn in philosophical interpretations of *Black Skin, White Masks* towards using the text as a resource for thinking the *specificity* of anti-Black racism. This is in contrast to the Fanon of the 1980s—the Fanon of Homi Bhabha's controversial foreword to the 1986 English translation of *Black Skin, White Masks*. Bhabha's Fanon is one adapted to a coalitional politics where the task of political Blackness is to think how the struggle against racial injustice can form part of an expanded socialist strategy and find common cause with burgeoning 'new social movement'. This leads Bhabha to emphasise the ambivalence, contingency and overdetermination of racialised identities as an index of the contingency of identities in general. The persistence of specifically anti-*Black* forms of structural discrimination and violence in the 2000s has led Afropessimist and phenomenological readers of Fanon—albeit from very different philosophical premises and to very different political ends—to argue for the ontological *specificity* of Blackness and anti-Black racism.

In both cases, I argue, the temptation to ontologise, either in the name of the overarching ambivalence of all social identities or in the name of the absolute specificity of Blackness, obscures the ways in which Fanon claimed the an examination of the colonial situation breaks with traditional ontologies. Through an examination of Fanon's use of the Sartrean concept of 'the situation' I show that Fanon thought it was impossible to account for racism through recourse to a general ontology. Instead, the specificity of the colonial situation and the relationship between subjects under colonialism can only be understood through an examination of the ensemble of social relations which fix the modes in which subjects relate to one another in colonial societies. Through recourse to Fanon's psychiatric writings, I show how Fanon understood this 'fixing' of relations (in which Blacks are consistently dominated or placed in a subordinate position) through a comparison between racist societies and modern workplace management techniques. Like Bhabha, and against the Afropessimist tendency to ontologise, such a reading of Fanon stresses the priority of relations over identities and the essential contingency of identities. *Pace* Bhabha, and in the spirit of the Afropessimist and phenomenological attention to the specificity of anti-Black racism, I demonstrate the *specificity* of the colonial relations and thus the impossibility of eliding the experience of Blackness into the experience of the ambivalence at the heart of all identities.

The upshot of this reading of Fanon, I suggest, is that we are able to account for the specificity of anti-Black racism while identifying its resolutely modern aspects—the contemporary practices, institutions and social relations in which anti-Blackness is reproduced. Beyond a theory of Blackness and anti-Blackness Fanon gives us, therefore, a means of identifying the particular institutions and social relations that must be transformed in the struggle for a nonracial society.



## 'Ambivalence' versus 'fixity' in the reception of *Black Skin, White Masks*

Fanon's epistemological revolution in the theory of colonialism is two-fold. Firstly, he shifts the register of his analysis—not totally, of course, but significantly—away from conceiving colonialism as primarily a system of economic and political inequality to conceiving it in ontological terms. To be more precise, in *Black Skin, White Masks* Fanon explains how the lived experience of the colonised in a colonial society fundamentally changes what it means to 'be', or disturbs the presuppositions of traditional ontology (I will return to this point shortly). Secondly, although he still flirts with a theoretical humanist perspective, he nonetheless focuses on and takes as his conceptual point of departure "the black-white" relation.<sup>1</sup> By focusing on the relation between black and white, Fanon undercuts the colonial pretension, the pretention of the White coloniser to full self-possession and self-identity. The coloniser is, on the contrary, not master of himself but an effect of the colonial relation: he does not pre-exist that relation but only comes into existence as constituted in and through it.

In a well-known and elusive opening passage of *Black Skin, White Masks* Fanon immediately announces the ontological dimensions of the analyses which follow. Fanon explains that the black man under colonialism occupies 'a zone of nonbeing, an extraordinarily sterile and arid region, an utterly naked declivity where an authentic upheaval can be born. In most cases, the black man lacks the advantage of being able to accomplish this descent into a real hell' (Fanon 2008, p. 2). The nature of Fanon's ontological inquiry is immediately qualified a couple of paragraphs on when Fanon explains that to understand the peculiar ontology of the black subject, we cannot make recourse to abstract universalist invocation of 'Man' and the 'human condition': 'Man is not merely a possibility of recapture or of negation'. (*ibid.*) 'The Black' explains Fanon, 'is a *black* man; that is, as the result of a series of aberrations of affect, he is rooted at the core of a universe from which he must be extricated'. (*ibid.*, emphasis my own).

Both these passages have received dozens of analyses in the various waves of Fanon reception since the publication of *Black Skin, White Masks*. For the purposes of this paper I will focus on a number of well-known readings 'the zone of nonbeing' and the 'aberrant affects' described by Fanon from two distinct theoretical and political conjunctures. I will pay particular attention to the shifts between Homi Bhabha's post-structuralist reading of Fanon in the late 1980s and more recent Afropessimist and phenomenological readings of Fanon. I will examine how each sought to claim the broader philosophical implications of Fanon account of the specificity of the colonial relation vis-à-vis other varieties of subject formation and forms of intersubjectivity by emphasising different aspects of Fanon's thought in line with their broader theoretical and political project.

<sup>1</sup> C.f. 'In the course of this essay we shall observe the development of an effort to understand the black-white relation' (Fanon, 2008, p. 3).



