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Descension

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The two texts that serve as bookends to the writings of Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs* and *Les Damnés de la Terre* are often situated as taking up two different elements and approaches to decolonization. The former dismantling the colonized psyche with aggressive deconstruction of the individual and the latter the shattering of the coercive regime of empire. This edition affords us the opportunity to linger with *Black Skin, White Masks* and to consider its seismic resonance over the last 70 years. The thinking in this essay is preoccupied with the “zones” that appear in *Black Skin, White Masks* in two ways. The first means to ensure that the attention granted to the *zone of nonbeing* does not distract us from the existence of another zone of subject (re)creation found in the text, the *zone of hachures*.¹ The ambition here is to do a bit more than present a taxonomy of Fanon’s zones but to demonstrate the manner in which they function as essential components in a chain of reasoning and activity that is aimed at decolonization.

The reason for this analysis is based upon the argument that Fanon, here, in the early moments of his thinking, is attempting to find a “way out” of the dialectical world of white supremacist logic that is described by Hegel. It is important to mark here that in endeavoring to escape Hegel’s dialectical imperative, Fanon uses the same tool in an attempt to render Hegel inert, not defeated. The prospect of Hegel’s dialectic being rendered inert versus interrupting or dismissing its logic is an essential concept here. As a matter of the theoretical architecture of Fanon’s thinking it appears that he is predisposed to resolve the question of achieving positive Black subjectivity via the resolution of opposing ideas and forces; Black vs. white, colonized vs. colonizer, etc. This process depends upon the *proper* functioning of dialectical reasoning whereby the encounter is determinative rather than reifying. Hegel’s dialectic, as it relates itself to the Radical Other, is designed to only reify marginal existence rather than present an opportunity for the subaltern to overachieve that status. Rather than abandon, for instance, the prospect of constructing positive Black subjectivity as a resolution of a conflict with Anti-

Blackness, Fanon endeavors to take Hegel's philosophical fingers off the scale and allow the process to proceed without negative presuppositions regarding the potentiality of certain actors. What I mean by this is that Fanon structures interlocking dialectical relations that, as should be obvious but is worth underscoring, inform the title of his text. The *peau noire* of the Black subject is oppositional in relation to the *masques blancs* that endeavor to resolve the unresolvable tension between the truth of Black subjectivity and its existence under assault from Anti-Black racism. This relationship is the driving force behind the thinking of Fanon that looks to the theorizing of two different, though related, "zones" of subject (re)creation that are the preoccupation of this essay. We will approach the zones separately and then place them in conversation with each other to go some way toward establishing the contours of a theory of the Black subject that leans upon this structure.

The first, the *zone of nonbeing*, is exposed in Fanon's Introduction that reads:

Il y a zone de non-être, une région extraordinairement stérile et aride, une rampe essentiellement dépouillée (my italics: MES), d'où un authentique surgissement peut prendre naissance. Dans la majorité des cas, le Noir n'a pas le bénéfice aux véritables Enfers.²

The 2008 edition of *Black Skin, White Masks* translated by Richard Philcox, presents the following translation of this essential passage in the following manner:

There is a zone of nonbeing, an extraordinarily sterile and arid region, an incline stripped bare (my italics: MES) of every essential from which a genuine new departure can emerge. In most cases, the black man cannot take advantage of this descent into a veritable hell.³

The 1967 Markmann translation renders the passage in the following fashion:

There is a zone of nonbeing, an extraordinarily sterile and arid region, an utterly naked declivity (my italics: MES) 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.⁴

I have italicized the elements of this essential passage that will represent the center of this thinking, "*une rampe essentiellement dépouillée...*" Readers can see for themselves the manner in which Philcox and Markmann have translated this section, but I am most curious about the work that is being done by the term "*dépouillée*" that they both have translated as descriptive of the "incline" (Philcox) and the "declivity" (Markmann). I want to propose another way of reading this critical passage by way of an engagement with Christina Sharpe's magisterial *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* where the author is preoccupied with an interview with Kara Walker that is archived in Arthur Jafa's film *Dreams Are Colder Than Death* "when she says that her most

comfortable space of making work is the occupation of space inserted between *her* and *her* skin and as a kind of ‘retinal detachment’.⁵

