

# Atlantic Theory and Theories

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A bit tardy. But, so it goes late in this pandemic. Or at least we hope it's "late."

I am exceptionally happy to present this issue, the second for the publishing year of 2022, of *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy*. It is the second issue to come out after the departure of Scott Davidson and Kris Sealey as co-editors and collaborators. We miss you both and offer this issue in further recognition of what we built in the decade-plus of work together.

This issue includes a review of Jill Jarvis' important book *Decolonizing Memory* by T.S. Kavitha, three long essays that reflect the diversity of concerns and figures in the Francophone and adjacent worlds, and a forum on Frantz Fanon's first book *Black Skin, White Masks*. The range of what we can call Atlantic theory, theory made in and from the swirl of history and memory in the Atlantic world, is present across this volume, tapping into historical and contemporary resources from Europe to the United States to the Maghreb to the Caribbean. Overlapping worlds. Entangled worlds. Entangled theory and theories forged inside, outside, and in tension with staged, historical, and comparative overlaps.

The long essays: Angela H. Brown's essay "A definite quantity of all the differences in the world': Glissant, Spinoza, and the Abyss as True Cause" opens the volume with a searching and important reflection on the function of the abyss in the work of Édouard Glissant. Brown's reflections are oriented around Baruch Spinoza's work as an interpretative frame, opening up new horizons in thinking about Glissant, and also contributes to a now substantial body of scholarship revisiting Spinoza's work and its relevance for contemporary scholarly, political, and philosophical questions. Urgent and compelling. We are also living under pandemic conditions, in the wake of millions of deaths and long-term impacts on human health, community, and senses of finitude. In that frame, we can see how Ryan Crawford's contribution "Into the Looking Glass: The Mirror of Old Age in Beauvoir and Améry" could not be more timely. Crawford explores the meaning of aging and agedness in the work of Simone de Beauvoir and Jean Améry, linking

those ideas to the history of Western philosophy and it contains so many insights into finitude, embodiment, and vulnerability. Read alongside Habiba Ibrahim's *Black Age* from 2021 and other texts, I think we can see a broadening and immensely important horizon of scholarship emerging around the most human of human issues: *we age*. What does that mean? Gratitude for days because Crawford has made this important contribution. Ruthanne C. Kim's essay "Returning to the Point of Entanglement: Sexual Difference and Creolization" rounds out our essay section with a fantastic piece on gender, creole modes of thinking, and embodied relations to the world and the social imaginary. Working through Glissant and Luce Irigaray, Kim's essay brings fresh insights into work on both figures while staging an important comparative study. This is one essay, but it opens up so many questions for further work – the mark of important writing, I think, and Kim helps us understand elements of Caribbean theory differently from the perspective of French feminism, elements of French feminism from the perspective of Caribbean theory. It recalls Max Hantel's work on sexual difference in Glissant's work from a 2014 issue of the *Journal*, and I am so happy to host work pushing this series of questions forward.

Following these three essays is a collection of short pieces on Frantz Fanon's classic text *Black Skin, White Masks*, which turned seventy years old in 2022. In 2011, we published a collection of pieces in recognition of the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of *The Wretched of the Earth*, and it is a real treat to read these reflections on Fanon's earliest work and mark such important differences. The political resonance of *The Wretched of the Earth* is famous and forever important. Such enduring importance is a tragedy of the world and the result of colonialism's persistent presence and violence, to be sure, but it is also indicative of Fanon's particular kind of genius. What is the resonance of *Black Skin, White Masks*? That is a very different question.

*Black Skin, White Masks* is an exemplary mixed-methods work, moving across (and with) elements of psychoanalysis, sociology, literary criticism, existentialism, phenomenology, Négritude, Marxism, and Hegelian dialectics. Fanon blends the personal with the philosophical, producing a text that is both fecund in and through our moment and limited to its author and his moment. We see all of that in the pieces from the forum. We see how Fanon's work is part of his particular moment, situated before the postcolonial and embedded in the anticolonial. That embeddedness gives fresh insights, always, into the persistence of the colonial and colonial modes of thinking, framing, writing, and imagining. I am thinking here of the contributions by M. Shadee Malaklou on bell hooks and Fatima Seck on the cultural politics of Black women's hair, where the persistence of the white gaze is understood to be the limit built into the very being of the world, and, so, how liberation around matters of gender and the aesthetics of selfhood require a complete reimagining of the world, who looks and how, and in what ways the gaze is racialized – or, in a revolutionary or post-revolutionary future, is outside the

racial gaze. I am also thinking about how Fanon's work helps Tony Alessandrini think about the present struggle over the right to teach, maybe even necessity of teaching, about the history and present conditions of antiblack racism – debates and political meltdowns in the United States around “critical race theory” – or how for Tacuma Peters the work in *Black Skin, White Masks* reframes and challenges practices of historiography. Both short essays display the fecundity of Fanon's early work for framing, unframing, and reframing social, political, and writerly tasks in the long age of antiblackness. Keisha Allan's piece on Chauvet's *Amour* extends the same sort of interpretative frame to revisit questions of race, color, and the vicissitudes of subjectivity in a literary piece – but also, by extension, a whole cluster of similar literary sub-genres, aesthetic approaches to art and resistance, and existential questions of incarnation and belonging.

But there is also the limit to what Fanon has to say in *Black Skin, White Masks*. It is, after all, a seventy years old text. Written post-World War Two, but before the massive waves of independence across the global south, *Black Skin, White Masks* asks its own questions about limited mobility and everydayness – Fanon on public transit, Fanon in a café, Fanon speaking in France or upon return to Martinique – and sits in the late-colonial moment. It is such a different text than *The Wretched of the Earth*. The 1961 text is ambitious and grand in its vision, encompassing the entirety of the global south in the anti- then post-colonial moment, collapsing the question of Algeria into the global south or the question of the global south into Algeria. (The order of those things remains forever unclear, but so it is with a text that bequeaths so many scholarly horizons.) Fanon is here to tell *all* the stories in *The Wretched of the Earth*. And tell a very specific story in *Black Skin, White Masks*, however broadly we might want cast his insights.

*Black Skin, White Masks* is a story about blackness. This locates Fanon's work in a more specific geography, and with important consequences, particular insights, and fecundity for thinking about the black Americas. That story about blackness works deeply within a pessimistic horizon, anticipating – with the insistence on a sociogenic ontology – many of the insights we now see in terms of “afropessimism.” A pessimism with limits, for sure, because Fanon's work from the beginning was in search of a new kind of humanism, a humanism, as Aimé Césaire put it in *Discourse on Colonialism*, made to the measure of the whole world. Michael Sawyer's essay on *Black Skin, White Masks* helps us understand this chiasm of pessimism and what comes next with a sustained reflection on the context and conditions of Fanon's notion of the zone of non-being, and Grant Farred's reflection on tarrying and staying-with, Fanon's persistence *and* withdrawal of both in the 1952 text and after, pushes us to see a certain Fanonian *decision* to pull back from certain insights and conceptual maneuvers. Fanon's exploration of colonialism's abject space is further explored by John E. Drabinski in his piece on the perhaps unexpected proximity of Fanon and V.S. Naipaul on the question of the

Caribbean and decolonial futures – a negotiation between the afropessimism of *Black Skin, White Masks* and the complicated affective lives of that pessimism in melancholia, the time of resistance, and the time of hope.

In all, then, it is a real pleasure to present these short essays in recognition of the seventy-year anniversary of the publication of *Black Skin, White Masks*. The collection, this special forum, is what you get when you ask for reflections with no boundaries, but instead request a response, as I did to each author, to what is striking, seventy years later, about such an important text. What does *Black Skin, White Masks* call us to think? How does Fanon help us reframe and rethink critical issues in everyday and expressive culture, politics, and historical memory?

Reading through these essays – the long essays, the pieces in the forum, the review of Jarvis' book – I was struck again and again by the fecundity of theory in the Atlantic world. We have internal conversations from Europe, the reach of Caribbean theory back into relation with the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the exchange between France and Martinique, the many travels of Fanon in Europe, the Caribbean, the United States, and parts of Africa – all clustered together to make something both coherent and eclectic. That is what's so interesting about thinking theory in the Atlantic context, the critical tensions and massive differences and coherent lines of interpretation and comparison. These all work from fractured histories of relation.

There is much to be learned in these pages. Many thanks to each author for their work, and to each reader for the time spent thinking-with and boosting the conceptual work done in these pages. Read and share. We publish without a paywall for a reason: to maximize access to important theoretical interventions. And as I close this Editor's Note and settle into the volume, it is worth a bit of a teaser for the first issue of 2023, due in June: a collection of essays on the work of Édouard Glissant. That is something to look forward to, for sure. Until then, enjoy these reflections, stay safe, and be good and generous to those around you.

# 'A definite quantity of all the differences in the world'

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## Glissant, Spinoza, and the Abyss as True Cause

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In a conversation with Manthia Diawara aboard the Queen Mary II in 2009, Édouard Glissant elaborated his definition of Relation, a concept that he formally presented in his book *Poétique de la relation* in 1990, but that emerged out of years of writing about creolization and cultural action in the Caribbean. Sitting at the ship's window, with the Atlantic Ocean crashing around him, Glissant explains that "the truth that is increasingly coming to light about Black reality in the New World is the truth of multiplicity, the truth of the step towards the Other."<sup>1</sup> Diawara prompts Glissant to expand on this multiplicity in terms of Relation and Glissant replies:

I believe that Relation is the moment when we realise that *there is a definite quantity of all the differences in the world*. Just as scientists say that the universe consists of a finite quantity of atoms, and that it doesn't change – well, I say that Relation is made up of all the differences in the world and that *we shouldn't forget a single one of them, even the smallest*. If you forget the tiniest difference in the world, well, Relation is no longer Relation.

Now, what do we do when we believe this? We call into question, in a formal manner, the idea of the universal. The universal is a sublimation, an abstraction that enables us to forget small differences, and Relation is wonderful because it doesn't allow us to do that. There is no such thing as a Relation made up of big differences. Relation is total otherwise it's not Relation. So that's why I prefer the notion of Relation to the notion of the universal. (emphases mine)<sup>2</sup>

The call to remember all the differences in the world is, for Glissant, a pivot away from the romantic (often nostalgic) abstractions of universal thinking and towards a totality made up of finite and, perhaps more importantly, *knowable* relations. Relation is the moment when we realize the undeniability

of totality, based on our knowledge of the interactions between—the weaving-together of—many small differences. It is therefore, I will argue, a positive dialectic of the kind that Pierre Macherey locates in the writings of Benedictus de Spinoza. This positive dialectic, applied to the specificities of Glissant's terms—including Relation, opacity, creolization, and the abyss—reveals both the political and epistemological potential of *Poétique de la relation*, and, in turn, the decolonial potential of Spinoza's philosophical system. I reach for Spinoza, via Macherey, in order to frame Glissant's Relation as a poetic form of materialist analysis.<sup>3</sup> Glissant's materialism, because it centers and emerges from the Caribbean, is a powerful tool for considering what we—scholars, artists, activists, workers—can *do* with the notion of difference in the afterlives and aftershocks of slavery, imperialism, colonialism, and universalizing (thus oppressive) modernisms.<sup>4</sup>

## Positive Dialectics and the Opacity of Relation

Macherey argues in *Hegel or Spinoza* that Hegel, in attempting to forge a linear history of Western philosophy, misreads (or symptomatically reads) Spinoza, pointing specifically to the “negation of the negation.” According to Macherey, Hegel takes Spinoza's phrase *omnis determinatio est negatio* to mean that “in all negation there is also something positive.”<sup>5</sup> However, Spinoza thinks determination and the relation between positive and negative very differently. Positive and negative are in two separate and irreconcilable orders in Spinoza's system. The absolute, or Substance, for Spinoza, is only positive, while the negative, cast outside of Substance, appears only in the finite, determined relations between things. “For Spinoza,” Macherey writes, “[...] the determined is that which cannot grasp itself except through a shortcoming, according to its own shortcoming, a lack of being, the negativity that determines it.”<sup>6</sup>

Hegel, by reading an irreconcilability of positive and negative into Spinoza's thought, suggests a weakness in Spinoza's process of reasoning: a weakness that, of course, Hegel claims his own dialectics can solve. In Hegelian dialectics, the contradiction “is not a fixed relation between distinct and antagonistic terms but the irresistible movement that discovers in each of these elements the truth of the other.”<sup>7</sup> This is not the case for Spinoza, for whom separate bodies or attributes can only be limits, and therefore cannot contain either total unity or the entirety of one another's truth.<sup>8</sup> Their unity exists outside of their existence, in the essence that is Substance. In Macherey's words:

to determine a being, no matter what it is, would be to determine it in a finite manner: the determination is reflected by intellect only as a limit, that is to say, as we have seen, as a relationship of exteriority. This is why a being is always determined by another being, whose negation it constitutes. Thus, thought as attribute—that is, determination of

substance—is posed as an ‘op-position’ [*un op-posé*] in the limitation that separates it from another attribute, extension. These two terms do not contain the conditions of their unity within themselves, which must therefore be reflected outside them, in substance where they are indistinct, indifferent. Thus, from the absolute to its determinations, and from these determinations to the absolute itself, no rational progression can be established at all, because it is *a question of irreducible terms, which unite exclusively negative relations*. (emphasis mine)<sup>9</sup>

More simply put, for Spinoza, there is no dualism. Nor even is there parallelism, really, since, as Macherey notes, parallelism maintains the illusion that thought and extension are two separate things. In his own time, Spinoza was offering a counterargument to Descartes’ separation of mind and body. He reasoned that thought and extension are the only two attributes, among many, under which we are able to grasp one irreducible substance (which Spinoza names Nature or God). Macherey argues that Hegel’s negative dialectics, via his misreading of Spinoza, reinstates dualism *and* assumes that thought and extension are the only two attributes, rather than the only ones that we are able to grasp. It is this, the issue of the graspable, the knowable, or even the countable *vis-à-vis* totality (i.e., Spinoza’s substance) that Glissant’s Relation takes up centuries later, as Glissant grapples with how the intersection of ostensibly separate parts (differences) reveals the inevitability and—to use Spinoza’s language again—the *necessity* of a totality that, because we experience it as limits in thought and experience, is opaque to us.

The distinction between Hegel’s negative and Spinoza’s positive dialectics runs throughout Glissant’s *Poétique de la relation*, though in different (and at times more specific) terms. In his chapter “For Opacity,” for instance, Glissant writes that “the opaque [...] is that which cannot be reduced.”<sup>10</sup> Unlike the common interpretations of myth or tragedy, in which obscurity leads to exclusion and “transparency” is about the attempt to “grasp” (i.e., incorporate, assimilate, reduce) the Other, Glissant’s opacity requires “the gesture of giving-on-and-with”—a gesture that leads towards actual totality, precisely because it moves us away from the Western *idea* of totality, which is static and perpetuates a false sense of unity.<sup>11</sup> In other words, Glissant’s totality is not an eternal unity that emerges from the adding-together of separate parts; it is the sum of Relations between opaque parts—opaque because they do not claim to create absolute truth out of their contradictions.<sup>12</sup>

Just as Spinoza provides an alternative to Hegel’s use of the contradiction to “affirm...a unity of opposites,” Glissant’s opacity, and its role in Relation, allows for a dynamic totality without negation. And, providing an archipelagic illustration of Spinoza’s Substance, which is made perceivable through finite attributes, Glissant’s totality is an abyss—the real abyss of the sea, and the horrors of the Middle Passage in particular. By revealing rootlessness as the material foundation of the abyss and its Relations, Glissant

eschews the negation that occurs when we cling to origin stories (which often imply that something preexists or is the opposite of Substance). Glissant's abyssal sea causes itself, always *becoming* via the ceaseless movement of uprooted, finite bodies, who, through this continual motion, create themselves as subjects-in-Relation. Relation is also, for Glissant, "the knowledge in motion of beings."<sup>13</sup>

### Colonialism as Imaginary Thinking, or, a New Scholium on Empire

The Middle Passage is not only a real, historical manifestation of Glissant's abyss. The Middle Passage *is* the abyss. It is totality under the attribute of extension rather than thought. Yet, because its violence is unthinkable—because it is a totality that is also the deep, tangible Atlantic, that is also the brutal interior of the slave ship, that is also the intergenerational trauma that follows in its wake—the Middle Passage is deemed unknowable. John Drabinski, in *Glissant and the Middle Passage: Philosophy, Beginning, Abyss*, focuses specifically on how this unthinkability is taken up in Glissant's writing and, in turn, considers the consequences of the Middle Passage on philosophy itself, offering detailed analyses of what exactly loss, fear, and genocide do to philosophers' stances on (what I'll generalize as) the knowable and the thinkable.

At the start of the book, Drabinski frames twentieth century European theory as a discourse around loss. He points out that the writings of Levinas and Derrida, for example, are haunted by genocide (that of the Holocaust) and by a fear around loss of memory and, in turn, loss of continuity with the past. Drabinski writes that

Theory under this specter [of genocide] is called to reckon with the constant presence of death and massive disaster in Europe – a presence, as [Aimé] Césaire noted long ago, that was always already present in the colonies, though it never provoked serious discourse or crisis – as a broken connection or disconnection with the past.<sup>14</sup>

The anxieties of twentieth-century European philosophy, based in what Drabinski calls Kant's "concession [...] to the finitude of knowing," emerge from a loss of faith in totality and a fear of untraceable origins.<sup>15</sup> Caribbean discourse moves beyond, or at least retools, this anxiety, because the untraceable origin is a given, thus allowing for totality to be understood as dynamic, nonlinear, and made up of a "definite quantity" of Relations. In Glissant's work, Drabinski writes, we witness the "the aporetic fold of the sadness and the pleasures of life that *goes on*, creates itself, and so makes language, world, and history out of abysses and traces of the traumatic past."<sup>16</sup>

Though Glissant's work has been read as an aesthetic and depoliticizing project (a move away from the decolonial projects of Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire), I believe that *Poétique de la relation* provides a real—and urgent—

means through which to apply Spinoza's aims to the subject-destroying and subject-creating forces of colonialism and slavery. If, as Drabinski argues, Glissant reveals pathways on which being might continue on after trauma and loss, then perhaps Spinoza's system can show us *how* those pathways might be accessed not only as thought but also as extension, since both are attributes under which the abyss becomes knowable.

To experiment with this, I will treat parts of *Poétique de la relation* as contemporary scholia to Spinoza's *Ethics* (and relate these later to his "Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect"), proposing (1) that Spinoza's call to think from true causes should be read as a fundamentally decolonial project, and (2) that Glissant's poetics provide an example of how humans can think from true causes despite our inability to know everything about totality, the abyss, or Substance all at once.

Writing in seventeenth-century Amsterdam, Spinoza certainly would have witnessed the societal changes and accumulation of wealth made possible by global trade, slavery, and continued colonial expansion. And, when we consider the seventeenth-century port city as a site of contact between peoples and goods, it is no surprise that Glissant's notion of Relation resonates with Spinoza's thorough analyses of the ways that bodies and emotions alter one another. Spinoza's writing about God and affect reveals an attunement to the ways in which difference intensifies the human intellect's tendency toward what Spinoza calls imaginary thinking: thinking that is not based in reality and which tends to manifest as explanations of phenomena based on effects or potential effects rather than on observable and/or intuitively known causes. I choose to focus on imaginary thinking here because its effects play out so violently and destructively in European powers' invention of race and racial hierarchies and the ensuing oppression of Black and brown peoples that such inventions have been used to justify.

Take this passage from the appendix to Book I, "De Deo," of the *Ethics* for example:

When men became convinced that everything that is created is created on their behalf, they were bound to consider as the most important quality in every individual thing that which was most useful to them, and to regard as of the highest excellence all those things by which they were the most benefitted. Hence they came to form these abstract notions to explain the natures of things: Good, Bad, Order, Confusion, Hot, Cold, Beauty, Ugliness; and since they believed that they are free, the following abstract notions came into being: Praise, Blame, Right, Wrong.<sup>17</sup>

Here, Spinoza illustrates how humans have come to form an abstract and inadequate notion of God by assuming that God exists *for them*. When we assume a thing, such as God, exists for us, we begin a chain of imaginary thinking through which we ascribe certain qualities to a thing based on our

desired results or preconceived (abstract) notions. Therefore, if we want God's effect in our lives to involve some specific divine intervention or granted entry into paradise, we will assume that God's real (and perhaps only) qualities are those that reflect our abstract understanding of the divine, paradise, and goodness. This way of thinking, for Spinoza, impedes real knowledge. If we define God, goodness, beauty, and other things only according to how we imagine they might benefit or harm us, then our understanding of those things will always be inadequate. And furthermore, when people "believe that they are free"—i.e., that the world exists for them—they allow their value judgements to snowball into "abstract notions" that end up having widespread implications at a societal level. For example, one person might be deemed Evil because their actions do not appear to benefit mainstream society, and another deemed Good because their actions lead to prosperity or the expansion of imperial power.

Following this logic, it is easy to read the entire colonial project as one of rampant imaginary thinking, wherein European powers, because they saw that they could benefit from resources elsewhere, vehemently defined that elsewhere according to potential benefits alone. By framing the New World as a bountiful paradise available for the benefit of the Spanish Crown and Europeans in general, the early colonizers perfectly illustrate the issue that Spinoza points out in man's understanding of God. This thinking pervades the letters and journals of those who first invaded the Antilles, wherein the material goods and picturesque views of the islands are described for the first time as inherently *for* European consumption. A letter to Seville from Dr. Chanca, physician of Columbus' fleet in his second voyage to the West Indies, exemplifies this tendency well:

We approached [the island of Guadeloupe] under the side of a great mountain, that seemed almost to reach the skies, in the middle of which rose a peak higher than all the rest of the mountain, whence many streams diverged into different channels [...] The captain put into land in a boat, and seeing some houses, leapt on shore and went up to them, the inhabitants fleeing at sight of our men; he then went into the houses and there found various household articles that had been left unremoved, from which he took two parrots...

[...] He found a great quantity of cotton, both spun and prepared for spinning, and articles of food, of all of which he brought away a portion; besides these, he also brought away four or five bones of human arms and legs. On seeing these we suspected that we were amongst the Caribee islands, whose inhabitants eat human flesh...<sup>18</sup>

If we read this letter alongside Spinoza and Glissant, we see that *taking* from the Other leads to an inherently distorted definition of place and people. But we also see the way that emotion—awe at the landscape, greed for exotic

animals and objects, and fear of cannibalism—drives the doctor's (and, in turn, the Spanish readers') understanding of reality.

In Book III of the *Ethics*, "De Affectibus," Spinoza provides fifty-nine propositions on the ways that emotions distort humans' ability to think from causes, propelling us instead into action and thought based on imaginary, and therefore inadequate, thinking. Proposition 46 is especially relevant to the growth of empire, and the rampant dehumanization that makes it possible:

If anyone is affected with pleasure or pain by someone of a class or nation different from his own and the pleasure or pain is accompanied by the idea of that person as its cause, under the general category of that class or nation, he will love or hate not only him but all of that same class or nation.<sup>19</sup>

Then, in the proof for Proposition 46, Spinoza tells the reader to refer back to Proposition 16, which reads: "From the mere fact that we imagine a thing to have something similar to an object that is wont to affect the mind with pleasure or pain, we shall love it or hate it, although the point of similarity is not the efficient cause of these emotions."<sup>20</sup>

The point of similarity here functions similarly to the "grasp" that Glissant explains in the context of encountering the Other. Perceiving a similarity, we cling to it and believe it to be the cause of pleasure or pain, despite having no real evidence of the source of the pleasure or pain coming from the apparently similar people or objects. Analogously, the colonizer takes things from the homes of the inhabitants of Guadeloupe that he recognizes as valuable (according to abstract notions arising from common affectations of the Spanish elite)—colorful birds, textiles, food—and quickly concludes that the presence of human bones means that these people are the cannibals described by the people of other islands. Dr. Chanca's letter therefore reveals an intricate network of affects-in-relation that forms the basis of empire and oppression. Instead of following Spinoza's call to consider the *causes* of pleasure and pain (and of awe, fear, etc.) or Glissant's insistence on the right to opacity (both texts coming long after 1492, of course), Dr. Chanca and the other Europeans in the Antilles use their own affective responses as justification for colonial expansion and subjugation of the Other. Versions of this justification can be seen in the neo-colonial, capitalist world of today: proof that world powers such as the United States have not done away with the affect-driven definitions and imaginary thinking of Columbus and his fleets.

The relations that Spinoza maps out in Book III are ones in which the affects consume and control one another without any rational reorientation of the intellect toward true causes. We might say they are affects without opacity; affects that, because they are in negative dialectical relation rather than positive, lead people and nations to consume and control out of fear,

hatred, and one-sided pleasure. But Glissant's opacity offers a way to retool affects-in-relation, even once empire has wreaked so much havoc already.

Take a hypothetical example that works for Spinoza's time as well as our own: A Dutch aristocrat sees an orange for the first time, smells it, tastes it, has it painted in a still life with his pearls, silver, and wine. Another aristocrat sees the painting and experiences joy, as well as jealousy. He wants to become similar to the man who owns the things in the painting, and so he buys an orange, thinking this fruit is the similarity, the thing-to-grasp, that will make him equal in joy and status with the other man. Following Spinoza, to desire the orange is to be guided by imaginary thinking emerging from affect. In order to act on the plane of reason, the jealous aristocrat would have to realize that the orange has no real link to joy or prestige. He would have to see the orange, as well as the other aristocrat, as opaque things that he can relate to without possessing them or placing them into his own hierarchies of value.

Would the implications of this acting-on-the-plane-of-reason stop the growth of empire? Though Spinoza acknowledges the inevitability (and the necessity) of imaginary thinking—and of humans' constant oscillation between reason and affect—he encourages an emendation of the intellect, a concerted effort to work and think from true and necessary causes rather than from imaginary effects and (often affective) abstractions. In the "Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect," published posthumously in 1677, Spinoza provides various examples of what this effort might entail. He considers how to deal with fictitious ideas, providing rational steps that echo the method of geometrical proofs:

First [...] if the idea is of a thing completely simple, it can only be clear and distinct. For such a thing would have to be known not in part, but either wholly or not at all. Secondly, it follows that if a thing comprised of many constituents is divided in thought into all its simplest parts, and attention is given to each part separately, then all confusion will disappear. Thirdly, it follows that a fictitious idea cannot be simple, but is formed by the blending of various confused ideas of various things and actions existing in Nature; or, as better expressed, fiction results from attending at the same time, without assent, to various ideas of this kind.<sup>21</sup>

Instead of perpetuating a fictitious idea by claiming an inability to disprove it, Spinoza recommends that we start with simple ideas that we know to be true. Then, we divide the fictitious idea down into its simplest parts and attend to each part as a distinct, knowable idea. Subsequently, the blending-together that leads to fiction will fall away and we will be able to think the separate simple ideas anew, building from them true ideas rather than false, confusing ones.

Paradoxically, Glissant's use of the term "imagination" provides another way to emend the intellect, precisely because Glissant's version of imagination is a form of creation that emerges from the Relation of opacities. The dangers of defining places, God, and peoples using abstract/fictitious notions of Good, Bad, Evil, etc. are mitigated when we acknowledge that a separate body is not completely knowable to us when it is set within a blend-of-ideas. A separate body cannot be united with us, even though (and precisely *because*) it is an element of a positive totality, a dynamic abyss, that we know intuitively to exist.

For Glissant, the imaginary is the "varied poetics" of peoples, "where the risk of thought is realized," while "culture is the precaution of those who claim to think thought, but who steer clear of its chaotic journey. Evolving cultures infer Relation, the overstepping that grounds their unity-diversity."<sup>22</sup> Therefore, we can think of the Glissantian imaginary as something like Spinoza's reasoning from true causes and Glissant's understanding of culture as akin to Spinoza's imaginary thinking, in that it relies on a false order that avoids the complexities of Relation—a "chaos" made up of simple truths. As for the "risk of thought," Glissant seems to recognize that to abandon mainstream (that is, colonial) culture would mean to threaten the false idea of order according to which empires continue to grow and oppress.

Glissant addresses such issues more explicitly, too. In a footnote to a passage about the ways that European science and philosophy have imposed false conceptions of "non-Western" cultures, he claims that "positivism and humanism [...] both end up imposing the reality of an 'ideal object' that they have initially defined as value."<sup>23</sup> Value is an abstract notion, even a fictitious idea in the sense that Spinoza explains above. And to say that this value is an ideal object is to attempt to reorient thought and action towards a false universality emerging from affects—namely, the fear of limits. Considering the radical potential of Albert Einstein's United Field Theory as a scientific poetics of Relation, Glissant laments the scientific community's return to "the comfortable empiricism that provides immense technological power."<sup>24</sup> This empiricism, according to Glissant, is "a science of conquerors who fear limits; a science of conquest."<sup>25</sup> Columbus and Hegel, each in their own ways, attest to this fear of limits. Rather than recognize opacity within a positive totality, they inadvertently set limits on knowledge by pretending that truth or the ideal object emerges from a progressive blending-together. Glissant and Spinoza recognize that truth (as well as the perfection of totality and Substance or Nature) *already exists*. When one pretends that they are building towards an ideal object, especially when that ideal object is as abstract as "value," they are perpetuating fictitious ideas.

This problem sheds light on the cultural 'event' in Glissant's writings. As Nick Nesbitt writes in *Caribbean Critique: Antillean Critical Theory from Toussaint to Glissant*, for Glissant, "culture is the realm of the anti-event, of depoliticization, of neo-colonial 'departmentalization'. This is a culture of

consumption, underwritten and served up by (French) subsidy.”<sup>26</sup> Therefore, to strive toward a cultural event in Martinique, for example, would be to perpetuate a fictitious idea, a French ‘ideal object’ of cultural value. “In this late colonial world,” Nesbitt continues, “culture is first of all the ‘cultivation [culture] of sugar cane’, and a ‘cultural’ event would precisely be the ‘reformation and reform of the structures of exclusion and alienation therein.’”<sup>27</sup> In a more recent text, Nesbitt sees an Althusserian critique of capitalism in Glissant’s writing, noting the importance of *dispossession* in Martinique, where people are often completely alienated from production and all goods come from off of the island. The Martinican is the “sujet-support du colonialisme réussit.”<sup>28</sup> Yet, for Glissant, it is precisely this dispossession that gives Relation its destructive (and, I would add, creative) power.<sup>29</sup> Dispossession is the machinery of Relation. In other words, rootlessness—made oceanic abyss by the slave trade, but also fundamental to all human subjects—gives the dispossessed more direct access to knowledge based on differences-in-Relation rather than on the imaginary thinking that fuels origin-obsessed colonialism.

## A Creolization of the Intellect, or, the Abyss as True Cause

As Drabinski puts it, the Caribbean is “literally and figurately the interval through which the Americas as New World were imagined.”<sup>30</sup> However, Glissant’s poetics of Relation take this imagination out of the hands of the colonizers, who use it to build an empire of imaginary thinking, and gives it to Antillean subjects, who, because they more often see (and experience) their origins as an ever-shifting abyss, can more naturally create from causes without falsely defining origins, and create from contact without falsely defining others. In *Poétique de la relation*, Glissant emphasizes that creolization is about processes, not about content. It allows us to think identities “by their relation to everything possible” and to “bring into Relation but not to universalize.”<sup>31</sup> Creolization thus reorients thought towards the possible. And the possible is something we come to know by thinking real, specific bodies and objects in relation, not by projecting imaginary ideas into the past and future. We can therefore read *Poétique de la relation* as a guide for the creolization of the intellect, a process that echoes Spinoza’s emendation in several ways.

To conclude, I present three instances in which Glissant’s terminology offers something like an Antillean response to Spinoza’s system. These of course are not parallels. Rather, I aim to suggest that Glissant’s poetics provide a means through which to abandon “mainstream culture” and creolize the intellect in thought and in action (extension).

## 1. Sea as Substance

In linking Glissant's oceanic abyss to Walter Benjamin's writing on history and memory, Drabinski contrasts the Middle Passage with the ancient city of Carthage, which was burned to the ground, leaving a trace of itself in the form of ashes and salt. Drabinski calls Carthage a "negative sublime," in which the positive or legible aspects of memory can be read through the visibility of an absence.<sup>32</sup> But then, he asks, "Where is the wreckage of the Middle Passage?"<sup>33</sup> and the answer is of course, at the bottom of the ocean. The ruins of the Middle Passage are human beings thrown overboard, left to disappear into the sea: that "one vast beginning," Glissant writes, "whose time is marked by these balls and chains gone green."<sup>34</sup> The sea in *Poétique de la relation* is the site of a *positive* sublime. Its totality, even if inaccessible, is a given—the Substance within and against which Caribbean subjects construct self, world, and language.

Macherey, in his in-depth analysis of Spinoza's conception of Substance and attributes in Book I of the *Ethics*, writes:

En constituant la substance à partir de toutes les formes de l'être, et il doit y en avoir une infinité, qu'elle rassemble dans son ordre unique, Spinoza du même coup soustrait la connaissance de cet ordre au présupposé d'une uniformité abstraite, qui serait elle-même en rapport avec la représentation d'une *entité vide de tout contenu*, donc complètement indéterminée.

[In showing substance to be constituted by all forms of being, and there must be an infinite number, each of which resembles substance in its unique order, Spinoza subtracts knowledge of this order from the presupposition of an abstract uniformity, that would therefore be, with respect to the representation of an *empty entity of total content*, completely indeterminate.]<sup>35</sup>

Glissant's sea is a real manifestation of the empty void, filled with all content. In other words, Substance is the sea, and the sea is the abyss. And, just as the indeterminacy of Substance, of the whole, does not prevent knowledge of its parts (the attributes), the Middle Passage uproots and deterritorializes, yet becomes an alternative, indeterminate, *true* ground from which the Antillean subject can grasp being (in parts) without the fantasy of a progression towards absolute unity.

## 2. Archipelago as Attributes

Spinoza repeatedly explains Substance by analyzing the relations between attributes. According to Macherey, he must do this (reiterate the tension between Substance and attribute) precisely in order to reach an understanding of "unity and diversity, without conflating them or separating

them."<sup>36</sup> Similarly, right at the start of *Poétique de la relation*, Glissant writes that Relation is "the overstepping that grounds" the "unity-diversity" of "evolving cultures."<sup>37</sup>

Spinoza also emphasizes the inevitable restrictions of the attributes. "As soon as one reflects substance in an attribute," Macherey clarifies, a restriction appears.<sup>38</sup> Therefore, "one single form is not sufficient to represent the absolute."<sup>39</sup> Rather, we must embark on an "indefinite quest for new determinations, which oppose each other"—indefinite because the search for completeness within a single form is always in vain—and "seek in vain to recuperate its completeness."<sup>40</sup>

We can imagine the archipelago— islands emerging from the oceanic abyss—as a set of perceivable attributes, with many others hidden beneath the ocean's surface. Each island is a limited manifestation of a number of complex and ever-multiplying Relations, yet the parallel quest, in Glissant's terms, would be to seriously pay attention to every Relation that one encounters, so that humanity might come closer to an understanding of totality that is divorced from the false idealism and colonial implications of universality.

Glissant was formulating versions of this quest from the early days of his career. In his closing statement at the 1st Congress of the Front Antillo-Guyanais in 1959 for example, he said: "Today there are no values of any one country that are not touched by the values of another. The world is shrinking, remaking itself, and the Antilles are in an ideal situation to promote the contact of cultures."<sup>41</sup> This notion of contact, which matured into Glissant's promotion of Relation, is one that thinks islands (as well as cultures and languages) as distinct attributes reflecting a total Substance. The archipelago is a "unity-diversity," too, which, if we were to extend its poetics of Relation to the world at large, might emend, or creolize, all human thought.

### 3. Abyss as True Cause

The second chapter of *Poétique de la relation*, "Errantry, Exile," begins with a discussion of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's notion of the rhizome.<sup>42</sup> Linking Relation to rhizomatic thinking—anti-arboreal and nonlinear—Glissant writes that "the root is not important. Movement is."<sup>43</sup> "One who is errant," he continues later on, "plunges into the opacities of that part of the world to which he has access. [...] The thinking of errantry conceives of totality but willingly renounces any claims to sum it up or to possess it."<sup>44</sup>

In errantry and exile, one must succumb to the undeniable truth of Substance and the oceanic abyss. One must strive to get at this truth, even though one knows they never will.<sup>45</sup> Like Spinoza's God, Substance, or Nature, the abyss is dynamic. It is always becoming, and, in so doing, it is always reiterating the true cause. With Glissant, we strive towards an intangible root

by learning the tangible Relations that it continuously brings into being. And with Spinoza, we strive for the true cause by first acknowledging that it exists a priori, even though we cannot perceive it as a whole. To think from true causes, to emend the intellect, is to think from Glissant's abyss.