In this respect, Stuart Hall puts his finger on the central dilemma faced by recent philosophical interpretations of *Black Skin, White Masks*. Using Homi Bhabha's controversial 1986 foreword to the text as one pole in a spectrum of possible interpretations, he writes.

[T]he as-yet deeply unresolved question in so-called 'post-colonial studies' as to how to reconcile – or at least hold in a proper balance – in its paradigm and explanation and reading, *both* Fanon's spectacular demonstration of the power of the racial binary to *fix*, and Bhabha's equally important and theoretically productive argument that all binary systems of power are nevertheless, *at the same time*, often if not always, troubled and subverted by an ambivalence and disavowal. Our dilemma is how to *think together* the overwhelming power of the binary, which persists despite everything in all racially inflected systems of power and representation; *and simultaneously* the ambivalences, the openings, the slippages which the suturing of racial discourses can never totally close up.' (Hall 1996, pp. 27–8)

On the side of the *ambivalence* against the fixity of colonial relation we have, therefore, readings like Homi Bhabha's where *Black Skin White Masks* is celebrated as a 'jagged testimony of colonial dislocations' which 'refuses the ambition of any total theory of colonialism' (Bhabha 2008, p. xxiv). For Bhabha, Fanon's reading of the colonial situation serves to deconstruct the categories of 'Man' and 'Society'. The colonial antagonism is not between two pre-constituted identities—colonised and coloniser, black and white. Rather the "constellation of delirium" that Fanon describes as characteristic of the lived experience of colonialism points towards a deeper instability at the heart of racialised subjectivities. The key moment for Bhabha is Fanon's description of the constitutive anxiety of the black subject described in the chapter 'The lived experience of the black man'. Fanon's description of The collapse of the 'corporeal schema'—the schema of a stable 'ego' within the spatio-temporal world—of the black man and its replacement by a 'racial epidermal schema' as he is assailed by a host of racist stereotypes conjures, for Bhabha,

[T]he image of a Post-Enlightenment man tethered to, *not* confronted by, his dark reflection, the shadow of the colonized man, that splits his presence, distorts his outline, breaches his boundaries, repeats his action at a distance, disturbs and divides the very time of his being. This ambivalent identification of the racist world [...] turns on the the idea of Man *as* his alienated image, not Self and Other but "Other-ness" of Self inscribed in the perverse palimpsest of colonial identity. (ibid, p. xxvii)

For Bhabha, in other words, the collapse of a stable sense of self (the corporal schema and the historico-racial schema, described by Fanon) and the Black subject's plunging into an abyss— 'All this whiteness burns me to ashes'—points to a deeper ambivalence at the heart of *all* identity formation (Fanon 2008, p. 86). Bhabha turns to Lacan to suggest that 'For identification, identity is never an a priori, nor a finished product; it is only ever the problematic process of access



to an "image" of totality'. (*ibid* pp. xxix–xxx). Fanon's text is praised by Bhabha for the passages in which the colonial relation is conceptualised as a confrontation with otherness where the Other is implicitly understood as 'the necessary negation of primordial identity'—for instance, in Fanon's description of how the encounter with the racialised gaze eludes the Hegelian problematic of recognition or when Fanon rejects recourse to an autochthonous African cultural heritage and identity *à la* Negritude in the course of anti-colonial struggles. On the other hand, Fanon is criticised for moments in his text in which he resorts to conceptualising the colonial relation as a confrontation with otherness where the Other is figured as a fixed phenomenological point (p. xxx).

Bhabha suggests that we should follow Fanon down the path of stressing the 'ambivalence of identification' while acknowledging that 'he is too quick to name the Other, to personalize its presence in the language of colonial racism— "the real Other for the white man is and will continue to be the black man. And conversely"' (*ibid*). Bhabha thus proposes that we draw from Fanon a 'politics of subversion'. That is, a politics that seeks to thoroughly undermine the language of colonial racism by living with difference instead of trying to transcend or sublimate it in the name of attaining—or indeed returning to—an 'authentic' identity beyond those constituted under colonialism. Bhabha gives a hint of what such a politics would look like when, in the closing paragraph of his text, he alludes to emerging social movements which gather under the banner 'Black' not in the name of a homogenising or exclusive nationalism but rather as a way of uniting heterogeneous struggles against oppression; 'to make of it a common cause, a public image of the identity of otherness'. (p. xxxvi).

Perhaps most characteristic of the opposite end of the spectrum described by Hall—i.e. those who stress *fixity* over *ambivalence*—are recent 'Afropessimist' readings of *Black Skin, White Masks*.<sup>2</sup> For Afropessimists such as Frank Wilderson III and Jared Sexton, contra Bhabha, we cannot understand the colonial relation as a mere 'ambivalence of identification' to the exclusion of a conception of colonialism as the confrontation of antagonistic identifications. This is not in the name of the return to 'fixed' or essentialised racial identities but rather as a means of insisting on the historically specific—and crushingly persistent—forms of anti-black racism that arise from slavery and the Middle Passage. The specificity of anti-black racism, according to Afropessimists, arises from the fact that civil society has been constituted through the refusal or foreclosure of Black political agency resulting in Black life becoming synonymous with 'social death'. When Fanon writes 'A feeling of inferiority? No, a feeling of nonexistence' (p. 106) and that the Black 'occupies the zone of nonbeing' Afropessimist critics argue that he is pointing towards something beyond the mere ambivalence of racialised identities. As Frank Wilderson III explains in his *Red, White and Black*.