When I find myself in this schism, in this kind of mercurial space that’s sort of nongendered and nonraced and constantly being sort of encroached upon...my skin keeps trying to stick itself back on...I’m working and then I become aware of the skin and everything that comes with it and I kind of like detach, just slightly, not all the way, it’s not into that space. I’m getting this image of retinal detachment or something. The skin is literally kind of pulled away and it’s kind of gory and grotesque and that’s where I feel at home. It’s not a safe space to be, but it’s one where you can kind of look at the underside of race a little bit.⁶

In bringing the Walker via Sharpe and Jafa to bear upon the first of Fanon’s zones, the central complication is resolving the tension between the description provided by Fanon that exposes the *place* of subject (re)creation while Walker speaks of “occupation of a space inserted between *her* and *her* skin.”. What Walker and Sharpe help us to understand about Fanon’s *zone of nonbeing* is that this space, this place, this ramp that is understood to function as a “stripped” or “naked” can have the term “*dépouillée*” translated as more closely related to the concept of a depilatory that is literally used to remove sometime unwanted (generally hair) from the skin.⁷ In this case, the *zone of nonbeing*, following Walker and Sharpe, is a space that is *inserted between* the subject and *peau*/skin that has been imposed upon the subject and its flesh.

This reading offers the possibility of thinking with an alternative functioning of the mechanism or machine for Black subject (re)creation designed and built by Fanon. What this means is that the *zone of nonbeing*, rather than being mapped as a space for subjective whole (body, spirit, and soul) to *visit* it is rather a wedge that, in its interruption of contact with the negative framing of Blackness is mechanically causal of a positive way forward in that Break. The description provided by Walker accommodates a variation on Fanon’s assertion that “[i]n most cases, the black man cannot take advantage of this descent into a veritable hell” in that Walker has figured out it is not a place to descend into but rather a wedge between the self and negatively framed covering of the self. There is still difficulty here in that Walker asserts the instability of the exercise but there is also an existential challenge that is illuminated by Fanon several paragraphs after his description of the *zone of nonbeing* where we learn that the Black man, in this thinking, must be alienated from the self. The passage reads:

The issue is paramount. We are aiming to liberate the black man from himself. We shall tread very carefully, for there are two camps: white and black.⁸

This separation, the two camps referenced here, leads us to the second of the zones Fanon articulates, that being the *zone of hachures*. This concept is found

in the opening sentence of Chapter Three “The Man of Color and the White Woman” that Philcox translates in the following fashion:

Out of the blackest part of my soul, through the zone of hachures, surges up the desire to be *white*.⁹

Markmann bizarrely translates the French “De la partie la plus noire de mon âme, à travers la zone hachurée me monte ce désir d’être tout à coup *blanc*.”¹⁰ as: “Out of the blackest part of my soul, across the zebra striping of my mind, surges the desire to be suddenly *white*.”¹¹ The linguistic challenge here is to deal with the term “hachurée” that Philcox leaves intact and Markmann struggles to translate and falls upon it being a type of crosshatching. It would perhaps be productive here to focus on the term “hachure” in the sense that it appears in the disciplines of geography and cartography. According to Merriam-Webster, “hauchures”:

are strokes (short line segments or curves) drawn in the direction of the steepest slope (the aspect direction) ...A very gentle slope or a flat area, like the top of a hill, is usually left blank. The hachures are traditionally monicolor, usually black, gray, or brown.

This space, in particular, seems to characterize a topographically steep space the passage over/through which leads the subject to arise at the desire for whiteness. For purposes of our thinking here and fully cognizant of the space we must interrogate the manner in which the subject described by Fanon becomes “white”: through intimacy with a white woman, we must offer some account of how we “got” here.