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<sup>1</sup> Édouard Glissant in Manthia Diawara, "Conversation with Édouard Glissant Aboard the Queen Mary II (August 2009)," *Afro-Modern: Journeys through the Black Atlantic* (London: Tate Publishing, 2010), 62.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> A big thanks to Nick Nesbitt for his feedback on the paper from which this article grew, and for his own work on Spinoza and Macherey, which I first had the pleasure of hearing about as a student in his graduate seminar on Spinoza in the Department of French and Italian at Princeton University. I thank the other students in that seminar, too, as their brilliant thoughts on and enthusiasm around a Spinozist reading of Glissant (and vice versa) pushed me to give it a try.

<sup>4</sup> I invoke Saidiya Hartman's "afterlives of slavery" and Yarimar Bonilla and Marisol LeBrón's "aftershocks of disaster" in one breath here, seeing a power in placing their critical contributions in proximity, but recognizing that their analyses and subject matter are distinct and not to be conflated. In *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007), Hartman offers a framework for thinking about slavery, diaspora, and systemic racism that shows how affect in the specific, individual, and/or familial narrative can radically reshape how history breathes and is told in the present. Then, in *Aftershocks of Disaster: Puerto Rico Before and After the Storm* (Haymarket Books, 2019), edited by Bonilla and LeBrón, we are presented with a poignant and galvanizing collection of essays, poetry, and art concerned with the lasting effects of Hurricane Maria in and beyond Puerto Rico, positing the aftershock as both destructive and creative. Simply put, the traumas of slavery and the traumas of environmental crisis are incommensurable. Yet, environmental crisis, especially in the Caribbean, does make inequity along the lines of race and class impossible to deny. The afterlives of slavery are laid bare in the aftershocks of disaster.

<sup>5</sup> Pierre Macherey, *Hegel or Spinoza*, trans. Susan M. Ruddick (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 115.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 115-16.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>8</sup> "Spinoza does not rule out all possibility of grasping or understanding the elements of nature all at once, in their intensive infinity, because it is this possibility on the contrary that expresses the point of view of eternity, or the third type [*genre*] of knowledge. What he rules out is that this knowledge can be created through a combination, in a law of convergent series, that totalizes the finite through a sort of internal logic of its progression [...] To say that nature is always the same does not signify, then, that it is organized by a formal principle that constitutes it as a totality, but that it expresses itself completely through the sequence of its own determinations, to the exclusion of all external interventions, which would reintroduce the bias of finality." (Macherey, *Hegel or Spinoza*, 159)

<sup>9</sup> Macherey, *Hegel or Spinoza*, 121.

<sup>10</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*. trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 191.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 191-2.

<sup>12</sup> This is perhaps an apt place to mention and recommend Natalie Melas' fabulous book *All the difference in the world: Postcoloniality and the Ends of Comparison* (Stanford University Press, 2007). The book came across my desk only after I had written the first version of this essay and I was excited to see that Melas had undertaken, in the chapter titled "Empire's Loose Ends," a finetuned analysis of Glissant's writing on "all the differences in the world," the Differential and the Same (in *Le discours antillais*), and Relation, which she explains as having anti-hegemonic, postcolonial aspirations while being complicit within totalizing notions of globalization. In the book as a whole, Melas puts pressure on the totalizing impulse of what we might call the Academy, specifically within the discipline of comparative literature. She traces the comparative method to the nineteenth century, explaining in her preface that it "replaced the directionlessness of a merely taxonomic comparison with a positivist evolutionary teleology." Per Melas, "when comparative literature abandoned the objective of studying all the literature in the world, its adjectival appendage gradually fell into amnesia" (xi); and, she argues, it is postcolonial literature that catalyzed this shift.

<sup>13</sup> Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 187.

<sup>14</sup> John E. Drabinski, *Glissant and the Middle Passage: Philosophy, Beginning, Abyss* (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 9.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Benedictus de Spinoza, *Spinoza: Complete Works*. ed. Michael L. Morgan, trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis, Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2002), 241-2.

<sup>18</sup> Taylor & Francis Group, *Select Letters of Christopher Columbus with Other Original Documents Relating to This Four Voyages to the New World*. (Farnham: Taylor & Francis Group, 2010), 24-5.

<sup>19</sup> Spinoza, 302.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 287.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>22</sup> Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 9.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>26</sup> Nick Nesbitt, *Caribbean Critique: Antillean Critical Theory from Toussaint to Glissant* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 145.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 145-6.

<sup>28</sup> Nick Nesbitt, "Critique de l'économie politique antillaise: Sur Glissant, Marx, et Althusser," *Archipels Glissant* (Saint-Denis: Presses Universitaires de Vincennes, 2020), 79-89.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Drabinski, 23.

<sup>31</sup> Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 89.

<sup>32</sup> Drabinski, 36.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>34</sup> Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 6.

<sup>35</sup> Pierre Macherey, *Introduction à l'Éthique de Spinoza: La première partie: La nature des choses* (Paris: Presse Universitaire de France, 1999), 93. Translation mine.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. Translation mine. Original: "C'est précisément pour parvenir à comprendre ensemble unite et diversité, sans les confondre ni les séparer."

<sup>37</sup> Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 3.

<sup>38</sup> Macherey, *Hegel or Spinoza*, 28.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Glissant, quoted in Nesbitt, *Caribbean Critique*, 139-40.

<sup>42</sup> If, like Hegel, one were tempted to draw some kind of filial connection between Spinoza and Glissant, Deleuze would be the most direct link. Deleuze's dissertations, written concurrently in the 1960s, were "Spinoza et le problème de l'expression" (1969) and "Différence et répétition" (1968). The latter, in which Deleuze applies and reworks aspects of his reading of Spinoza, has impacted much Caribbean theory, from Glissant to the Cuban writer Antonio Benítez-Rojo, whose book *La isla que se repite* (1998) argues that order and disorder are not opposites in nature, and that the apparent chaos of the Caribbean forms an "island" of paradoxes that repeats itself, comprising a complex sociocultural archipelago.

<sup>43</sup> Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 14.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 20-21.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

# Into the Looking Glass

## The Mirror of Old Age in Beauvoir and Améry

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It was not long after the pandemic began that policy makers, public intellectuals and common people alike came to collectively recognize that those who were now most threatened were also those to whom they had otherwise paid so little attention. For while the elderly had long been ignored as individuals, excoriated as a group, and likened at all times to so many drags on national purse, profit and progress, such calculated meanness could not long withstand the fright felt at the sight of an entire generation suddenly promised to annihilation.<sup>1</sup> And so the usual homilies to youthful supremacy did soon become more muted as stock phrases about older people's obsolescence and consequent superfluity came to seem too impolitic to pronounce amidst a natural-historical catastrophe in which the old were everywhere dying off in droves. But because a dream long cultivated in secret will frequently find its advocates foreswearing afterwards their intentions once its consequences have finally been realized, that earlier disdain for the old did quickly give way to self-exonerating expressions of sympathy and frantic provisions undertaken for their safety. Until, that is, so many months of concern turned into so many years of restrictions and it became acceptable to once again identify the old as scapegoats, vent popular frustrations upon them, and bemoan unendingly the losses endured by young people compelled to now sacrifice the time of their lives for the benefit of those resented for having already lived out their own. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that this unprecedented but by no means uncharacteristic situation did not culminate in any corresponding attention paid to older people's contemporary experience of mass death or their far longer, more historically and societally variable plight more generally. In much contemporary social philosophy, unfortunately, the situation was little better. There older people's plight was recorded, their suffering bewailed, but little to no subsequent analysis sought to determine what the old might themselves know about the contemporary world, and how that knowledge might inform social philosophy's attempts at bringing about much-needed social change.

To take up this otherwise neglected line of inquiry, the present essay will consider a previously unexplored episode in the history of social philosophy in which the writers Simone de Beauvoir and Jean Améry first set themselves beside the mirror of old age.<sup>2</sup> For what one finds throughout the accounts of what each writer saw when peering into the looking glass is not only an exemplary critique of the various orthodoxies constraining popular and scholarly discourses on aging to cliché and commonplace, then as now; even more significant is how Beauvoir and Améry so transform our understanding of old age that the readymade responses of rejection, veneration and disavowal so typical of our regard for the elderly start to appear illegitimate and unnecessary once the aging body is no longer treated as a mere *object* of knowledge, as usual, but as a subject capable of producing knowledge in its own right. In this way, the aging body becomes an organ of insight of a kind otherwise unwitnessed in the history of philosophy, and a medium through which society's idols can be seen in their untruth so as to then transform the conditions perpetuating the elderly's humiliation. For Beauvoir and Améry, however, such untimely knowledge as this cannot be gained by intellectual exercise alone. And will not eventuate in the sort of consolation so often desired either. For both authors, such knowledge requires instead that one first proceed from that lived experience of old age in which numberless indictments and self-indictments do naturally follow as newfound infirmities and pains, humiliations and pressures so compound that body and mind, now combined, become both agent and author of a question insisting throughout their meditations: what, each asks, does the aging body itself know about the present state of society and its possible transformation? That question, as urgent and unusual today as it was in Beauvoir and Améry's day, is also the spur for the present essay.

But to understand how Beauvoir and Améry first arrived at such a question, one has to first identify those more traditional social and philosophical conceptions of old age encountered and undermined once each turned towards the looking glass of old age around the time of their fifty-fifth year. After reconstructing this scene, the present essay will then detail what it was Beauvoir and Améry both saw before that mirror, as well as their resulting reflections and intertextual dialogue, before turning to the ways in which each writer sought to reclaim the experience and knowledge of old age for philosophical insight and contemporary social change.

At a time when intergenerational conflicts have only continued to increase older people's historical ostracism, it is perhaps appropriate to consider again Beauvoir and Améry's conviction that the feelings of aversion, fright and indifference obstructing a proper understanding of the social and existential situation of old age can only be surmounted by first staring them in the face. To do so today will require, as then, that social philosophy abandon its long-held inattention to the subject of aging so as to afterwards stare so long into the looking glass of old age that the elderly's suffering comes

to appear as unnecessary as it is unfortunate, and as cause for the kind of coalitions and experiments that would finally be commensurate with conditions that continue to degrade the lives of young and old alike.<sup>3</sup>

## The Consolation of Philosophy; or its Shame

That aging has long been a problem for philosophy would seem to be evidenced by its prominent place within the so-called western tradition. From ancient Egypt comes the earliest-known written remark on the subject some 4,500 years ago; from the Old Testament, Homeric Greece and Plato's Athens endless testimony to the joys and sorrows of old age. But what still remains the most extensive ancient treatment of aging is to be found in Cicero's *On Old Age* (*Cato Maior de Senectute*) (45/44 BC).<sup>4</sup> The most *extensive* and, in many respects, also the most *definitive* account, especially if one takes seriously the fact that *De Senectute's* portrayal of old age has so well endured the millennia that every subsequent analysis cannot help but contend with its terms. It is thus all the more important to recall that the dialogue in which Cato the Elder is there engaged is undertaken for the purpose of defending a felicitous notion of old age so far removed from corporeal, societal and philosophical problems as to render those problems insignificant. And, indeed, what is otherwise called the problem of old age is not there considered by Cicero a problem at all, but a situation calling out for a typically philosophical sort of solution. For when the author begins by speaking of the familiar "burden of old age," he then just as quickly goes on to claim that, with the help of a "calm and philosophic[al] mind," one can learn to do as he did and treat old age as what he calls "an easy and a happy state."<sup>5</sup> That the facts of old age do often contradict such optimism is for Cicero no contradiction at all. For whenever he finds an old person without those qualities said to be characteristic of such an 'easy and happy state' – characterized then as now in terms of authority, wisdom, honor and serenity, and in accord with that dictum according to which those who live well also age well – Cicero will then propose a typically philosophical kind of consolation by arguing that such failings do not belong to the condition of old age as such, but are instead the result of individual failings its sufferers were not philosophical enough to sufficiently correct.

And while Cicero's laudatory account of aging continues to cast a long shadow over all subsequent writing on the subject, there is reason to suspect that such encomiums to a good old age betray a far greater fear than they might otherwise admit. Indeed, for many the situation of the old constitutes instead the kind of "scandal," as Simone de Beauvoir put it, that can only be presented otherwise by subterfuge, omission, avoidance or just plain maliciousness.<sup>6</sup> For Beauvoir, the idea of a "ripe old age" propagated by Cicero is the kind of mystification whose individual and social consequences are at once an insult to the intelligence and an offense against what every life will eventually come to know. "We harden in some places and rot in others,"

Beauvoir writes of old age, quoting Sainte-Beuve, and adds: “We never ripen.”<sup>7</sup> Frequently employed, however, to satisfy the most transparent of political ends,<sup>8</sup> such mystifications as Cicero’s are just as often invoked to naturalize those forms of suffering the ruling ideology enjoins the old to endure with poise, grace and fortitude – no matter their untruth. In this way, as Beauvoir writes, when it is today men who grow old and in the process retain all of the “virtues and the faults of the men they were and still are,” for instance, such older men are for some reason expected to remake themselves in the image society finds most pleasing, “required,” she writes, “to be a standing example of all the virtues.”<sup>9</sup> “Above all,” she continues, “they are called upon to display serenity: the world asserts that they possess it, and this assertion allows the world to ignore their unhappiness.”<sup>10</sup> But this “idea that old age brings serenity,” Beauvoir replies, is in the final analysis an idea “that must be totally set aside.”<sup>11</sup> To understand aging, one would have to first “invalidate consolation,” as Jean Améry writes, and then go on to indict every last example of that “vile dupery” confounding old age with wisdom, tranquility and the like.<sup>12</sup> As mistaken as they are immemorial, such prejudices are only entertained today by those who know nothing about old age, want to know nothing about old age, and who have always confused the different phases of life with what society finds most pleasing. “From classical times,” Beauvoir writes

the adult world has done its best to see mankind’s condition in a hopeful light; it has attributed to ages that are not its own, virtues that they do not possess: innocence to childhood, serenity to old age. It has deliberately chosen to look upon the end of life as a time when all the conflicts that tear it apart are resolved. What is more, this is a convenient illusion: it allows one to suppose, in spite of all the ills and misfortunes that are known to overwhelm them, that the old are happy and that they can be left to their fate.<sup>13</sup>

It is for this reason that Beauvoir will refer to her own book on aging, *La Vieillesse (The Coming of Age)* (1970), as an “anti-*De Senectute*,”<sup>14</sup> for what she had there sought to demonstrate was that the regular dismissal and degradation of the old exemplified so well by Cicero has long since become in its effects tantamount to “the failure of our entire civilization.”<sup>15</sup> And although *The Coming Age* certainly constitutes Beauvoir’s most sustained analysis of the subject, her engagement with the problem was actually an enduring concern throughout the whole of her life.<sup>16</sup> More than twenty years before, *Le Deuxième Sexe (The Second Sex)* (1949) had already dedicated a fair bit of attention to that subject whose future place in Beauvoir’s work was foreshadowed in the very terms of that book’s now-famous title. *Foreshadowed*, but not yet present; *included*, but only inasmuch as the old’s *exclusion* was recognized without being as yet rectified by its author – so ambivalent is the status of the old in the history of philosophy that their exclusion even marks the work of those as dedicated to their inclusion as Beauvoir. At the same

time, however, a more careful examination of Beauvoir's most famous book's title might also enable us to identify some of the basic contours of this ambivalence, as well as Beauvoir's early and enduring sensitivity to that ambivalence's effects.

To consider Beauvoir's title today is to recognize how the act of counting the sexes once appeared no more difficult than counting one's fingers: man is the first sex, woman the second — so says dogma and superstition, so repeat societies made in their image. But when Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* turned to the situation, not simply of women but of older women, the author was there led to consider the idea that such older women might actually constitute what is called a "third sex" instead.<sup>17</sup> "Not males," as Beauvoir notes, these older women incapable of any longer bearing children are in some sense "no longer females" either.<sup>18</sup> Restricted here to the particulars of physiology, this idea of older women as a 'third sex' outside the bounds of sexed humanity will gain additional resonance when Beauvoir later shows how such aging women no longer occupy any sanctioned role in society at all.<sup>19</sup> Subject as they are to the ravages of time, the crises of biology and the judgment of society, older women like this will have to frequently confront the horror of societies for whom the woman who does not conform to such images is simply no woman at all. And it was precisely this status of older women as a 'third sex,' and of older people more generally as "stand[ing] outside humanity," as Beauvoir would later put it, that continued to occupy Beauvoir's attention as those around her and she herself continued to age.<sup>20</sup>

In this sense, then, the relative inattention otherwise paid to Beauvoir's analysis of aging within the scholarly literature, and to *The Coming of Age* more generally, should be set against the evidence of Beauvoir's long-term engagement with the problem, her own explicit statement as to that later study's centrality to her larger oeuvre, as well as the recognition that her writings on both 'the second sex' and the 'third sex' issued from the very same sense of injustice, incomprehension and attempt to redress that injustice. For Beauvoir not only speaks of these two studies in terms of their more essential unity — as when she calls *The Coming of Age* "the counterpart of *The Second Sex*" — but also explains her drive to write both books in remarkably similar terms.<sup>21</sup> The origin myth particular to each is in fact common to both. And that is because each answers a need that will repeat itself throughout Beauvoir's life. To give an account of the origins of *The Second Sex*, for instance, Beauvoir will relate a scene in which she was sitting at a cafe sometime in 1945: "I felt the need to write in my fingertips," she says, "and the taste of the words in my throat, but I didn't know where to start, or what."<sup>22</sup> And so she spoke to a friend, and afterwards decided: "In fact, I wanted to write about myself."<sup>23</sup> Soon afterwards she realized that "the first question to come up was: What has it meant to me to be a woman?"<sup>24</sup> And from there the work began: "I am a woman, and I wished to throw light upon the woman's lot," she wrote of *The*

*Second Sex*. And of *The Coming of Age*, something remarkably similar: “I was on the threshold of old age,” she writes, “and I wished to know the bounds and the nature of the aged state.”<sup>25</sup> What unites the first, her most famous book, with her second and least appreciated,<sup>26</sup> is precisely this need “to understand a state that is my own,” as she would later say, “and to understand it in its implication for mankind as whole.”<sup>27</sup> In this sense, each book sought to understand the situation in which Beauvoir, like so many others, often find themselves, as either women or as older people – or both. But to understand this situation, and thereafter bring such experiences to expression, does necessarily also entail, for Beauvoir and social philosophy more generally, that one begin by determining the extent to which one is already made by others so as to then demonstrate how the causes of one’s individual misfortune do not reside upon the surface of the mirror, as is otherwise so clearly the case, but within those infernal social processes that are their condition instead.<sup>28</sup>

It is for this reason that Beauvoir’s work in social theory should be today understood, like all attempts at today contending with the problem of aging, in terms of that form of ideology critique Beauvoir called “demystification.”<sup>29</sup> Demystification, for Beauvoir, meant the work of confronting the sources of universalized unhappiness in order to show how that unhappiness has been for so long prepared. “Doing away with humbug and telling the truth: that is one of the aims I have pursued most stubbornly throughout all my books,” she explained.<sup>30</sup> That the truth told about the causes and consequences of this unhappiness will often result in gestures of aversion, empty consolation and frightened disavowal – all that is to be expected. “To fight unhappiness,” Beauvoir writes, “one must first expose it, which means that one must dispel the mystifications behind which it is hidden so that people do not have to think about it. It is because I reject lies and running away,” she continues, “that I am accused of pessimism; but this rejection implies hope – the hope that truth may be of use. And this,” Beauvoir concludes, “is a more optimistic attitude than the choice of indifference, ignorance or sham.”<sup>31</sup> Because a sham is what so much talk of aging and the old often amounts to, a mystification of reality undone the moment social philosophy resolves to entertain that “tradition of bleak meditation” to which Beauvoir and Améry belong by finally setting itself before the mirror of old age in order to see what that situation actually amounts to.<sup>32</sup>

## Into the Looking Glass: Simone de Beauvoir

What the mirror reflects back is as much the image of the individual as of society, and it is just as subject to change as is the body whose passage through time transforms it in turn. For Simone de Beauvoir, the mirror of old age had been an object for reflection from the time of her mature adulthood until the

very end of her life, and subject to ever-changing ideas about the image, experience and difficulty of understanding old age.

In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir first introduced the problem of women's image in society and the process of growing older when noting how the woman "is still relatively young when she loses her erotic attractiveness and the fertility which, in the view of society and in her own, provides the justification of her existence and her opportunity for happiness. With no future, she still has about one half of her adult life to live."<sup>33</sup> And it is at this point, as the body begins to change, that a woman like Beauvoir, more dependent than men, she claims, on what is called their "physiological destiny,"<sup>34</sup> first turns to the image seen wrinkling, sagging and pockmarked in the mirror, and realizes that she now has only two options left: she can either identify with the person she sees in the mirror and set out upon a furious battle to "prolong her dying youth"<sup>35</sup> with the aid of hair dye, skin treatments and plastic surgery; or she can refuse what she sees there, telling herself "this cannot be I," not me is "this old woman reflected in the mirror," and begin to thereby devalue the reality she sees before her by taking flight into the many fancies revealed by an inner eye said to know how all mirrors lie, and in search of that new life offered by charlatans of the occult, religion and other miracles.<sup>36</sup> Both responses are of course only two ways of refusing to grow old, and are both inspired by what Beauvoir calls the anguish felt "at the throat of the woman whose life is already done before death has taken her."<sup>37</sup>

And this despite the fact that such a woman is at that moment not even very old, and not at all incapacitated; indeed, the very opposite. "Toward fifty," Beauvoir writes,

she is in full possession of her powers; she feels she is rich in experience; that is the age at which men attain the highest positions, the most important posts; as for her, she is put into retirement. She has been taught only to devote herself to someone, and nobody wants her devotion any more. Useless, unjustified, she looks forward to the long, unpromising years she has yet to live, and she mutters: "No one needs me!"<sup>38</sup>

The list of indignities she will suffer appears endless: potential sexual partners no longer find her attractive, her spouse devotes more time to the society in which he now occupies a privileged station, the children are all grown up and no longer need her. As a result, she is often told that, since her former life — the one for which she had been raised, the one in which she had for so long lived — has now come to an end, "she should," as they say, "start out toward a new future."<sup>39</sup> Unwanted, ostracized and unprepared for anything else, however, she "will sadly reply" to such suggestions "that it is too late," as Beauvoir writes, muttering to herself, bitter and inconsolable: "What's the use?"<sup>40</sup> What is for Beauvoir true of the life of women at each and every stage of their life is no less true of the older woman: namely, that she is only offered

freedom – from duty, from appearances, from the rigid expectations of society – at the moment “when she can make no use of it,” as Beauvoir writes.<sup>41</sup>

No longer the young girl made to please, nor the dutiful daughter, fetching wife or mother of innocents, the older woman “falls from the heaven of timeless idols,” according to Beauvoir, and finds herself “no longer anything more than a finished, outdated individual,”<sup>42</sup> “prey to loneliness, regret and boredom,”<sup>43</sup> with the only remaining task that of the “problem of how to kill time.”<sup>44</sup> The consequences are of course not difficult to predict: such women know “that they have been duped and deceived all their lives,” as Beauvoir notes, and so, “sane and mistrustful, they often develop a pungent cynicism.”<sup>45</sup> A cynicism Beauvoir analyzes in terms of its origins, development and ends, but one for which she had at that time little to no sympathy. For while the older woman’s “experience enables her to unmask deceits and lies,” as Beauvoir writes, “it is not sufficient to show her the truth.”<sup>46</sup> “[T]he wisdom of the old woman...remains wholly negative,” says Beauvoir, “it is in the nature of opposition, indictment, denial.” “It is,” the Beauvoir of 1949 concludes, ultimately “sterile.”<sup>47</sup> That such a dismissive judgment as this may well appear allied with Cicero’s own old age ideology is likely a measure of the sort of difficulty faced whenever one confronts the oftentimes insoluble experience of growing old – a difficulty in no way effaced by the fact that Beauvoir would so dramatically revise this judgment some twenty or so years later in *The Coming of Age*.<sup>48</sup>

It should be remembered, however, strange as it might seem, that at the time the above lines were first published, Beauvoir was only a little less than forty years old. At that time in her life, in other words, when she thought a woman had already begun the irreversible descent into aging that would steal from her the charms the mirror once held, as well as the affections that were the result of those charms. From 1944 onwards, Beauvoir would later write, “the most important, the most irreparable thing that has happened to me is that...I have grown old.”<sup>49</sup> And this occurred, Beauvoir claims, when she was then only thirty-six-years-old. Such an early onset of aging, or at least of the sense of having already begun the aging process, may seem to some inexplicable, but becomes more comprehensible if one considers Beauvoir’s further claim that, as she notes, “Long before the eventual mutilation” of aging has left any of its most manifest traces, such a woman is already “haunted by the horror of growing old.”<sup>50</sup> And that horror is of course never very far away. For the woman approaching old age, even the most common, everyday objects can come to seem to her the medium of fate. Standing before a mirror and facing herself at forty-years-old, Beauvoir would later record what she saw: “Deep in that looking glass,” she writes, “old age is watching and waiting for me; and it’s inevitable, one day she’ll get me.”<sup>51</sup> When Beauvoir first came to write of her own experience of aging, at the end of 1963’s *Force of Circumstance*, she was already well-versed in just how powerful was this need for indifference, ignorance and lies.

At the time, Beauvoir, then fifty-five-years-old, looked into the mirror to see that the old woman who was earlier only watching and waiting for her had since come all too close: "She's got me now," Beauvoir writes, and so the middle-aged author now finds herself before the mirror she would like to otherwise avoid, "flabbergasted," as she says, "at the sight of this incredible thing that serves me as a face."<sup>53</sup> But what is particularly unusual here is that it is not only the face of the then-fifty-five-year old that Beauvoir saw in the mirror, but also, as she writes, "my face *as it was*," preserved and transformed, "attacked by the pox of time for which there is no cure."<sup>53</sup> And that is of course only the most outwardly visible sign of an aging whose effects are felt everywhere. "[T]he world around me has changed," Beauvoir writes, "it has become smaller and narrower," more finite, less rich, its mysteries dissolved,<sup>54</sup> its marvels emptied, one's sympathies for the young tempered by the knowledge that, in Beauvoir's words, "they perpetuate our world, and in doing so they steal it from me."<sup>55</sup> Even the most memorable places that once inspired such awe in her that they became personal totems have since changed irrevocably. The Acropolis she sees now is no longer the Acropolis she once knew; old and regularly reminded now of the shortness of her future, Beauvoir suddenly feels the eyes of the young on that monument too, sensing how they stare at it with eyes trained towards a future from which she knows herself excluded. "In the eyes of those twenty-year-olds," she says, "I see myself already dead and mummified."<sup>56</sup> And the gaze that looks back from everyday objects only compounds such pain now that she is at all times aware of just how much her powers of revolt have dimmed, her joys paled, her desires faded; as "[m]emories grow thin," she writes, "myths crack and peel, projects rot in the bud."<sup>57</sup> But lest it be thought that it is Beauvoir herself who steals the sap from a world otherwise so vital and alive, it must be emphasized that, as she goes on to insist, "[i]t is not I who am saying good-bye to all those things I once enjoyed, it is they who are leaving me; the mountain paths disdain my feet. Never again shall I collapse, drunk with fatigue, into the smell of hay. Never again shall I slide down through the solitary morning snows."<sup>58</sup> Inconsolable on account of all she knows herself to have so recently lost, Beauvoir cannot help but sense that all she has learned and experienced, all she has felt and thought, will have all have been for nothing: "I think with sadness," she writes, "of all the books I've read, all the places I've seen, all the knowledge I've amassed and that will be no more. All the music, all the paintings, all the culture, so many places: and suddenly nothing. They made no honey, those things," she concludes, "they can provide no one with any nourishment": "...there is no place where it will all live again."<sup>59</sup> Forsaken now by what seems to her the whole of the world, Beauvoir recalls a time when that world once seemed so open to her, so endless and promising, when she had before her "a whole life to live"; but now, looking back at her former self, she realizes "with stupor," as she writes, just "how much I was gypped."<sup>60</sup> With these words the *Force of Circumstance* ends, its last lines' sense of defiance and resentment undimmed by that serenity so often expected of the old, and

certain cause for the controversy that would erupt with the book's publication.

Although Beauvoir would later admit that the book was indeed written with every intention of giving offense, the kind of clichés, platitudes and outright aggression which greeted its publication are nevertheless noteworthy for their representative meanness and feigned incomprehension.<sup>61</sup> It is as though her many readers had thought, Beauvoir writes, that "I ought...to have pretended that I felt young and that I should go on feeling young until I drew my last breath."<sup>62</sup> Because it is serenity people expect from the old, Beauvoir knew, and because her readers had long been in the habit of identifying with her, her own lack of serenity was something they could not tolerate because its consequences would be for them too terrible to bear: "If I am frightened by age," Beauvoir explains, "then that means *it is* frightening; which is something they do not choose to admit."<sup>63</sup> The "furious outcry" stirred by Beauvoir's attempt to understand what it meant for her to find herself aging did not, however, provoke outrage in one of Beauvoir's better-known contemporary admirers.<sup>64</sup> For when Jean Améry first read Beauvoir's remarks on aging he was not at all driven to denounce such unpleasantness but to turn the mirror upon himself instead, and repeat the very same experiment Beauvoir had herself undertaken. And while the terms of his own experiment were ultimately allied with hers, their results were rather different in kind.

## Into the Looking Glass: Jean Améry

Beauvoir's *Force of Circumstance* comes to an end with a revolt against the mirror that reflected back to her a face she did not want to recognize as her own. Aghast to now find that her nightmare of growing old has finally come true, and that she can no longer bear to see what the force of circumstance has done to her face, Beauvoir recalls how she once looked upon that face without the least displeasure. Of the face of youth, "I gave it no thought," she writes, "it could look after itself."<sup>65</sup> No longer. "I loathe my appearance now," she continues

the eyebrows slipping down towards the eyes, the bags underneath, the excessive fullness of the cheeks, and that air of sadness around the mouth that wrinkles always bring. Perhaps the people I pass in the street see merely a woman in her fifties who simply looks her age, no more, no less. But when I look, I see my face as it was, attacked by the pox of time for which there is no cure.<sup>66</sup>

These lines, among the last of Beauvoir's memoir, would afterwards inspire Jean Améry's own turn to the mirror in 1968's *On Aging*, and feature prominently at the very beginning of that book's second chapter. At the time of writing, Améry was almost exactly the same age as Beauvoir when she

wrote the above lines – and so when the two take up the subject, they are both not at all *old*, but most certainly *aging*. For Améry, however, appreciative though he was of Beauvoir's work,<sup>67</sup> his own experience of aging was something altogether different.<sup>68</sup>

Originally written for radio, the five essays of which Améry's *On Aging* consist revolve around a series of protagonists through whose experience and reflections one can track something of the difference separating Beauvoir from Améry. In the book's second chapter, for instance, Améry gives the name "A" to a fifty-year-old woman, an admirer of Beauvoir, who the reader first meets as she stands before the looking glass. Améry's essay starts by describing what Beauvoir's admirer sees. For days, this A. has been noting in the mirror the development of several small yellow growths upon her eyelids – not terribly noticeable, not even particularly ugly, but still a sign of how aging has left its mark. Staring at them, A. sees the growths staring back, tries to assess what is now happening to her and finds herself in need of some greater clarity about this "dark state of affairs" into which she has recently been driven.<sup>69</sup> And so she turns to Beauvoir for counsel because Beauvoir had always been for her, as for so many others, a "writer she considers a friend even though they have never met."<sup>70</sup> As a result, A. picks up Beauvoir's *Force of Circumstance* to read the above lines about that more illustrious woman's own confrontation with the mirror, and finds herself at once "full of sympathy" and yet, at the same time, "not entirely satisfied with her friend."<sup>71</sup> It is not that Beauvoir is wrong exactly, it is not that A. feels in any way unmoved by Beauvoir's complaint. The problem is that what really matters to A. is something Beauvoir for some reason never mentions. For what so surprises A. about Beauvoir's otherwise searching remarks is that the latter says so little about what "happens *beyond* or *beneath* the justified occasion for the complaint."<sup>72</sup> And it is precisely this something else that not only most interests A. but which Améry's essay itself tries to comprehend.<sup>73</sup> Because if it is true that Beauvoir's remarks are in some respects insufficient, that they leave A. unsatisfied, then that is likely because A. possesses some form of knowledge as yet absent from Beauvoir's words, a knowledge gained during the night Beauvoir's writing day did not find but which A. discovered by persisting before the mirror without giving in to the temptation of simply turning away in disgust. For that is precisely what A. does – she keeps staring, and finds there a form of knowledge absent from Beauvoir's account but essential to understanding the ambiguity at the center of the condition of aging.<sup>74</sup> What, then, is the nature of this ambiguity?

In many respects, A.'s reaction is little different from Beauvoir's own. For once A's eyes find themselves fixed upon those yellow growths she sees in the mirror, for instance, she realizes that she does not like herself at all anymore and, Améry writes, perhaps even "tells herself like her friend that what now has to serve as her face has become a dreadful thing."<sup>75</sup> Is it self-hatred she feels? Self-disgust? Shame? No, none of those things. Instead one

should say that A. is simply tired of herself. And yet what A. does eventually come to discover in that most ungenerous mirror is also a certain form of self-satisfaction, some “pride of having already endured for a long time” on account of which she “wears her brittle skin like a brave warrior wears his scars.”<sup>76</sup> She is alienated from herself, of course, but she is also getting closer to herself at the same time. This is indeed the essential paradox of old age, and it is precisely this ambiguity that begins to transfix her as soon as she knows that there is “no chance of ever [again] being reconciled to anything unambiguous.”<sup>77</sup> For even though she experiences, like Beauvoir, a distinct sense of misrecognition whenever someone calls her by that name of hers she now associates only with her younger self, this alienation is but a single pole over which her existence hangs taut. For “in the same breath and in the same tick of time it becomes obvious to her” that, as Améry writes,

if she just perseveres in front of the mirror and does not turn away from the glass, irritated as only a stranger can be, that she, along with all the yellow flecks and lackluster eyes, is *closer* to herself, with all her weariness and intimate familiarity, than ever before, and that in front of her mirror image, now a stranger to her, she is condemned to become more and more oppressively herself.<sup>78</sup>

And it is here that A. becomes for a moment so markedly different from her friend Beauvoir. For A. “knows that she not *only* detests her face, that it is not *only* alienated from her,” but that this face is also the sign of all she has *gained*, that her face is perhaps only now hers for the first time: the face wanted by the world is no more, the world that wanted her face is no more, and so what she now sees in the mirror is a face that is hers and hers alone.<sup>79</sup> Her loss is here just as much a gain to be had by those who, as Améry writes, “have the *patience* to persevere in front of the mirror, who can summon up the courage not to let themselves be chased away by yellow flecks and dehydration, who do not internalize the conventional judgment of others and submit to it” – only for them can the reflecting mirror become the medium through which one not only discovers this essential ambiguity, but also comes to recognize oneself through that image opposed to the world so as to then experience “an increased sense of self” at the sight of a face that is finally one’s own and that of no one else.<sup>80</sup>

But of course this additional self is not for that reason the source of any unambiguous joy. For such a self does also belong to a body that is the engine of our ruin, a ruin everywhere visible in the veins that protrude, the stomach that grows, in the toenails that become thick and cracked. The body which now possesses an additional, augmented self also knows how the world in which one once participated has since become “a clear negation of ourselves,” and that this aging body now “cuts us off from world and space with its heavy breathing, painful legs, and the arthritically plagued articulation of our bones.”<sup>81</sup> Nature, mountain, valley, water, landscape – each is now equally inhospitable, and all are thus felt to be the “contradiction of [one’s own]

person.”<sup>82</sup> And so the body that weighs one down, that cuts one off from the world seems to have now changed its function – as the threat long feared from outside comes suddenly from within, the body becomes for the aging person the source of a “death threatening them as a murder.”<sup>83</sup>

And so at the same time as the aging body becomes the source of a new sense of self, the mind cannot but reject its pains, and will forever afterwards seek to separate itself from a body that continually wears it down: “If only the damned cadaver would leave one in peace!”, shouts the aging mind.<sup>84</sup> As a result, the sense of self provided by this body will also be seen as a “hostile *new ego*, foreign and, in the exact meaning of the word, odious.”<sup>85</sup> Even here, however, the situation remains ambiguous because the aging body will just as frequently become the object of a new kind of tenderness. “You poor stomach,” says the old man

you’ve been carrying me through a world of streets, mountains, cobblestones, and gas pedals! Now you’ve been taken from time and work and can’t do any more; you’re both tired, just like my heart that won’t allow me anymore to go upstairs two steps at a time.<sup>86</sup>

And so the older person may very well become transfixed by the paradox of this newly added, newly loved and newly pitied body that is at once one’s own and not. “I am my leg, my heart, my stomach,” say those who are aging, “...I am all my living cells as well as those only sluggishly renewing themselves – and at the same time I am still *not* those cells. I am becoming a stranger to myself the more I approach them and, while doing so, becoming nonetheless myself.”<sup>87</sup> The aging person finds itself rivetted to this paradox, a paradox that is in some sense insuperable even if it must nevertheless still be solved. And with time it will most assuredly be solved, one way or another; the question is only: on whose terms?