Unlike the solution-oriented, interest-based, or hybridity-dependent scholarship so fashionable today, Afropessimism explores the meaning of Blackness

<sup>2</sup> See Wilderson (2010) and (2015), Sexton (2011) and Marriot (2018).



not—in the first instance—as a variously and unconsciously interpellated identity or as a conscious social actor, but as a structural position of noncommunicability in the face of all other positions; this meaning is noncommunicable because, again, as a position, Blackness is predicated on modalities of accumulation and fungibility, not exploitation and alienation. (Wilderson 2010 p. 59)

Insofar as, for Wilderson, ‘modernity marks the emergence of a new ontology because it is an era in which an entire race appears, people who, prior to any transgressive act or losing a war, stand as socially dead in relation to the rest of the world’ (Wilderson 2010, p. 18) there is something absolutely singular about anti-black racism and the place (or nonplace) of the black subject in contemporary societies.

In addition to the dismissive reference to ‘hybridity scholarship’ signalling that prioritising *fixity* over *ambivalence* in Fanon’s account of the colonial relation implies an entirely different theoretical framework from that of Bhabha, we also see outlined within Afropessimist literature an entirely different account of what constitutes an authentic anti-racist politics. For Afropessimisms, the kind of coalition politics and the submergence of Blackness under a broad-tent politics of ‘identities’ and ‘differences’ endorsed by Bhabha is reformist and inadequately antagonistic to the status quo of an anti-Black world.<sup>3</sup>

Because the Black subject is positioned outside the social and outside the category of ‘the human’ the only authentic Black politics, for Afropessimists, is one in which anti-Blackness is purged from the world through an act of radical revolutionary negativity. And insofar as the world, according to them, is constituted in and through anti-Blackness, such a Black politics would herald the end of the world as we know it. Some of Fanon’s more apocalyptic pronouncements, as in his famous paper on violence, should not, according to Afropessimism, be dismissed as stylistic excesses or essentialising reductions—as Bhabha sometimes suggests they are. Rather, they are essential for pinning down the specificity of anti-Black racism—both existentially and structurally—and building a politics adequate to that specificity. As David Marriot writes in his recent Afropessimist inflected study of Fanon, the latter views the revolution against colonialism ‘as a moment of invention, in which destructive violence allows the socially dead to acquire a new symbolic form. For this radical disarticulation is the moment when all the received and contrived principles of colonialism, which had kept the people within their proper limits, become reversed or are rendered unreliable, and the existing basis of knowledge teems with errors’ (Marriot 2018, p. 243).

<sup>3</sup> For an account of the Black nationalist undertones of Afropessimism see (Gordon et al. 2017, p. 106). If there is anything ‘nationalistic’ about an Afropessimist politics it is not a nationalism founded on an essential black identity but rather on the singular structural *position* (or, better, *non-position*) occupied by the Black subject.



## The temptation to 'ontologise'

In assessing this tension between the relative priority accorded to the fixity of the racial binary versus its ambivalence Stuart Hall is once again instructive. He points out yet another difficulty attendant to any theoretical confrontation with *Black Skin, White Masks*. The difficulty arises from whether one conceptualises 'the condition for the formation of subjectivity in the dialectics of desire 'from the place of the Other' [as] part of a *general ontology*' or, instead, as 'historically specific to the colonial relation' (Hall 1996, p. 27). Fanon does, after all, state explicitly in the 'Lived Experience of the Black Man' chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks* that,

[E]very ontology is made unattainable in a colonized and civilized society. It would seem that this fact has not been given sufficient attention by those who have discussed the question. In the *Weltanschauung* of a colonized people there is an impurity, a flaw that outlaws any ontological explanation [...] Ontology [...] does not permit us to understand the being of the black man. (Fanon 2008, p. 82)

We may ask whether, for all their care to provide an anti-essentialist account of the colonial relation in Fanon, both Bhabha and the Afropessimists end up with an account of the formation of colonial subjectivities that fall back on a general ontology of the kind Fanon explicitly rejects.

In Bhabha's case, it is as though Fanon's account of the anxiety that is encountered by the Black man faced with the colonial gaze serves as a sort of deconstruction which reveals, beneath the imaginary identifications of both coloniser and colonised, a general Lacanian mechanism for self-identification. The ambivalence characteristic of the Black under colonialism is thus an ambivalence common to *all* identities. The colonial situation, though itself historically specific, serves to uncover a *general* characteristic of identity formation rather than to reveal something specific about Black colonised identity and subjectivity—even something specific about the *ambivalence* at the heart of that identity. Bhabha is writing at a time, the late 1980s, where theorists on the left were developing conceptual frameworks which would challenge socialist parties to incorporate the struggles of 'new social movements' that had emerged since the late 1960s by emphasising the throughgoing contingency of all social relations and the ambivalence and instability of all political identities. For this reason, in the British intellectual context Bhabha along with, most notably, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe emphasised the 'anti-essentialist' nature of the struggle for socialist hegemony in order to broaden the remit of socialist politics and strategy beyond a narrow class essentialism.