There are three layers of the Black subject that Fanon exposes and are relevant here. The first is what the Du Bois of *The Souls of Black Folk* understands as the “Dark Body” which is distinct from the second layer, again following Du Bois, the Negro of *Souls* that is dialectically and unreconcilably opposed by the American. Fanon seems to understand the first layer, the Dark Body as “men who are black...[who] owing to a series of affective disorders...have settled into a universe from which we have to extricate them.”¹² That universe must necessarily be the encircling of the man who is black with Black skin that is in excess and opposed to what RA Judy’s recent *Sentient Flesh: Thinking in Disorder, Poiēsis in Black* indexes as Flesh in that, thinking with the assertion of the formerly enslaved Thomas Windham that “I think we should have our liberty cause us ain’t hogs or horses – us is human flesh.”¹³ Judy glosses this in the following manner:

Windham’s “us is human flesh” troubles this orientation in a way that cannot be easily dismissed. Rather than give temporal primacy to flesh as the stolen sign, his statement presumes that meaning and form are expressed simultaneously: the flesh is *with* and not *before* the body and person, and the body and person are *with* and *before* or even *after* the flesh.¹⁴

It is Fanon's notion of Black Skin, that covers the flesh of the person who is Black that is an analog to Du Bois's Negro and represents, for Kara Walker, the "skin [that] keeps trying to stitch itself back on"¹⁵ that destabilizes the coherence and safety of the creative "mercurial space that's sort of nongendered and nonraced and constantly being encroached upon...my skin keeps trying to stick itself back on."¹⁶

The question that arises from this understanding is to develop some understanding of the process that Fanon describes. It appears that the person who is Black employs Fanon's *zone of nonbeing* as a wedge to alienate what I will call "negatively framed Blackness" to ensure that Blackness itself does not continue to be understood as a lack.

The Blackness/Flesh has been enveloped with negatively framed Blackness or what Kara Walker understands as "the skin" that the depilatory of the *zone of nonbeing* is employed to forcibly separate from the flesh. At this point the potentiality exists for the "new departure" that Fanon warns that "[i]n most cases, the black man cannot take advantage of their descent into a veritable hell."¹⁷ This descent, via this reading practice, is the metaphysical occupation of the opening by the essence (Soul) of the Black person that has vacated the body to work on itself in this space of subject (re)creation. This kenosis renders the subject profoundly unstable in that the vessel is left vacant. This offers a few possibilities that speak to the viability of the Black subject. In the best of circumstances, the creative space allows the soul to resolve the matters that have made the alienation necessary in the first place and then return to a space that has become a stable place for this new existence. The remaining options are generally bad. The subject can return and find itself still under assault in this case by forces that are bent on destroying the new formation. Alternatively, the subject can find the vacated space has been occupied by another essence that resists its return or finally, the "Black body" may no longer exist.

The difficulty here is that the space that is opened as well as the Body are constantly under assault by the gravitational pull of white supremacy and Anti-Black racism; the "series of affective disorders"¹⁸ that institutes this false universe. In that the essence/soul has vacated the relatively protective shell of the vessel it is even more exposed to the danger of extermination. As the pressure mounts here the essence/soul searches for lines of retreat and/or advance. This phenomenon points at the *zone of hachures*, understood geographically, and thinking with the lines that appears as the gradients of the landscape, are resonant with a description that Fanon provides just *before* he exposes the *zone of nonbeing*.

I'm bombarded from all the sides with hundreds of lines that try to foist themselves on me. A single line, however, would be enough. All it needs is one simple answer and the black question would lose all relevance.

What does man want?

What does the black man want?

Running the risk of angering my black brothers, I shall say that a Black us not a man.¹⁹

This is the moment where the sheer force of white supremacy that appears as the dialectical relationship between Black and man arises. In this moment the term “man” is overwhelmed by its humanist understanding of white as necessarily human and Black as necessarily sub-human. This is the *zone of hachures*. Think of it now as appearing at the moment of existential crisis and appearing to offer some coherent way to stabilize the existence of the subject in crisis by presenting a predictable or perhaps familiar path back to the body and the notion of adopting a persona (whiteness) as means of finding safety.