Another scene, this time featuring a protagonist who is not now a reader of Beauvoir but a man, again called A., who wakes up in the middle of the night with a toothache. Such a man knows, of course, that his pain can be stopped by painkillers, and then more permanently stilled by surgery and dentures designed to replace his body so that it might better accord with the world’s demand: Fix those teeth, and be quiet about it. The path to this kind of normality would then consist in the old man brushing off all of his pain and humiliation without complaint and thereby earning the “respect owed to [the old] by a society that does not want to be bothered by the spectacle of their demise.”<sup>88</sup> But that is most certainly not the only path. For once A. finds himself lost in the nighttime pain of his toothache, he gets to thinking: what if he were to accept the fact that the world of mountains, casual talk and convention is now lost to him, reject the painkiller, refuse the surgery, and renounce that need for society’s approval which had animated him for so long? What if he were to count his nighttime suffering as a gain rather than a loss? For there is undoubtedly some truth to the idea that, as Améry writes,

"We only discover our body in pain and aging," and that this body of suffering "is just as much a true ego as the stratified time the aging have built up inside themselves" – indeed, the man in pain knows precisely this, knows that the night of suffering is just as real, that the body that writhes is just as much himself, indeed, perhaps even more himself, than would be the body rejected and replaced by painkillers and surgery.<sup>89</sup> For while A. knows himself to now be, as he says, "reduced in my ability to function," he also knows that this reduction is not only a loss: "I am increased in what immediately belongs to me," he says, "I gain in ego," he continues, and this additional bodily gain may be not only *the equal* of what was once, but rather *more* me, *more* true.<sup>90</sup> And so, as Améry suggestively writes, "One would have to shed light on the tormenting and festive minute in which A. gave himself over entirely to his toothache as *his*, eventually becoming totally engrossed in its inflammation, and determine whether this was the authentic moment of truth."<sup>91</sup>

That at least is the question Améry sets himself as he follows the man with the toothache into the night; unfortunately, however, it is not the kind of question that can ultimately be answered affirmatively. For even though Améry will go so far as to say that A. there "became himself in a new way," that it was the toothache that "helped him to his, or at least a new, ego," whatever moment of truth there was in that night was just that – momentary, since the contrary of what Améry here calls the "bodily ego," that is to say, the "mental ego," always "turns out to be the stronger."<sup>92</sup> In fact, it is not at all a fair fight — for that ego made by and for others is also one's own: indeed, it "is just as much something of our own as anything that immediately and physically experiences itself," Améry writes.<sup>93</sup> And because this reality will "not release us as long as we exist," the older man can never be sure what to make of his now-enlarged and ecstatic body of pain.<sup>94</sup> "To be sure," Améry writes,

he can start a relationship with his pain and acquire something he could perhaps call his "knowledge." But such is only possible during the night: not only because society demands that he fill out the income tax declaration free of pain and with a clear mind, but also because he cannot accept the ego of toothlessness, refused by the world and expelled from it, that threatens him. For he is "world" himself, he is society, and he sees himself with the latter's eyes. A. himself thinks he senses that society senses him: therefore, he wants to preserve the ego of fresh teeth he's dragged with him from his youth and at any price get rid of the other ego he called in the middle of the night his "authentic ego."<sup>95</sup>

It would seem, then, that time is only regained once the mirror is made to lie so as to thereby maintain the lie society – and the society in us – requires us to keep. But what of that man with white teeth, has he escaped the uncertainty of the night and achieved some greater certainty in the day? Here too problems abound. For why has one sought to maintain those teeth, the other

that head of hair, the other that fetching figure? Each imagined that those attributes were the focal points around which their social egos turned, believed that it was these attributes that made them what they were. But is this identification any less fanciful than the one which seized A. during the night of his toothache, when he was convinced that that specific moment was the moment of truth and all the others a lie? For who's to say that it was not the timbre of the voice that was for others the focal point of the first man, not his teeth; the heave of laughter that distinguished the second, not his hair; the gleam in the eyes that made the woman, not her figure? The image to which one submits when remaking oneself in this way is often that of a self that "has sometimes not existed in reality at all," as Améry writes – which naturally begs the question of whether this search for greater security will indeed succeed by so summarily casting off the knowledge of the night.<sup>96</sup> "The reality of the social ego we experience as such every day and to which we submit," Améry writes, "is in the end just as questionable as A.'s nocturnal toothache ego" – here too, then, there is no easy way out.<sup>97</sup> No way to resolve the matter into anything unambiguous.

And so this essential ambiguity is of course real, but only up to a point. Because the skin does actually separate me from the world, because the bodies of the aged are in fact no longer part of the world, this much longed-for "ambiguity becomes an antinomy"<sup>98</sup>: "in aging," Améry explains, "I am myself *through* my body and *against* it."<sup>99</sup> The contradiction is at once both irresolvable and real, and can only be recognized at the extremes – when the body that was once an afterthought becomes irrepressible, first ignored, then loathed, then loved and ignored once again; when the world that was once mine rejects me, mocks me, excludes me, instigates my rebellion and then compels me to submit just the same. Here it is ambiguity that must be learned on the other side of that antimony for which aging serves as propaedeutic and initiation. "It is aging that exposes us to that kind of consciousness," Améry writes, "and makes us capable of it."<sup>100</sup> For it is only then that we become capable of integrating within ourselves this antinomial relationship between alienation and familiarity, association and disassociation, ego, non-ego, anti-ego and society, all kindred, different in kind, separate and yet combined, their relation only determinable once that "world whose image is logic" leaves us as we age.<sup>101</sup> "[W]e have to take logical contradictoriness upon ourselves," Améry writes, "have to take upon ourselves absurdity and the risk of every mental confusion when we meditate on our condition"<sup>102</sup> – and to do this one needs the mirror to find there disgust and fascination, needs, too, the desire to smash the mirror and then so luxuriate in its grip that the age one has recently achieved but otherwise "disparaged in resignation" can then become the medium through which knowledge of one's condition becomes as manifest and unavoidable as the flesh that retrains the mind until that moment when one is so well appraised of this condition that one is, as Améry says, "ready for revolt."<sup>103</sup> That world the old once understood no longer exists and they cannot understand the world in which they live; they are compelled

to decipher its signs but they cannot do it; their world and their egos are outmoded and destroyed and yet they must remain hopelessly, worthlessly faithful to both. And so, for Améry, the only way they can continue without deceiving themselves is to lead what he calls an “inconsistent revolt of fighting out a contradiction.”<sup>104</sup> In this, the old are condemned to both “accept and to refuse their annihilation” as ambiguity becomes antinomy becomes contradiction: for this is what it is to age without seeking solace in fairy tales for the benefit of a society that will never repay the sacrifice.<sup>105</sup>

## Reclamation

For Beauvoir, like Améry, the problem of old age can only be properly posed when set against the background of that greater ignorance, inattention and avoidance characteristic of society’s treatment of suffering in general and of the suffering of the old in particular. And it is for this reason that *The Coming of Age* begins with the fable of Prince Siddhartha. For Beauvoir, the fable is exemplary because Siddhartha rejects such indifference so as to see the old as individuals and societies rarely do, that is to say, as part and parcel of themselves. “When Buddha was still Prince Siddhartha,” Beauvoir begins

he often escaped from the splendid palace in which his father kept him shut up and drove about the surrounding countryside. The first time he went out he saw a tottering, wrinkled, toothless, white-haired man, bowed, mumbling and trembling as he propped himself along on his stick. The sight astonished the prince and the charioteer told him just what it meant to be old. ‘It is the world’s pity,’ cried Siddhartha, ‘that weak and ignorant beings, drunk with the vanity of youth, do not behold old age! Let us hurry back to the palace. What is the use of pleasures and delights, since I myself am the future dwelling-place of old age?’<sup>106</sup>

“Buddha recognized his own fate in the person of a very aged man,” Beauvoir continues, “because, being born to save humanity, he chose to take upon himself the entirety of the human state. In this he differed from the rest of mankind, for they evade those aspects of it that distress them. And above all, they evade old age.<sup>107</sup> And they evade it because they know it to be their own unfortunate fate. And so, as a result, one banishes any thought of the realities of old age from the course of one’s life because one knows very well how that time which exists past the prime of life entails a form of existence hostile to the one and only life one wants to live. Instead, one lives as though in a children’s book, pretending that one will someday transform from a caterpillar into a butterfly – rather than that most hated, but more real metamorphosis from a butterfly into a worm as one passes into old age.<sup>108</sup>

In propagating such illusions and further perpetuating the exclusion of the old, it is of course not only the old who suffer. “We carry this ostracism so

far," Beauvoir writes, "that we even reach the point of turning it against ourselves: for in the old person that we must become, we refuse to recognize ourselves."<sup>109</sup> Even though we all know that this is indeed our fate, that what it is that the old know about the course of a life is what we too will one day come to know. And so "[w]e must stop cheating," as Beauvoir writes, exhorting her readers: "...let us recognize ourselves in this old man or in that old woman. It must be done if we are to take upon ourselves the entirety of our human state. And when it is done we will no longer acquiesce in the misery of the last age; we will no longer be indifferent, because we shall feel concerned, as indeed we are."<sup>110</sup> For if we were to take seriously this solidarity with the old Beauvoir calls for, then it soon becomes "clear that *everything* has to be reconsidered, recast from the very beginning. That is why the whole problem is so carefully passed over in silence: and that is why this silence has to be shattered."<sup>111</sup> The old experience what the clichés never admit: the world is disappearing, things and places and people fall silent the moment they offer nothing new to the senses, and a vicious circle will soon be established within which inactivity results in curiosity's withdrawal that then leads to a loss of enthusiasm whose effect is that the eyes and imagination of the old are constantly engaged in that hate-filled task of what Beauvoir calls "depopulating the world."<sup>112</sup> And while one might suppose that a respite from this indifference might be found among those who care for the old, it is often the very opposite. Insecure and defenseless, the old are at such times almost entirely dependent upon others, and thus live only at the mercy of others' whims, affections and inconstancy. And because the old know that they can be abandoned at any moment, they become increasingly distrustful of those upon whom they rely, terrified of whatever it is that might serve as an excuse for their eventual abandonment.

As a result, Beauvoir says, the old possess what she calls "an ill-defined sense of injustice," and will often act out of resentment, rage and rebellion.<sup>113</sup> Just as often, however, these resentments remain below the surface, harnessed but no less real – and, one might add, no less just. "The old person's resentment," Beauvoir writes, "...smoulders deep inside him. He feels that he is excluded from his times; he survives rather than lives. He sees everything that he has desired, believed in and loved called into question or even denied; he revolts against this fundamental dispossession," evoking in him a fury directed, more often than not, against those younger than he because each seems to be the agent of his own dispossession.<sup>114</sup> As a result, he will sometimes place little store by the feelings of others, will act in brutal self-interest, display no respect for the customs governing those younger than he, and will then take his revenge for the injustices he has suffered, becoming petty and mean. But what of it? "These attitudes may be irritating," Beauvoir writes, "But they must be understood. The elderly man, forgotten and treated with disrespect by the new generations, is challenging his judges both now and in the future" by his revolt against standards and expectations that are not his own.<sup>115</sup> Of course those younger than him will often humor him by telling him how

young he looks, will offer him smiles of pity as though he is a thing of childish in consequence, will send him looks of disdain for the ideas he holds but which are no longer in step with the times as they limit his actions to those conforming not to his character but to those designed to make him useless and inoffensive – and then people wonder why he appears so sensitive to the slights and injustices he is made to endure. “Wronged and oppressed,” Beauvoir writes, “he retaliates by refusing to take part in the game. The adult world is no longer his: he challenges its watchwords and even its ethics. He no longer imposes any discipline upon himself. He feels that ‘everything is allowed,’” not because he is incapable of controlling himself, but because he doesn’t see why he *should* any longer control himself.<sup>116</sup> To such people, one readily applies the label “anti-social,” and sees in their actions all the attributes of those malcontents today disparaged for not playing by the rules – in doing so, however, one does not recognize, as Beauvoir writes, that “these are men who base their conduct on their situation. Many of their attitudes,” she continues, “are attitudes of protest: *but their state is one that calls for protest.*”<sup>117</sup> It is as though one were to criticize the inmates of an asylum for their dirtiness and lack of hygiene. “Dirtiness?” Beauvoir asks, “But they have been tossed on to the rubbish heap,” she replies, “so why should they obey the laws of health or decency?”<sup>118</sup> As a result, all such protests should be seen instead, Beauvoir writes, as “ways of making a claim,” a claim the old lack the ability to make otherwise and which others will not otherwise register.<sup>119</sup>

For “[w]hy should an old person be better than the adult or child he was?” Beauvoir rightly asks, “It is quite hard enough,” she continues, “to remain a human being when everything, health, memory, possessions, standing and authority has been taken from you. The old person’s struggle to do so has pitiable or ludicrous sides to it, and his fads, his meanness, and his deceitful ways may irritate one or make one smile.”<sup>120</sup> “[B]ut in reality,” she concludes, “it is a very moving struggle. It is the refusal to sink below the human level, a refusal to become the insect, the inert object to which the adult world wishes to reduce the aged. There is something heroic in desiring to preserve a minimum of dignity in the midst of such total deprivation.”<sup>121</sup> For Beauvoir, then, there is something enviable in this rebellion of the old, this resistance to what one has both become and been made.

At the same time, however, this is not, according to Beauvoir, even the most important characteristic for which one should envy the old. For is it not also true of the old, of he who “discovers that he is no longer going anywhere,” of the one who “knows that one is no longer getting ready for anything,” that they are also the ones who have come to see “that the idea of advancing towards a goal was a delusion”?<sup>122</sup> The notion of upward progress, felt and experienced in youth and then preserved into middle age, falls apart for the old — and although this recognition is “accompanied by an often bitter disillusionment,” the result is also that one has been set “free from false notions.”<sup>123</sup> As a result, Beauvoir writes, “[t]his sweeping away of fetishes and

illusions is the truest, most worth-while of all the contributions brought by age."<sup>124</sup> And while some might reply that one need not pass over into old age in order to know the end of these illusions, Beauvoir claims that this is not at all true: "knowing is not feeling," she counters, "All truth is 'that which has become.' The truth of the human state is accomplished only at the end of our own becoming."<sup>125</sup> Here no thought experiment will prove sufficient, no half-experience of loss will approximate the total absence of a future known only to the body of the old.

For aging is, as Beauvoir emphasizes, ultimately a process whose last stage has been long prepared. It was prefigured in youth, its infamy ensured at adulthood, its shocks having as their condition the feverish pace and putative success of adulthood, then followed by a retirement made useless once one's occupation has been taken. For what were to have been one's golden years are precisely those years in which one will not be able live as the person one has become. "That is the crime of our society," Beauvoir writes, "It's 'old-age policy' is scandalous. But even more scandalous still," she continues, "is the treatment that it inflicts upon the majority of men *during their youth and their maturity*. It prefabricates the maimed and wretched state that is theirs when they are old."<sup>126</sup> Bodies wasted by work cannot enjoy the leisure to which they've been condemned, and a life made to be maximized and within which free time was always seen as throwaway time is now one's entire lot, as one has to confront the fact that one is not only cast out from society, but from oneself.<sup>127</sup> It is thus little surprise that "the vast majority of mankind look upon the coming of old age with sorrow or rebellion," as Beauvoir writes, since old age is, she says, "life's parody," a joke turned against those who once believed in that purpose and prosperity on whose basis they worked and that was then stolen from them the moment they were supposed to have received it.<sup>128</sup> And while it is of course true that society could indeed be so well arranged that one would then have the chance to "die without having suffered any degradation," as Beauvoir writes, that is not in fact how society has been arranged.<sup>129</sup> Instead, "society turns away from the aged worker as though he belonged to another species."<sup>130</sup> Indeed, she continues, "Society cares about the individual only in so far as he is profitable. The young know this. Their anxiety as they enter in upon social life matches the anguish of the old as they are excluded from it."<sup>131</sup> But "between these two ages," Beauvoir writes, "the problem is hidden by routine," that conspiracy of silence within which one prepares the way for the degradations one will suffer when old but which are rarely if ever questioned because to do so would be to question the very systems upon which our contemporary lives depend.<sup>132</sup>

To break the conspiracy of silence surrounding old age, according to Beauvoir, requires first recognizing how "the whole meaning of our life is in question in the future that is waiting for us" in that state of old age that is at once our individual and societal destiny.<sup>133</sup> And if this is true, then one would

do well to today 'recognize ourselves in this old man or in that old woman' wherever we see them, no matter how miserable their present state might be, because it is in fact our own future we are at such times witnessing.<sup>134</sup> Difficult and outlandish as such acts of identification might be, they are not only legitimate means for integrating the whole of the course of a life within the more limited scope of our own blinkered present; they are also opportunities for extending the bounds of our solidarities and social philosophies to better address contemporary problems. Because each and every worker must today live under the constant threat of replacement and socially engineered obsolescence realized already in the case of the elderly, for instance, Beauvoir is undoubtedly right to recognize in such common degradations the possibility for a new kind of alliance "between the workers and the unproductive old."<sup>135</sup> But if the forces of collective misfortune are indeed as common across the ages as Beauvoir suggests – even if the process of social degradation does only truly culminate with the onset of old age – then why shouldn't the bonds of solidarity be so extended as to include all those for whom the contemporary ideology of progress and its accompanying injunctions to resilience, innovation, disruption and adaptation are just as injurious as they are for the old themselves? For such questions to present themselves with the sort of theoretical urgency they already possess in practice, however, individuals and whole societies would have to first take upon themselves the task of staring unstintingly into that looking glass of old age otherwise spurned for fear that one might find there the sort of irreducible, ultimately uncomfortable reality Theodor W. Adorno once approvingly identified, now nearly a century ago, as the very point at which philosophy must come to a stop. Because theory otherwise wants only to continue, uninterrupted and implacable, before realities its most strenuous efforts will show themselves incapable of cognizing so long as those realities leave little impression upon a body of philosophy immunized against the corruptions of the concrete everywhere avoided in the practice of contemporary philosophy. It is for this reason that the critical theory of Adorno early abandoned the traditional philosophical search for origins and goals, and sought to instead practice a form of "last philosophy"<sup>136</sup> committed at all times to tracking the progress of that "logic of disintegration"<sup>137</sup> the present essay has sought to follow with Beauvoir and Amery in the experience and knowledge of the old. For critical theory to still possess some purchase on the present, such a philosophy would have to demonstrate again its commitment to the kind of experiments in philosophical form anticipated by Adorno, exemplified by Beauvoir and Amery, but otherwise so sorely lacking today.<sup>138</sup>

- <sup>1</sup> Among the many social problems for which the old are held responsible today, few are mentioned as frequently as that supposedly poor state of national budgets for which the old are thought responsible because of the state provision of old-age pensions. Too many older people who live too long, and whose collective care costs the state too much money – so goes the usual refrain. As a result, the old are then made liable for the implementation of austerity policies that not only increase their own immiseration but that of the wider society too. For an analysis of how such policies affect the old around the world, see the most recent report of the International Labor Organization: “World Social Protection Report 2020-2022.” There are, however, a great many other social and political problems for which the old are also held responsible today. In the wake of the recent Brexit vote and USA presidential election of Donald Trump, for instance, many political analysts tried to explain what they saw as their respective nation’s continuing conservatism and, for them, nearly-inexplicable state of electoral politics by referring to the deleterious effects of older people’s outsized role in the electorate. See Fitch, “The Young Are the Biggest Losers.” From the perspective of Silicon Valley, the very condition of the old appears so frightful that many of its tycoons are obsessed with eliminating the necessity of old age altogether. See O’Connell, *To Be a Machine*. For a general survey of changing conceptions and life experiences of the old, especially as they are affected by recent cultural and economic trends, see Pickard, “Old Age and the Neoliberal Life Course.”
- <sup>2</sup> To the best of my knowledge, there exists no sustained historical, philosophical or literary discussion treating both Beauvoir’s and Améry’s writings on old age. Indeed, the few studies that do mention the writers together typically restrict themselves to mentioning Améry’s crediting certain writers as influences – Vladimir Jankélévitch, Herbert Plügge and André Gorz – and naming others with whom he entered into explicit dialogue, like Marcel Proust, Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre. Entirely absent from the scholarly literature, however, is any effort to reconstruct the terms of the intertextual dialogue Améry develops with Beauvoir’s work or parse the many differences and similarities between their respective works as constituting an important episode in the history of social philosophy. The lone exception to this rule appears to be Brandl, *Philosophie nach Auschwitz*, 75-80. For a brief discussion of Améry’s forerunners in French intellectual life, see Boussart, “Jean Améry’s Essay «Über das Altern»,” 79-90.
- <sup>3</sup> In recent continental philosophy, this inattention is all the more remarkable in that so many of its most pressing concerns intersect with aspects central to the experience and knowledge of the old. Think, for instance, of contemporary interest in such notions as *non-contemporaneity*, *untimeliness*, *obsolescence*, *superfluity*, *precarious life*, *vulnerability*, *care*, *late work*, *critiques of progress*, etc. In other fields, by contrast, the subject of old age has long been prominent. For reference, one might here mention the important work of gerontology, critical gerontology and feminist gerontology studies, as well as recent cultural studies and literary studies-based interest in what has come to be called “age studies” in USA-based humanities departments. For a recent gloss on these different approaches, see Finlay, “Intimately Old.”
- <sup>4</sup> For the most comprehensive historical treatment of old age, see Minois, *History of Old Age*.
- <sup>5</sup> Cicero, “De Senectute,” 11.
- <sup>6</sup> Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, 6.
- <sup>7</sup> Beauvoir, 380.
- <sup>8</sup> For Beauvoir’s critique of both Cicero’s politicization of old age and defense of what she calls the “conservative ideology” of ancient Rome and its ailing senators, see Beauvoir, 118-120. For a brief

account of the private grief and sorrow from which Cicero's *De Senectute* likely emerged, see the "Introduction" to Cicero, "De Senectute," 2-7.

- <sup>9</sup> Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, 3. That Beauvoir refers here to older men, rather than older women, is not peculiar to this particular passage but is in fact characteristic of *The Coming of Age* as a whole. For an analysis of this phenomenon, see Davis, *Age Rage and Going Gently*, 49-55. At the same time, it should also be mentioned that Beauvoir's *The Coming of Age* nevertheless anticipates what one would today call an 'intersectional' perspective through its focus on those determinants of old age deriving from class, wealth, race, culture and occupation. For the most sustained discussion of this aspect of Beauvoir's work, see Deutscher, *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir*.
- <sup>10</sup> Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, 3-4.
- <sup>11</sup> Beauvoir, 485.
- <sup>12</sup> Améry, *On Aging*, xxii.
- <sup>13</sup> Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, 485.
- <sup>14</sup> Beauvoir, *All Said and Done*, 149.
- <sup>15</sup> Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, 543.
- <sup>16</sup> Beauvoir's regular engagement with the subject of aging is also to be found in *La Force des choses* (*Force of Circumstance*) (1963), *Une mort très douce* (*A Very Easy Death*) (1964), *La Femme rompue* (*The Woman Destroyed*) (1967), *Tout compte fait* (*All Said and Done*) (1972) and *La Cérémonie des adieux* (*Adieux*) (1981).
- <sup>17</sup> Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 31.
- <sup>18</sup> Beauvoir, 31.
- <sup>19</sup> It should be pointed out that Beauvoir's designation of older women as a 'third sex' is not at all meant critically; indeed, the very opposite. For Beauvoir, such post-menopausal women are conceived, instead, as being "now delivered from the servitude imposed by her female nature." "Often," she continues, "...this release from female physiology is expressed in a health, a balance, a vigor that they lacked before." Lest it be misunderstood, however, that Beauvoir here engages in a kind of biological reductionism, one would be well-advised to simply continue reading: "I categorically reject the notion of psycho-physiological parallelism," she writes two pages later, "...If I mention it at all, it is because it still haunts many minds in spite of its philosophical and scientific bankruptcy." See Beauvoir, 31, 33.
- <sup>20</sup> Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, 4.
- <sup>21</sup> Beauvoir, *All Said and Done*, 146.
- <sup>22</sup> Beauvoir, *Force of Circumstance*, 103.
- <sup>23</sup> Beauvoir, 103.
- <sup>24</sup> Beauvoir, 103.
- <sup>25</sup> Beauvoir, *All Said and Done*, 147.
- <sup>26</sup> Scholarly inattention to Beauvoir's work on aging has frequently been noted. According to Penelope Deutscher, for instance, "Beauvoir's large-scale late work is often omitted from theoretical assessments of her work, and this is a missed opportunity." Deutscher, *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir*, 120n.84. For a brief list of exceptions, see Deutscher's just-mentioned footnote. For

more recent studies, see Stoller, *Simone de Beauvoir's Philosophy of Age*; Martin, "Old Age and the Other-Within"; Deutscher, "Afterlives"; and Segal, *Out of Time*.

<sup>27</sup> Beauvoir, *All Said and Done*, 146-147.

<sup>28</sup> The account most relevant to Beauvoir's understanding of that process by which the self is constituted by others, and especially by the *gaze* of others, is to be found in Jean-Paul Sartre's analysis of *the look* in *Being and Nothingness*. See Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 340-400.

<sup>29</sup> Beauvoir, *All Said and Done*, 146.

<sup>30</sup> Beauvoir, 499.

<sup>31</sup> Beauvoir, 499.

<sup>32</sup> According to Oliver Davis, this 'bleak tradition' tends to "highlight the sense in which old age reduces the human subject, erasing both achievements and differences," can be traced back as far as Aristotle – if not to ancient Egypt – and includes such authors much cited by Beauvoir as Montaigne. Davis, *Age Rage and Going Gently*, 37.

<sup>33</sup> Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 575.

<sup>34</sup> Beauvoir, 575.

<sup>35</sup> Beauvoir, 576.

<sup>36</sup> Beauvoir, 580.

<sup>37</sup> Beauvoir, 581.

<sup>38</sup> Beauvoir, 584.

<sup>39</sup> Beauvoir, 595.

<sup>40</sup> Beauvoir, 595.

<sup>41</sup> Beauvoir, 584.

<sup>42</sup> Beauvoir, 588.

<sup>43</sup> Beauvoir, 591.

<sup>44</sup> Beauvoir, 592.

<sup>45</sup> Beauvoir, 596.

<sup>46</sup> Beauvoir, 596.

<sup>47</sup> Beauvoir, 596.

<sup>48</sup> That it is often difficult to speak about old age without relying on the terms of Cicero's old age ideology can also be demonstrated by the many occasions in which Beauvoir herself reverts to the terms of that ideology when describing, for instance, the aging and failing health of both her mother, Françoise Beauvoir, and longtime partner, Jean-Paul Sartre. Of her mother's later years, Beauvoir will write of how her mother's vitality filled her with wonder, how she respected her mother's courage and admired her for not getting bogged down in the past as so many others do. See Beauvoir, *A Very Easy Death*, 19, 18. Of Sartre's failing health, Beauvoir writes admiringly of his uncomplaining fortitude, serenity of mind, moderation and constancy. At the same time, however, Beauvoir regrets how the passions of Sartre's youth have now so left him that he begins to take everything with such calm and uncharacteristic equanimity, and thus appears, like

Beauvoir's mother before, utterly shameless in the face of the sort of indecencies he would have never tolerated previously. See Beauvoir, *Adieux*, 59, 75, 124, 52, 90.

<sup>49</sup> Beauvoir, *Force of Circumstance*, 669. A closer study of Beauvoir's work, however, reveals a considerably more complicated picture. For she will elsewhere date the onset on her own sense of having aged completely differently, and she will at other times claim that she possesses no real sense of having aged at all. In *All Said and Done*, for instance, she writes that "my ageing became apparent to me between 1958 and 1962." Beauvoir, *All Said and Done*, 131. And earlier, in the same book, she writes, "since I finished *Force of Circumstance*...I do not feel I have aged...Like everybody else, I am incapable of an inner experience of it: age is one of the things that cannot be realized. Seeing that my health is good, my body gives me no token of age. I am sixty-three: and this truth remains foreign to me." Beauvoir, 40. Here, in Beauvoir's denial of any personal experience of growing old, there would seem to be not only a marked contradiction with so many of her other statements, but also the sense that living a life of projects can become the means by which old age goes unfelt. Compare, for instance, a similar sentiment in the memoir of Beauvoir's longtime partner, Claude Lanzmann. "It has never occurred to me, in all the years I have amassed," Lanzmann writes at eighty-four-years-old, "to dissociate myself from the present, to say, for example, 'In my time...' My time is the time I am living right now and even if I like the world less and less – and with good reason – it is mine, absolutely. No retirement, no retreat, I don't know what it means to grow old..." Lanzmann, *The Patagonian Hare*, 526-527.

<sup>50</sup> Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 575.

<sup>51</sup> Beauvoir, *Force of Circumstance*, 672.

<sup>52</sup> Beauvoir, 672.

<sup>53</sup> Beauvoir, 673; my italics.

<sup>54</sup> Beauvoir, 669.

<sup>55</sup> Beauvoir, 670.

<sup>56</sup> Beauvoir, 671.

<sup>57</sup> Beauvoir, 673.

<sup>58</sup> Beauvoir, 673.

<sup>59</sup> Beauvoir, 674.

<sup>60</sup> Beauvoir, 674.

<sup>61</sup> Critical responses to Beauvoir's books were not only significant for the commonplaces and clichés with which her work was greeted, but also for the personal attacks so often waged against her. These *ad feminam* attacks resulted, in the case of *The Second Sex*, for instance, in Emmanuel Mounier's lament about the "tone of resentment" he detected throughout Beauvoir's book, as well as Albert Camus's criticism that her work had the effect of "making the French male look ridiculous." For further details, see Kirkpatrick, *Becoming Beauvoir*, 261.

<sup>62</sup> Beauvoir, *All Said and Done*, 131.

<sup>63</sup> Beauvoir, 131; my italics.

<sup>64</sup> Beauvoir, 146.

<sup>65</sup> Beauvoir, *Force of Circumstance*, 672.

<sup>66</sup> Beauvoir, 672-673.

<sup>67</sup> In his 1970 review of Beauvoir's *La Vieillesse*, Améry begins by noting his deep appreciation of Beauvoir's *La Force des choses*: "Die schönsten und anrührendsten Worte, die ich jemals über das Altern las, fand ich auf den letzten Seiten von Simone de Beauvoirs dritten Memoirenband *La Force des choses*..." [I find the last pages of Simone de Beauvoir's *Force of Circumstance* to be the most beautiful and touching I have ever read about aging...]. Améry, "Das Alter - ein Politikum? Simone de Beauvoirs jüngstes Werk," 381. Améry's review was originally published in *Die Zeit* on April 10, 1970. I would like to thank Sara Walker for bringing this article to my attention, as well as for her generous help with translations from the German.

<sup>68</sup> For Améry, it was only when he was in his mid-50s, that is to say, after the Nazi death camps and another twenty years of journalistic writing, that he was able to finally write what it was he had on his mind – a fact that meant, for him, that it was ultimately rather late in life that he was able to reach that stage others typically achieve in their thirties. This discrepancy was "reason enough," he would later write, "for me to feel aging particularly painfully. I was at the beginning, and at the same time, letting the reins drop, I was galloping towards the end" – for even though he was in some sense only just starting out on his writing career, the same could not be said of his life: that was already more than half gone. As quoted in Heidelberger-Leonard, *The Philosopher of Auschwitz*, 172.

<sup>69</sup> Améry, *On Aging*, 28.

<sup>70</sup> Améry, 28.

<sup>71</sup> Améry, 28.

<sup>72</sup> Améry, 28; my italics.

<sup>73</sup> Améry's critique of Beauvoir – via his protagonist A. – is often at pains to demonstrate just how measured and nuanced is his critical judgment. Writing about the difference between Beauvoir and A., for instance, Améry will write on the subject of Beauvoir's disgust with her mirror image that "A. [is] different from her friend [Beauvoir] or at least different from the way she described it." Améry, 32; my italics. Despite this nuance, Améry's critique can be tracked throughout the essay. At its beginning, for instance, when A. thinks that her minor facial deformity might be caused by xanthelasma, she then associates this source of her sickness with Xanthippe, the wife of Socrates, assumes this name as her own, and chides Beauvoir for not being as Xanthippe-like as she is herself. When A. recalls how Socrates' Xanthippe acquired a bad reputation and then adopts Xanthippe's name, for instance, A. thereby assumes a fundamentally contradictory identity: she is at once both the object of societal disdain as well as the proud subject of the same kind of bad reputation imposed upon Xanthippe. By adopting this name, A. thus differentiates herself from Beauvoir's decision to remain at the level of unambiguous alienation, while she has, to the contrary, chosen to remain long enough in front of the mirror to achieve that more ambiguous relationship with aging through which she comes to recognize her own self-satisfaction in her aging condition. After recalling Beauvoir's line about her face being marked by the 'pox of time,' Améry accords to his protagonist a gentle rebuke: "A. mumbles," Améry writes, "poor Simone, you who suffer without being a Xanthippe like me." Améry, 28.

<sup>74</sup> Améry, 30. While Améry here uses the notion of ambiguity to distinguish A.'s relationship towards aging from that of Beauvoir, Améry surely knew just how central the concept of ambiguity was to the work of Beauvoir (and Merleau-Ponty). Perhaps, then, Améry's own use of the word might be seen as an attempt to signal both his inheritance and distance from Beauvoir inasmuch as, for him, the ambiguous situation of old age culminates in a contradictory state of *antinomy* from which there is little to no hope for release. Indeed, this more stark sense of ambiguity – as antinomy – might be said to serve as a principal point of differentiation between his work and

Beauvoir's, and can be demonstrated in terms of how both their premises and conclusions differ. Améry's 1968 preface to *On Aging's* first edition, for instance, states that his own book's "contradictory premise was the total acceptance of inescapable and scandalous things" – which is precisely the kind of premise Améry would criticize Beauvoir's *The Coming of Age* for not taking on as its own. Améry, xxii. In his 1972 review of the German-language translation of that book, Améry takes issue with Beauvoir's conclusions in the following terms: "Der Gegensatz zwischen ihrer Elaboration und ihren Schlußfolgerungen ist flagrant....Simone de Beauvoirs Revolte wäre sinnvoll nur durch die Annahme des Widerspruches, das heißt: die totale Anerkennung der Hoffnungslosigkeit. Die Introdution einer Hoffnung auf die «ideal Gesellschaft» als Waffe gegen das Nichts macht den Aufstand Madame de Beauvoirs zu einem blind irrenden." [The contrast between what she details and her conclusions is flagrant...Simone de Beauvoir's revolt would only make sense if it were to accept the following contradiction: the total acceptance of hopelessness. The introduction of a hope for the 'ideal society' as a weapon against the Nothingness makes Madame de Beauvoir's revolt stray blindly]. Améry, "Der Skandal das Alterns," 392. Améry's review was originally published in *Die Zeit* on March 31, 1972. It is perhaps as a result of Améry's skepticism about all such recommendations, as well as his hostility to utopian political rhetoric, that his 1977 preface to the fourth edition of *On Aging* sought to once again underscore the aporetic nature of his own meditation. "Today as much as yesterday," he writes, "I think that society has to undertake everything to relieve old and aging persons of their unpleasant destiny. And at the same time, I stick to my position that all high-minded and reverential efforts in this direction, though indeed capable of being somewhat soothing – thus also being harmless analgesics – are still not capable of changing or improving *anything fundamental* about the tragic hardship of aging." See Améry, *On Aging*, xviii.

<sup>75</sup> Améry, 29.

<sup>76</sup> Améry, 30.

<sup>77</sup> Améry, 30-31.

<sup>78</sup> Améry, 31.

<sup>79</sup> Améry, 32.

<sup>80</sup> Améry, 32.