While Bhabha's position is not reducible to that of Laclau and Mouffe, it is prone to some of the same theoretical and political difficulties. The difficulties arise from how they conceptualise the movement from what Laclau calls the 'logic of differences' to the 'logic of equivalences'. That is, from heterogeneous struggles and political subjects to their equivalence in their shared antagonism



to a ‘power bloc’. One gets the impression that in this conception of politics differences are not ever allowed to be really *different*, that is, really heterogeneous. Differences are resolved through their assimilation into an overarching strategy or form of political subjectivity. We are deprived of an enquiry into how specific forms of social relations and the subjects they produce may imply—or, indeed, demand—absolutely singular forms of political strategy and forms of revolutionary subjectivity. Hall is blunter when he writes, ‘For the whole thrust of Bhabha’s text [...] is the *political* consequence of a Lacanian theoretical position, where ambivalence is a necessary part of the script. Whereas Fanon’s theoretical position [...] has the political question of *how to end this alienation* inscribed in it. Fanon cannot, politically, ‘live with this ambivalence’, since it is that ambivalence that is killing him!’ (Hall 1996, p. 27). This is not to say that coalition building in the struggle for hegemony is not possible or desirable. It is just to caution against an approach to unifying heterogeneous struggles by straightjacketing them in a particular approach to socialist strategy (essentially electoral politics in Laclau and Mouffe). We may want to think instead how the basis for the ‘equivalence of struggles’ is itself transformed in its mediation through heterogeneous forms of political subjectivities.

While the Afropessimist literature does more to address the specificity of anti-Blackness and the struggle against it and it also does more to address Fanon’s claims about the impossibility of ontology in the colonial situation there is still a strong ontologising impulse among its adherents. While Afropessimists make much of Fanon’s claim that the Black subject lacks an ontology and occupies a ‘zone of non-being’ they do this by essentially *ontologising* this position of non-being. Instead of interrogating how the lived experience, that is the specific historical and social context, of the Black subject rules out the project of an ontology in the traditional sense of the term—as an abstract and universal discourse on, say, Man and Being—the Afropessimists construct one, albeit one centred on the negativity of Black ‘social death’.

Just like Bhabha they risk, therefore, straightjacketing anti-racist struggle into a particular form of revolutionary strategy and subjectivity which is, as it were, ‘grafted onto’ their ontology. Fanon’s theorisation of colonialism develops across a myriad of geographic and historical contexts and incorporates distinct genealogies of racism: the experience, foregrounded in *Black Skin White Masks*, of a Black man from one of France’s ‘old colonies’, the encounter with soldiers from the ‘new African colonies’ while he was fighting in the free French army during the Second World War, the status of the *indigènes* in colonial Algeria and the specificity of anti-Arab racism in colonial Algeria and in the metropole. It is hard to imagine Fanon endorsing an account of anti-Black racism and the struggle against it as absolutely *ontologically* distinct from say, the plight and struggles of indigenous peoples and the Palestinian struggle for national self-determination—as Wilderson has done in a number of his published works.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, (Wilderson 2020, pp. 8–13) where he claims the Blacks are placed in a subordinate position to Palestinians in a world constituted through anti-Blackness.





Phenomenologically inflected readings of Fanon—as opposed to the broadly post-structuralist ones examined above—have done better to examine the problematic place of ontology in Fanon's thought. They have done so through comparing Fanon's account of the lived experience of the Black man under colonialism to more traditional ontologies and phenomenological systems. Lewis Gordon, for instance, points out that while Hegel's master–slave dialectic (as well as phenomenological frameworks which issue from it) 'presuppose the subtle symmetry of Otherness', Fanon points to the failure of Self–Other relations under the colonial situation. 'Since racism is a denial to an Other attributes of the self and even those of another self—in other words, even of being an *Other*—the resulting schema is one of location *below*, in the zone of nonbeing' (Gordon 2015, p. 69). Nelson Maldonado-Torres also reads Fanon's account of the failure of the master–slave dialectic under colonial conditions as signalling a 'more general rethinking of ontology in the light of coloniality and the search for deconcolonisation' (2007, p. 242). Comparing the 'colonial difference' in Fanon to Heidegger's 'ontological difference' and Levinas' 'trans-ontological difference', Maldonado-Torres describes the colonial difference, in terms similar to Gordon's, as a 'sub-Ontological' difference.

While recent phenomenological studies have done a better job at attempting to think Fanon's break with traditional ontology, their accounts tend, just like their post-structuralist counterparts to *ontologise* this failure of ontology under colonialism. Maldonado-Torres describes the 'sub-ontological' difference as an *ontological* colonial difference (as opposed to the *epistemological* colonial difference described in the work of Walter Mignolo) and therefore as a 'difference between Being and what lies below Being or that which is negatively marked as dispensable as well as the target of rape and murder' (ibid, p. 254). Like we saw with the Afropessimists, there is a temptation to ontologise the place of the colonised Black subject instead of exploring the extent to which the colonial situation radically calls into question traditional ontologies and phenomenologies. The same temptation can be discerned in Gordon's account of the politics that he reads emerging from the location of the Black colonised subject 'below' Self–Other relations. Gordon writes, 'white-black relations are such that blacks, in their effort to rise out of the zone of nonbeing, struggle to achieve Otherness (to get into Self–Other relations); it is a struggle to be in a position, in effect, *for the ethical to emerge*, for ethics and morality, proper, are relationships between human beings or in terms of demands placed on living in the human world' (Gordon 2015, p. 69). Ciccariello-Maher echoes Gordon in claiming that the anti-colonial struggle for equality called for in *Black Skin, White Masks* is one in which 'racialized subjects must first seize access to ontology, storming the fortified heaven of being itself' (2010, p.).