When the person who is Black needs to follow the *single line* back to Black Flesh, the force of white supremacy interrupts the logic of that pursuit, and “white masks” are superimposed that serve to reattach Black skin to Black flesh. Fanon turns away from Hegel rhetorically but in fact fully reinstates him:

I want to be recognized not as *Black* but as *White*.

But – and this is the form of recognition that Hegel never described – who better than the white woman to bring this about? By loving me, she proves to me that I am worthy of white love. I am loved like a white man.

I am a white man.²⁰

One cannot help but hear the pathetic musings of the voice of Othello here who, upon proclaiming his love for Desdemona becomes blithely aware of the approach of a torch bearing mob bent upon disrupting his desires.

..For know, Iago

But that I love the gentle Desdemona,

I would not my unhoused free condition

Put into circumscription and confine

For the sea’s worth. But look, what lights come

yond?²¹

What light indeed? Just when the General is certain that his service to the state has afforded him the right to what Fanon names as “white love” the forces of white supremacy have arrived to disabuse him of that notion. Shakespeare knows full well that this is the trap for this form of Black thought because it will inevitably fall prey to the logic of white supremacy, and it is this reality

that leads Fred Moten to decry the fallacy that is *Othello* in his essay “Letting Go of *Othello*” in the November 2019 issue of *The Paris Review* writing:

And it’s not so much that Shakespeare has given an early articulation of the Negro Problem; it’s that, instead, he has given Negroes a problem...So that the terribly beautiful, evilly compounded genius of it is that what we are constrained to do with Othello when we enact him is act like him.²²

Fanon, in acting like Othello or perhaps more appropriately acting out *Othello*, becomes, rather than “white” (which, by the way, is a whole other kind of madness) what Moten indexes as a Negro with a Problem that, so long as this logic persists, represents the Gordian Knot that is tied in *Black Skin, White Masks*. This essay is meant to point urgently in the direction of liberation from dialectically indexed Black Being. It is an opening, not a resolution, and properly situating these zones as understood to act as stages that can lead to a sovereign form of Being as Black or a return to the perdition of externally imposed referent for positive existence. Recall in the opening of this piece I noted the utility of thinking for this moment with *Black Skin, White Masks*, as discreet while at the same time mindful of its place in this intellectual genealogy. I mean intellectual genealogy expansively. A genealogy that needs to properly situate what I understand as the descriptive nature of Afropessimism’s comprehensive analysis of anti-Blackness as an essential link in a theoretical evolution, as opposed to a terminus. This is not solely related to the the manner in which the text is the first and necessarily prefigures the appearance of *The Wretched of the Earth* but also in the way it is a link in a chain of events of revolutionary subject (re)creation. What I mean is that there is work by other thinkers that, at least implicitly, *needs* the opening presented here by Frantz Fanon in pursuit of what I will call *Being as Black*.

- ¹ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 45.
- ² Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1952), 6.
- ³ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trs. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008.), xii.
- ⁴ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trs. Charles Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 8.
- ⁵ Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 97.
- ⁶ Ibid. 98.
- ⁷ I owe this revelation to a discussion with William Balan-Gaubert.
- ⁸ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (2008), xii.
- ⁹ Ibid. 45.
- ¹⁰ Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs*, 51.
- ¹¹ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967), 63.
- ¹² Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (2008), xii.
- ¹³ RA Judy, *Sentient Flesh: Thinking in Disorder, Poiēsis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 1.
- ¹⁴ Ibid. 7.
- ¹⁵ Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 98.
- ¹⁶ Ibid. 98.
- ¹⁷ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (2008), xii.
- ¹⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁹ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (2008), xii.
- ²⁰ Ibid. 45.
- ²¹ William Shakespeare, *Othello the Moor of Venice* (Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 2008), 210.
- ²² Fred Moten, "Letting Go of *Othello*," *The Paris Review*. Blog from November 1, 2019
<https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2019/11/01/letting-go-of-othello/>