<sup>81</sup> Améry, 35.

<sup>82</sup> Améry, 37.

<sup>83</sup> Améry, 38.

<sup>84</sup> Améry, 39.

<sup>85</sup> Améry, 39.

<sup>86</sup> Améry, 40.

<sup>87</sup> Améry, 40.

<sup>88</sup> Améry, 42.

<sup>89</sup> Améry, 42.

<sup>90</sup> Améry, 43.

<sup>91</sup> Améry, 45.

<sup>92</sup> Améry, 46, 46, 47.

<sup>93</sup> Améry, 48.

<sup>94</sup> Améry, 48.

<sup>95</sup> Améry, 48-49.

<sup>96</sup> Améry, 50.

<sup>97</sup> Améry, 50.

<sup>98</sup> Améry, 51. The force of this shift from *ambiguity* to *antinomy* is even more striking in the German-language original, since Améry does not there use the more common *Mehrdeutigkeit* or *Ambiguität* for *ambiguity* but instead preserves the French original: “Die Ambiguité wird zur Antinomie.” Améry, “Über das Altern,” 79.

<sup>99</sup> Améry, *On Aging*, 40.

<sup>100</sup> Améry, 51.

<sup>101</sup> Améry, 51.

<sup>102</sup> Améry, 51.

<sup>103</sup> Améry, 34.

<sup>104</sup> Améry, 102.

<sup>105</sup> Améry, 102.

<sup>106</sup> Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, 1.

<sup>107</sup> Beauvoir, 1.

<sup>108</sup> See Beauvoir, 13.

<sup>109</sup> Beauvoir, 4.

<sup>110</sup> Beauvoir, 5.

<sup>111</sup> Beauvoir, 7; my italics.

<sup>112</sup> Beauvoir, 451.

<sup>113</sup> Beauvoir, 477.

<sup>114</sup> Beauvoir, 478.

<sup>115</sup> Beauvoir, 479.

<sup>116</sup> Beauvoir, 480.

<sup>117</sup> Beauvoir, 481; my italics. To demonstrate how older people’s resentments and rebellions might be something more than the unfortunate complaints of malcontents would require setting their experience and relationship to history and to life within the wider philosophical critique of *ressentiment* first waged by Nietzsche’s “On the Utility and Liability of History for Life.” See Nietzsche, “On the Utility and Liability of History for Life,” 85-168. A first point of contact and contrast with Nietzsche’s position might then be found in Améry, “Resentments,” 62-81.

<sup>118</sup> Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, 481.

- <sup>119</sup> Beauvoir, 482.
- <sup>120</sup> Beauvoir, 486.
- <sup>121</sup> Beauvoir, 486.
- <sup>122</sup> Beauvoir, 491.
- <sup>123</sup> Beauvoir, 491.
- <sup>124</sup> Beauvoir, 492.
- <sup>125</sup> Beauvoir, 492. Among Beauvoir scholars, it is not uncommon to find questioned the singularity of experiences and insights Beauvoir attributes to the old but which others wish to claim for a wider range of people. For Elisabeth Schäfer, for instance, the sense of time experienced by the old may very well constitute a far more generalizable phenomena in no way exclusive to the old. “Does the experience of time limiting our lives only appear as a phenomenon of old age?”, Schäfer asks, and answers: “Even the young experience time limiting our lives, because it, in fact, marks every act.” Schäfer, “Habit Shifting into Projects,” 103. Like Beauvoir, Améry ultimately rejects such a position and maintains that the irreversibility of time is a phenomenon known only to the old. See Améry, *On Aging*, especially pgs. 13-17.
- <sup>126</sup> Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, 542; my italics.
- <sup>127</sup> Beauvoir, 541.
- <sup>128</sup> Beauvoir, 539.
- <sup>129</sup> Beauvoir, 543.
- <sup>130</sup> Beauvoir, 542.
- <sup>131</sup> Beauvoir, 543.
- <sup>132</sup> Beauvoir, 543.
- <sup>133</sup> Beauvoir, 5.
- <sup>134</sup> In *The Coming of Age*, this ‘recogni[tion of] ourselves in this old man or in that old woman’ is also to be found in that process by which one’s mother or father come to represent, as Beauvoir writes, one’s own “reflection in the mirror of the years to come.” Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, 5. Strangely, however, the mirror motif otherwise so constant in Beauvoir’s reflections on her own aging is in this book related only to what others see in the mirror but never herself – save for one brief exception (283). In *The Coming of Age*, Beauvoir will instead relate mirror scenes deriving, for instance, from such writers as Anacreon (101), Plutarch (112), Ovid (122), Madame de Sévigné (287), Marcel Proust (290), Louis Aragon (292), André Gide (299), Paul Valéry (299), Michelangelo (300, 513), Jun’ichirō Tanizaki (339), Paul Léautaud (341) and Goya (408).
- <sup>135</sup> Beauvoir, 3.
- <sup>136</sup> Adorno, *Against Epistemology*, 40.
- <sup>137</sup> See Adorno, *Negativ Dialektik*, 409. For more on the logic of disintegration, see also Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 144-146.
- <sup>138</sup> Adorno, “The Actuality of Philosophy,” 132. On Adorno’s notion of ‘last philosophy’ and call for greater philosophical experimentation in the context of contemporary critical theory’s relative inattention to the problem of climate change, see Crawford, “The Reality of Disappearance: Critical Theory and Extinction.”

# Returning to the Point of Entanglement

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## Sexual Difference and Creolization

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In this essay, I suggest an entangled analysis of sexual difference theory via Luce Irigaray and creolization via Édouard Glissant. I argue that these two distinct discourses share a critical stance against Western sameness and assimilation into a closed metaphysical system. However, each is born of particular historical socio-political struggles that should not be collapsed. I bring them together to demonstrate that their claims are productively entangled and that a critical re-reading of melancholia can unite readers to locate sources of sexual-racial-colonial violence in disparate locations and epochs, holding collective memory and acting beyond critique. Relying on Françoise Vergès's account of métissage and anamnesis, I will suggest that Antillean geographical vantages reveal complexities of racial and colonial relation to one's mother, the state, and the sea. By interrogating psychoanalytic and linguistic claims, I forward a South-South circulation of coordinated but distinctive political reimaginings that challenge static notions of race, gender, and sexual difference.

### **The Wombs of Women**

In June 1970, a scandal broke the headlines on Reunion Island. Doctors had racked up vast sums of money under the cloak of performing "minor interventions," which were, in fact, thousands of abortions, many conducted without consent, under false diagnoses such as appendectomies. These men performed abortions in the first, second, and third trimesters and many concluded with sterilization. Françoise Vergès writes, "the doctors broke two laws: one forbidding abortion and criminalizing those who practice it, and the other concerning reimbursement for medical procedures."<sup>1</sup> As thirty Reunion women pressed charges, officials ignored them. During the trial, the accused defended their actions, arguing that the state's local overseas department representatives indirectly encouraged them vis-à-vis the island's birth control policies. The irony is that at the same time, in the metropole, officials

criminalized abortion, resulting in national French women pursuing abortions under deplorable medical conditions without social security reimbursement or publicly funded compensation.<sup>3</sup> The hypocrisy, she observes, is only superficial: “Regulating women’s bodies was the objective in both France and the overseas departments (DOM), but it was not practiced in the same way in the two spaces. In France, the state wanted women to bear children; in the DOM, it launched aggressive birth control campaigns and systemically hampered the establishment of social legislation that would protect pregnant women.”<sup>3</sup> Vergès notes the failure of the 1970s influential Movement for the Liberation of Women (MLF; *Mouvement de libération des femmes*) to include as central to their political platform the condition of women in the colonies of France and its territories, a failure she calls the “racialized management of the wombs of women.”<sup>4</sup>

In preparing the manuscript to write this account, Vergès conducted no fieldwork and gathered no oral testimonies. She relied on public records and articles. She used literary and cinematic sources to reveal that these abuses of power remain unhidden in plain sight. As sight gives access to a logic of racial aesthetics, the visible evidence of racism remains unseen. Her analysis of this phenomenon is not solely to raise awareness of the dual valuation of women’s wombs; it is also to denationalize feminist approaches that use national markers to group thinkers into a referent like “French feminists.”<sup>5</sup> Acknowledging historian Dipesh Chakrabarty who proposed the “provincializing of Europe,”<sup>6</sup> she gestures toward moving beyond nativist or atavistic narratives, not rejecting what came from Europe, but “deconstructing a method wherein ‘Europe works as a silent referent,’ by integrating other cartographies, South-South circulation, and other schools of thought, to understand better strategies (ruse, diversion, fabrication, dissimulation) enacted by the colonized.”<sup>7</sup> In this paper, I suggest a mode of decolonial strategy that I identify as entangled disidentification. I forward a South-South circulation between thinkers Édouard Glissant and Françoise Vergès as exemplars of this strategy. However, I also include in this circulation the contribution of sexual difference thinker Luce Irigaray to function as a European referent, but by which the forces of creolization can reshape sexual difference’s focus and aim.

## Entanglement

In *Caribbean Discourse*, Glissant describes the metamorphosis of a people transhipped as enslaved people but by which a “mingling of experiences” or a “tangled nature of lived experience” produces a process of being that thwarts the “illusion of successful mimesis” into the image of their master.<sup>8</sup> To be clear, it is the murkiness of reflection back to the master that mobilizes a new relation of becoming, a strategy he calls opacity.<sup>9</sup> He describes how the master, through assimilation/annihilation, provides “models of resistance to

the stranglehold it has imposed, thus short-circuiting resistance while making it possible."<sup>10</sup> The description is one of entrapment even as one resists. Glissant's writings are for a people who have been transformed elsewhere, unable to collectively continue "the methods of existence and survival, both material and spiritual, which it practiced before being uprooted."<sup>11</sup> However, Glissant's writing transforms the exile into one who can engage in the nomadic process of creolization.

Luce Irigaray also posits exile as the condition of post-Enlightenment man and, with a Freudian-Lacanian analysis, surmises that for man to be or become, he must sever his birth and origin from a woman's body,<sup>12</sup> forming a "schism in the unity of the self,"<sup>13</sup> and an "exile from his first natural identity . . . lost and blind in an artificial world that he created."<sup>14</sup> With this void or hole, sometimes analyzed as Being, a precarity can now be exploited to perpetuate a logic of him/Him. Man, she argues, has cut himself off from life (sexuate difference) so that forms might exist, the logos constituting forms from one subjectivity with replications of itself, not two with fecund multiplicities, and "only those who belong to certain societies – of men – can communicate with this language."<sup>15</sup> Therefore, sexual difference is not merely a signifier of a social category like race, culture, colonial history, or even biological sex—it is an operative and material way to reveal how we conceive of life itself in all its diversities.<sup>16</sup> Our current status, sexual indifference, Irigaray supposes, fails to cultivate an interiority. Instead, man is exiled to an external world "that he intends to appropriate by means of a technique which reduplicates that real, of logic through which he makes the world his own, the logos."<sup>17</sup> From Irigaray's reading, the logos is the Master, and all must bend toward the project of assimilation/annihilation within this Self-Same, thus eradicating any difference or resistance. However, life, particularly sexuate life, persists, and Irigaray's project, I suggest, resonates with creolization. Sexual difference, like creolization, reconfigures sexuate subjects portrayed as fissured, nomadic, and in exile, as replete beings whose coherence exceeds Western colonial language and closed metaphysical systems. Sexual difference is also an affirmative project, suggesting that those outside the self-same can serve as global guides in a life-sustaining, errant wandering. In this, Glissant and Irigaray share a philosophical exploration of exile to decipher another subject position.

Additionally, Glissant's theorization of entanglement can advance the critique of a closed metaphysical system that sexual difference theorists describe as "phallogocentrism," the collusion between a logocentric determinate method for deriving truth that culturally relies on a gendered masculinist (phallic) and patriarchal agenda. Within phallogocentrism, resistance to the dominant symbol only reinforces the power to "other" any resisters. Such is the plight, argues Irigaray, for any actual sexual difference and why her theory is not a gender additive critique but one that cuts to the heart of metaphysical unity and the possibility for difference itself to exist. All

differences, however plural, are caught within a metaphysical trap predicated upon a masculinist conditioning of wholeness and unity conflated with the universal; hence, particulars only generate variations of the same. Under this diagnosis, a woman truly is a misbegotten male. Such an analysis leads Irigaray to an oft-spurned statement: "Sexual difference is an immediate natural given, and it is a real and irreducible component of the universal. The whole of humankind is composed of women and men and of nothing else. The problem of race is, in fact, a secondary problem—except from a geographical point of view?—which means we cannot see the wood for the trees, and the same goes for other cultural diversities—religious, economic and political ones."<sup>18</sup> In this essay I consider the line, "a geographical point of view," a strange addition in which she seemingly prioritizes sexual difference over and against an uncritical list in which culture follows race.

Rosi Braidotti notes a cartographic precision to Irigaray's writings, wherein she includes the location of her essays as if to imply that situated ethics and politics of location ought to inform her work.<sup>19</sup> But like Irigaray, locations and cultures are not singular; they are plural, a mixture of hyphenated places, cultures, languages, customs, and beliefs. While Irigaray argues that women are in exile by the Western constructs of both language and subjectivity, the claim seems to elide the ontological and political reality of people who remain stateless and homeless, without a natal land or their land stolen. Or they—in the case of Reunionese people—were transshipped, indentured, or economically lured to lands not their own. However, sexual difference, as Irigaray deploys it, draws our attention to how place and dwelling are conceived and reproduced from a woman's body, drawing attention to the quandary of no place for those who become the building materials for others to have a place.<sup>20</sup> Hence, given the importance of place with sexuate difference to reveal the ontological chinks in the armor of metaphysical presence, it is necessary to take the notion of sexuate difference and allow it to wander and shift with the morphological bodies and environs outside of Irigaray's lived experience. I suggest Glissant and Vergès offer interlocking accounts which can deepen and specify Irigaray's claims.

I argue that Glissant is useful when paired with Irigaray because he theorizes with geographic locations. Still, his poetics and prose provide a way to critically rupture beyond mimesis and to use the entangled metaphysics of sameness productively. His theories are for those "seeking to make sense of the *entangled*, interrelated, interdependent cultures of a globalized world. . . . challenging in the process the populist rhetorics of cultural purity, of ethnolinguistic nationalism, and of ideological monolingualism."<sup>21</sup> Instead of seeking purity, universal truth, and continuity to challenge prescient socio-political tensions, Glissant embraces opacity, errantry, and diversion—"an interweaving of negative forces."<sup>22</sup> He explains, "Diversion is the ultimate resort of a population whose domination by an Other is concealed: it then must search *elsewhere* for the principle of domination, which is not evident in

the country itself: because the system of domination . . . is not directly tangible. Diversion is the parallaxic displacement of this strategy."<sup>23</sup> This searching elsewhere is a rhizomatic extension of an uprooted people. Glissant narrates examples of diversion, including the Creole language, a camouflage of assimilation. He includes a swath of migratory and revolutionary thinkers, including Aimé Césaire, Marcus Garvey, and Frantz Fanon, who found political progress elsewhere than the entangled places where the processes of creolization began. In true nomadic fashion, Glissant returns to where he began, from house arrest in Paris to the Isle of Martinique in 1965. During these fifteen years, he forged a line of study with a regional Caribbean filiation, challenging the departmentalization of the islands with France. He wrote in 1981, "We must return to the point from which we started. Diversion is not a useful ploy unless it is nourished by reversion: not a return to the longing of origins, to some immutable state of Being, but a *return to the point of entanglement*, from which we were forcefully turned away; that is where we must ultimately put to work the forces of creolization, or perish."<sup>24</sup>

I consider Glissant's brief commendation of entanglement, ostensibly where movement cannot proceed, a quagmire of mixed and enmeshed ideologies and stagnating political possibilities. The brutal example Vergès cites of sexual, racial, and capitalist systems leaves a wake of trauma. How does one respond ethically to such traps? Glissant's notion of entanglement spurred a series of questions that I center in this essay: What does it mean to use entanglement as an embodied pause that frames retour and detour? Can this notion be applied to Irigaray's argument of sexual difference, and can creolization with sexual difference engage racial-sexual-colonial entanglements which Irigaray so deftly avoids? How are those committed to sexual difference entangled, and what detours, disidentifications, and melancholia does entanglement positively offer?

Entanglement, as a word, signifies immobility, ensnarement, and entrapment. Dictionaries offer quicksand, quagmire, toil, trap, morass, noose, and mesh synonyms. I argue the principal entanglement that sexual difference theories under analyze is what Aimé Césaire called "colonial trauma," or the historical legacies of oppression between France and its colonies, and by extension, its nationally recognized theories (loosely deemed "French" theory) and the provincialization of these theories in overseas departments and territories. Sexual difference via Irigaray reveals the spatio-temporal and morphological implications for thinking concepts like entanglement—entrapment and surface tensions, caught in a noose, ensnared in a morass, stuck in the toils of a mesh with no escape. I note that these metaphors and turns of expressions convey psychic, sexual, and racial motifs of objects and experiences, of being sexually and racially marked, of traumas made manifest through coloniality. While Irigaray explores sexual logics, which tends to how we conceive of solid and non-fluidic mediums, her work is also clinical in that she engages moments of trauma, observed as immobility

among women and the psychoanalytic interpretation of latency, hysteria, and melancholia. However, she misses how these affective signals enmesh with racialized-sexualized-colonial trauma and that these notions are inextricably entangled.

The first entanglement I explore is the structural, linguistic, post-structural, deconstructive, and psychoanalytic theories that erupted in France and the United States after World War II, popularized by a flight of intellectuals deemed “French,” which included but is not limited to Roland Barthes, Gilles Deleuze, Marguerite Duras, Michel Foucault, René Girard, Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, Jacques Lacan, and Luce Irigaray.<sup>25</sup> Although presented to post War U.S. scholars as a French intellectual package, weak similarities connect their works while strident differences remain. However, amongst this flight of intellectuals, scant attention to the experiences of racism and colonialism, particularly amongst the psychoanalysts, develops. Notable exceptions include Jean-Paul Sartre’s existential psychoanalysis, Octave Mannoni’s “Prospero complex” colonizer, Albert Memmi’s autobiographically informed critiques, and Frantz Fanon’s analysis of the social saturation of racism and anti-blackness and the power of these to penetrate the internal forces that shape the human as a social subject. However, suppose psychoanalysis is the theoretical framework by which entanglements of racism are revealed. In that case, its profound racist and sexist underpinnings as socio-politically operationalized in France and the U.S. are rarely theorized. I explicate Irigaray’s complicated history with psychoanalysis and other feminists to argue that her work doesn’t suppose theoretical purity; instead, it reveals the melancholia that many within these complex structures experience and by which theories of sexual difference can work coordinately with lived experiences to expose, rename, and ultimately, re-imagine.

## This Feminism Which Is Not One

Luce Irigaray figures as one of three women inaccurately dubbed a “French feminist,” and a superficial gloss of her works may prime a reader to conclude that she inadequately considers racism and colonialism, occluding how anti-blackness, Settler colonialism, and interlocking structures of oppression that condition life itself and the project sexual difference.<sup>26</sup> However, a growing list of recent scholars interested in sexual/sexuate difference has brought these concerns into dialogue with her work.<sup>27</sup> Irigaray’s unique version of sexual difference theory, particularly given its reach toward an invocation of a feminine subject, mentions abortion rights but seems to elide the assumed race neutrality of sexual difference and its historical complicity with colonialism. The failure to attend to sexual difference theory’s racial-colonial complicity mirrors the same elision to these concerns in mainstream political women’s movements across France. A prescient global critique of “the

women's movement," made univocal in its assemblage, argues that right-wing, neo-liberal, and feminist theorists co-opt the language of women's rights throughout Europe as covers for anti-Islam and anti-immigrant campaigns, a trend Sara Farris calls femonationalism.<sup>28</sup> These kinds of femo-imperialisms or femo-colonialisms reify the positionality of colonial women to be spoken about but not with, or the false necessity for White communities to "empower" women labeled "Third World." As Chandra Talpade Mohanty writes, "Universal images of the Third World woman (the veiled woman, caste, virgin, etc.), images constructed from adding the 'Third World difference' to 'sexual difference,' are predicated upon (and hence obviously bring into sharper focus assumptions about Western women as secular, liberated, and having control over their own lives."<sup>29</sup> I read Mohanty articulating that Western, secular women have created a political movement centering their symbolic as the self-referent, thus generating a system whereby the legibility of blackened and colonized people is foreclosed. However, white women's lives and even the term "French feminism" reveals the thin liberation white women can offer within this system.

Irigaray's work is positioned within a constellation of fecund thinkers Anglo-American readers tend to flatten, reducing multiple strands of feminist thought and action that erupted in France after the 1968 student protests into a smaller subset misrepresented as "French feminism."<sup>30</sup> French feminism as an expression is erroneous in that it tends to reduce the national representation of French feminism to Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva, and Luce Irigaray. It supposes wrongly that all three are feminists and ignores that each has a distinct and diverse relationship with the term "feminist." In the 1970s, a diversity of disparate groups organized to advance feminism with the MLF, which the press simplified into a taxonomy of three groups: "*lute des classes*," "*Féministes révolutionnaires*," and "*Psych et po*."<sup>31</sup> Cixous and Irigaray did associate with *Psychanalyse et politique* or *Psych et po*, of which Cixous had the most substantial ties; however, Irigaray distanced her association in 1974 after a contentious dispute.<sup>32</sup> Kristeva neither associated herself with the MLF, and by extension *Psych et Po*, nor did she call herself a feminist. Despite the waning connection of these women writers, during the decade, *Psych et po* grew to have prominence amongst the MLF's diverse groups through an influx of unknown funding;<sup>33</sup> the group leveraged these funds to advance their publications and, in 1979 even trademarked both the name "*MLF/Mouvement des libération des femmes*" and the logo of the fist in the woman's sign. Claire Goldberg Moses recounts that when opponents of *Psych et Po* alerted the MLF participants to the sweeping changes in their organizations, *Psych et Po* used its ample funding to pursue lawsuits, which resulted in *Psych et Po* receiving financial damages while continuing to sue other feminists in court for "defamation."<sup>34</sup> However, to audiences in the United States unaware of these actions, "French feminism" went on to signify the linguistic/psychoanalytic traditions primarily, with Marxist and materialistic versions overlooked<sup>35</sup> or overshadowed.

Nevertheless, Moses surmises that Cixous, Kristeva, and Irigaray became conflated with “new” French intellectualism, which existed before the invention of French feminism. Anglo-American interpreters, already proponents of a “French theory,” began to promote this disciplinary turn. During the 1960s, American academics flattened by the arguments of New Criticism were eager to embrace the promise and possibilities of feminist criticism, hermeneutics, postmodernism, psychoanalytic criticism, structuralism, semiotics, Marxism, and deconstruction. They viewed the contributions of Barthes, Foucault, Lévi-Strauss, Sartre, and Derrida as ways to “legitimate the transition of ‘soft’ disciplines from being *descriptive* enterprises to more *theoretical* ones.”<sup>36</sup> Those familiar with Irigaray’s critique that soft/hard binaries are proxies for feminine/masculine constructs can map the overwhelming maleness of the list. Under this reading of events, the Anglo-American turn had less to do with *Psych et Po* and its take-over of the feminist movement in France and more to do with the American theoretical search for legitimacy that these French male intellectuals provided; Cixous, Kristeva, and Irigaray came in secondarily as a balancing force of women’s representation.<sup>37</sup> Moses explains the American invention of “French feminism,” which she describes as “a feminist *political* practice, a strategy for placing both women theorists and the topic of gender centrally into their field of scholarship alongside a group of heavily French male theorists who had already captured their male colleagues’ attention.”<sup>38</sup> Those familiar with the work of Irigaray can recognize that even gender balance and representation misconstrues Irigaray’s claims of sexual difference by which she argues that difference must be theorized at the level of the symbolic. This move only reifies an assumed Phallic unity.

However, reading these events with Françoise Vergès’s previously cited account, what is galling is not only that Irigaray came to represent French feminism but that even the notion of a “French” feminism fails to acknowledge the colonial discourse that makes such nationalism possible, in which French national feminists were both victims and agents of a parallel but inverse racial logic occurring in their departments and territories. To use Irigarayan language, the “French” in feminism remains a blind spot that renders the sexual-racial-colonial experiences of the people in the departments and territories invisible. The experiences of sexually segregated policies and carceral punishments, hysterical in their arbitrary racial markings, remain inversely situated, not only the symbolic castration of women but also their lack and excess to the signifier of whiteness that constitutes, even while it does not cohere with the actual demographics of the country, what it is to be nationally French.

Scant evidence remains that Irigaray acknowledges how issues like abortion, equal pay, sexual violence, and private/public dichotomies intersect and interlock with structural racism, homophobia, ableism, xenophobia, and colonialism, which Vergès so aptly illustrates. For Irigaray’s proponents, it is

because these notions are already encoded within a male universal symbolic.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, sexual difference must be prior. A host of French intellectuals (Kristeva, Derrida, Sartre, Memmi), nationally entangled with Algeria and North Africa, engage in the colonial and anti-Semitic conversations capturing the European landscape. Still, unlike Fanon, they do not bring to the fore the anti-Black critique U.S. theorists argued as central.<sup>40</sup> While Irigaray and Derrida offer unique and robust versions of sexual difference predicated upon the psychoanalytic work of Lacan, they rarely engage that theory's capacity to deploy applied socio-political issues of justice. It appears dubious or inadequate to say that these thinkers, particularly Irigaray, used the framework of sexual difference to think about race and postcolonialism explicitly. One is left to question if sexual difference is sufficient to engage with race and anti/de/post/neo-coloniality and if the heavily psychoanalytic, structural, and post-structural leanings of sexual difference can offer a robust theoretical framework for those committed to this triadic analysis.

## Entanglement and Disidentification

For Glissant, movement is not a linear motion but a locomotion varied in speed, direction, and intensity by entanglements, diversions, and errant wandering. By entanglement, I read Glissant analyzing paradoxically the "negative forces of oppression" rendered on his culture and body that follow and morph as he changes geographic locations. Creolization, as such, is a process by which mixed, transshipped, and racially anti-identified people can locate, narrate, and reconceive filial bonds while retaining a unique composite, rather than atavistic, genealogy of knowledge and kinship. Such a move resists dialectical synthesis. Instead, Glissant keeps the oscillation between thesis and anti-thesis, identity and anti-identity.

Glissantian entanglement may share strategic scope with what José Esteban Muñoz posits as disidentification, a third location, a cultural, material, and psychic survival strategy, a Foucaultian polyvalence of discourse that responds to state and global power apparatuses which seek to impose brutal systems of racial and sexual subjugation.<sup>41</sup> For this paper, critical to Muñoz's definition of disidentification is the observation that it is an anti-assimilationist thought that mourns a lost object but realizes melancholically that there is no escape.<sup>42</sup> Importantly, Muñoz depathologizes melancholia, pointing to the lives under siege by which melancholia offers a site for collective struggle, "a productive space of hybridization. . . between a necessary mourning and indispensable militancy."<sup>43</sup> This notion of melancholia, indispensable militancy, and tangled forces, I suggest, Glissant remains within, stagnant but not stuck. The processes of creolization resist a singular culture, a way of thinking, a filial genealogy, and an economic production in service to capitalist enslavement. As such, creolization is a

process that those committed to sexual difference's critique ought to recognize as a specificity of the metaphysical rupture that sexual difference theories suggest. Irigaray's work hearkens to what exists outside the Self-Same symbolic—that something persists and subsists, that an unraveling lurks in the background and morphology reveals this diversity of ideologies and lived experience.

## Critical Melancholia and Whiteness

Ranjana Khanna has noted that psychoanalysis is both a colonial discipline and a framework for liberatory postcolonial and neocolonial movements, a critique she titles "critical melancholia."<sup>44</sup> She explains that critical melancholia reveals how intellectuals from locations deemed "primitive" relative to "civilized" nation-states became agents of the disciplines and studies that had named them colonized peoples. Melancholia among these intellectuals appears as an "inability to assimilate loss, and the consequent nagging return of the thing lost in psychic life."<sup>45</sup> Tracing Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia," Khanna explains similar states of loss to a person, objects, or abstractions, such as an ideal, liberty, or country; however, a state of dejection accompanies melancholia.<sup>46</sup> Successful mourning involves the psychical work of narcissism, directing energy inward and assimilating the feelings of loss; with melancholia, assimilation is impossible. The object is swallowed whole, and one is stuck with this loss and unaware of its influence.<sup>47</sup> Freud captures this inability to assimilate as negative. Yet, paradoxically, it also offers a subversive agency whereby critical identification with the self is lost, and temporality—how one functions with this loss in the past and the future—is revealed through reverberating echoes.

Khanna writes, "What Echo was to Narcissus, melancholia is to mourning. And if Freud would eventually transfer the critical agency found in melancholia into the normalizing function of the superego, I would salvage it, putting the melancholic's manic critical agency into the unworking of conformity and into the critique of the status quo."<sup>48</sup> Khanna describes a demetaphorization where encryption is the symptom of mourning, and haunting is the symptom of melancholia. The looming specter of melancholia over the postcolonial independent nation-state reveals a manic call for justice made necessary, as Glissant rejoins because the colonizer constrained resistance to only their terms. As such, the colonized would be incapable of metabolizing<sup>49</sup> or assimilating the loss of subjecthood in the lands they were transhipped. I return to this haunting in the final section of this paper as I explore the unresolved sexual and racial violence Vergès recounts.

In *Speculum of the Other Woman*, under the subtitle "A Very Black Sexuality,"<sup>50</sup> Irigaray also traces "Mourning and Melancholia." According to Freud's insight, the little girl's melancholia is due to the discovery of castration, a condition both the little girl and her mother share, making the

mother an unconsciously forsaken object-relation of identification. She records the melancholic symptoms of the little girl<sup>51</sup> and Freud's conclusion that the girl's libido withdraws from her object-mother, seeking a displaced object. The ego will attempt to consume or cannibalize the loss by orally devouring it. In melancholia, Freud supposes that women manifest this sign of dejection as a refusal to eat or consume (anorexia), even a lack of sexual appetite. Given the collective and shared condition of castration, the little girl cannot work through this by mourning because the object is not dead but lost, and she cannot perceive what has been lost. Exasperated, Irigaray quips that the girl lacks sufficient narcissism to establish a firm melancholic syndrome:

This is not to say that the sexuality of this 'dark continent' will not show a good number of the symptoms of melancholia. But they will be scattered about rather than organized in a coherent and permanent manner...Hysteria is all she has left...she will do as she is asked. But this "as" or "as if" is not ludic, not under her control...But here the game is controlled—as we have already seen—by the Phallus's mastery of the sexual economy...The choice she faces would be between censoring her instincts completely—which would lead to death—or treating them as, converting them into, hysteria. Actually, there is no real alternative. The two operations entail each other.<sup>52</sup>

What is clear is that melancholia can be helpful in a critical sense but only as a descriptive phenomenon. It does not resolve the tensions that sexual and racial identity assimilation demand—it leaves these choices as things that ought not to be assimilated. Irigaray's reading, when mapped with Khanna's "critical melancholia" in the context of postcolonialism, reveals a manic (Khanna) and hysteric (Irigaray) response to inassimilable loss that the Phallic economy proffers. Like Muñoz's earlier account, melancholia is a site for collective mourning and political resistance when the polis has no axiom to recognize excluded political agents or attempts to define them as lack. Rather than being stuck without agency with inassimilable loss, Glissant's work sets in motion a productive errantry, a political strategy of detour/retour in which injustice isn't swallowed but transformed beyond the binary choices of assimilation or death. Interestingly, Fanon also noted the diagnosis of the colonized as hysterical,<sup>53</sup> as the colonized is made wretched under the symbolic law which orders hierarchy by sex and race.

Glissant's notion of entanglement can be paired with Irigaray's notion of sexual difference in that sexual difference signals a space or a gap between subjective binaries, an interval of possibility that exceeds a psychoanalytic symbolic order, permitting the real and the imaginary to unfold in new directions. Her work is helpful in that she diagnoses a Western cultural imaginary constructed via a privileging of the male identity, bodily unity, solidity, and visibility, interpreted morphological reals mapped onto the anatomy of the male body and the lack of the female body. Sexual difference is a way to reveal this framework and to breach its cultural lock, challenging

its psychic and generationally cultivated markers of inclusion and exclusion. While Irigaray's work centers principally on the *f eminine* other, not the female body per se, to expose and undermine this phallogocentric economy, her positing of the *f eminine* intervention remains, as Marjorie Hass suggests, race invisible;<sup>54</sup> it succumbs to the markers of whiteness. Sexual difference, given its psychoanalytic framing, exposes the deep psychic trauma on raced bodies and the mental "dis-ease" of raced cultures. I suggest that while Khanna and Irigaray underscore the unconcealment of inassimilable loss that melancholia exposes, sex, not race, is posited within this order of the symbolic. I turn to Seshadri-Crooks to explicate this formative distinction.

## Psychoanalysis and Race

In Lacan's work, Seshadri-Crooks argues that race functions as an element of the real, not the symbolic, and as such, whiteness functions as its signifier without a signified. Race is a category that predetermines social arrangements and behaviors by accenting difference rather than connection. Thus, race is in service to a mythos that we are Whole beings and allows people to view others as wholly "black," "white," "red," or "yellow." It functions to support a logic of domination that hides our vulnerability. Sexual difference, she notes, rests on historically contingent valuations derived from male and female. By contrast, race is about exclusiveness, a person's exceptional uniqueness, which conflates with the public good as one takes up this power-centric interest via Hobbesian social contracts. But she argues, "it is not power in the sense of material and discursive agency that can be reduced to historical mappings. As many have assumed, if such were the case, then a historicist genealogy of the discursive construction of race would be in order: Foucault, not Lacan, discourse analysis, not psychoanalysis."<sup>55</sup> She argues that race organized difference in its access to being, a *jouissance* that whiteness promises it can access. She concludes, "The subject of race, therefore, typically resists race as mere "social construction," even as it holds on to a notion of visible, phenotypal difference."<sup>56</sup>

Notions of colonial race include inherited features under the genetic lottery of one's biological parents. Whatever their race, the children inherit a series of genes by which kinship is bound to culture and ethnicity. The organizing feature doesn't adhere to geographical or even national groupings. It is ultimately a mapping of what one sees, visual aesthetics or racial aesthetic practice,<sup>57</sup> by which "gross morphological features" (hair, bone, skin) are interpreted before class, ethnic, or cultural variances, and—like sex—one inherits these features from birth as a set of normative embodied appearances. Here an Antillean point of view challenges what is seen. A North-South, rather than Antillean-Antillean point of view, gazes via the sight of the metropole—the white gaze.

It also means race becomes operative within the Hegelian realm of the family or the private aspect of civil society; it operates on the interplay between the family, an organization socially regulated that can justify itself through a supposed biology of inherited essences.<sup>58</sup> To uncover racism, Seshadri-Crooks focuses on how “race transmutes its historicity, its contingent foundations, into a biological necessity. It is this process, a process that depends upon and exploits the structure of sexual difference, that one must grasp. . . . Race depends upon the sexed subject for its effectivity; the indeterminacy of the sexed subject is the fulcrum around which race turns. The signifier Whiteness attempts to signify the sexed subject, which is the ‘more than symbolic’ aspect of the subject.”<sup>59</sup> Such a signification ultimately fails and yields anxiety that she argues is related to the unconscious anxiety about the historicity of Whiteness, a fraudulent signifier.<sup>60</sup> She applies the structural mapping of psychoanalysis to reveal the collusion of the symbolic that orders how we perceive and fail to perceive material reality. The method forces people to confront the subject’s lack of being, no possibility for desire, and an effect of language; this anxiety to face vulnerability also hides the social construction of race.

## Neutered Whiteness

As the opposition between dualities is integral to Western philosophy’s deployment of hierarchy, Irigaray’s project challenges the valuation system. Sexual difference, as Western philosophy has conceived it, has placed woman in a system by which her subjectivity varies by degree or kind to man. As Mary Bloodworth-Lugo notes, she is greater or lesser by degree (one-sex model) or a different kind (two-sex model) than he. What the two-sex model identifies with clarity is the assumption of body neutrality that typically follows gender theory. Namely, the fluidity of non-binary gender traits is still applied to a “neutral” static and non-social body. The masculine and feminine gender qualities, under gender theory, are dismantled while leaving the male-body and the female-body the canvases upon which these traits are applied. To use sexual difference theory to tackle racial invisibility, the neutral body cannot be the aim of difference; thus, racial markings ought to be critical to this unmasking of the neutral and neutered Western body.