## Colonialism as 'situation' and 'technique' in Fanon's psychiatric writings

In what follows, I will pursue a reading of Fanon that takes his challenge to ontology neither as a call to *refound* ontology on the basis of the radical absence of the Black subject from traditional discourses of Man and Being; nor one which reduces Fanon



politics to a *struggle for access to ontology*. I will instead pursue a reading of Fanon that claims that he had in mind an account of the lived experience of colonialism and racism that radically called into question the methodological precepts of philosophies which sought to construct general ontologies.

Pierre Macherey's recent engagement with Fanon's thought points in the direction of the kind of reading of Fanon that I wish to pursue. Comparing the 'Look Mama!' passage in *Black Skins White Masks* to the scene described by Louis Althusser in his 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' in which someone is 'interpellated' by recognising themselves as the addressee of a policeman's imperative ('Hey you there!'), Macherey suggests a problematic shared between these two otherwise incompatible philosophical systems. What the dramatisation of the theory of the two thinkers share, according to Macherey, is that while both are illustrated by a face-to-face encounters, each also presuppose 'a background that teems with the unthought and the unsaid' (Macherey 2012, p. 17).

As Althusser states in his paper on ideology, interpellation does not have to be explicitly verbalised in order for its effects to be felt. In Althusser's account of the operation of ideology, the policeman's command is not a spontaneous act but merely a stand-in for the myriad practices and institutions, operating at myriad levels of society and in myriad sites, through which capitalism manages to reproduce itself without resorting to naked violence and repression. Similarly, the 'Look Mama' scenario described by Fanon also seems to be aimed at illustrating a phenomenon that does not have to be explicitly verbalised or incarnated in a face-to-face encounter for its effects to be felt. The words that plunge the Black man into anxiety are pronounced by a child and articulate the most banal racial stereotypes; this suggests that while the speaker (the little white boy) utters the words, he is neither there author nor their ultimate source. The scenario points, rather, to the accumulation of racial stereotypes and racist and racialised practices—both existing and historical—which structure social relations at every level of colonial society. In the colonial situation, therefore, 'it no longer makes sense to speak of intersubjectivity: the encounter between two people facing one another is just an occasion for the reproduction of a relational mode whose forms are already fixed, under conditions that traditional ontology is incapable of accounting for' (ibid).

Of the philosophical means at Fanon's disposal to articulate the relational mode proper to the colonial context, Macherey suggests Sartre's notion of 'the situation' should be ascribed particular importance. For Sartre one is never, say, Black or Jewish or anything else (a woman, gay, bourgeois etc.) in an absolute sense or on the plane of being in itself but, always in—and as a product of—a 'situation'. In Fanon's case, 'being Black' does not constitute a primary or objective determination that can be examined in isolation from the 'situation' in which it emerges—the confrontation between the Black man and the terrified white child. Macherey describes the concept of 'the situation' as a

Complex ensemble of relations that confront people with one another in a context in which their manner of relating to one another is predetermined or called upon to take place according to a certain order or responding to certain norms. It is therefore a paradoxical combination of freedom and necessity which, seen



from the angle of freedom, is unstable, and, seen from the angle of necessity, is regulated by a historical conditioning that unfolds on a plane that is not that of individual intentions, because it depends on the global organization of society (2012, p. 18)

Macherey's reading chimes with another famous and widely commented upon passage in *Black Skin, White Masks*. Namely, one of the opening passages of *Black Skin, White Masks* in which Fanon describes the methodological framework—both philosophical and psychiatric—that informs the book and his approach to psycho-social phenomena more broadly. The passage sees Fanon taking his distance from both biological determinist and psychoanalytic approaches to the relationship between the mental and the psychic when he writes.

Reacting against the constitutionalist tendency of the late nineteenth century, Freud insisted that the individual factor be taken into account through psychoanalysis. He substituted for a phylogenetic theory the ontogenetic perspective. It will be seen that the black man's alienation is not an individual question. Besides phylogeny and ontogeny stands sociogeny (Fanon 2008, p. 4).

The relationship between these three determinants of the psychological phenomena—the biological (phylogeny), the biographical or the psychoanalytic (ontogeny) and the social (sociogeny)—were central to Fanon's thought throughout his career. He thought it was crucial that one held all three, and considered the relationship between all three, if one was to take proper understanding of the psychological phenomena one was examining. It is also clear, however, that an understanding of 'sociogeny' had a particular priority in his thought, both psychiatric and political. It is through a consideration of the 'complex of social relations' (to borrow Macherey's terminology) that allowed Fanon to make sense of 'North African Syndrome' and challenge the presuppositions of the colonial ethnopsychiatry of Antoine Porot and the Algiers School.<sup>5</sup> It is also central to the institutional reforms he introduced to his psychiatric practices in colonial Algeria and newly independent Tunisia.<sup>6</sup>

It is in fact in his psychiatric writings, more than anywhere else, that Fanon elaborates most explicitly on the 'ensemble of social relations' which establish racialised subjectivities and a particular 'relational mode' under colonialism; it is also where he begins to spell out how we can transform them. Before turning to Fanon's psychiatric writings, however, I wish to slightly expand upon Macherey's account of Fanon's radical challenge to traditional ontology. There is another instructive comparison to be made between Althusser's account of the operation of ideology and

<sup>5</sup> See (Fanon 1988, pp. 3–17). Fanon uses the term 'North African Syndrome' to refer to severe abdominal pain suffered by North African immigrants with no underlying physiological cause. While mainstream psychiatrists concluded that the condition had no basis in reality Fanon pointed to societal causes that could induce this psychosomatic disorder. It is also through reference to the social context of colonial Algeria that Fanon challenges many racist presuppositions of the Algiers School who, for instance, explained psychosomatic disorders with reference to the presumed duplicitousness endemic to Algerian culture.

<sup>6</sup> See Chapter 10, 25 and 26 of Part II of (Fanon 2018).



Fanon's analysis of the lived experience of the Black man which is missing from Macherey's text. In Althusser's account of ideology, the usual causal order in which ideology is understood is overturned. A conception of Ideology as a 'worldview' or 'set of ideas' imposed on an individual and resulting in a certain set of behaviours and actions is rejected by Althusser. He does so through invoking Pascal's advice to the libertine who lacks religious belief: "Kneel down, move your lips in prayer, and you will believe". While Pascal's advice reverses traditional accounts of the direction of causality underpinning ideology—that is, for Pascal it is action or practice which produces belief—Althusser wants to do away entirely with a conception of ideology as a set of ideas, and therefore, any distinction between mind and body. He thus retranslates Pascal in the following terms,

I shall therefore say that, where only a single subject (such as the individual) is concerned, the existence of the ideas of his belief is material in that *his ideas are his material actions inserted into material practices governed by material rituals which are themselves defined by the material ideological apparatus from which derive ideas of the subject.* (Althusser 1971, pp. 169–170)

Fanon, similarly, eschews an account of racism as a 'worldview' or 'set of ideas' guiding a set of practices. For Fanon, racism and racist society is defined with reference to a series of material practices or a structure which governs the practice of individuals and their modes of relating to one another. In his concept of the 'corporeal schema', racism is to be defined at the level of the physical, spatio-temporal being of the subject in the world and the range of action this presence allows. As David Macey suggests, 'A clearer image of what Fanon himself understands by a corporal schema emerges from his description of the Algerian women who, during the war of independence, took off their traditional veils, adopted European dress and planted bombs: 'The absence of the veil alters the Algerian woman's corporeal schema. She has to rapidly invent new dimensions for her body' (1999, p. 11). The collapse of the Black man's corporal schema in his encounter with the terrified white little boy comes about because he realises that he is not the ultimate source of his spatio-temporal being and compartment in the world. His very bodily presence in the world and his range of actions and relating with others is not carefully curated by his own ego and individual history—'A slow composition of my *self* as a body in the middle of a spatial and temporal world [...] a definitive structuring of the self and of the world' (Fanon 2008, p. 83). Rather, it is relational form that is imposed on him by a complex ensemble of relations in colonial society: 'The elements that I used had been provided for me not by "residual sensations and perceptions primarily or a tactile, vestibular, kinesthetic and visual character," but by the other, the white man, who had woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories. I thought that what I had in hand was to construct the physiological self, to balance space, to localize sensations, and here I was called on for more' (ibid, p. 84).

Fanon had intended to submit *Black Skin, White Masks* (originally entitled *Essay on the Disalienation of the Black*) as the dissertation required for his qualification for a medical doctorate.<sup>7</sup> Many of the themes explored in the text are thus psychiatric

<sup>7</sup> See (Macey 2012, pp. 136–137) and (Khalifa 2018, p. 173).



in nature and would be expanded by Fanon in his subsequent psychiatric writings. I cannot provide a definitive account of the relationship between Fanon's political and psychiatric thought here. I will merely highlight certain themes explored by Fanon in his later psychiatric writings which support and expand upon my reading of Fanon's conception of the colonial relation. Over the decades, a number of authors have highlighted Fanon's contribution to psychiatric thought and practice.<sup>8</sup> What all these studies highlight is the importance of Fanon's time as an intern in the Saint-Alban hospital and his coming into contact with the thought and practice of a school of radical psychiatry known as 'institutional psychotherapy'.