Irigaray’s argument supposes a metaphysical asymmetry. As such, woman resides both within and outside this system. Human beings can’t be alive without a feminine subject, and she is not the same as the Other of the Phallus. Being present while out of grasp makes the feminine subject a constant presence that is simultaneously absent. Under the symbolic rule of the Father’s law, the father is the only subject, the only kin to a developing younger male subject. The mother is already de-kinned and serves as a function rather than a relation. It is this meditation on lost kinship that Sabrina Hom suggests, drawing upon the fluidic element of blood, Irigaray’s work

brings the relation between the mother and daughter out of the Oedipal dyad of father and son. Hom, also tracing Seshadri-Crooks, contends that Irigaray's meditation on blood signifies the complexities of paternal-child identification and subjecthood and the entangled racial subject identifications of kinship.<sup>61</sup> The phallus as a lack not only severs identification between mother-daughter, but it functions, as Fanon writes, to amputate the black man. These severed relations litter a minefield that lures people into its explosive landscape, promising the dominance of a civilized pure, whole being. Irigaray's work via the maternal helps us establish new modes of kinship beyond the sutured wreckage, which I explore in the final section.

### ***La Mère/Mer***

Irigaray's focus on the maternal, as her work underscores, plays on the homophone of the mother and the sea, *la mère* and *la mer*.<sup>62</sup> To understand the racial, colonial, and sexual implication of this doubled meaning, I return to Irigaray's rethinking of the solid and fluid, the mother and father, the land and sea. In *Wombs of Women*, Vergès defines terms she anticipates a French audience will need to be clarified, and her first is *Outre-Mer*. She writes of *Outre-Mer*: "This designation refers to the colonial administration and today comprises a wide range of distinct situations. As such, it is inadequate. Nonetheless, I see no other way to describe the situation of these lands that, according to the republican system, are united by the fact that they are products of the reconfiguration of the French slave empire (the overseas departments, or DOM: Martinique, Guadeloupe, Guyana, Reunion Island) and post-slave empire (Kanaky, Pacific Islands, Mayotte)."<sup>63</sup> A land defined by its colonial legacy and enslaved status of the people who occupy these lands, she suggests, results in the feeble marker *Outre-Mer*. Its distance and its non-solidity are already implied. Hortense Spillers pens that the people of the Middle Passage were suspended in an "oceanic" medium of Freudian "undifferentiated identity: removed from indigenous land and culture. . . . were in movement across the Atlantic, but they were also nowhere at all" reduced to quantities, cargo, degenderized.<sup>64</sup> The sea hides the accounting of people and their transshipment. The sea becomes a fluidic medium in which one is not a mother; on land and with soil, her reproductive capacities can be leveraged. However, her family kinship will have little semblance with Lacan's sexual division of parentage.

### ***La Mère-Patrie—The Gift***

To understand "colonial family romance," a colonial child of the French revolution, Vergès turns to Freud's contention that the little boy (not the little girl as we already note from Irigaray's reading of the castrated girl and mother) views his idealized parents as the source of all beliefs. Perception

shifts as the child comprehends the erosion of power that mark his father (the Phallic anxiety, or lack of lack in Lacan's account) and mother (castrated phallus). The boy's hostile feelings, particularly toward his father, will pivot toward a better parentage, a new set of relations worthy of nurturing those unitary hopes and beliefs—the socio-political body. This move legitimates a revolutionary allegiance around abstractions of *fraternité, liberté, égalité*. Vergès narrates that the prerevolutionary romance generated a salvation narrative within the Hexagon, where the revolutionary Republic lifted people from the yoke of feudalism and tyrannical patriarchs. Contrastingly, love and affection did not motivate people to travel to the colonies; men went abroad in search of capital exploits in gold and religious conversion. Absent is a discourse of a political ideal. If the monarchy represented patriarchy, then the figure of Marianne, "the benevolent mediator," would protect her children from his tyranny, thus heeding the Oedipal warning of the overbearing king. This protective figure, *La Mère-Patrie*, was sent to the colonies to protect her children from other local tyrannical or failed fathers.<sup>65</sup> As Vergès notes, this formed a founding mythos, what Glissant calls a "unique root"<sup>66</sup> genealogy and narrative, an idealized parent associated with European whiteness, capable of denying the dimension of race in the making of this identity. She pens, "The fable gave France the means to console itself when colonized 'children' would rebel and to repress the reasons for which they rejected her. It was their ingratitude, rather than tyrannical 'love,' that explained their behavior."<sup>67</sup>

Ultimately, she claims the family romance invents a cast of diminutive children in need of *La Mère-Patrie*, caught in a cycle of dependence and debt. Her benevolent oversight and order are the colonial *don*,<sup>68</sup> or gift, the legacy of the Enlightenment project. Akin to this mother-father figure is primogeniture, a preference given to superior white brothers who are consanguineal relations by revolutionary power and possibly mixed blood. This lurking *métissage* forms an anxious and unspoken disapprobation of sexual intercourse between races. It was the *frère aîné* (older brothers), not the colonial lobbies, who, in the Republic's narration, abolished slavery in 1794, forcing the colonized people into an indentured gratitude that lasted through the mid-twentieth century.<sup>69</sup> Uncounted were the colonies' resources of wood, sugar, minerals, and bodies needed to fight France's wars. The debt was insurmountable and asymmetrically established. Rather than filial contributors, the colonized were cast as "dependents" ascribed with mental illness and moral failures associated with the racialized and sexualized markers of a matrifocal society,<sup>70</sup> female-headed families which nurtured an infantile society of the lazy, indolent, addicted, and socially-politically impoverished.<sup>71</sup>

## Métissage and Anamnesis

The Lacanian anxiety traced as the Phallus and its hidden signifier whiteness is transformed through Vergès's analysis of *métissage*. She notes the dialectic of enslavement and emancipation: on the one side were the colonizers, as described, who blamed the Creoles for their conditions of oppression; they attributed abuses of power to the irregular actions of individuals and corrupt administrators, not a system of power. Countering this fiction of childish and deserved enslavement, Frantz Fanon argues for a *tabula rasa* approach, rejecting the Manichean society divided by two species, the duality marking the cold war. He rallies for a Third World restart to history, one which does not succumb to defining itself "in relation to the values which preceded it."<sup>72</sup> Vergès reads in Fanon's call an implication that men and women have the power to "reinvent their symbolic and material world, to shed memory. It construes memory as a morbid legacy, a melancholic nostalgia...a fantasy of self-engendering, a refusing a filiation that is experienced as impossible to receive and transform."<sup>73</sup> The dead spirits of defeat and loss inspired him toward Algiers and not to Martinique; rejoining with Glissant's earlier point, he did not return to the entangled legacy of Creoles on the island of Martinique. There he found no political traction for the new epoch. Vergès notes Toni Morrison's commentary that slavery was "undigestible and unabsorbable, completely,"<sup>74</sup> an ethos Khanna affirms but also supposes this indigestibility can be a productive site of critical analysis. Vergès—instead of Fanon's *tabula rasa* or a morbid melancholia—argues for anamnesis, a collective remembrance of a group's origins embracing an ambivalence of symbolic limit and the possibility that one may exceed this limit. The collective remembrance resonates with Muñoz's notion of melancholia as collective mourning and indispensable militancy. She reads a mixed heterogeneity of emancipatory discourses within Reunion history and society: an appropriation of French republic ideals but without mimetic assimilation. Instead, they were, as she says, "creolized, métissés, hybridized," turning to examples like Xiaomei Chen and Jacques Derrida, as theorists who posit the capacity of people, in Audre Lorde fashion, to turn the master's tools into weapons that destroy the house he intended to build.<sup>75</sup> She asserts an "in-between" of "citizen *and* colonized, worker *and* citizen, member of the colonized community *and* member of a subethnic, *and* women," what she calls an inscribed social matrix of race, gender, class, and sexual difference.<sup>76</sup>

In this way, Vergès's *métissage* brings together the entangled identities and categories of each of the thinkers I have traced in this paper, but in true Irigarayan fashion, she does not syncretize or sublimate—she forges new pathways of remembering and, ultimately, becoming. In a Glissantian sense, she holds the entangled memories and historiographies carefully, refusing to unsee or assimilate; her melancholia turns to a re(member)ing of people and land where the vantage of the Antillean, rather than the colonizer, holds sway.

If Irigaray's work brought us back to the question of filiation and the mother, Vergès remembers via anamnesis the Creole mothers and their site of loss and sterilization on the island of Reunion; she memorializes the hysteric loss to which France's legal system and feminist movement remain blind and mute. She uses the sea, via the Middle Passage, to figure the bodies of the enslaved, pushing their haunting beyond morbid melancholia toward a collective call for responsibility, to live up to the ideals of the revolution and tear down its façade that turns every person into a capitalist worker within the global neo-plantation. Like materialist feminists, she worked within France, tracing the history and economic oppression. Unlike them, she cannot remain indifferent to France's subaltern and the complicity of this silence.<sup>7</sup> Using the discourses of European psychoanalysis and the Lacanian grammar of White supremacy, Vergès offers those committed to the claims of sexual difference a geographical vantage upon which colonialism, racism, and sexual difference remain entangled. We return to the islands of Martinique and Reunion, not to encounter a pure sexual difference but one where the forces of creolization may indeed enliven our perishing pursuits, which are haunted and wounded without such an analysis.

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<sup>1</sup> Françoise Vergès, *The Wombs of Women: Race, Capital, Feminism*, trans. Kaiama L. Glover (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 16.

<sup>2</sup> Françoise Picq, *Libération des femmes : Les années-mouvement* (Paris : Editions du Seuil, 1993).

<sup>3</sup> Vergès, *The Wombs of Women*, 16.

<sup>4</sup> Vergès, *The Wombs of Women*, 26.

<sup>5</sup> Libreria delle donne di Milano, *Non credere di avere dei diritti: La generazione della libertà femminile nell'idea e nelle vicende di un gruppo di donne* (Rosenberg and Sellier, 1987); Teresa de Lauretis, "The Practice of Sexual Difference and Feminist Thought in Italy: an Introductory Essay," In *Sexual Difference*, Milan Women's Collective Bookstore, trans. Teresa de Lauretis and Patrizia Cicogna (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990); Claire Goldberg Moses, "Made in America: 'French Feminism' in Academia," *Feminist Studies* 24, no. 2 (Summer 1998): 245. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3178697>; Christine Delphy, "The Invention of French Feminism: An Essential Move," *Yale French Studies* 97 (2000): 166-198; Lisa Disch, "Christine Delphy's Constructivist Materialism: An Overlooked 'French Feminism'," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 114, no. 4 (October 2015): 827-849. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-3157155>. Three women, including Irigaray, became misrepresented as nationally standing in for France's feminist movement. Irigaray's strained relationship with Psych et Po resulted in greater political traction with Italian feminists than French feminists, sympathetic to materialist feminist claims.

<sup>6</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Trenton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000/2007).

<sup>7</sup> Vergès, *The Wombs of Women*, 21.

- <sup>8</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, trans. J. Michael Dash (University Press of Virginia, 1989), 14, 15.
- <sup>9</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 189-194.
- <sup>10</sup> Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 15.
- <sup>11</sup> Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 15.
- <sup>12</sup> Luce Irigaray, *In the Beginning, She Was* (London, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 52. “Cut off from her - or her - men withdraw from themselves. They wander deprived of vigor, of energy. Animated by a mechanism as arbitrary as their language, they learn with a master how to adapt themselves to it, without failure, without errors, a false gesture, a false word, or concatenation of words. They are initiated into repeating, into imitating. This apprenticeship is supposed to make them men. Instead, it exiles them from themselves.”
- <sup>13</sup> Irigaray, *In the Beginning*, 90.
- <sup>14</sup> Irigaray, *In the Beginning*, 130
- <sup>15</sup> Irigaray, *In the Beginning*, 83.
- <sup>16</sup> Ranjana Khanna, “On the Name, Ideation, and Sexual Difference,” *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 27, no. 2 (2016): 63. To situate what I mean by sexual difference and what I understand Irigaray’s work to offer, I borrow Ranjana Khanna’s definition: “Sexual difference is a term with transitional content, yet to be fully conceived, and indeed perhaps intellectually hospitable in ways that resist content as justification, conceptualization as closure, or thought as merely aspirational.”
- <sup>17</sup> Irigaray, *In the Beginning*, 143
- <sup>18</sup> Luce Irigaray, *I Love to You: A Sketch of a Possible Felicity in History*, trans. Alison Martin (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), 47.
- <sup>19</sup> Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 17.
- <sup>20</sup> Luce Irigaray, “Place, Interval: A Reading of Aristotle, *Physics IV*,” in *Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 34-55.
- <sup>21</sup> Édouard Glissant, Preface to *Introduction to a Poetics of Diversity*, trans. Celia Britton (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020), xiii; italics mine.
- <sup>22</sup> Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 19.
- <sup>23</sup> Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 19, 20.
- <sup>24</sup> Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 26; emphasis mine.
- <sup>25</sup> Michèle Lamont, “How to Become a Dominant French Philosopher: The Case of Jacques Derrida,” *American Journal of Sociology* 93, no. 3 (1987): 613. “Structuralism,” *Yale French Studies* 35/37 (1966). Lamont notes the critical introduction of these nationally branded thinkers at an influential international structuralism conference in 1966 at John Hopkins University, where invited scholars included Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Serge Doubrovsky, Lucien Goldmann, Jacques Lacan, and Tzvetan Todorov. The conference followed with a special issue on structuralism in *Yale French Studies*, further strengthening the fabric of their associated works.

Explicit volumes with their works named also cemented this U.S. notion of a unified French thought, such as Vincent Descombe's *Modern French Philosophy* and John Fekete's *The Structural Allegory: Reconstructive Encounters with the New French Thought*. Similar works threaded Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray's works together, such as Nancy Fraser's and Sandra Lee Bartky's *Revaluing French Feminism: Critical Essays on Difference, Agency, and Culture*.

- <sup>26</sup> Elizabeth V. Spelman, *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), 104-107; Sylvia Wynter, "Beyond Miranda's Meanings: Un/silencing the 'Demonic Ground' of Caliban's Woman'," In *Out of Kumbia: Caribbean Women and Literature*, eds. Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1990), 355-72; Penelope Deutscher, *A Politics of Impossible Difference: The Later Work of Luce Irigaray* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002).
- <sup>27</sup> Sabrina L. Hom, "Between Races and Generations: Materializing Race and Kinship in Moraga and Irigaray," *Hypatia* 28, no. 3 (2013): 419-435; Stephen D. Seely, "Irigaray Between God and the Indians: Sexuate Difference, Decoloniality, and the Politics of Ontology," *Australian Feminist Law Journal* 43, 1 (2017): 41-65; Rachel Jones, "Philosophical *Métissage* and the Decolonization of Difference: Luce Irigaray, Daniel Maximin, and the Elemental Sublime," *Journal of Aesthetics and Phenomenology* 5, no. 2 (2018): 139-154; Joanne Faulkner, "Settler Colonialism's 'Miscarriage': Thinking the Failure of Relationality through Irigaray's 'Interval'," *Angelaki* 24, no. 3 (May 2019): 137-154;
- <sup>28</sup> Sara Farris, *In the Name of Women's Rights: The Rise of Femonationalism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017).
- <sup>29</sup> Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," in *Dangerous Liaison: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives*, ed. Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti, and Ella Shohat (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1997), 273.
- <sup>30</sup> Christine Delphy, "The Invention of French Feminism: An Essential Move," *Yale French Studies* 97 (2000): 166-198.
- <sup>31</sup> Françoise Picq, *Libération des femmes : Les années-mouvement* (Paris : Editions du Seuil, 1993), 190. Picq contests the simplified reduction of group dynamics, dividing and sapping the strength away from the varied group projects.
- <sup>32</sup> Claire Goldberg Moses, "Made in America: 'French Feminism' in Academia," *Feminist Studies* 24, no. 2 (Summer 1998): 245. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3178697>; Picq, *Libération des femmes*, 210-215.
- <sup>33</sup> Moses, "Made in America," 250.
- <sup>34</sup> Moses, "Made in America," 241. It is argued that this nomenclature of "French Feminism" is an invention that Anglo-American feminists coined to delineate their own lingually divided project.
- <sup>35</sup> Disch, "Christine Delphy's Constructivist Materialism: An Overlooked 'French Feminism'," 827-849.
- <sup>36</sup> Lamont, "How to Become a Dominant French Philosopher: The Case of Jacques Derrida," 614.
- <sup>37</sup> Moses, "Made in America," note 58. Moses cites a 1993 Iowa doctoral History candidate who notes that when the poststructuralists, such as Foucault and Derrida, were added to her program, she, as a feminist, turned toward Cixous, Kristeva, and Irigaray. This author notes that in 2002, in her graduate study, Kristeva and Irigaray (the only female 20th-century female figures studied) were paired with a heavily "French" male list that included Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, Levinas, Foucault, and Derrida.

- <sup>38</sup> Moses, "Made in America," 262.
- <sup>39</sup> De Lauretis, *Sexual difference*, 18. When asked about lesbianism absent from *Non credere di avere dei diritti*, contributor Luisa Muraro wrote back, "From the way you speak of lesbianism, almost seems as if you are making sexual choice a principle or a cause or a foundation of freedom. If that were what you thought, I would say to you: no, the principle of female freedom is of a symbolic nature. It is not an actual behavior, however valid and precious such a behavior may be toward the empowering of women in society. . . . in order for us to enter the symbolic order we must start from silence, we must clear everything out—the place of the other must be empty."
- <sup>40</sup> Kathryn T. (Gines) Belle, "Fanon and Sartre 50 Years Later: To Retain or Reject the Concept of Race," *Sartre Studies International* 9, no. 2 (2003): 55-67.
- <sup>41</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentification: Queers of Color and the Performance Politics* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 19, 25, 26, 161-79.
- <sup>42</sup> Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 18. 51-74.
- <sup>43</sup> Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 74.
- <sup>44</sup> Ranjana Khanna, *Dark Continents: Psychoanalysis and Colonialism* (Durham, ND: Duke University Press, 2003), x. Khanna writes, "Critical melancholia is an affect of coloniality as well as a reading practice that makes apparent the decentered nature of the psychoanalytic paradigm."
- <sup>45</sup> Khanna, *Dark Continents*, 16-17.
- <sup>46</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 vol., trans. and ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1953-74), 14:243.
- <sup>47</sup> Khanna, *Dark Continents*, 21, 22.
- <sup>48</sup> Khanna, *Dark Continents*, 23. Like Antoine Poirot's diagnosis of men in Algiers suffering from "pseudomelancholy," giving rise to violent behavior, which differs in its manifestation from European melancholy, one can understand these men critically and politically protesting the hegemony of their lost ideal—the right to subjecthood and the right not to be exploited.
- <sup>49</sup> Myra J. Hird, "Digesting Difference: Metabolism and the Question of Sexual Difference," *Configurations* 20, no. 3 (Fall 2012): 213-237. Hird suggests that metabolism offers ways to excite the tensions between being and becoming that Elizabeth Grosz's Darwinian account of sexual difference provides. It is beyond the scope of this paper to account for this mode of analyzing sexual difference. Still, I note the synergy between melancholia as an indigestible loss and how metabolism may offer a way to frame sexual difference beyond sexual dimorphism that forecloses the implication of Irigaray's work.
- <sup>50</sup> Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), 66; emphasis mine. I note the unconsidered notion of "blackness" as a necessary construct for Irigaray to trace the "dark" continent of woman. Under her reading of Freud, the terms blackness and sexuality reference female sexuality within psychoanalysis. I argue that blackness should be theorized explicitly as a distinct construct, and its relation to sexual difference deserves studied examination.
- <sup>51</sup> Irigaray, *Speculum*, 66, 67.
- <sup>52</sup> Irigaray, *Speculum*, 71, 72.
- <sup>53</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 19.

- <sup>54</sup> Marjorie Hass, "The Style of the Speaking Subject: Irigaray's Empirical Studies of Language Production," *Hypatia* 14, no. 10 (2000): 64-89.
- <sup>55</sup> Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks, *Desiring Whiteness: A Lacanian Analysis of Race* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 8.
- <sup>56</sup> Seshadri-Crooks, *Desiring Whiteness*, 8.
- <sup>57</sup> Seshadri-Crooks, *Desiring Whiteness*, 19.
- <sup>58</sup> Seshadri-Crooks, *Desiring Whiteness*, 17.
- <sup>59</sup> Seshadri-Crooks, *Desiring Whiteness*, 21.
- <sup>60</sup> Seshadri-Crooks, *Desiring Whiteness*, 21. She notes another way of expressing her argument: "Race is a regime of visibility that secures our investment in racial identity. We make such an investment because the unconscious signifier Whiteness, which founds the logic of racial difference, promises wholeness. (This is what it means to desire Whiteness: not a desire to become Caucasian [!] but, to put it redundantly, it is an 'insatiable desire on the part of all raced subjects to overcome difference.) Whiteness attempts to signify being, or that aspect of the subject which escapes language. Obviously, such a project is impossible because Whiteness is a historical and cultural invention. However, what guarantees Whiteness its place as a master signifier is visual difference. The phenotype secures our belief in racial difference, thereby perpetuating our desire for Whiteness."
- <sup>61</sup> Hom, "Between Races and Generations," 427. Hom writes that the discourse around racial blood reveals that racialization is "dependent upon controlling and rationalizing blood."
- <sup>62</sup> Irigaray, *Speculum*, 168, footnote.
- <sup>63</sup> Vergès, *The Wombs of Women*, 21.
- <sup>64</sup> Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* (summer 1987): 65-81, 72.
- <sup>65</sup> Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 66. I note the synergy between this account and the cunning attack against black masculinity and failed fatherhood that Spillers observes in the racial propaganda of the Moynihan Report, where a perceived "matriarchy" is pathologized.
- <sup>66</sup> Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 22.
- <sup>67</sup> Vergès, *Monsters and Revolutionaries*, 4.
- <sup>68</sup> Marcel Mauss, "Essai sur le don : Forme et raison de l'échange dans les sociétés archaïques," ed. Jean-Marie Tremblay (1923-1924/2002) : [http://www.uqac.quebec.ca/zone30/Classiques\\_des\\_sciences\\_sociales/index.html](http://www.uqac.quebec.ca/zone30/Classiques_des_sciences_sociales/index.html)
- Jacques Derrida, *Given Time. I, Counterfeit Money* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1992); Vergès, *Monsters and Revolutionaries*, 6, footnote 16. Vergès notes the play on the French verb *donner*, which means to give, and its noun form, *don*, implies not only a giving but of the sacred, devotional, favor, or grace. She traces Mauss's famous essay on *le don* in which he explores the social relations that encode the gift, a theme picked up by Derrida in his work, noting the irresolvable paradox of debt that every gift entails.
- <sup>69</sup> The departmentalization or independent autonomy question split Afro-Caribbean thinkers and scholars, including Aimé Césaire (a departmentalist) from Édouard Glissant (a regional autonomist).

- <sup>70</sup> Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 65-81, 77. The single parent-model is endorsed via a mythos of “One” God who is father/mother to his children; However, as Spillers notes, this single-parenthood becomes illegitimate in matrilineal or focal societies. In White supremacist cultures, the father may remain awkwardly unnamed to conceal the forbidden desire of the white father; his excluded parental acknowledgment also ensures his children can become his racially reproduced capital gains.
- <sup>71</sup> Octave Mannoni, “Administration de la folie, folie de l’administration,” in *Un commencement qui n’en finit pas : Transfert, interprétation, théorie* (Paris : Éditions du Seuil, Champ Freudien, 1980), 137 ; Vergès, *Monsters and Revolutionaries*, 18. Vergès cites Mannoni’s analysis that psychiatry became the medical discipline by the Republic collaborated to exclude based on protecting “the tranquility of the majority” with “historically defined norms and propriety” to maintain a “certain way of being reasonable.” Thus read, Creoles are the failed children of the Enlightenment project and its capitalist efficiency.
- <sup>72</sup> Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 5, 55.
- <sup>73</sup> Vergès, *Monsters and Revolutionaries*, 13; emphasis mine.
- <sup>74</sup> Elsie B. Washington, “Talk with Toni Morrison,” in *Conversation with Toni Morrison*, 235; Vergès, *Monsters and Revolutionaries*, 15, fn. 56.
- <sup>75</sup> Xiaomei Chen, *Occidentalism: A Theory of Counter-Discourse in Post-Mao China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 17; Jacques Derrida, “The Laws of Reflection: Nelson Mandela, in Admiration,” in *For Nelson Mandela*, by Jacques Derrida and Mustapha Tlili (New York: 1987), 17; Vergès, *Monsters and Revolutionaries*, 16, fn. 61 and 62. She cites Chen’s use of “Occidentalism” as a tactic whereby the semi-colonized could borrow from their colonizer, repurposing this discourse toward their political aims and cultural milieu. Similarly to Derrida, only an authentic inheritor can conserve and reproduce the legacy and turn the logic of the legacy “against those who claim to be its guardians” via “unheard of acts of reflection.”
- <sup>76</sup> Vergès, *Monsters and Revolutionaries*, 16.
- <sup>77</sup> Vergès, *Monsters and Revolutionaries*, fn. 70. She cites working as a journalist for the monthly and weekly review *des femmes en mouvements*, in which numerous articles on women in the world were recorded, including Egypt, Salvador, Eritrea, the Soviet Union, Guatemala, Chile, United States; however, very few were written about immigrant women in France or the “remnants of the empire.”

# Loving with bell, Leaping with Fanon, and Landing Nowhere

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In the intimate and informal quarters of her home, bell taught me to enact revolution as the everyday, vernacular, spiritual praxis of self-love. bell insisted that we cannot receive love from others or lovingly set the world on fire before we learn to love ourselves. At the time, I had no spiritual practice or self-love. Instead, I had rage, anger, and pain. Invoking the lessons of her own spiritual teacher, Thich Nhat Hanh, bell instructed me to take “the ugliness and the mess of my rage” and “use it as compost for [my] garden.”<sup>1</sup>

In the days and nights since her transition, I have sat with bell’s lesson, not least of all, in my work as director of the bell hooks center at Berea College and as chair of its Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies department; where I facilitate feminist study not as the white liberal pluralism whereby we add color and mix—a feminism which cannot account for the embodied and psychic pain that bell fearlessly interrogated—but as a spiritual praxis of self-love that grapples with lived experiences of dispossession and pain, including the psychic assaults of “imperialist white supremacist capitalist [cis-hetero-]patriarchy,”<sup>2</sup> productive of an unconscious that is sociogenically designed, as David Marriot writes, to “hate you.”<sup>3</sup>

bell haunts me still, reminding me to go where the love is, provoking me to use love as the ethical demand for an Otherwise in which *all* life matters, where we creatively repurpose the ‘sunken places’<sup>4</sup> of our psychic assaults to “leap,”<sup>5</sup> as Frantz Fanon instructs, towards other possibilities of living; in ways that enact what feminist theorist Karen Barad describes as “responsibility,”<sup>6</sup> in other words, mutual care. Reading bell’s work through Fanon’s psychoanalytic treatise *Black Skin, White Masks*, as well as selections from *Wretched of the Earth*, I elaborate the relationship between the intersectional, structural violence that bell named and her later, more popular work on love. I bemoan that her attention to love has been depoliticized by intellectuals and

institutions alike to obscure and discredit (and defang) her more dissident interventions. Instead, I dwell on what bell taught me: that love is a verb, an action, an intention, a possibility, a choice, a community, an accountability – to ourselves, to each other, and to the earth that sustains us. Love is active; self-love, especially, *activates* us to leap towards what Fred Moten describes as the “elsewhere and elsewhere”<sup>7</sup> of our freedom dreams: a location that we do not know and which we cannot name, though we want and feel and reach for it anyways.

I am still learning how to cultivate my garden of possibility without resorting to what Audre Lorde warns are “old blueprints of expectation and response,”<sup>8</sup> which I know can only ever engender what Sylvia Wynter characterizes as “the performative enactment of our ensemble of always already role-allocated individual and collective behaviors.”<sup>9</sup> And so, in this essay, I ask the difficult question: how can we enact self-love as the spiritual praxis of liberation in a world that teaches us – especially those of us who are women, femme, and gender non-conforming persons of color – to hate our raced, sexed, and gendered flesh; to hate other persons who are made flesh; and to hate the natural world (i.e., the ‘bush’) that we dangerously approximate?

More to the point: how can we lovingly set the world – not the earth, but *the world* – on fire (i.e., to create different possibilities for living) before we address the cognitive dissonance that goads us to act against our own self-interest, at the behest of imperialist white supremacist capitalist cis-hetero-patriarchy; specifically, its claims to positivism and progress, which, despite promising to deliver us from a state of nature, can only ever exclude us from Man’s timeline.

bell teaches us that love is what makes it possible for life that does not matter – for life that does not have access to the timeline of Man (or to any timeline) – to matter. She writes, “No matter our place in imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist patriarchal culture, when we do the work of love, we are doing the work of ending domination.”<sup>10</sup> bell calls on us to abandon our (bad) faith in Man’s positivism and progress in favor of another kind of faith: “spiritual awakening.”<sup>11</sup> In what follows, I pair bell’s insight with Fanon’s argument that “occult instability”<sup>12</sup> is what yields revolution, in order to elaborate love in bell’s own words: as “reckless abandon,”<sup>13</sup> as a “spiritual awakening”<sup>14</sup> that asks us to give up on this world in search of an/Other, even (especially) if we do not (yet) know where or how or if we will arrive at that landing.

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When I arrived at her doorstep in Fall 2019 with a bouquet of flowers that I could not afford, bell told me that she didn’t like flowers (she did) and then

continued to say, with nod and a wink and a smile, that she was originally against my hire at Berea College. When I asked why, she remarked that she could not imagine a woman of Iranian descent finding home in Berea.

From then on, I was her Iranian. At other times, she called me a “prophet of doom,” someone who thought too critically at the expense of my joy. Forsaking love. I think she saw in my quarrel with institutional inequity some of herself and what the academy took from her. And it did take from her. bell recounted that, when she fell ill, it felt as though a balloon had popped and deflated. She attributed this to the unsustainable rate at which she wrote and taught. She was concerned that I was doing the same.

I was fortunate to sit with bell almost daily. Already a mentor and elder, she became my confidant and friend. bell didn’t talk theory with me; she gossiped – though I would soon learn that the two are one in the same. Sitting across from the sofa where she devoured mystery novels and inhaled Juicy Fruit gum, we schemed together about how to curate beloved feminist community in Berea. She bemoaned the absence of feminism in today’s culture and would dream with me about advancing antiracist feminism through a new Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies curriculum that foregrounds women of color, indigenous, queer, and “crip” perspectives; and through establishing a center in her name, where students are supported as social justice leaders who agitate, as bell did, for a different, more inclusive future.

We ate Indian food and McDonalds cheeseburger together and laughed, and laughed, and laughed. We sifted through boxes of magazines, scouring them for positive images of black, brown, and queer women, and window shopped on Etsy for Turkish rugs. Giggling with bell in the living room, kitchen, and hallways of her home, as she spilled the tea, disabused me of my pessimism.

On the voicemail recording that bell took with her from home to home in Berea, she recites the refrain, “All awakening to love is spiritual awakening,” penned in *All About Love: New Visions*<sup>15</sup> and coincidentally inspired by the writings of Iranian poet Rumi. She called on those of us who called on her to enact love as a spiritual praxis that “connects and liberates us,” strengthening “our collective willingness to be bold in telling the truth and hearing the truth.”<sup>16</sup>

bell learned to enact love as a verb, as radical truth-telling, from “the hillbilly country folk who were [her] ancestors and kin” in “the Kentucky backwoods”<sup>17</sup>—in her black rural community’s informal, ordinary, and vernacular ways of care. bell’s gossip, then, *was* her truth-telling, a homegrown way to curate honest, intentional, and yes, beloved community. bell never hesitated to tell you what’s what.

I was not spared her critique, nor was anyone else. When I could not find the strength to leave an abusive relationship, bell called me a bad feminist, and she meant it. She told me (and anyone who would listen) that I love too much and too hard, and that I should never have partnered with a white man who was using me to find a way out of his whiteness. bell's truth-telling required that I also be bold in "hearing the truth," and in letting others hear it, too. She wasn't (just) airing my dirty laundry; her hard truths held a mirror up to what I didn't want to see but needed to know if I was to, as Toni Cade Bambara implores, get my "house" "in order."<sup>18</sup>

Our everyday goings-on, including the ways in which we call each other out and in, can be willful acts of giving and receiving love; but we need to attend to our own house before we can burn down the Master's, if we are to enact love as revolution and not rehabilitation, as a changing not of the guards but of the structure, including our structures of feeling.

Loving too much and too hard wasn't my problem; far from it. Rather, bell was concerned that selfless love had made me an implement of white futurity. bell's lessons, on the page and in person, were lessons in self-love, in how we get free from profound pain. She writes,

I came to theory because I was hurting—the pain within me was so intense that I could not go on living. I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend—to grasp what was happening around and within me. Most importantly, I wanted to make the hurt go away. I saw in theory then a location for healing.<sup>19</sup>

Elsewhere, she elaborates, "Only love can give us the strength to go forward in the midst of heartbreak and misery."<sup>20</sup>

If bell's gossip was her theory, it was also a location for my healing. Her revolutionary "m/Othering," her "nurturing work" and "survival dance" as a "chosen and accidental mentor," provided "spaces of self-love"<sup>21</sup> that helped me to cultivate a patch of green (i.e., where I could lay down my heavy head and bruised heart) in beloved community with those persons who bell trusted to hold my pain with the loving kindness that I needed to heal—to love—myself.

Getting free and "[going] forward in the midst of heartbreak and misery" need not be concomitant, however. Healing from the psychic as well as discursive-material violence of imperialist white supremacist capitalist cis-hetero-patriarchy requires love not as a linear or teleological process. What bell's vernacular lessons teach us is that "going forward" is not a process; its "progress" does not progress. Love cannot arrive at a location of healing on Man's timeline. Pairing bell's love ethic with Fanon's call for "occult"<sup>22</sup> revolution, I argue that what bell describes as a march onwards is really a march to nowhere, to somewhere uncharted, and in being so, is the path to personal and (as) political freedom.

I needed to get my house in order. bell helped me with that. I remember and miss her irreverent gossip, her trademark side-eye, the smooth and deliberate movements of her hands as spun theory from practice, the long pauses before her truth-telling, the ways in which she held and loved us still, even when we could not love ourselves, so that we might love ourselves.

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I am not a prisoner of history. I should not seek there for the meaning of my destiny. I should constantly remind myself that the real *leap* consists in introducing invention into existence. In the world through which I travel, I am endlessly creating myself.

Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*<sup>23</sup>

We must join [the people] in that fluctuating movement which they are just giving a shape to, and which, as soon as it has started, will be the signal for everything to be called in question. Let there be no mistake about it; it is to this zone of occult instability where the people dwell that we must come.

Frantz Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*<sup>24</sup>

As a feminist agitator, I did not want love. I was, as bell scolded me, “strident.” What I wanted was to set the world on fire so that something new could grow from its ashes, in its “wake.”<sup>25</sup> What I wanted was the madness of freedom – what Jared Sexton describes as “a mad freedom [...] where there is none.”<sup>26</sup> What I wanted was the new beginning that Frantz Fanon writes about in *Wretched of the Earth*, an “invention”<sup>27</sup> galvanized by the stridency of those who demand it. In Fanon’s own words:

We were running like madmen; shots rang out . . . We were striking. Blood and sweat cooled and refreshed us. We were striking where the shouts came from, and the shouts became more strident and a great clamor rose from the east: it was the outhouses burning and the flames flickered sweetly on our cheeks.

Then was the assault made on the master’s house. They were firing from the windows. We broke in the doors. The master’s room was wide open. The master’s room was brilliantly lighted, and the master was there, very calm . . . and our people stopped dead ... it was the master.

... I went in. "It's you," he said, very calm. It was I, even I, and I told him so, *the good slave, the faithful slave, the slave of slaves*, and suddenly his eyes were like two cockroaches, frightened in the rainy season.

...I struck, and the blood spurted; that is the only baptism that I remember today.<sup>28</sup>

bell taught me that love—a strident, urgent, anarchic love “assembled in a riotous manner,”<sup>29</sup> a love that loves too much and too hard, but in the interest of self-actualization—is what will strike the match that burns down the Master’s house. Love as rage “is profoundly political,” bell writes. “Our deepest revolution will come when we understand this truth.”<sup>30</sup>

Mad freedom requires mad love. It is love without direction, love that is out of control, love without recourse to rationality and reason, that baptizes us, the “wretched of the earth,” as gardeners and guardians of that earth, tasked with using our “blood and sweat” to fertilize freedom “where there is none”—for ourselves and for other Others, in ways that provoke apocalyptic, epistemological catastrophe for Man, promising not white futurity, but futurity for the earth (and for us). Only love can cultivate this garden of possibility. The tried to bury us, the saying goes, not knowing that we are seeds. We bear (strange) fruit not in the promised land “that the world lives in,”<sup>31</sup> but in an Eden of our own making.