At St Alban, Fanon was the intern of the revolutionary psychiatrist François Tosquelles. While mainstream French psychiatry remained largely biological determinist and hostile to the human and social sciences, and Freudian psychoanalysis had concluded that psychotic disorders lay outside its remit (since, apparently, psychotics could not achieve transference relations with the analyst), adherents of institutional psychotherapy looked to social and collective determinants of psychosis. It was within social relations that these radical psychiatrists thought that the operation of a psychotic's unconscious could be understood. Social relations were thought to be the source and site of desires, fantasies and identifications. The importance of an examination of the social relations in which the psychotic was placed was not only essential to diagnosing or understanding psychotic disorders but also essential in their treatment. Institutional psychotherapy sought to produce a "neo-society" within the psychiatric hospital, that is, a new set of social relations from which disalienating forms of collective identification and social practice could emerge,

As Tosquelles's colleague Jean Oury put it, the main goal of institutional psychotherapy was to set up "mechanisms to fight, every day, against that which can turn the whole collective towards a concentrationist and segregationist structure" [...] In the words of Tosquelles, institutional psychotherapy was more than an attempt to cure the patients and the doctors. It was an attempt to "cure life." (Robcis 2020, p. 314)

Fanon—unlike Tosquelles and Oury whose activities in the French resistance during the Second World War had decidedly shaped their thought—did not use the term 'concentrationism' in his psychiatric writings. At the height of the development of his psychiatric ideas the overriding metaphor deployed by Fanon for the kind of relational mode that is imposed upon subjects under colonial and racist societies was not the concentration camp but the Taylorist workspace. In a course Fanon taught at the Institut des hautes études in Tunis on 'The meeting between society and psychiatry', Fanon, curiously, includes extended discussions on 'control and surveillance' in the workplace, 'telephonists' neuroses' and 'employees of large stores' before entering in a discussion of racism in the United States and

<sup>8</sup> See (Bulhan 1985), (Cherki 2006), (Keller 2007), (Khalifa 2015, 2018), (Macey 2012), (Ranzanajao and Postel 2007), (Robcis 2020) and (Vergès 1997).



the features of ‘colonised societies’. He begins his discussion of contemporary techniques for the management of workforces by remarking that

Modern times, it has been said, are characterized by the individual’s being put on file. The psychiatrist intervenes when the individual is part of a work scheme, of a technique, the individual working in a team, on the assembly line, needs to be controlled. (Fanon 2018, p. 522)

Fanon then goes on to summarise some of the behaviours and nervous disorders that result from the individual being submitted to these workplace ‘techniques’. He explains, for instance, how the imposition of a time clock in the workplace

Prevents and limits the endemic guilt of the worker. For the boss, the time clock is indispensable. As the time clock is continually present, it introduces a number of specific conducts in the worker. It represents the overall apparatus that employs the worker. Before the time clock, the worker had the possibility to apologize, from now on, the worker is constantly rejected in the solitude with the impossibility of persuading the employer about his good faith. Hence the pathological conduct observed: nervous tensions, explosive angers, dreams of these workers/nightmare: a train that departs and leaves me, a gate that shuts, a door that does not open, a game that I am not allowed to play, the boss has vanished, leaving the time clock in his place... (ibid, p. 521)

Fanon then moves on to similar discussions about techniques imposed on workers in call centres and the surveillance of employees of large stores. What is striking, however, is that after extended discussions on these techniques for workplace surveillance and control, Fanon moves on to a discussion of American racism where he describes the structure of racist society in strikingly similar terms,

In a divided society, a behaviour can be observed characterised by a predominant nervous tensions leading quickly to exhaustion. Among American Blacks, control of the self is permanent and at all levels, emotional, affective...The division which is called the colour bar, is a rigid thing, its ongoing presence has something nagging about it (ibid, p. 524)

Here we have an account of the effect of racist social relations which clearly resonant with the discussion of the ‘Look Mama!’ scenario in *Black Skin, White Masks* but this time it is not dramatised as a face-to-face encounter by Fanon. Rather, the effects of racist social relations on the lived experience of subjects are compared to the effect of anonymous techniques of workplace discipline and surveillance. As Michael Behrent explains, the term ‘technique’ was used by a number of French thinkers in the 1950s (including, notably, Michel Foucault) ‘to refer not to tools, machines, or the application of science to industrial production, but rather to methods and procedures for governing human beings’. (2013, p. 55) Here, we gain some precision in the kind of relational mode that Fanon thought was imposed on subject in a colonial context. Racist society is described here as a series of ‘techniques’, that is a series of practices and institutions, that govern and



constrain the conduct of subjects and fix their mode of relating to one another and induce anxiety on the subjects on which they are imposed.

Let us return to *Black Skin, White Masks*, where Fanon writes, 'not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man. Some critics will take it on themselves to remind us that this proposition has a converse. I say that this is false' (Fanon 2008, pp. 82–83). What Fanon is describing is the way in which the conduct and mode of relating of the Black subject is fixed in a racist society. The entire purpose of the Black subjects behaviour becomes to assimilate into a White world while simultaneously being assailed constantly with reminders of their being positioned in a place of inferiority and exclusion by the ensemble of social relations within a racist society. They must simultaneously modify their conduct and behaviour to a White world while constantly having their activities scrutinised and 'surveilled' in anticipation for markers of a 'Blackness' which has been pre-constituted through myriad racist discourses and practices. As Fanon writes in *Black Skin, White Masks*, 'I was responsible for my body, for my race, for my ancestors' (ibid, p. 84). As recent events have shown, this is often a responsibility Black subjects pay for with their lives.