The question for all of us, in the hour of bell’s passing, is how to grow that Eden, how to plant our seeds such that—as Queer Black Troublemaker and Feminist Love Evangelist Alexis Pauline Gumbs writes—its fruit “sprouts out of the wet places in our eyes, the broken places in our skin, the waiting places in our palms, the trembling holding in our mouths...something that grows...with sustainable, transformative *love*.”<sup>32</sup> How can we activate self-love, living into the ugliness of our differences, using those differences to mature our garden, in an Eden where we are coeval with nature, when all that we know is the humanist hegemony that goads us differentiate ourselves from that ‘bush,’ from its ‘heart of darkness,’<sup>33</sup> which lives in us, too?

For bell, the transformative self-love that will grow our garden requires “spiritual awakening,” in other words, faith in what we do not know and what we cannot name; as well as “reckless abandon,” which is necessary to take that “leap” of faith. While unproductive by worldly standards—this “leap” cannot take us to a location on Man’s map—love as a spiritual praxis of reckless abandon engenders, as bell notes in her 2014 commencement address to Berea College students, an alternative cartography, “a map that can take you *wherever you want to go*,” including to the unknown and unknowable locations of our “mad” freedom dreams.

The beauty of bell’s map is that it cannot read the territory—or rather, that there is no territory for it (yet) to read. It proffers no semblance of what justice as a destination looks like. Hers is a call to movement—to what Fanon

describes as “occult instability”—and not arrival into new norms and “-isms”<sup>34</sup> that only serve to divide and conquer us. Trans theorist Susan Stryker describes gender beyond a binary similarly: as movement *away* from an unchosen starting point, rather than as arrival into new gender categories.<sup>35</sup>

It is a scary thing to put one foot in front of the other, to stumble in the dark, when one does not know what they are looking for or how to get there. It is an even scarier thing, as a people of color, to discard with the trappings of whiteness, to reject white recognition and inclusion in a world that was never meant to accommodate us, in which we were “never meant to survive.”<sup>36</sup>

bell's revolution of “reckless abandonment” does not await its verb or destination. Instead, it uses love to activate justice improvisationally, without coordinates, instructions, or notes, in ways that are untraceable, which cannot be known but which can only be felt—“perceived yet not recognized.”<sup>37</sup> Drawing on Karl Marx, Fanon describes this justice as a “poetry from the future” that we can dream about but which “exceeds expression,”<sup>38</sup> because its form (i.e., what revolution as “reckless abandon” and “occult instability” look like) cannot be reconciled by our current common senses, in other words, by our “old blueprints of expectation and response.”

How do we get to the fugitive and furtive Otherwise that bell and Fanon want? How do we search for the “elsewhere and elsewhere” of our freedom dreams if we do not know what this possibility for Otherwise living looks like—if we cannot name it? How do we begin to recalibrate our common senses to generate and sustain Other conditions of possibility, born from the ashes of this world, composed instead of beloved community, if the map has no territory?

If the black feminist liberation that bell calls for (and which, the Combahee River Collective reminds us, makes possible everyone else's liberation, too<sup>39</sup>) does not live, as Sexton writes, “in the world that the world lives in, but is lived underground,”<sup>40</sup> in a location outside of the white structures that totalize and hail us, then love as a spiritual praxis can “guide us,”<sup>41</sup> providing us with a map to the Otherwise location that our flesh feels, but which our minds cannot conceive.

The question for Fanon—and bell—is how to enact the “leap” that will take us somewhere unchartable, that is to say, to a spiritual location. How do we read this map to nowhere with the knowledge that we do not (yet) know how it will materialize or where we are going; when not just the world, but our own psyches, traumatized by the white gaze, “hate us”?

bell tells us that “we learn about love in childhood.”<sup>42</sup> It is also in childhood that we learn to absent love from our self-relations, when we learn to hate the flesh of our bodies, when we detach our spiritual from our corporeal selves, even as our bodies keep the score. Fanon helps us to better understand the love ethic bell that describes as a relationship to the self. He

observed that the stories that all children, including children of color, use to activate themselves are “written by white men for white children.” And so,

the Wolf, the Devil, the Evil Spirit, the Bad Man, the Savage are always symbolized by Negroes or Indians; since there is always identification with the victor, the little Negro, quite as easily as the little white boy, becomes an explorer, an adventurer, a missionary “who faces the danger of being eaten by the wicked Negroes.”<sup>43</sup>

Which is to say, the child of color, raised on moral fables that valorize and validate whiteness, becomes the passing-white adult of color who concedes to white liberal pluralism as salvation. It is for this reason that we cling to the imperialist white supremacist capitalist cis-hetero-patriarchal world that contains and confines us, but which cannot hold our pain or possibility.

bell wanted nothing more in her later life than to continue writing children’s books, to teach black children especially that they should be “Happy to be Nappy” (1999) in a world structured by chronopolitical<sup>44</sup> “-isms” that typify whiteness as the location of beauty and virtue, and blackness as the homeless foil—the ‘boogeyman’—to the goodness of whiteness.

We are taught as children that to be the protagonists of our own stories we must enact positivism and progress, which have always been white. As Richard Spencer exclaimed at the National Policy Institute’s November 2016 conference, it is white persons and white persons only who are “strivers, crusaders, and explorers.” They are the ones who “build, produce, and go upward.”<sup>45</sup> The fact that we, the racialized, wretched of the earth, cannot “go upwards” to do the “crusading” and “exploring” that is exemplified by the white protagonists of our childhood dramas, suggests that we must “leap” with “reckless abandon,” without pause, enacting “occult instability,” if we are to actualize our own possibilities, intervening in and discarding with the timeline of Man, which relegates us and other Others to a time before (human) time, therefore justifying the extraction of our flesh as well as the earth’s.

It is Man’s space-time continuum, productive of racial modernity, of the Enlightenment lie that cisgender white men characterized by masculinism and mastery sit at the apex of human civilization, including its cartographies of being and doing and knowing, that we cannot navigate, that was not made for us, but rather, which locates us as the “zero degree” of Man’s “social conceptualization,”<sup>46</sup> serving to codify our vulnerability rather than allow our freedom.

Nor does our own map promise arrival. As David Turnbull notes, “It is not enough just to have a map. We need a cognitive schema as well as practical mastery of way-finding, to be able to generate an indexical image of the territory.”<sup>47</sup> Ours, instead, is a map to nowhere. We have no access to “mastery.” Our “way-finding” protocols have been sociogenically colonized to obscure the path, any path, forward. Dionne Brand explains,

One is not in control in dreams; dreams take place, the dreamer is captive, even though it is the dreamer who is dreaming. Captured in one's own body, in one's own thoughts, to be out of possession of one's mind; our cognitive schema is captivity.<sup>48</sup>

When we "leap" towards our freedom dreams, we chart new flights of departure without the means with which to enact and submit to a new timeline whereby we arrive at a destination, whereby, as Marriott describes, we produce new "norms, protocols, and regulations."<sup>49</sup> We must stay suspended, Fanon instructs, in the leap. It is that "occult instability," typified by "reckless abandon," that engenders the fervent possibilities of Otherwise living, which cultivates a garden "out of the wet places in our eyes, the broken places in our skin, the waiting places in our palms, the trembling holding in our mouths," using love to grow "a mad freedom where there is none."

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This essay has asked how we might we live outside of the white gaze that we have internalized, which forecloses the celebration of our differences, which proscribes self-love, and therefore, revolution. Fanon gives us some way to make sense of the leap of faith that bell wants us to take in order to enact self-love as the revolutionary, spiritual praxis of "reckless abandon." In *Black Skin, White Masks*, he instructs us to "leap" towards an unknown and unknowable place where we make our own lives matter – and other life, too, including non-human life, like earth-matter. As bell notes, "When we love the earth" – again, not the world, but the earth – "we are able to love ourselves more fully. I believe this. The ancestors taught me it was so."<sup>50</sup>

bell is with the ancestors now, teaching us still that our survivance is conjoined with the earth's, that when life that does not matter matters first, then all structures of oppression collapse. Her lesson that love is the way and that justice is the destination exemplifies Fanon's invitation to "leap" towards alternative worlds of our own making. It is bell's spiritual praxis that is the map to the territory that we do not yet know and which we cannot anticipate but which we hope and dream and work towards anyway.

The bell I knew wasn't just a critic; she was a lover. The two, for her, were mutually inclusive. She was also a dreamer, helping us to imagine what exists just beyond the horizon of our "unending" and "uninterrupted"<sup>51</sup> oppression. She invoked love to intervene in the ways of the world without reproducing its hierarchical and teleological organizing structures. She wanted not to rehabilitate a world in which we were never meant to survive but to use love as a spiritual praxis of "reckless abandon" and "occult instability" to lovingly set the world on fire. As the children of her revolutionary "m/Othering,"<sup>52</sup> we remain strident, loving too much and too

hard not to make a way in this world, but to keep the flame of Otherwise living burning.

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- <sup>1</sup> “bell hooks tells the story of the first time she met Thich Nhat Hanh,” YouTube video, posted by “Lion’s Roar,” December 21, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PEIkPDuBGUQ>.
- <sup>2</sup> The inclusion of “cis” and “hetero” to bell’s canonical concept for understanding intersecting structure of oppression is inspired by her conversation with Laverne Cox at the bell hooks Institute on September 7, 2015.
- <sup>3</sup> David Marriott, *On Black Men* (Columbia University Press, 2000), 90.
- <sup>4</sup> In his debut film *Get Out* (2017), director Jordan Peele illustrates the psychic, intrusive violence of whiteness as productive of a “sunken place” for black people.
- <sup>5</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 1986), 229.
- <sup>6</sup> Karen Barad, “Quantum Entanglements and Hauntological Relations of Inheritance: Dis/continuities, SpaceTime Enfoldings, and Justice-to-Come,” *Derrida Today* 3, no. 2 (2010): 240-268, 251.
- <sup>7</sup> Fred Moten, “Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh),” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 112, no. 4 (2013): 737-780, 746.
- <sup>8</sup> Audre Lorde, “Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference,” Copeland Colloquium, Amherst College (April 1980).
- <sup>9</sup> Sylvia Wynter, “Unparalleled catastrophe for Our Species? Or, to Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations,” *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, ed. Katherine McKittrick (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015), 32-33.
- <sup>10</sup> bell hooks, “bell hooks 2014 commencement,” Berea College Special Collections and Archives (May 4, 2014).
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>12</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 227.
- <sup>13</sup> hooks, “bell hooks 2014 commencement.”
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>15</sup> bell hooks, *All About Love: New Visions* (Harper Perennial, 2000), 83.
- <sup>16</sup> hooks, “bell hooks 2014 commencement.”
- <sup>17</sup> bell hooks, *Belonging: A Culture of Place* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 171.
- <sup>18</sup> Toni Cade Bambara, “On the Issue of Roles,” excerpt from *The Scattered Sopranos*, Livingston College Black Woman’s Seminar (December 1969).
- <sup>19</sup> bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (Routledge, 1994), 59.
- <sup>20</sup> bell hooks *Salvation: Black People and Love* (William Morrow, 2001), 16-17.

- <sup>21</sup> Alexis Pauline Gumbs, “m/other ourselves: a Black queer feminist genealogy for radical mothering,” *Revolutionary Mothering: Love on the Front Lines*, eds. Alexis Pauline Gumbs, China Martens and Mai’a Williams (PM Press, 2016), 22.
- <sup>22</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 227.
- <sup>23</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 229.
- <sup>24</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 227.
- <sup>25</sup> Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Duke University Press, 2016).
- <sup>26</sup> Jared Sexton, “The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism,” *InTensions Journal* 5 (2011): 1-47, 6.
- <sup>27</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 229.
- <sup>28</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 88.
- <sup>29</sup> Saidiya Hartman, “The Anarchy of Colored Girls Assembled in a Riotous Manner,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 117, no. 3 (July 2018): 465-490.
- <sup>30</sup> bell hooks, *Salvation: Black People and Love* (William Morrow, 2001), 16.
- <sup>31</sup> Sexton, “The Social Life of Social Death,” 28.
- <sup>32</sup> Alexis Pauline Gumbs, “Freedom Seeds: Growing Abolition in Durham, North Carolina,” *Abolition Now! Ten Years of Strategy and the Struggle Against the Prison Industrial Complex* (The CR10 Publications Collective, 2008), 145.
- <sup>33</sup> Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (1899).
- <sup>34</sup> Sylvia Wynter, “PROUD FLESH Inter/Views: Sylvia Wynter,” *Proud Flesh: New Afrikan Journal of Culture, Politics, and Consciousness* 4 (2006), 24.
- <sup>35</sup> Susan Stryker, *Transgender History: The Roots of Today’s Revolution* (Seal Press, 2008), 1.
- <sup>36</sup> Audre Lorde, “A Litany for Survival,” *The Black Unicorn: Poems* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978), 32.
- <sup>37</sup> Kara Keeling, “Looking for M—Queer Temporality, Black Political Possibility, and Poetry from the Future,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 15, no. 4 (2009): 565-582, 567.
- <sup>38</sup> Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks*, 223.
- <sup>39</sup> Combahee River Collective, “A Black Feminist Statement” *Home Girls, A Black Feminist Anthology*, ed. Barbara Smith (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, Inc., 1983).
- <sup>40</sup> Sexton, “The Social Life of Social Death,” 28.
- <sup>41</sup> hooks, “bell hooks 2014 commencement.”
- <sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>43</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 146.
- <sup>44</sup> The term “chronopolitical” references politically humanist and therefore racist constructions of time. I inherit this neologism from Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (Columbia University Press, 1983); and Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Duke University Press Books, 2010).
- <sup>45</sup> “‘Hail Trump!’: Richard Spencer Speech Excerpts,” YouTube video, posted by “The Atlantic,” November 21, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1o6-bi3jlxk>.

- <sup>46</sup> Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 64-81, 67.
- <sup>47</sup> David Turnbull, "Exhibit 9: Maps—a way of ordering our environment," *Maps are Territories: Science is an Atlas* (1989).
- <sup>48</sup> Dionne Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes on Belonging* (Vintage Canada, 2011), 29.
- <sup>49</sup> David Marriott, "Inventions of Existence: Sylvia Wynter, Frantz Fanon, Sociogeny, and 'the Damned,'" *The New Centennial Review* 11, no. 3 (2011): 45-89, 48.
- <sup>50</sup> hooks, *Belonging*, 34.
- <sup>51</sup> Sexton, "The Social Life of Social Death," 6.
- <sup>52</sup> Alexis Pauline Gumbs, "m/other ourselves."

# The Lived Experience of Social Construction

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*“So wait, basically Fanon is saying that race is a social construct. Right?”*

I’ve gotten this statement, or a version of it, a lot. Often it has been spoken by students during class discussions, but just as often by colleagues and, once, in pretty much the exact form above, by an earnest audience member after a screening of Isaac Julien’s *Frantz Fanon: Black Skin, White Mask* at a venue in Brooklyn.

I get it. And it’s not wrong: after all, Fanon isn’t *not* saying that race is socially constructed. If you just stop there, then what’s most amazing about Fanon is that he said this so long ago—in the case of *Peau noire, masques blancs*, seventy years ago and counting—long before the culture wars and the science wars, back in the days of the non-metaphorical decolonization wars. But *basically*, he’s not telling us anything that we don’t already know about race and racism today. Right?

The first problem, of course, is that “basically.” The difficulty of *Peau noire, masques blancs*—and I mean “difficult” in every sense—is not just a constitutive part of the text but, I would insist, is ultimately determined by Fanon’s larger intellectual and political project. Prior to the publication of the book, Francis Jeanson, Fanon’s editor, asked him to clarify a particular passage in the manuscript; Fanon wrote back: “I cannot explain this sentence. When I write things like that, I am trying to touch my reader affectively, or in other words irrationally, almost sensually. For me, words have a charge.”<sup>1</sup> One reason why *Peau noire, masques blancs* continues to astonish seventy years later has to do precisely with this affective charge, which has not diminished with time.

But returning to the question—*Isn’t Fanon basically saying that race is a social construct?*—I’ve come to develop a ready response. What Fanon reveals in *Peau noire, masques blancs* is not simply the social construction of race but, to quote the title of the book’s most famous chapter, *l’expérience vécue du Noir*.

Fanon speaks to us of racial identification as, at the same time, utterly fictional, not to say psychopathic, and *simultaneously* as completely determining of the subject's experience from the moment of racial recognition—which is to say, in the U.S. context at least, from the moment of birth.<sup>2</sup> The most horrific racial epithet or the blindest, most “polite” descriptor (“*Sale nègre!*” ou simplement: “*Tiens, un nègre!*”): equally socially constructed and equally all-determining.<sup>3</sup> What we find in *Peau noire, masques blancs*, then, is something that remains useful for anti-racist thought and action today: an extended analysis of *the lived experience of social construction*.

Such an analysis moves us beyond the mere declaration that race is a social construct, a fact sometimes trotted out as though its simple assertion will itself dissolve racism. In the opening pages of the book, Fanon remarks, almost off-handedly, “what is called the black soul is a construction by white folk” [*une construction du Blanc*].<sup>4</sup> But that’s just the starting point for the analysis to come. In his vivid portrayal of the experience of racialization (“*Tiens, un nègre!*”), he narrates how the Black subject’s efforts “to construct a physiological self”—a bodily existence that would not be “imposed on me” but rather “a definitive structuring of my self and the world”—are instead determined from without, constructed in advance “by the Other, the white man, who had woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, and stories.” This forced engagement with the construction of one’s self by the hostile and threatening Other is experienced as a literal attack upon his body, and a total collapse into what Fanon calls “an epidermal racial schema.” “*Tiens, un nègre!*” *C’était vrai*.<sup>5</sup>

At the center of *Peau noire, masques blancs* is the narrative of this internalization—or, to use Fanon’s coinage, the *epidermalization*—of a particular form of social construction: the systematic inferiority complex, imposed from the outside, that is the inevitable result of racialization. This insight into the nature of epidermalization, the manner by which white supremacy works to impose upon the Black subject a lived experience determined and framed by “the power of inner compulsion and subjective con-formation to the norm,” is, as Stuart Hall puts it, “the lesson—the somber majesty” of *Peau noire, masques blancs*.<sup>6</sup> Simone Browne’s expansion of Fanon’s insight sixty years later, via her analysis of “digital epidermalization” to describe the racializing power of biometrics, attests to the continuing relevance of this lesson. Epidermalization, in Browne’s words, names the “contact moment of fracture of the body from its humanness, refracted into a new subject position.” “*Tiens, un nègre!*” Now as then, via eye or lens or pixel, epidermalization is “the making of the body as out of place, an attempt to deny its capacity for humanness.”<sup>7</sup>

The point here is not simply that all experience is socially constructed; after all, as feminist thinkers such as Joan W. Scott have taught us, “It is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience.”<sup>8</sup> Rather, the specific nature of social construction under the

regime of racialization guarantees that the experience through which subjects are constituted is pathological by its very nature. What Fanon calls, with supreme concision, “the juxtaposition of the black and white races” inevitably creates “a massive psycho-existential complex”; the analysis of this complex, he insists, is only the first step towards its abolition.<sup>9</sup> Fanon’s humanism is ultimately encompassing enough to suggest that the pathology extends to all – as he famously notes, “any ontology is made impossible in a colonized and acculturated society.” But to stop there, in an “all lives matter” sort of gesture, ignores what he calls “the basic problem”: put bluntly, “the black man suffers in his body quite differently from the white man.” Ontology ultimately “ignores the lived experience” – in this case, the fact that “the Black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man.”<sup>10</sup>

This situation of “denied subjectivity” determines the lived experience of social construction under a regime of anti-Black racism. In Lewis R. Gordon’s words, “where there is no being, where there is no one there, and where there is no link to another subjectivity...then all is permitted.” The situation of a subject constructed through anti-Black racism is the experience of “a subjectivity that is experiencing a world in which all is permitted against him or her.” And what follows from this? “The conclusion, marked in red over half a millennium, is ineluctable: structured violence.”<sup>11</sup> Simply revealing this situation of structured violence to be a “social construct” is very, very preliminary to destroying it.

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“Race is a social construct” is also a statement attributed to what’s currently circulating in the public square as “Critical Race Theory.”<sup>12</sup> Now that “CRT” has become a favorite target of fascist trolls and bottom feeders – that is to say, the Republican Party – it too has become an object against which “all is permitted.” I mean that in the most literal sense. Christopher Rufo, a thinktank con artist and prime mover of the campaign to villainize “CRT,” has said as much. “We have successfully frozen their brand,” he wrote on Twitter in March 2021, in a weird echo of Fanon’s description of the reifying power of racialized identification (“the Other fixes me with his gaze, his gestures and attitude, in the same way you fix a preparation with a dye”<sup>13</sup>); Rufo continues: “We will eventually turn it toxic, as we put all of the various cultural insanities under that brand category....The goal is to have the public read something crazy in the newspaper and immediately think ‘critical race theory.’ We have decodified the term and will recodify it to annex the entire range of cultural constructions that are unpopular with Americans.”<sup>14</sup> The fascists too have learned to play the “social construct” game, in their sick way.

Now that one insane accusation after another has been heaped into the bucket labeled “CRT” – CRT wants to teach your child that human sacrifice should be culturally revered! CRT will scream at your preschooler for being

white! CRT wants to replace math and science with Social Justice Studies! – all is permitted against it. The resultant image seared into the public mind is vividly evoked by Patricia J. Williams: “a million Willie Hortons dressed up as teachers hired to feast on the brains of kindergartners, killing their innocence.”<sup>15</sup> The violence still to come as a result of the assault against CRT is chillingly portended in a 2021 campaign ad from Michele Fiore, a Republican candidate for governor in Nevada, produced the same month Williams wrote these words: in the ad, Fiore pulls out a pistol and shoots a bottle labeled “Critical Race Theory” (along with two others: “Voter Fraud” and “Vaccinate Mandates”), smiling as the bottle shatters into a million pieces.<sup>16</sup> *Je m'emportai, exigeai une explication...Rien n'y fit. J'explosai. Voici les menus morceaux par un autre moi réunis.*<sup>17</sup>

Scholars like Williams who actually work in the large, capacious, and complicatedly interlocking fields of critical race theory – particularly those who, in Derrick Bell’s words, “are both existentially people of color and ideologically committed to the struggle against racism, particularly as institutionalized in and by law” – have been forced to respond to such egregious attacks by going back to the basics.<sup>18</sup> As they have patiently explained, the notion of race as a social construct is indeed an important part of the point. But again, that’s a beginning, not a conclusion. The legal theorist Angela Onwuachi-Willig, writing as part of a *New York Times* forum a few weeks before the fateful 2016 Presidential election, begins her article by stating: “Race is not biological. It is a social construct.” But, she continues, “That all said, unlike race and racial identity, the social, political, and economic meanings of race, or rather belonging to particular racial groups, have not been fluid. Racial meanings for non-European groups have remained stagnant. For no group has this reality been truer than African-Americans.”<sup>19</sup>

The first part of the formulation is simple enough to articulate in the public sphere; in Fanon’s terms, the admission that race is not biological but rather a social construct is akin to saying “the Negro is a human being – i.e., his heart’s on his left side, added those who were not too convinced.”<sup>20</sup> More demanding is the fundamental insight of theorists working in actually-existing critical race theory: racism is not just “persistent” but rather foundational to the legal and political system of the United States. This idea too has been simplified into a buzzword – “structural racism” – whose liberal articulation implies that it can be addressed and rectified via a few small adjustments, mostly limited to diversity initiatives. Right-wing trolls like Rufo have feasted upon the liberal rhetoric of some of the most convoluted of these DEI initiatives.

For the right-wingers who have declared war against CRT, what may be most incendiary about the theorists and activists who take the foundational status of white supremacy and anti-Black racism as a starting point is the refusal of these thinkers to articulate this insight in an incendiary way. Fanon

might have called this the “affective ankylosis of the white man.”<sup>21</sup> The petrified racial schema signified by Fanon’s quasi-clinical term functions to “make gestures and attitudes of phobic discharge possible for privileged subjects, and position racialized subjects as the phobic objects of those gestures.”<sup>22</sup> So in the white imagination, Cheryl I. Harris’ eighty-five page, closely-argued, extensively-sourced *Harvard Law Review* article “Whiteness as Property” becomes, thanks to an online “briefing book” produced by Rufo, a screed that calls for stripping whites of their property and redistributing it along racial lines. Describing the hate mail that she has received as a result, Harris rightly spells out the consequences of this affective ankylosis: “Maybe I’m reading this in a particular way, but I know that when people believe that something like their property is threatened, or their children are threatened, they feel justified in doing whatever they need to do to protect them.”<sup>23</sup>

The psychodrama played out by Senator Ted Cruz during the confirmation hearings for Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson in March 2022 was a particularly spectacular example of such “phobic discharge” available to privileged subjects. Justice Jackson’s work as a jurist has had nothing to do with critical race theory, but that hardly mattered; Cruz and a parade of white colleagues proceeded to heap abuse upon her for merely uttering the phrase during a lecture delivered seven years before. As a Black woman forced to seek “confirmation,” all was permitted against her, and all was brought to bear.

In this context, arguably the most scandalous aspect of Derrick Bell’s life-long work is embedded in the seemingly bland phrase he used to describe the alignment of forces that led to the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision: “interest-convergence.” The brief moment of legal desegregation ushered in by such decisions was of course attributable to the tireless struggles of those who participated in the Civil Rights Movement, Bell among them; but the enshrinement of these principles in law, as he argued, had to do with a fleeting moment when the interests of white elites converged with those of the movement. By the time Bell wrote about this in 1980, this brief moment of interest-convergence was already long past.<sup>24</sup> His argument robs both liberals and conservatives of their beloved claim that achievements like *Brown v. Board of Education* represent irreversible “progress” made within a perfectible system, thanks to struggles that need to be continued in more limited forms (the liberal position) or that can be comfortably relegated to the history books since we have now achieved peak racial equality (the conservative position, as expressed repeatedly by the Supreme Court over the past two decades).

Against such claims, we might counter with the two searing questions asked by Joao Costa Vargas and Joy A. James, in response to the state-sanctioned murder of Trayvon Martin in 2012: “What happens when, instead of becoming enraged and shocked every time a black person is killed in the United States, we recognize black death as a predictable and constitutive aspect of this democracy? What will happen then if instead of demanding

justice we recognize (or at least consider) that the very notion of justice...produces or requires black exclusion and death as normative?"<sup>25</sup>

It is precisely the achievement of those who have struggled, on the page and in the streets, to force such questions to the surface that those socially constructed as "white" have been forced into an unavoidable confrontation with the murderousness inherent in whiteness itself. This is best evidenced on the psychic level, precisely where Fanon pursued it all his life. Williams points out the most surreal and terrifying provision of laws that ban CRT from schools: they explicitly "prohibit teaching in which 'any individual should feel discomfort, guilt, anguish or any other form of psychological distress on account of his or her race or sex.'" Such laws thus "outlaw feelings, which transfers agency beyond negotiation or norm or law."<sup>26</sup>

What such laws attempt to outlaw, in short, is the process by which *white subjects are at last being forced to consciously experience their social construction via racialization.*

\* \* \*

Let's be clear: whiteness as a category of identity supposedly based on skin color is literally insane. Throughout *Peau noire, masques blancs*, whiteness is at the heart of the psycho-existential complex that Fanon sets out to explore and explode: "The black man wants to be white. The white man is desperately trying to achieve the rank of man."<sup>27</sup> When I teach *Peau noire, masques blancs* to undergraduates, I ask them to point out something in the room that's white. Their eyes inevitably fall upon the whiteboard behind me, and we agree that no human being who is still breathing is *that* color. Whiteness only makes sense as metaphor, as *the absence of color*. When whiteness comes to the surface and becomes visible, as it has thanks to the struggle of those "both existentially people of color and ideologically committed to the struggle against racism," it becomes bloodily present. Had he lived to see the passing of laws that aim to outlaw critical race theory—laws that are themselves violent manifestations of white supremacy and that will no doubt do untold damage—Fanon might nevertheless remark: "You have come too late."<sup>28</sup>

That fact in and of itself is not to be celebrated. As chroniclers of whiteness from Ida B. Wells to W. E. B. Du Bois to James Baldwin to Nell Irvin Painter to Ta-Nehisi Coates (not forgetting John Brown, David Roediger, and Noel Ignatiev) testify, there's nothing in the world more dangerous than whiteness that considers itself wounded. For those like me who enjoy, unasked, the socially constructed state of whiteness, the lines have been drawn and the battle stands ready to be joined. Here again Fanon can help us, if we follow him from *Peau noire, masques blancs* to Algeria. Against flattened caricatures of Fanon as an undifferentiated "third world" figure for whom Martinique and Algeria were interchangeable, we must remember the act of

solidarity necessitated in his border crossing, in every sense, into the Algerian Revolution.

There are many (including Kwame Anthony Appiah, in a recent and weirdly aggressive “tribute” to Fanon) who are happy to see this embracing of the Algerian Revolution as stemming from Fanon’s own pathology, his vain attempt to superimpose his own psychic battles onto a struggle that belonged to others.<sup>29</sup> But one doesn’t have to defend all aspects of Fanon’s involvement with Algeria to find in it an exemplary instance of solidarity as a literal crossing over that transforms what came before. In the midst of the struggle, Fanon writes in *Les Damnés de la terre*, lines are crossed: segments of the colonized bourgeoisie pledge themselves to neocolonialism, while some members of the colonizing population commit themselves to the decolonization struggle. “The species is splitting up before their very eyes,” Fanon writes of those engaged in the struggle; and “the scandal really erupts when pioneers of the species change sides, go ‘native,’ and volunteer to undergo suffering, torture, and death.”<sup>30</sup>

The structural violence that is racialization will not be abolished simply by being revealed as a social construct. It can only be contested in struggle. In this struggle, ongoing and still to come, the abolition of whiteness—the treason to whiteness that is loyalty to humanity, in Ignatiev’s resounding phrase—has a small but necessary part to play. This, too, is the lesson of *Peau noire, masques blancs*, if we are ready to learn it.

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- <sup>1</sup> David Macey, *Frantz Fanon* (New York: Picador, 2002), p. 157-58.
- <sup>2</sup> In fact, this structuring of lived experience according to racial determinism actually *precedes* birth, given the structural disparities in pre-natal care imposed upon non-white women. See, for example, Latoya Hill, Samantha Artiga, and Usha Ranji, "Racial Disparities in Maternal and Infant Health: Current Status and Efforts to Address Them," Kaiser Family Foundation Report (November 1, 2022).
- <sup>3</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Oeuvres* (Paris: La Découverte, 2011), p. 153.
- <sup>4</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove, 2008), p. xviii; *Oeuvres*, p. 68.
- <sup>5</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 91-92; *Oeuvres*, p. 155.
- <sup>6</sup> Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence Wishart, 1990), p. 226.
- <sup>7</sup> Simone Browne, "Digital Epidermalization: Race, Identity, and Biometrics," *Critical Sociology* 36.1 (2009), p. 134.
- <sup>8</sup> Joan W. Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," *Critical Inquiry* 17.4 (1991), p. 779.
- <sup>9</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. xvi.
- <sup>10</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 89-90, 119.
- <sup>11</sup> Lewis R. Gordon, "Is the Human a Teleological Suspension of Man? Phenomenological Exploration of Sylvia Wynter's Fanonian and Biodecean Reflections," in *Caribbean Reasonings: After Man Towards the Human—Critical Essays on Sylvia Wynter*, ed. Anthony Bogues (Kingston: Ian Randle, 2006), p. 240.
- <sup>12</sup> A few minutes spent googling "Critical Race Theory" will bring up a multitude of "explainer" pieces, most of them well intentioned (if often lacking accuracy), but a few, like the Heritage Society's "How to Identify Critical Race Theory," that are open attempts at intellectual assassination (the piece ends by encouraging readers to "become whistleblowers" under the heading "How to Stop CRT"). All of them seem to agree, however, that "race is a social construct" is a central tenet of "CRT."
- <sup>13</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 89.
- <sup>14</sup> Quoted in Sarah Jones, "How to Manufacture a Moral Panic," *New York Magazine* (July 11, 2021).
- <sup>15</sup> Patricia J. Williams, "How Not to Talk About Race," *The Nation* (October 18, 2021).
- <sup>16</sup> Fiore's gubernatorial bid was unsuccessful, as was her 2022 campaign for Nevada State Treasurer; however, she continues to serve as one of Nevada's Republican National Committee members.
- <sup>17</sup> Fanon, *Oeuvres*, p. 153, ellipses in original.
- <sup>18</sup> Derrick A. Bell, "Who's Afraid of Critical Race Theory?" *University of Illinois Law Review* 4 (1995): 898.
- <sup>19</sup> Angela Onwuachi-Willig, "Race and Racial Identity Are Social Constructs," *New York Times* (September 6, 2016).
- <sup>20</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 99.

- <sup>21</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 101.
- <sup>22</sup> Shiloh Whitney, “The Affective Forces of Racialization: Affects and Body Schemas in Fanon and Lorde,” *Knowledge Cultures* 3.1 (2015).
- <sup>23</sup> Cheryl I. Harris, “Whiteness as Property,” *Harvard Law Review* 106.8 (June 1993); Jones, “How to Manufacture a Moral Panic.”
- <sup>24</sup> Derrick A. Bell, “*Brown v. Board of Education* and the Interest-Convergence Dilemma,” *Harvard Law Review* 93.3 (1980): 518-533.
- <sup>25</sup> Joao Costa Vargas and Joy A. James, “Refusing Blackness-as-Victimization: Trayvon Martin and the Black Cyborgs,” in *Pursuing Trayvon Martin: Historical Contexts and Contemporary Manifestations of Racial Dynamics*, ed. George Yancy and Janine Jones (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014).
- <sup>26</sup> Williams, “How *Not* to Talk About Race.” As she points out, the language of such laws is more or less identical from state to state because they are “drafted not at the local level but by a team coordinated and funded by an array of conservative think tanks, including the Manhattan Institute [where Rufo is employed], the American Enterprise Institute, and the Heritage Foundation.”
- <sup>27</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. xiii.
- <sup>28</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 101.
- <sup>29</sup> Kwame Anthony Appiah, “Liberation Psychology,” *New York Review of Books* (February 24, 2022).
- <sup>30</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, translated by Richard Philcox (New York: Grove, 2004), p. 94.

# Descension

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## The Fanon Zone(s)

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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*.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup>

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.<sup>4</sup>

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’.”<sup>5</sup>

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.<sup>6</sup>

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 “*dépourillée*” translated as more closely related to the concept of a depilatory that is literally used to remove sometime unwanted (generally hair) from the skin.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup>

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*.<sup>9</sup>

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*.”<sup>10</sup> as: “Out of the blackest part of my soul, across the zebra striping of my mind, surges the desire to be suddenly *white*.”<sup>11</sup> 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.”<sup>12</sup> 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.”<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup>

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"<sup>15</sup> 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."<sup>16</sup>

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."<sup>17</sup> 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"<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup>

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.<sup>20</sup>

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?<sup>21</sup>

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.<sup>22</sup>

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*.

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

# Epidermalization of Inferiority

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## A Fanonian Reading of Marie Vieux-Chauvet's *Amour*

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As part of the commemoration of the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, the following reflections are akin to his critical work on the psychoaffective impact of colonialism. Fanon's notion of the epidermalization of inferiority has inspired my analysis of the socio-political struggles in Haiti and the complex antagonisms shaped by colonialism, contemporary political personalities, and constantly clashing perceptions of race, gender and nation. I turn to Fanon's notion of the epidermalization of inferiority in *Black Skin, White Masks* to explore the effects of French colonization on the female protagonist's psyche in Marie-Vieux Chauvet's *Amour*. Chauvet was born just short of a decade prior to Fanon, and writes, like him, in the moment of anti-colonial struggle in the Caribbean, exploring like *Black Skin, White Masks* the psychological effects and affects of colonialism. A Fanonian reading of the text illustrates the psychological impact of colonialism on women in post-colonial societies that remain deeply governed by the former colonizer's values.