The aim of anti-racist struggle, under this conception of a racist society, would thus be to fundamentally transform the set of techniques and institutions which shape the conduct of subjects and fix their mode of relating to one another. Fanon does not provide us a detailed account of the transformations required. However, he gives some indications of what such a struggle would look like when, in *Wretched of the Earth*, he applauds the tactics and forms of organisation by Algerian people to circumvent efforts by the French army to severely constrain their freedom of movement in certain zones,

Today, arms factories are working in the midst of the mountains several yards underground; today, the people's tribunals are functioning at every level, and local planning commissions are organizing the division of large-scale holdings and the working of tomorrow. (Fanon 1963, p. 188)

Fanon goes on to describe how a thriving black market developed in response to French blockades of towns where the nationalist movement intervened in order to ensure that supplies were purchased through nationalist wholesalers and that fair prices were set.

These passing remarks from Fanon do not, of course, provide us with a fully-fledged model for anti-racist and anti-colonial resistance. They nonetheless provide a formidable challenge for all anti-racist struggles which emerge in the wake of his thought. They indicate that the aim of anti-racist struggle is to produce forms of self-organisation that escape the specific techniques and modes of surveillance that are used to impose certain social relations on individuals within a given society.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Strategies of' and ending with first in-text reference to: 'Contemporary strategies of self-organisation and solidarity would thus require an analysis of the institutions and techniques through which race and anti-Blackness are reproduced today (see for instance, (Gilmore 2007), (Noble 2018) and (Veriava 2019)) as well as recuperating the legacies of forms of solidarity and "world-making" that fought for and enacted racial justice at both the grassroots and global level [see, for instance, (Haider 2018) and (Getachew 2019)].



We should recall here that the aim of Fanon's psychiatric practice was to produce a 'neo-society' in the hospital whereby the construction of a new set of social relations between patients and doctors within the hospital could become vectors for disalienating forms of transference and identification. These practices were always specific to the society in question and Fanon had to adapt his practice in both the Algerian and Tunisian context.

## Conclusion

We may ask ourselves how returning to debates around interpretations of Fanon's thought tells us about race *today*. Returning to the letter of Fanon's text, recent archival discoveries and the availability of previously untranslated texts cannot merely be an arcane scholastic exercise in rendering more precise exactly 'what Fanon said' and castigating those who deviate from his Word. As I stated at the start of this paper, different contexts produce different Fanons in which different aspects of Fanon's texts come to be emphasised. An approach which is historically sensitive to both Fanon's thought and the reception of that thought provides scholars and activists in the present a measure of what is still relevant—and what is, perhaps, new—in Fanon for tackling our contemporary conjuncture. It also allows us to see how the political and theoretical context of Fanon's reception may obscure or overemphasise certain aspects of his thought to serve the particular context in which they are intervening. In our case, this allows us to agree with Bhabha's emphasis on the centrality of the agency of relation and the non-giveness of identity while suggesting that he goes too far in trying to make Fanon a theorist of identity *in general*. We are also able to recognise that Bhabha pursued such a reading in the context of a *coalitional* politics of 'identities' and differences in the late 1980s.

Fast-forwarding to the 2010s and 2020s, in which virulent form of anti-Black racism and violence calls for an appreciation of the specificity of anti-*Black* racism, we can see good reasons, both theoretical and political, for the reticence of Afropessimist thinkers, and some phenomenological readers of Fanon, to submerge Blackness under the signifiers of the coalitional politics—"people of colour", "BAME" or, even, "Wretched of the Earth". However, in ontologising Blackness as social death we may worry that the Afropessimists lose the historical specificity of contemporary anti-Black racism and the precise manner in which anti-Blackness is reproduced in contemporary societies. We thus lose some of the most salient aspects of Bhabha's emphasis on the colonial relation and the changeability of identity.

Returning to the letter of Fanon's text, and tracing the development in his psychiatric writings of themes first addressed in *Black Skin, White Masks*, allows us to, invoking Stuart Hall's terminology once again, hold in proper balance the capacity for the racial binary to "fix" relations between subjects in racist societies and the extent to which all identities are subject to "ambivalences" and contingency. We see, with the help of Macherey, that what Fanon was interested in—in the 1950s phenomenological milieu in which his thought developed—was the *specific* colonial situation in which Blackness was produced by eschewing any recourse to general ontology. Fanon's psychiatric writings give us further insights into how he thought





the colonial situation—an ensemble of social relations which fixes the modes in which specific subjects relate to one another—operates by comparing the relations imposed on subjects in racist and colonial societies to industrial ‘techniques’. His emphasis on contemporary forms of industrial management and surveillance—as opposed to, say, merely the historical experience of the Middle Passage—signals the importance Fanon accorded to the resolutely modern aspects of the colonial situation. Six decades after his death, we will not find a complete strategy for today’s struggles in Fanon’s texts. We may, however, find in his own attention to the modern ‘techniques’ of the colonial relation an encouragement to analyse and undo the specific mechanisms which produce and reproduce race today. If returning to Fanon’s political and clinical writings tell us anything, it is that ontology is a poor guide to strategy.

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