In *Amour*, (1968) Marie Vieux-Chauvet explores the heightened racial and political tensions that plague Haiti. *Amour* is the journal entries of the protagonist, Claire Clamont, who belongs to an affluent mulatto family - the epitome of Haiti's bourgeoisie society. Claire is the darkest member of the family. Her mahogany skin tone has made her the object of ridicule in her family and their social circle. From the first pages of the narrative, Claire unveils her despair. She describes her unenviable fate as an unmarried virgin. At the age of thirty-nine, with diminishing prospects for marriage and motherhood, she attributes her internal anguish to her skin color. The consequences of Claire's inferiority complex are twofold: she internalizes it and lives with a self-demeaning identity and at the same time externalizes it by committing acts of violence. She yearns to free herself from the burden of her "corporeal malediction." Claire's self-contempt in *Amour* is inextricably linked to the racial tensions in her socio-political milieu. The novel is set against the backdrop of a power inversion where the new black middle class has usurped the political power of the formerly dominant mulatto elite.

Claire's feelings of self-hatred are compounded by the presence of the black police commandant, Calédu, who tortures the community. She harbors resentment towards this dark man and the dark masses who have gained political power in recent years. Claire nourishes plans of vengeance against the new political elite, personified by Calédu. Ultimately, Claire murders the dictator when the opportunity arises during an attempted revolt. In the end, Claire kills Calédu almost incidentally-in a symbolic act of vengeance against the black body- the source of her epidermic malediction.

Claire's inferiority complex echoes Frantz Fanon's description of the epidermalization of inferiority where the experience of the black subject under the white gaze produces both an internal and external crisis. Fanon argues in *Black Skin, White Masks* that the "inferiority complex" of black people is a result of incessant oppression that subsequently develops into a negative association with skin color. Fanon explores the factors that engender an inferiority complex in colonized subject, illustrating the psychoaffective impact of colonization. He insists that the white-dominated society managed to perpetuate discriminatory practices through the propagation of negative racial stereotypes. Commenting on the negative stereotypes ascribed to the black subject, Fanon writes:

The Negro is an animal, the Negro is bad, the Negro is mean, the Negro is ugly. The white world, the only honorable one, barred me from all participation. A man was expected to behave like a man. I was expected to behave like a black man—or at least like a nigger. I shouted a greeting to the world and the world slashed away my joy. I was told to stay within bounds, to go back where I belonged.<sup>1</sup>

Here, Fanon describes the psychological impact of the white panoptic gaze on the black subject. He asserts that "in the white man's world the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema. Consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity."<sup>2</sup> Under the weight of a barrage of negative stereotypes of "tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, slave-ships" the black man experiences feelings of self-contempt. Fanon illustrates how anti-black racism is internalized by the colonized subject and how that internalization engenders feelings of "self-hatred" and the propensity to emulate the powerful colonial, a process which he called epidermalization of inferiority.

In *Amour*, paralleling Fanon, Claire's inferiority complex is a direct consequence of a negative association with skin color. From the onset the text, she attributes her internal anguish to her dark skin: "Tugged at by the delicate ambiguity of my situation, I suffered from an early age because of the color of my skin."<sup>3</sup> As the darkest of the three sisters, she despises the black blood that surreptitiously flows in her veins. She asserts that "the mahogany color that I inherited from some great-grandmother went off like a small bomb in the tight circle of white and white-mulattoes with whom my parents socialized."<sup>4</sup>

Commenting on Claire's racial anxiety, Munro notes, "Claire's alienation is determined largely in and through the body, by the dark shade of her skin. Seeing the light skin of her two sisters Félicia and Annette, she is also seen (by herself and others) as "stained" by darkness, "the surprise that mixed blood had in store for her parents."<sup>5</sup> Claire experiences a double form of alienation as she is isolated from both the light-skinned bourgeoisie and the dark-skinned lower classes,<sup>6</sup> which heighten her feelings of despair.

Claire's internalized self-hatred stems from her childhood as she is constantly upbraided by her father because of the color of her skin. She is subjected to incessant verbal and physical abuse at the hands of her father who believes that it is his duty to protect her from the detrimental effects of her blackness. Any act of disobedience is severely punished and attributed to her problematic skin color. When Claire disobeys her father by befriending another societal outcast, Agnès Grandupré, the paternal whip is used to correct her deviant behavior. In the aftermath of one of his brutal assaults, her father declares that the black blood she inherited requires the whip: "Ours is a race lacking in discipline and our old slave blood requires the lash."<sup>7</sup> After this incident, she became aware of her darker skin color and its stark difference from the light skin tone of her family members: "At that moment, I noticed the milky whiteness of his skin, hardly more tanned than my mother's. I stared with astonishment at the dark arms resting on the sheets. Was I really their daughter? No, it was not possible. How could I be the daughter of two whites?"<sup>8</sup> Her skin color becomes repulsive to her as "she renounces love believing herself monstrous."<sup>9</sup> She carries within herself feeling of "shame," "self-contempt" and "nausea." As she identifies her complexion as the root of her despair, Claire experiences her skin as an "epidermic fatality."<sup>10</sup>

Claire's personal trauma is the nation's trauma. This tense family drama might be read as a metaphor for the intra-familial psychological drama that constitutes a national psychological drama. Her internalized self-hatred is intimately connected to the story of the nation. In *Amour*, Claire and those of her class distance themselves from their African ancestry and feel an allegiance to the European mother country, France. The presence of Jean-Luze, the Frenchman and husband of Claire's sister Felicia, underscores the persistence in Haiti of the former colonizer's values that hierarchize European civilization, whiteness and enlightened rationality over their imputed "others," savagery, blackness and superstition.<sup>11</sup> Jean-Luze is the love interest of the Clamont sisters as they are enthralled by his European ancestry. Considering Claire's alienation from her black self, it is hardly surprising that she is scripted as nursing a secret longing for Jean-Luze.

In her adulthood, Claire writes in her journal to assuage her internal anguish. In the intimacy of her room, Claire reimagines her reality by creating a fantasy world to fulfil her repressed sexual desires. Her bedroom becomes the only place where she can truly exist as she creates an imaginary homeland

that is the antithesis of the exterior environment in which she lives. Within this fictive world, Claire is consumed by fantasies for her sister's husband Jean-Luze. Claire never openly admits her feelings but confesses to her journal her repressed desires: "Bless this love that imprisons me, praise be to Jean-Luze the Frenchman who enthalls me so much that nothing matters apart from our love."<sup>12</sup> She lives vicariously through her sister Annette whose relationship with Jean-Luze is the sole avenue for Claire to satisfy her desires that "burned in silence like a torch." This illusionary world becomes the vehicle through which she escapes from her despondent reality. Symbolically, unable to fully and openly live in her society as woman and black, she retreats and dreams of communion with the white expatriate.

Claire's internal crisis is juxtaposed with the overtly political crisis that has befallen her town. From her window, Claire witnesses the constant violence that has erupted in her community: "Quietly like a shadow, I watch this drama unfold scene by scene."<sup>13</sup> She observes the victimization of women at the hands of the black police commandant, Calédu, who takes pleasure in torturing the mulatto women. As Claire explains, Calédu and his gendarmes violate the bodies of these women by whipping their genitals or raping them so violently that they are permanently crippled: "He loves to whip women, and once in a while he has them arrested just like that, one or two times for his pleasure."<sup>14</sup> She witnesses the victimization of her childhood friend Dora who is captured and returned to the town permanently disabled after Calédu's abuse. Claire describes Dora's brutal torture at the hands of Calédu: "She came back two days later haggard and unrecognizable, followed by the taunts of the beggars roaring with laughter to see her walk with open legs like a cripple."<sup>15</sup> Claire sees Dora collapse in the middle of the streets and rushes to her aid and accompanies her home. She seethes with rage as she observes Calédu's sadistic violence as he takes pleasure in mutilating the mulatto women in the community: "You spread your cruelty, I know how to hide mine. You bite, I sting-stealthily, my eye trained by a bourgeois education imbibed like mother's milk, which makes me the most cunning of enemies, I wait for my moment."<sup>16</sup> She suppresses her hatred and waits for an opportune moment to fight back against Calédu's reign of torture.

The question of politics, race, and skin takes us beyond *Black Skin, White Masks* and into Fanon's later work, which moves away from the question of racial formation in the Caribbean toward a broader global politics. The political turmoil in *Amour* reflects Fanon's analysis of the cycle of violence that has characterized the process of decolonization. In *Amour*, Calédu, like his predecessors, perpetuates acts of violence against the masses. Claire describes the colonial legacies of violence and hatred that persist in her community: "The police force has become vigilant. It monitors our every move. Its representative is commandant Calédu, a ferocious black man who has been terrorizing us for about eight years. He wields the rights of life and death over us and he abuses it."<sup>17</sup> Calédu represents the Duvalier regime, one that

imprisons and violates mulatto women from the bourgeoisie. Reflecting on Calédu's reign of terror, Hellman-Keller notes,

Under the Noiriste regime personified by Calédu, the racial hierarchy is reversed as light skin no longer promised privilege but assured danger as Calédu's rise to power consequently marks the moment when the mulatres-aristocrates become a target for revenge.<sup>18</sup>

Claire reflects on how the rise of Noirisme has transformed the social order in the community as the oppressed have usurped the power of their oppressors. Calédu's enforcers, analogous to Duvalier's Tonton Macoutes (a group of paramilitary thugs often recruited from the lowest strata of Haitian society), are described by Claire as "armed beggars." While the mulatres-aristocrates have endured economic hardships under the new regime, the petit-bourgeois and Blacks have accumulated wealth and power. Claire remarks that Calédu's Black associates, such as the Trudors have attained social mobility: "Other houses, twins to ours, line the Grand—rue on both sides are at odds with the modern villa of the new prefect, Mr. Trudor, a figure of authority whom everyone greets with a bow. We have lost our smugness and will greet anyone with a bow. Many a spine has been bent from all this scraping."<sup>19</sup> Prior to the rise of the Noiriste regime, the Trudors would have been shunned by the mulatres-aristocrates. Even M. Trudor remarks that "all that has happened is the roles have been reversed. As the Haitian proverb goes: 'Today it's the hunter's turn, tomorrow the prey's.'"<sup>20</sup> Claire expresses her disdain for the recent social climbers, stating that they have "certainly found a gold mine."<sup>21</sup> Here, Claire perpetuates the discriminatory practices of those of her own social class. She perceives the rise of Calédu's black associates as a threat to the mulatres-aristocrates who have suffered under the new social order.

Claire explains that Calédu's Noiriste regime tortures the inhabitants, subjecting them to incessant surveillance and corporal punishment:

Calédu recently spit in my path with contempt. His armed beggars are aggressive and act as if they were great leaders in their rags. They track us down like wild beasts. We walk around like beaten dogs, tails between legs and noses to the ground. Terrorized and tamed by flea-bitten bums and upstarts.<sup>22</sup>

Commenting on Calédu's reign of violence, Myriam Chancy notes that "Calédu's viciousness is born of his own past oppression: now risen from the lower classes to assume a role of power as a commander of the state's police, he turns on those he sees as purveyors of class inequalities."<sup>23</sup> As Duvalier and his Tonton Macoutes infiltrated both the public and private spaces of Haitians' lives, the police commandant Calédu's incessant surveillance and corporal punishment demonstrates a similar pattern of violence for the inhabitants of the town.

Claire's inner world of despair coupled with the heightened racial tensions in the private and public realm engender violent compulsions. She contemplates the possibility of surrendering to her existential angst through an act of suicide. Claire's plans are thwarted by the riots that have erupted in the street:

I lift the weapon to my left breast, when the cries of a riotous mob, shake me out of my delirium. Stretching out my arm with the dagger, I listen. Where are the cries coming from? Now my attention is turned away from its goal. Life and death, do they depend on chance? I hide the dagger in my blouse and I come down.<sup>24</sup>

In the end, though, the cries of the people bring her out of her self-enforced isolation to involve herself in the public realm-and act decisively. Claire sees Calédu approaching her door, looking for refuge. Claire writes: "He's afraid, alone in the dark, hounded by beggars he himself armed. He is moving backward to my house. Does he realize that? Behind the blinds of the living room, I watch and wait for him."<sup>25</sup> She turns the dagger away from herself toward its proper target - the ferocious black man who is causing pain to the mulatres-aristocrates. She externalizes her rage toward the noiriste regime personified by Caledu. Her final act can be read as an aggressive act of retaliation against the black body—the source of her existential crisis.

In *Amour*, Claire is afflicted with a debilitating psychosis reflective of what Fanon calls the epidermalization of inferiority. Claire's internalized self-hatred culminates into acts of violence, entrapping her in a dystopic world where she is completely alienated from reality. Her only imaginable strategy for redress from her corporeal malediction is through violence. When the opportunity arises during an attempted revolt-she takes action against the dark-skinned police commandant who has terrorized her community, externalizing her suppressed rage on the black body. Claire stabs Calédu-almost incidentally to death in a symbolic act of anti-black racism.

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- <sup>1</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trs. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 111.
- <sup>2</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 86.
- <sup>3</sup> Marie Vieux-Chauvet, *Amour, Colère et Folie* (Paris : Gallimard, 1968), 10.
- <sup>4</sup> Vieux-Chauvet, *Amour, Colère et Folie*, 12.
- <sup>5</sup> Vieux-Chauvet, *Amour, Colère et Folie*, 11.
- <sup>6</sup> Martin Munro, "Chauvet the Prophet: Writing the Future and the Future of Writing," *Yale French Studies* no.128 (2015): 43-56.
- <sup>7</sup> Vieux-Chauvet, *Amour, Colère et Folie*, 96.
- <sup>8</sup> Vieux-Chauvet, *Amour, Colère et Folie*, 96.
- <sup>9</sup> Ronnie Scharfman, "Theorizing Terror: The Discourse of Violence in Marie Chauvet's *Amour, Colère et Folie*," in *Postcolonial Subjects: Francophone Women Writers*, eds. Mary Jean Green, Karen Gould, Micheline Rice-Maximin, Keith L. Walker and Jack A. Yeager (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 229-45.
- <sup>10</sup> Joan Dayan, "Reading Women in the Caribbean: Marie Chauvet's Love, Anger, and Madness," in *Displacements: Women, Tradition, Literatures in French*, eds. Joan DeJean and Nancy K. Miller (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 10.
- <sup>11</sup> Valerie Kaussen, *Migrant Revolutions: Haitian Literature, Globalization, and U.S. Imperialism* (Lanham. Lexington Books, 2008), 10.
- <sup>12</sup> Vieux-Chauvet, *Amour, Colère et Folie*, 40.
- <sup>13</sup> Vieux-Chauvet, *Amour, Colère et Folie*, 1
- <sup>14</sup> Vieux-Chauvet, *Amour, Colère et Folie*, 14
- <sup>15</sup> Vieux-Chauvet, *Amour, Colère et Folie*, 14
- <sup>16</sup> Vieux-Chauvet, *Amour, Colère et Folie*, 50.
- <sup>17</sup> Vieux-Chauvet, *Amour, Colère et Folie*, 10
- <sup>18</sup> Helene Lee-Keller, "Madness and the Mulâtre-Aristocrate: Haiti, Decolonization, and Women in Marie Chauvet's *Amour*," *Callaloo* 32, no. 4 (September 2009) : 1293-1311.
- <sup>19</sup> Vieux-Chauvet, *Amour, Colère et Folie*, 9.
- <sup>20</sup> Vieux-Chauvet, *Amour, Colère et Folie*, 78.
- <sup>21</sup> Vieux-Chauvet, *Amour, Colère et Folie*, 76.
- <sup>22</sup> Vieux-Chauvet, *Amour, Colère et Folie*, 120.
- <sup>23</sup> Myriam Chancy, *Searching for Safe Spaces: Afro-Caribbean Women Writers in Exile*. (Temple University Press, 1997), 191.
- <sup>24</sup> Vieux-Chauvet, *Amour, Colère et Folie*, 150.
- <sup>25</sup> Vieux-Chauvet, *Amour, Colère et Folie*, 151.

# Fanon and Hair

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*Moi-même, au début, j'avais du mal à aller au travail en afro. J'ai fait des nattes pendant un temps, puis j'ai porté un bandeau, avant de les laisser naturels. J'étais assez fière. Mes collègues rechignaient sans oser me dire franchement qu'ils n'aimaient pas mon allure. A leur réaction, j'ai vu qu'ils préféraient les nattes à l'afro. Un jour, j'attendais le bus, une voiture s'est arrêtée et on m'a demandé si j'allais chez le coiffeur...C'est dur. J'avais besoin d'encouragements et d'aide pour faire les nattes et les vanilles. Maintenant, ça va, je gère. Je suis les conseils de coiffure sur YouTube. J'ai un peu peur que le mouvement nappy ne soit qu'un effet de mode éphémère. Ce serait dommage car on commence à s'habituer à voir des coiffures naturelles. Il ne faudrait pas que les générations futures souffrent des mêmes problèmes de cheveux que leurs aînées.*

*- Cynthia Tocny, Chef de projet informatique bancaire.*

At first, I was uncomfortable going to work in an afro. I had braids for a while, then I wore a headband, before wearing my hair naturally. I was quite proud. My colleagues were hesitant and did not dare to tell me that quite frankly, they did not like my appearance. From their reaction, I saw that they preferred the braids to the afro. One day, I was waiting for the bus, a car stopped, and they asked me if I was going to the hairdresser... It's hard. I needed support and help to do the braids and the twists. But now, it is okay, I can manage it. I follow the hairstyle tips on YouTube. I am a bit fearful that the nappy movement is nothing but a trend. It would be a shame because we are getting used to seeing natural hairstyles. Future generations should not suffer from the same hair problems as their elders

*-Cynthia Tocny, IT project manager in Banking  
(translation mine)*

What would it mean to think about Frantz Fanon's work on race, embodiment, and identity in the context of the contemporary cultural politics of Black hair? Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* offers us some key terms for deepening our engagement with this issue and, in that continuing relevance, his work tells us something important about the persistence of the colonial gaze in contemporary life. The discourse around Black hair has evolved to mean more than what it meant in the 1960s and 1970s, even with all the resonant continuities. Though it continues to revolve around the symbol of Black beauty, celebration and resistance, the symbol is not exclusive to one single hairstyle choice. One of the perils of freedom is the ability to exercise the right of choice. That includes the freedom to choose how you want to look and what language you want to speak. This is about giving agency to Black bodies to make choices that make meaning for them, self-invention between Black peoples, and thus to not define such meaning in terms of the white gaze or white ear. In trying to create safe spaces for self-invention, we must take caution as not to create barriers around emergent thoughts, visions, and ideas that are in some basic way uncategorizable. The existence of Blackness on its own terms, measured without the white gaze, has long been obscured so we should take caution to not dismiss or degrade any aesthetic that does not fit a specific type of (racial) mold.

An autobiographical note. As a Black woman born to Senegalese parents, raised in the United Arab Emirates and now living in the United States, I have always been around multiple cultures and that came with the ability to now speak multiple languages (Wolof, English, Arabic and French). And my hair journey has ranged from having an Afro, braids, perming my hair, going through a period of transition, wearing it natural, adding extensions and the list goes on. Many have tried to contest my Blackness for one reason or another – aesthetic and linguistic. But, in no way am I less Black than another because of a hairstyle choice or the languages I speak. My Blackness has always been spoken to me by my family. My Blackness is a constant reminder to me by society. My Blackness is rooted in my experiences. My Blackness is rooted in my very existence. As long as I continue to live in my Black body, no one can take away my Blackness, and all the marvelousness it is capable of. To this, Fanon might suggest I read his *Black Skin, White Masks* as a way to explain my back-and-forth hair journey between the natural and the permed, in order to deepen an understanding of the effects of colonialism on the Black psyche.

Though Fanon's perspective can explain so much this, I would like to put his text in dialogue with Rokhaya Diallo's *Afro*<sup>1</sup> a book project in which she compiles the experiences of 120 Afropeans, men and women living in France, documenting their experience of wearing their natural hair in an interracial public. Experiences range from those of professors, bankers to ministers and civil servants. And it works from the plain fact that hair dictates so many factors in a Black woman's life. Although the Afropeans in the study

are talking about hair, their experience conveys more broadly what it means for a Black *body* as such to exist in predominantly white spaces. By putting these two texts in dialogue, can we extend Fanon's discourse around that to which Black bodies must conform when existing in white spaces? To what extent does Fanon's theorization of Black bodies in white spaces hold up?

To better grasp Fanon's understanding of Black bodies' existence in white spaces, our way into theorizing the culture and politics of Black hair, I want to begin by looking at his discourse on language in *Black Skin, White Masks*. When looking at Fanon's discourse on language, it is important to remember the time and period of this text, a time when the Vichy period had so deeply influenced people's attitudes towards their own Blackness. As Fanon states, "every West Indian, before the war of 1939, there was not only the certainty of superiority over the African, but the certainty of a fundamental difference. The African was a Negro and the West Indian a European."<sup>2</sup> Thus, when the Second World War broke out, Martinicans were caught in the untenable psychological position of believing that they were French, exactly like (and equal to) the metropole, while simultaneously rejecting and repressing their Black identity. From this, we can see how the text *Black Skin, White Masks* was influenced by this moment and the subsequent rise of Black consciousness—embracing one's Black identity and rejecting any association with the French metropole. This is highlighted in many moments throughout the text where Fanon signifies a clear divide between the Black and white body, while also maintaining an aspirational relationship. For example, Fanon notes how a Black person cannot exist in a white space without changing their true self: "Among a group of young Antilleans, he who can express himself, who masters the language, is the one to look out for: be wary of him; he's almost white. In France, they say 'to speak like a book.' In Martinique, they say 'to speak like a white man.'"<sup>3</sup>

Fanon's ambiguities in articulating an either/or framework of approaching language, either Black people speak their heritage language or that of the colonizer, follows the colonial ideology and value placed "one-language, one-state, and one-nation."<sup>4</sup> I would like to shift away from an either/or framework and adopt a both/and framework, one that tolerates the coexistence of languages, cultures, and different views on the Black body. Black bodies have been used and extracted from, but what happens when the Black body takes autonomy and agency and can exist in multiple different spaces in multiple different modes? Fanon emphasizes his argument by looking to the Antillean living abroad, namely France, and being an altered individual upon their return home. However, we can see how Diallo's arguments in *Afro* demonstrates critical narratives about selfhood and the body and that, although it may be challenging to keep one's Black essence, it is still possible to do so while existing in white spaces.

As a way of seeing the effects of additional languages on the Black tongue, we can also look to English Language Learning (ELL) for adults. The

reason for looking to ELLs is because they are perfect examples of individuals who are both heritage speakers and gaining the language proficiency of European languages. In an essay on decolonizing language and linguistic practices for ELLs, Chaka Chaka argues the need to revisit the learner labels attributed to ELLs, as they are often often framed negatively, resulting in “raciolinguistic profiling of these learners, as they end up being classified by their race, panethnicity, nationality, immigrant/refugee status, regionality, and at times, by their skin color in addition to their language abilities.”<sup>5</sup> Chaka points to how ELL remediation models that hope to fix ELL’s English language errors are problematic. One of the reasons Chaka points to is that the othering of ELLs leads to a “belief that ELLs are different from dominant, monolingual English speakers.”<sup>6</sup> In doing this, these models follow “the different ideology, or on what Gutiérrez and Orellana refer to as *genres of difference*, which do exactly what they are intended to do: frame difference (e.g., multilingualism) as a pathology or characterize ELLs as *linguistic others*. Additionally, such models are driven by the essentialized and racialized notion of whiteness. Whiteness adopts and appropriates a dominant and normalizing vantage point that frames and conceptualizes other racial groups differentially.”<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, Chaka points to how,

equating the native speaker to Standard English is an ideological tendency that is oblivious to correct varieties of English used and spoken by people of color, as well as by those who are not necessarily natives as implied by the native speaker construct. The same applies to equating the native speaker to whiteness: there are native speakers of English who are not White. So, this metonymic equation tends to erase native non-White speakers of English from existence.<sup>8</sup>

The concept of genres of difference put forth applies to both hair and language for Black people. Both aesthetic qualities center their difference on the basis of a conception of whiteness as pathology. Chaka argues how “This culture of monoglot Standard has its roots in colonial modernity ideologies that privilege the primacy of one-language, one-state, and one-nation over multilingual states and pluriracial nations. This ideal, romantic, monolingual, and monocultural statehood and nationhood has given rise to the “coloniality of language.”<sup>9</sup> There is a parallel between the discourse, we can see, on how ELLs are regarded and Fanon’s theory of the Black man and language. Fanon clarifies how the struggle is not about proving the Black man being equal to the white man, but how “What we are striving for is to liberate the Black man from the arsenal of complexes that germinated in a colonial situation.”<sup>10</sup> With that being said, Chaka’s argument is also a sort of response to Fanon in that we must combat the framing of difference by adopting a both/and framework where we allow Black bodies to hold multiple identities and languages. To move away “from the arsenal of complexes that germinated in a colonial situation” is to combat it with an open system that gives agency to Black bodies to exist in a malleable way of their choosing.

In a study that looks at the experiences of Black women who wear their natural hair, Johnson and Bankhead present the historical role of hair and how inseparable it is from Black people's identity.<sup>11</sup> Dating from the 12<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> century, Johnson and Bankhead present how there has always been a link between hairstyle choice and social messaging. For example, a young Wolof girl would partially shave her head to point out that she was not of a marrying age. During the slave trade, the Europeans took note on this and other significations of the value of hair within African communities. As a way of dominating the society and erasing their roots, slave owners shaved the heads of enslaved Africans upon their arrival to the Americas. They note how

[i]n an effort to dehumanize and break the African spirit, Europeans shaved the heads of enslaved Africans upon arrival to the Americas. This was not merely a random act, but rather a symbolic removal of African culture. The shaving of the hair represented a removal of any trace of African identity and further acted to dehumanize Africans coming to the Americas in bondage... Europeans deemed African hair unattractive and did not consider it to be hair at all; for them it was considered the fur of animals and was referred to as wool or wooly.<sup>12</sup>

Enslaved Africans who worked closely to the plantation masters had to wear hairstyles that followed the trend or norm of the time *or* cover their heads as to not "offend Whites, a concept that carries into our present society, in a somewhat more nuanced manner." The view of the "unattractiveness" of Black women's hair persists today. "Good" hair is perceived as the hair closest to European hair—long, straight, silky, bouncy, manageable, healthy, and shiny; while "bad" hair is "short, matted, kinky, nappy, coarse, brittle and wooly." Using the terms "good" hair is often synonymous for "White, straight hair" and "bad" hair linked to mean "highly textured African hair."<sup>13</sup>

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon notes that "whether he likes it or not, the Black man has to wear the livery the white man has fabricated for him."<sup>14</sup> This is where we can place his text in dialogue with Diallo's *Afro*, as her collection of testimonies shows how times have changed to show how Black bodies have come to resist heteronormative norms by carrying their Blackness as Blackness into white spaces. The narratives presented in *Afro* demonstrate the psychic battle they endure of carrying their Blackness, via their hair, into these white spaces. However, these narratives also show us how they eventually break out of this psychic battle by de-centering the white gaze and choosing to focus on what the Black body wants and how the Black body wants to define itself regardless of the Other. In this case, the Other is not longer the Black and brown body, but the white body.

Although the stories in Diallo's *Afro* are told by Afropeans, these same stories and sentiments are shared by Black women in the United States. Notably, in the United States, the civil rights era had a deep impact on Black hair. During the 60s and 70s, the Afro hairstyle, or hairstyles that involved

preserving the naturalness of a Black woman's hair was embraced. Johnson and Bankhead state how "This was the era where hair that was once considered "bad," because of its tight curl, was now considered "good" because it was worn "free" from chemical or heat processing restraint."<sup>15</sup> As early as 1905, studies show how Black women denounced hair straightening methods, as they were associated with trying to mirror European beauty standards. However, Johnson and Bankhead note how "some disagreed with this perspective, arguing that hair straightening was simply a style option and not an attempt to become white."<sup>16</sup> Racial symbols overlay Black women's choice of hairstyle, whether they choose to use methods to straighten their hair, wear wigs, braid their hair or just wear their hair naturally. Although this movement challenged the norms of the beauty standard set by the West, it highlighted a divide within continental and diasporic Black communities putting those who wore their natural hair against those who did not and chose to wear socially acceptable hairstyles set by the West. A Black woman's hair and/or hairstyle choice can influence their social capital, as well as their social and political stance. This divide in the hair community persists today and is propagated by the media, such as BBC News, that releases articles such as "Empowering black women to embrace their natural hair."<sup>17</sup> Although there may have been some good intentions behind such a piece, it propagates a narrative that *Black women* are the ones who refuse to embrace their natural hair. Considering the historic and psychological traumas that Black women had/have to endure in the past because of their hair, and knowing how hair is tied to one's social capital and can impact one's financial capital, does the problem lie with the Black woman or with society and their perceptions on what is acceptable hair? When we look at the African continent as well, we see propagation of colonial stereotypes and European hairstyles. In another BBC News article "Letter from Africa: Fighting 'uniform hairstyles' in Kenya"<sup>18</sup> that came out in 2019, state that "not too long ago, the management of a national TV station sent a memo to female presenters saying they should not wear the Kenyan Hollywood star Lupita Nyong'o's look or natural hairstyles." This article also speaks on Black-on-Black discrimination when it comes to hair and the social order involved stating "the silkier it is [hair] the higher your status." Black women have long been judged by their hair and/or their hairstyle choices. Why does the aesthetic of hair offend many? What does it say about us as a society that we critique others based on the hair that goes from their scalp?

The raciolinguistic profile being done to ELLs is comparable to the profiling of Black women's hair and declaring which hairstyle is socially or culturally acceptable and why. Chaka's argument that ELL labeling is informed by whiteness, which mimics the logic of hair politics and the politics of what and how languages Black people speak. Fanon remarks that to be Black is to have whiteness as a destiny. "To speak a language" he writes, "is to appropriate its world and culture. The Antillean who wants to be white will succeed, since he will have adopted the cultural tool of language."<sup>19</sup> This

framing privileges European languages and a colonial consciousness, but what would it mean for the Antillean, a Black body, to succeed not because they are able to speak French, but to succeed because of their ability to “adopt the cultural tool of language[s]” and metamorph into multiple different spaces? Fanon’s framing is obsessed with whiteness and so, to bring it back to hair, what would it look like if we decenter Black hair, negotiating aesthetics outside of whiteness? What if an afro could just mean *an afro* and a Black woman’s choice to perm her hair could just mean that? If we are to use the analogy Chaka develops, that “there are native speakers of English who are not White,” then we can say that this is similar to how there are Black women who do not have a kinky hair texture. Does *not* having the kinky hair texture negate one’s Blackness? Although it has its evils, one of the promises of social media is the ability to hear alternative narratives. For example, the dominant narrative around some Black women’s decision to perm their hair is rooted in wanting to mirror beauty standards set by the West. However, in so much social media, we see and hear so many reasons, such as not having enough time and/or the know-how to properly maintain natural hair.

Regardless of the reasons and rationales, Black women now have options for how they want to look. If we connect this to language and linguistic practice, what would it look like for a Kenyan to speak French and English fluently then turn around and speak Kikuyu? Instead of the colonial frame, which sees denigration when that Kenyan that speaks English and French is less Black compared to a Kenyan who only speaks Kikuyu, we should consider how both are fully inhabiting an authentic Blackness, even if it *sounds* different. This is not to say that Fanon’s argument about the psychological effects of colonialism on a Black person’s consciousness does not hold. Indeed, given our rapidly changing cultural moment, driven by seemingly endless access to information, I encourage us to expand how we define Blackness and Black bodies, and caution against creating restrictions – so often evocative of colonialism – in transition to new ways of thinking.

You may be wondering why I have gone on and on about Black hair. Though this phenomenon of the politics of Black hair is not new, I would like to draw attention to the similarities on the effects of hairstyle choices and the mastery (or lack of) of European language when it comes to Black people. Just like hairstyle choice, there has long been a discourse around Black people and language. The way a language is spoken is often linked to one’s social and socioeconomic status and can also affect their social and financial capital. Despite a growing recognition amongst linguists that there is no such thing as a correct way of speaking a language, we still see how the default accepted language is that of the American US or British, in other words, white standard European languages. Just like the choice of straightening one’s hair, there are historic and psychological underpinnings around the use of language for Black people. Just like hair, the socially accepted and default “correct” way of speaking was set by the European man. Any other style or way of speaking

was (and in some communities still is) seen as “incorrect” and/or lacking mastery of the language.

In other words, for a non-European to speak a European language, just like Black hair, the language had to be “straightened out” and stripped of all and any cultural identity to be accepted by the white ear. Heritage and creolized languages are often limited to the “home” just as some hairstyles are limited to the “home” in order to not offend the internalized and external white gaze. Johnson and Bankhead note how “Misrepresented, distorted or missing images send direct and indirect messages about what it means to be beautiful, and have beautiful hair and a beautiful body, as well as who has the power to define these beauty standards.” Just like language, racially hegemonic images dictate who sets the standard of the “correct” way of speaking which often involves stripping down of any non-European accent. Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* has long dominated discourses on the psychological effects of speaking European language with a Black tongue. In the opening chapter to *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon claims that to speak a language is to adopt another world, the civilization of another. Fanon contends that speaking the language of the colonizer is to actively participate in “one’s own oppression.”<sup>20</sup> And so Fanon poses a particularly difficult challenge for Black people, placing them between a rock and a hard place: if we keep our heritage or creolized language, then we risk being considered inferior to the rest of the world, the world of white hegemony, adding what Fanon sees as the psychological dimension that comes with economic and political senses of inferiority.

On the other hand, if we speak the language of the colonizer, we risk continuing the cycle of colonialism and doing the colonizer’s work *for them* by adopting their psyche, world, and culture through language practices. I wholeheartedly agree that speaking another language is to adopt the subjectivities of another civilization. But only for a moment. Although we may like to think things stay in neat packages (nothing stays neat forever), our personalities flow and seep into multiple areas of our life. Does the problem lie with those who choose to modify and transform the possibilities of what Fanon would call the colonizer’s language or with a society that has long privileged European languages and, through those languages, are gateways to economic freedom? I would like to flip Fanon’s argument on its head and, instead of seeing the addition of another language on the Black tongue as a disadvantage to a Black essence, see it as an additional “superpower” that can give access to Other worlds. We should not define Blackness by the languages that are spoken (or not) but by permitting Black bodies to engage with this world in a way that makes meaning for them. This can look like many different things. And that is precisely the point, to lift any and all limitations on how Blackness is defined for Black bodies.

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- <sup>1</sup> Rokkaya Diallo, *Afro* (Paris: Éditions Les Arènes, 2015)
- <sup>2</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Toward the African Revolution: Political Essays*, trs. Haakon Chevalier (New York: Grove Press, 1988), 20.
- <sup>3</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trs. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 4-5.
- <sup>4</sup> Chaka Chaka, "English Language Learners, Labels, Purposes, Standard English, Whiteness, Deficit Views, and Unproblematic Framings: Toward Southern Decoloniality," *Journal of Contemporary Issues in Education*, 16, no. 2 (2021): 24.
- <sup>5</sup> Chaka, "English Language Learners, Labels, Purposes....," 21.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>10</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 14.
- <sup>11</sup> Tabora A. Johnson and Teiahsha Bankhead, "Hair it is: Examining the Experiences of Black Women with Natural Hair," *Open Journal of Social Sciences* 2 (2014): 86-100. Johnson & Bankhead constructed a research project titled Black Hair Narratives and surveyed 529 Black women. They asked 52 questions and had discussions about natural hair, the acceptance of natural hair in different environments, and how they were received by other social groups. The goal of this project was to see the correlation between hair esteem levels and how Black women chose to wear their hair. From this sample, results showed how 95% wore their natural hair out, and that they felt that they were received favorably by others and the teasing, taunting and ridicule often came from family members and friends but not co-workers and/or supervisors. However, we should keep in mind that the sample set was a relatively young and highly educated population of Black women & that most people lived in New York. These results challenged the researchers' expectations about this study but Johnson & Bankhead note how these results could be limited to those who occupy a higher socioeconomic status for women living in urban settings.
- <sup>12</sup> Johnson and Bankhead, "Hair it is," 6
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>14</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 14.
- <sup>15</sup> Johnson and Bankhead, "Hair it is," 4.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.
- <sup>17</sup> Everett, Samantha. "Empowering Black women to embrace their natural hair." June 20, 2018. <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/uk-england-44521629>
- <sup>18</sup> Warungu, Joseph. "Letter from Africa: Fighting 'uniform hairstyles' in Kenya." March 30, 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-47721869>
- <sup>19</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 21.
- <sup>20</sup> Drabinski, John. "Frantz Fanon (2019)," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/frantz-fanon>

# The Work of Staying-With

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There is a breathlessness to Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*. Fanon leaves us in no doubt that he is an author with a great deal to say about matters, among which racism, colonialism and the effect of both on the black body and psyche are his preeminent concern, that are politically urgent. As they are. Such is Fanon's urgency that he uses every resource at his disposal – works of literature that turn on the colonial condition, psychoanalysis (from Freud to Lacan with the likes of Mannoni in between), as well as the occasional philosophical invocation (Hegel is a presence if by no means a fleshed-out one; although, it must be said, it is Jean-Paul Sartre who is called to do duty most often).

Although Fanon suggests that he considered presenting *Black Skin, White Masks* as a doctoral thesis, one finds it difficult to imagine such a prospect, in no small measure because the project is so stylistically incoherent. *Black Skin, White Masks* is an admixture of the anecdotal (Fanon has no trouble extracting political or psychoanalytic conclusions from his personal encounters; a tendency which applies as much to his Martinican past as to his experience of living in France; a tendency that extends to making deductions based on his observations in colonized Algeria), the psychoanalytic, the implicitly philosophical and the rhetorical. That is, the rhetorical in the sense that this is how Fanon structures his argument: through the declarative, through declamation. A scientific work *Black Skin, White Masks* is not.

And therein may reside its strength and its resilience. In our historical conjuncture, in a world still – more than 70 years after the 1952 publication of *Black Skin, White Masks* – riven by racism, ethnonationalism, increasing inequality, to say nothing of the environmental catastrophe that stares us so unremittingly in the face, Fanon's analyses resonate. The depth of *Black Skin, White Masks'* commitment, Fanon's capacity to address us (or, at least, so it seems), to provide a language and a discursive paradigm (a framework out of which we can apprehend the condition of our world), lends the intensity of his voice a special attractiveness. We are drawn to it. After all, Fanon's urgency is ours, except, perhaps, multiplied many times over for us, so close

do we know ourselves to be to ecological disaster, a disaster that has a great deal to do with the machinations of capital and the technological innovations that capitalism hath wrought.

However, finding ourselves so open to the allure of *Black Skin, White Masks* produces, of course, its own effects. Or, to phrase the matter bluntly, Fanon's breathlessness, his lack of philosophical specificity and stamina and his tendency toward the grand declamation, is not without philosophical cost. One could say, and this is an undeniably legitimate defense, that because of the conditions under which Fanon wrote – he was a practicing psychiatrist serving patients traumatized by the Algerian war as well as an FLN cadre (revolution is an exacting business, often leaving the revolutionary with only so much time to write, to think) – not only mitigate how it is that *Black Skin, White Masks* is presented to us, but make it an all the more remarkable text. Indeed.

Yet, such an acknowledgment serves only to explain Fanon's work. It does nothing to alleviate us of the work of *thinking* Fanon. And to think Fanon is to subject his work to scrutiny, to think what it is Fanon either does or fails to. It demands that we follow the threads of Fanon's argument at precisely those moments where it is weakest, at those moments when the threads fray, and, as importantly, those moments of aporia – when there are spaces between the threads, when gaps open up, where connections, as it were, are in need of being made.

This essay is preoccupied with one such moment, a moment which is not aporetic in the strictest sense. It is, rather, a moment filled with philosophical prospect. It is a prospect born out of Fanon's haste, his moving too quickly from one line of argument to another. Fanon abandons a condition worth tarrying with, a moment deserving of thinking.

## Tarrying With

The final line of *Black Skin, White Masks* is, as we well know, a famous one. A poetic line, rich with philosophical appeal, patinaed with Socratic inflection, it would be fair to say. "O my body make of me always a man who questions!" It is not, however, this line that is the object our scrutiny. It is a line that enjoys none of the status of *Black Skin, White Masks'* concluding sentence. It is a line that lies, for all intents and purposes, buried in the chapter entitled "The So-Called Dependency Complex of Colonized Peoples." However, it may be, for all its obscurity, the germ out of which that final line is born. Lost within the clamor of declamation, Mannoni is Fanon's target in this chapter, about the "Malagasy" (the focus of Mannoni's work) with more than an occasional turn to South African apartheid, Fanon writes: "To understand something new requires that we make ourselves ready for it, that we prepare ourselves for it; it entails the shaping of a new form."<sup>1</sup> In its archaic form, to "tarry" means to

“wait for.” Already we are free, etymologically, at any rate, to proffer that “O make me . . .” is the outcome of a waiting that began earlier, much earlier. It is only by insisting upon “waiting,” by lingering over Fanon’s call to “shape a new form.”<sup>2</sup>

In order to “make ourselves ready” for this “new form,” however, it will be necessary to we tarry with it. To tarry, as proposed here, is composed of both a temporal and a phenomenological dimension. That is, to tarry is both to commit to spending time with the philosophical object (proposition, the idea, the theory, the concept, whatever the case might be) in question and to be open to that object. In tarrying, we apprehend the object as it is so that to be open to is, as it were, to “look” or “gaze upon” simultaneously in its familiarity and in such a way as to know that there is much about the object that is unknown, as well as unknowable, to us. The object under scrutiny is, in a word, entirely capable of surprising us and in so doing it yields a series of insights; insights not only into the object itself but also to that which is proximate to it (that with which it has a relation); and, moreover, that which would, at first, or even third, glance, appear to be – to exist – in no obvious relation to the object as we first understood ourselves to know it. In order to be open to the object we must stay-with it.

Even if, as is shown to be the case of the “terror” that is shown to be at core of six of the seven Malagasian dreams – “we find a dominant theme of terror” – such a being open-to reveals the existential threat of being open-to (Fanon, 101). To look on the open, to search for what it is that has taken up residence in the aporia, is always to run the risk of encountering, without respite or a path along which to escape, the prospect of “terror.” We can never be sure as to what will make itself visible to us, as Nietzsche and Heidegger remind us, each in his own way, when we (dare to) look into the abyss. (Here Slavoj Žižek’s reading – a reading which is nothing less than a signal provocation – of Heidegger’s turn to the poetry of Hölderlin in the aftermath of World War II is instructive. Commenting on that Hölderlin line, “the wasteland grows,” that Heidegger attends to repeatedly in *Was Heißt Denken?*, Žižek offers the following insight, an insight that is, for all intents and purposes, counter-intuitively, “in order to overcome the danger, one has to push it to the extreme.”<sup>3</sup> It is his capacity to uncover – reveal – the counter-intuitive, of course, that the strength of Žižek’s work resides.) Or, Joseph Conrad, for that matter, who warns us against the “terrors” of colonialism with a brevity that does nothing to reduce our fear: “The horror, the horror.”

## Fanon Does Not Tarry

This Fanon does not do. Having urged us to “make ourselves ready for it,” he does not pause. This he does not do even as he, dialectician that he by inclination is, cognizant of the fecundity that resides in the encounter between objects, or, between subject and object or object and object. In his critique of

Adler (“The Negro and Adler”), Fanon once again recognizes the possibilities for thinking that reside in that moment when antagonists are brought face-to-face with each other: “Contact with the object means conflict” (Fanon, 212). In this instance, when Fanon posits the “Negro” as that object that enjoys no sovereignty (the Negro cannot stand alone and figures only as that which must be apprehended through “comparison”), Fanon, after presenting us with the figure of “Narcissus,” quickly disperses his analysis rather than subjecting what the effects of such a “conflict” might be (Fanon, 212; 211). The pattern, then, is established.

Tarrying is not what Fanon does. Instead, he moves immediately from the phenomenological to the structural. Following hard on the heels of “it entails the shaping of a new form,” Fanon dismisses the possibility of the phenomenological, declaring it an impossibility: “It is utopian to expect the Negro or the Arab to exert the effort of embedding abstract values into his outlook on the world when he has barely enough food to keep alive” (Fanon, 95). Given to the Manichean as Fanon so often is, the phenomenological is set against the alimentary. By Fanon’s reckoning, and there is a great deal to be said in his defense but that is not by itself sufficient, we would do well to remind ourselves, it is only under “utopian” conditions that the “Negro or the Arab” can undertake the phenomenological – “to exert the effort of embedding abstract values into his outlook on the world” – because of the impoverished structural conditions under which the colonized make their lives.

(Here, we would do well to pause to remind ourselves, if only for a parenthetical moment, of that troublesome strain in Fanon’s work: his utter neglect, abjection, even, of vernacular life and culture. I have in mind here Fanon’s derogation of the role of the blues and jazz – and probably early rock ‘n’ roll, soul and the entire oeuvre that is black music in the US – in African-American culture. Fanon dismisses blues and jazz as little but a “slave lament.” Fanon cannot, and why he cannot has to be proclaimed a mystery, such is its axiomatism, understand how the cultural work that goes into making the blues and jazz functions as a phenomenology. It is, moreover, a phenomenology that not only derives from, pays tribute to and in those rare moments, actually overcomes, the conditions of black suffering, in no small measure by articulating itself in its own, and, in truth, very distinct, existential register. The blues and jazz, as Angela Davis shows in *Blues Legacies*, is also a phenomenology of liberation. The blues and jazz, as well as soul music – as well as rap and hip-hop, its advocates would insist – constitutes a movement that works toward its own kind of emancipation. And freedom, we should add. A freedom crafted out of pain and as such all too conscious of the suffering that is borne in and by the music, but a freedom that is reached for, sometimes more hesitantly than others, but the claim on freedom is almost never relinquished.)

The colonized cannot both think for bringing the “new” paradigm into being and attend to his basic needs – food, shelter, clothing, safety. Indeed, we could say that it is precisely because of the structural inequalities imposed by colonialism that the need for a different, more equitable, just, non-racist tomorrow is made all the more imperative. What is more, Fanon – in his casual invocation of the “utopian,” a tradition of thinking with a very long and intensely political history, fails to recognize that it is precisely under conditions of extreme historical uncertainty, with the threat of violence and the destruction of the existing political order visible on the horizon, that utopian thinking tends to flourish. The premise and promise of the utopian is that it is impatient with business-as-usual, that it will no longer, in its leftist instantiatino, abide capital accumulation for the sake of capital accumulation, that the endless cycle of production and consumption must be broken; the utopian takes as its ground the emptiness of liberal democracy platitudes – “freedom,” “representation,” “parliamentary elctions.” The utopianist knows the vacuity of those concepts and, because it knows it, seeks an emancipation that is beyond the ken of, that is so instinctively stifled and relentlessly suppressed by, what-is. That is, the urgency of undoing what-is and installing in its place something radically different is the very motor of many a utopian movement. In this regard, when the US seems to be on the cusp of political and cultural implosion (so much so that one can now speak of a US society that will tolerate the possibility of “alternative truths”), one need only cast one’s mind back to the number of millenarian movements that flourished in the US in the years – decades, in truth – preceding the American Civil War. All across New York State, for example, from Albany in the east stretching all the way across the state (a city such as Oneida, NY, to name but one, was a hotbed of utopian agitation and organization, a movement that stretched) to as far west as Pennsylvania and Ohio; albeit in significantly distinct forms and incompatible iterations. Material want, economic scarcity, as much as the desire for a new social order, can provide a powerful impetus for the utopian imaginary.

Add the yearning for love and loss of love, and you have the blues.

Is the germ of the utopian always already present in the blues? Why ever not? We might want to take a closer phenomenological look at what Billie Holiday or Lena Horne is trying to tell us.

This is not to suggest that the immanence of Fanon’s argument is without standing. On the contrary, many a revolution has been born out of the determination to secure material security for an oppressed or exploited community (October 1917, for one); of course, we know that frequently the oppressed community is the exploited community. It is, however, to refuse the political neatness (a neatness that often claims for itself the standing of the politically axiomatic – political commonsense, so to speak) at the heart of Fanon’s presentation: the impoverished, the malnourished, the lumpenproletariat, shall we say for the sake of argument, cannot think for

protest, for producing social unrest and through it radical transformation of their society, cannot begin to envisage the revolution, to say nothing of executing the revolution, on, metaphorically rendered, an empty stomach. The alienated or the exploited do not have it within their capacity to both attempt to tend to their rudimentary needs and think against the world as it is. Or think for their rudimentary needs because of the world as it is.

The philosophical cost of not tarrying with, it becomes possible to suggest, is the persistence of the Manichean. And because the Manichean persists, in no small measure because it has an undoubted appeal for how it is we apprehend the world, it becomes all the more difficult to think-with – to think for the germ of the utopian within the condition of scarcity or because of depravity (again, the blues or the hauntings that pervade the music of Miles Davis, Charlie Parker, Ornette Coleman) rather than, as is Fanon’s habit, to set opposing forces against each other in the most stark light. What Fanon is advocating, whether it is acknowledged or not, is that the revolution (although the labor strike might present a peculiar difference, in both tenor and motivation for our thinking here) is seldom, if ever, made under ideal conditions. Marx says as much, and as explicitly as he can, in the “Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte.”

In his insistence that thinking can only take under place under, if not “utopian” then certainly those conditions where alimentary needs have been satisfied, Fanon shows himself to be a proponent of, shall we say, the “Event” – that is, the revolution follows a chronological order, a set sequence – rather than the event – radical transformation taking place in society either by surprising everyone (as in the case of, say, Mohammed Bouazizi’s self-immolation which set in motion the Arab Spring) or as the accumulation of situations or circumstances that culminate, again, in the most unpunctual way (that is, the event is only punctual to itself), in an explosion. An explosion that shows itself to be, in retrospect, “inevitable” but in its unfolding – historical accidents that produce historical opportunity; the slow seething of resentments at injustice; the enacting or implementation of a series of unjust laws. The event as the effect of concatenation as opposed to the “Event,” where radical – and almost certainly violent – rupture with what-was is the order of the day.

## The End is in the Beginning

How does the man who “questions” come into being? What prepares such a man, Fanon’s iteration of the new human condition, one that can only come into being after colonialism has been overthrown (and the postcolonial elite of *The Wretched of the Earth* have been laid to rest historically), to be in the world?

Fanon's answer, of course, is that "we make ourselves ready for it." The problem, of course, is that Fanon offers no path through which we might come to prepare ourselves. (Almost making us long for, one is tempted to say, but not only for the sake of provocation, a figure who walks the path, which of course involves a doubling back, an unwanted return, of Nietzsche's Zarathustra.)

The answer to the question of how bring into being such a human being dedicated to the question (always questioning) demands, first, the delineation of that which is-not. One must, as it were, know what it is that this interrogative being wants while also acknowledging that such a knowing is impossible. To know that it is impossible to know. Such a mode of being toward, one that is at once confident in its delineation and entirely unsure of itself, may be the only way in which it is at all possible to "make ourselves ready for it." To think for that which is-not but must-be, to imagine a "new form," that is, a distinct way of being that emerges out of the rupture that is which-is, is nothing less than a call for the absolutely assiduous ("discipline," as it might have been called in an earlier political moment, that moment when the Party in its orthodoxy proclaimed itself omniscient), but such an absolute assiduousness that knows itself as limited, a priori, by what it does not, and cannot, know. Much as we would like to assert differently, we know in advance that the "new form" will not conform to that form which motivates us to achieve it. The "new form" will, thus, only conform in part to our design; its form will not coincide with our prescribed form. The "new form" will be, despite – and perhaps because of – our very best efforts, sovereign only to itself. As for its content, well, that is an entirely different matter. Indeed, we would not be wrong to propose *Wretched of the Earth* as the content to the form of *Black Skin, White Masks*.

We will find ourselves adapting to this "new form" that is at once of and not of our own making. Our imaginary will be astounded. It might indeed even be disappointed, as Fanon was disappointed, to understate the matter greatly, by the actions of the new postcolonial elite, a political class that showed itself to be the scourge of the previously colonized masses and about which Fanon is scathing in *The Wretched of the Earth*. Our imaginary is in no way prepared for the content which so violently comes to mis-shape the "new form" that Fanon enjoined us to conjure into being.

Aphoristically rendered, the disappointment of the form in encountering stubborn integrity of the content (the content will not accommodate itself to the form), reminds us of the difficulty of undoing both what-was and what is to-come. The form-content dialectic familiarizes us, if familiarizing is necessary, with the immensity of the task that is preparing-for that being-toward the world that accedes to preparing-for as a task that is not only impossible, but is, in fact, a work without end.

The only way in which we can even begin to be prepared is, however, a mode of being-toward that already exists within Fanon's interrogative arsenal. There is no historically opportune moment to begin to be a "man who questions." The "man who questions" must begin, if he is showing fidelity to the interrogative, by drawing everything, all his pronouncements, his every declaration, regardless of the intensity of his invective, into "question."

That is, the "man who questions" must confront the question: what does it mean to understand? How can such a man know that full comprehension is beyond his capacity and yet must be that for which he strives? What does it mean to prepare for? What will such a preparation entail? And, perhaps most saliently, how is it possible to undertake this work, all the labor that is required to understand, the relentlessness of the preparation, the kind of thinking that is capable of procuring for itself a "new form," under conditions that are far from optimal.

Marx's "Eighteenth Brumaire" presents itself as an obvious touchstone, at the very least it would be a good place to start. But only if the phenomenological and the alimentary – the material, Marx would insist – are held together. Held together in a such a tension that they threaten, at every turn, to undo each other, but must, for the sake of Fanon's interrogative, be made constantly to engage despite their determination to rupture. Form must be held in proximity to content.

To question, then, as a first recognition of the violence that resides at the core of every thinking. Of thinking-for that which is-not but must-be. The man dedicated to the question fails himself if he cannot subject himself to tarry, in every act, with the violence that is holding together that which would sooner tear itself asunder.

To tarry with is to expose the self to the violence that constitutes every question.

The question as the first act of violence, a violence that can only come into its own if it is tarried with. The self must risk itself in posing that question which it knows will refuse to yield. And to know that answer, in whatever form it takes, as inherently provisional, as nothing but the prelude to the future that is the violence contained already in the question to come. The question already present in the question that has not yet been addressed. It is out of this demand that the singular force that is tarrying with emerges. It is because of this demand that we must, despite our every inclination to resist, persist in tarrying with.

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\* For David Johnson and the phenomenological difficulty he presented me with almost 25 years ago. I remain in his debt. Happily so.

<sup>1</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1982), 95.

<sup>2</sup> There are moments, it should be said, when Fanon's critique assumes a frankness that inclines in the direction of an of the need for extended, if not the sustained attention itself. In delineating the encounter between the colonizer and the Malagasy, Fanon writes: "something new had come into being on the island and that it had to be reckoned with - otherwise the analysis is condemned to falsehood, to absurdity, to nullity" (Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 97). It is only by accounting for the rupture with what-was, the disruption wrought by colonialism, that the truth of colonialism can be revealed. For Fanon, however, it would appear that it is analytical rigor rather than the temporal, tarrying with, that drives his argument in this moment.

<sup>3</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes* (New York: Verso, 2008), 119.

# *Black Skin, White Masks* and the Paradoxical Politics of Black Historiography

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Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* has the paradoxical status of being a text that rejects historiography and History as a primary means of facilitating radical political transformation while also being a key point of departure for histories concerning modern colonial and decolonial thought.<sup>1</sup> This reflection is an examination of the tensions in *Black Skin, White Masks* as a political work and as an intervention into philosophical, psychoanalytic, literary, and existential debates. Prompted by the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of *Black Skin, White Masks*, I examine the richness of the past two decades of historiographical scholarship on slavery, abolition, and freedom struggles in the Caribbean and North America alongside arguments that Fanon made about the limited role of history in sustaining and guiding anti-colonial thought and praxis. *Black Skin, White Masks* remains relevant, albeit troubling, for querying the presumed connections between historical knowledge, political action, and scholarly production facilitated by academic and political trends. I am interested in how the provocations of *Black Skin, White Masks*, in particular its last chapter "By Way of Conclusion," provides fertile grounds for questioning, positioning, and refining contemporary historiographical production.

At the center of Fanon's discussion of history, is the relationship of history to decolonial, anti-colonial, and other forms of radical political action. For Fanon, the type of historical scholarly and popular historiographies that sought to ground contemporary Black anti-colonial struggles in the twentieth century— including recovering lost Black civilizations or histories of Black resistance— were neither the pre-requisite nor the cause of anti-colonial political action. His arguments destabilized the emphasis on Black history in various traditions of Black scholarly and activists production in the years between the 1920s-1950s in the Black Atlantic which included Arturo

Schomburg's "The Negro Digs Up His Past," W.E.B. Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction in America*, C.L.R. James's *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Overture and the San Domingo Revolution*, and Aimé Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism*.<sup>2</sup> The relationships between history and political action in each of these texts are distinct; however, there is an assumption that recovering and narrating Black diasporic and resistant colonial history can provide a guide, impetus, and ground for anti-racist and anti-colonial political action.

*Black Skin, White Masks* problematizes easy connections between historical knowledge of Black politics (and Black civilizations) and Black revolutionary action in order to maintain a materialist and existential understanding of anti-colonial thought and action. Fanon argues that those who need history the most are a small minority of Black people who are alienated primarily through language, culture, and education, while the majority of colonized Black people are alienated through the material conditions of their lives which includes mechanical, domestic, manual, and agricultural labor.<sup>3</sup> This division in how Black colonized subjects are positioned means that scholarly historiographies and literature are not likely to dis-alienate the masses of Black people.

Furthermore, *Black Skin, White Masks* argues that Black people should avoid focusing their energy, intellectual efforts, and political orientations on the past, and thus on the ontological level avoid being trapped by "History."<sup>4</sup> History for Fanon, refers to the philosophies of history in Western thought and the historiographies of political and social events. His argument against "History" and an orientation to the past, reinforces earlier analyses about how responding to colonial norms places the Black colonial subject in an existential and philosophical game rigged to deny his humanity.<sup>5</sup> Thus, history as a way to legitimate the humanity and equality of Black people (even for themselves) through the resources and logics provided by colonialism is another form of psychic, political, and philosophical dead-end.<sup>6</sup> In addition, history as a prerequisite for political action would mean that Black people (especially men) are not spontaneous actors, but rather trapped by the past.<sup>7</sup>

*Black Skin, White Masks* facilitates novel approaches to conceptualizing history (especially of historicizing and grappling with colonial thought) which are not guided by the desire for recognition. This has proved meaningful in how scholars of colonialism and decolonization have continually revealed the changing logics of colonial historiography, History, academic disciplines, colonial methodologies, and colonial epistemologies in knowledge production.<sup>8</sup> However, *Black Skin, White Masks* poses vexed challenges for those who desire to write histories of spaces, peoples, and lands that take seriously the identities created and concealed by colonialism and that are grounded (at least partially) in national and racial conflicts.<sup>9</sup> This is because Fanon's understanding of universalism and humanism place into doubt projects that can be considered particularist, provincial, and bound by the logics of colonialism.<sup>10</sup>

The arguments that Fanon deploys to avoid particularism pose challenges to recent historical production. In *Black Skin, White Masks* national histories and histories of particular spaces and territories do not belong exclusively (or possibly primarily) to specific nations or races. Rather, Fanon argues against racializing and nationalizing political and social histories due to how such moves can reify and naturalize race instead of revealing it as a product of human artifice birthed by European colonialism. Thus, Fanon provocatively maintains that not only are the histories of Africa his inheritance, but also those of Europe, the Mediterranean, and Asia. His view of history crosses racial and national lines, thus he states, "Every time a man has brought victory to the dignity of the spirit, every time a man has said no to an attempt to enslave his fellow man, I have felt a sense of solidarity with his act."<sup>11</sup> This solidarity functions as a recognition of those who have served human dignity as well as those who have opposed the domination of others. It also allows for individuals to knit together disparate events, peoples, and ideas found in the past. Fanon's idiosyncratic view of history filtered through his political and philosophical lenses is meant as a model for how others might want to approach past human actions and thought i.e., history. Such an approach can serve to connect people to events that are not considered part of their cultural, racial, and national inheritance.

Fanon rejects the norms of modern European historiography, (including the long tradition of developmental historiography of which Kant, Hegel, and J.S. Mill are exemplars), that universalize European history (History).<sup>12</sup> He also opposed the norms and expectations of Black historiography that demand a focus on political and social transformations produced by Black people. Instead, he propounds a decolonial humanist historiography that opposes the partial humanism of *negritude* and European philosophies of history. He writes against both in his statement, "I am a man, and I have to rework the world's past from the very beginning. I am not just responsible for the slave revolt in Saint Domingue."<sup>13</sup> This perspective is further contextualized by claims that the Peloponnesian War, fought in the fifth century BCE, and the invention of the compass also are his. Finally, Fanon demands that Black men not become slaves to the past, which renders specific forms of racial and national consciousness (including *negritude*) problematic.<sup>14</sup>

Moreover, *Black Skins, White Masks* represents a direct challenge to those who would place historical consciousness as a prerequisite to decolonial political action. When Fanon claimed that the Black man was the slave to the past, he sought to reveal that the relationship to the past that Black writers and scholars had imagined as a space of freedom was in fact a space of confinement.<sup>15</sup> Fanon challenged core beliefs that had influenced scholarly, popular, and political understandings of the necessity of excavating, interrogating, and affirming Black civilizations and Black history in Africa and its diaspora. In this way, *Black Skin, White Masks* arguments are explicitly

political, by denying a host of historical understandings and ways of relating to the past, Fanon attempts to guide consciousness of history and its relation to anti-colonial praxis.

The challenge of *Black Skin, White Masks* to earlier historical scholarship including the work of Aimé Césaire, C.L.R. James, and others is noteworthy. However, *Black Skin, White Masks* poses similar challenges to recent historiographies on slavery, marronage, and anti-colonial resistance. In the past two decades, historians, literary theorists, and scholars of Black Studies have repeatedly challenged academic disciplinary boundaries in order to excavate Black political and social history over and against the limits of the colonial archive and the archive of slavery. Just as previous generations—including Fanon’s predecessors and contemporaries analyzed above—recent scholars have created illuminating histories by subverting the epistemologies that constituted modern colonialism and chattel slavery. They have continued to critically examine the construction and content of archival knowledge and the dominant methods used to interpret the archive.<sup>16</sup> In such a flourishing of intellectual production, which continues to coincide with Black political and social resistance throughout the Americas, it once again appears that historiography and History have a profound connection to anti-racist, anti-colonial, and decolonial action aimed at addressing the structures of colonialism and racial slavery birthed and maintaining the modern/colonial world. Recent historiographies have widened understandings of who counts as Black political and social agents as well as have provided alternative epistemologies and knowledges that challenge Eurocentric worldviews. Placing class, gender, sexuality, and the sacred at the center of historical analyses and approaches have led to profound changes in understandings of the practice of historical analysis and the historiography of particular events and locales.

One example of this has been recent historiography on the Haitian Revolution. The Haitian Revolution has had an outsized impact on Black thought especially during the twentieth century when Black anti-colonial thought borrowed extensively from the history of the first Black republic, the second independent nation in the Americas, and the only successful modern slave revolt. Through Caribbean intellectuals, the Haitian Revolution and the subsequent nation of Haiti became archived as the exemplar of Black revolutionary anti-colonial thought and praxis. The history of Haiti became a key point of departure for theorizing Black history, Black culture, Caribbean history, and anti-colonial thought. Recent historiographies of Haitian history have sought to extend critical perspectives examining that history without narrating it from the perspective of those most powerful. The historiography of the past three decades has been instrumental in separating Haitian history, social development, and politics from the discourses and actions of the property owning, urban, elite, and anti-Black positions of the leaders who would lead post-independence Haiti. These “histories from below” have

documented how the mid-twentieth century vision of the Haitian Revolution as the embodiment of anti-colonial praxis was partially grounded in the ideology and historiographies of the property-owning elite of Haiti in the nineteenth century.<sup>17</sup> In light of histories that have focused on bossales, women, non-literate peoples, and the vodou masses, this has meant that the mid-twentieth century understanding of anti-colonial and revolutionary Black thought and praxis was partial, and that the Haitian Revolution can no longer be conceptualized through elitist, male, literate, and secular lenses of the nineteenth or twentieth century. The recent historiographies have highlighted narratives, conflicts, and solutions that were always there, but not brought to the forefront due to the perspectives of scholars, the limited political/epistemological commitments of thinkers, and the structures of “post-colonial” politics and society.

*Black Skin, White Masks* has not been an explicit point of departure for this scholarship due to its contentious views on gender and sexuality, and its complex blending of philosophical thought, cultural analysis, and psychoanalysis.<sup>18</sup> This has meant that Black historiographical scholarship about nations, peoples, social structures, and political history has flourished alongside scholarship on the history of the philosophical underpinnings of colonialism. In many ways, the result of the former poses challenges to Fanon’s conceptions of history, decolonization, and political action in *Black Skin, White Masks*. For example, through expanding the meaning of revolution, the conflicts at the heart of the slave revolts, independence, and post-independence politics and social transformation, scholars of Haitian history have helped redefine understandings of the human, politics, and philosophy and thus the meanings of anti-colonial and decolonial thought and action that Fanon presupposed. In particular, the focus on gender and sexuality provides challenges to the male dominated materialist assumptions of political action and political agency, while the focus on the sacred—especially vodou—transforms the meaning of history through its embodiment of gods (lwa) working in the present, thereby collapsing neat distinctions between the past/present (i.e. historical periodization and consciousness) as well as the pivotal role of the sacred (and history) and the consciousness of the *damné*.<sup>19</sup> Scholarship on the Haitian Revolution has reinterpreted the meaning of revolution, marronage, anti-colonial thought/practice, decolonization, and abolition. Through reshaping the understanding of one of the most famous Black revolutions and the only successful modern slave revolt, this scholarship has redefined earlier understandings of the sources of Black revolutionary potentiality. The transformation of concepts, distinctions, and the grounds of Fanon’s thought may require a rethinking of history as a space of confinement and as an impediment to revolutionary political action. However, Fanon’s seventy-year-old arguments pose challenges to present day historiography. His analysis of how colonialism alienates Black subjects differently, his warning of the dangers of attempting to gain recognition through History, his claim

that the Black subject can be a slave to the past, as well as his critiques of racial, national, and cultural ownership of past events pose challenges to historiography today.

Thus, we find ourselves at a crossroads, down one path are new understandings of decolonization, abolition, marronage, and anti-colonial politics that have been shaped by recent historiography, down the other are Fanon's provocations to attend to the structure of colonial intellectual production and avoiding particularity that might reify the racial logics of colonialism. One way out is to specify some of the challenges that *Black Skin, White Masks* poses for Black historiography in the twenty-first century. This includes questioning whether colonial capitalism still functions through creating divisions between those who can access education and upward mobility and those who are more materially vulnerable. We are left asking: who are histories of slavery and histories of resistance, against slavery and colonialism for? Who asked for this – not only in the Fanonian way of providing unwelcomed but critical insight, but also which communities and people specifically asked for these histories in print?<sup>20</sup> Are these historiographies subtle attempts to display the humanity and rationality of Black people to colonizing national and international audiences –i.e. attempts to place Black people within a History that will never accept them?<sup>21</sup> Can there be a history of the decolonial masses – which sees the masses as engaged in the process of acting against economic inferiority, and “its internalization or rather epidermalization,” which also explicitly grapples with the colonial logics of knowledge production?<sup>22</sup> This type of history may be able to combine the two strands of historiography examined above.<sup>23</sup> If such histories are possible, how? Will these histories have a value outside of the dis-alienation of the most privileged? Fanon offers one way to query and assess contemporary historiography as well as the structural apparatus in which the writing of history is produced. However, these questions inevitably place us back at Fanon's seemingly denial of the role of histories in their ability to spur or facilitate anti-colonial, anti-racist, and decolonial social and political action.

In the end, the arguments of *Black Skin, White Masks* leave only a sliver of room for the possibility of Black history playing some role in spurring anti-colonial and decolonial action. As I have reconstructed the line of argumentation, this sliver could be found in Fanon's insistence that human creativity and human capacity to will can transform our human made societies.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, although Fanon makes it abundantly clear that histories cannot be the ground for decolonial action, it does not follow that this forecloses the possibility that such historiographies once in the world cannot have subtle, subterranean, and unexpected influence on human subjects and populations.<sup>25</sup> In this way, it behooves us to maintain that historiography should have a revolutionary function, even if a classic text argues that it is unlikely to have that intended effect.

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- <sup>1</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trs. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008).
- <sup>2</sup> Schomburg writes, “The Negro must remake his past in order to make his future...History must restore what slavery took away, for it is the social damage of slavery that the present generation must repair and offset;” W.E.B. Du Bois states, “Particularly interesting for students of human culture is the sudden freeing of these black folk [enslaved peoples in the U.S.] in the Nineteenth Century and the attempt, through them, to reconstruct the basis of American democracy from 1860-1880.” C.L.R. James writes of his history of revolution that “the concluding pages which envisage and were intended to stimulate the coming emancipation of Africa.” Aimé Césaire laments the destruction and colonization of non-European societies when he states, “I make a systematic defense of the non-European civilizations. Every day that passes... brings home the value of our old societies.” Arthur Schomburg, “The Negro Digs Up His Past” in *The New Negro*, ed. Alain Locke (New York: Atheneum, 1925), 231; W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 3; Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 44. C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Overture and the San Domingo Revolution* (New York: Random House, 1963), vii.
- <sup>3</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 199.
- <sup>4</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 204.
- <sup>5</sup> Thus, it reinforces key passages in “On the Lived Experience of the Black Man,” in which Fanon goes through the possible dialectical moves in proving Black humanity which ends in tears. See Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 119.
- <sup>6</sup> Nelson Maldonado-Torres, *Against War: Views from the Underside of Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 131.
- <sup>7</sup> Christopher J. Lee, *Frantz Fanon: Toward A Revolutionary Humanism* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2015), 93-94.
- <sup>8</sup> Readers will of course be familiar with the diversity of texts that avoid centering Eurocentric concepts and frameworks and instead center decolonization, humanism, and decoloniality. Such works includes Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Sylvia Wynter, Maria Lugones, and a host of scholars and thinkers who are in extended dialogue with these writers. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2005); Sylvia Wynter, “1492: A New World View” in *Race, discourse, and the origin of the Americas : a new world*, eds. Vera Lawrence Hyatt and Rex Nettleford (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995), 5- 57; Maria Lugones, “The Coloniality of Gender” *Worlds & Knowledges Otherwise* (Spring 2008), 2; Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books Ltd, 2006); Glen Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).
- <sup>9</sup> *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man: An Essay on Philosophy and the Human Sciences* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 28.
- <sup>10</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 202.
- <sup>11</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 201.
- <sup>12</sup> Immanuel Kant, “An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment,” in *Practical Philosophy: The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 54-60; G.W.F. Hegel, *Introduction to the Philosophy of History* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1988); J.S. Mill, *On Liberty* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1978).

- <sup>13</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 201.
- <sup>14</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 116.
- <sup>15</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 200.
- <sup>16</sup> Stephanie M. H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts" *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 1-14; Stephanie E. Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008); Marisa J. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); Jennifer L. Morgan, "Accounting for 'The Most Excruciating Torment': Gender, Slavery, and Trans-Atlantic Passages" *History of the Present* 6, no. 2 (2016): 184-207.
- <sup>17</sup> Joan Dayan, *Haiti, History, and the Gods* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Mimi Sheller, "'You signed my name but not my Feet': Paradoxes of Peasant Resistance and State Control in Post-Revolutionary Haiti" *Journal of Haitian Studies*, 10: 1 (2004): 72-86; Lauren Dubois, *Avengers of the New World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005); Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (New York: Beacon Press, 2015); Johnhenry Gonzalez, *Maroon Nation: A History of Revolutionary Haiti* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019).
- <sup>18</sup> Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel, *Coloniality of Diasporas: Rethinking Intra-Colonial Migrations in a Pan-Caribbean Context* (New York: Palgrave, 2014), 110-113; T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, "Anti-black Femininity and Mixed-race Identity: Engaging Fanon to Reread Capécia" *Fanon: A Critical Reader*, eds. Lewis R. Gordon, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, Renée T. White (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 155-162.
- <sup>19</sup> Joan Dayan, *Haiti, History, and the Gods* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Gina Athena Ulysse, "Vodou as Idea: On Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley's 'Ezili's Mirrors,'" *Los Angeles Review of Books*, September 28, 2018; Natasha Tinsley, *Ezili's Mirror: Imagining Black Queer Genders* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 9-12.
- <sup>20</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, xi.
- <sup>21</sup> See Lewis Gordon, *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man: An Essay on Philosophy and the Human Sciences* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 29.
- <sup>22</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, xv.
- <sup>23</sup> Jean Casimir, *The Haitians: A Decolonial History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020).
- <sup>24</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, xv.
- <sup>25</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 201.

# Martinique Between Fanon and Naipaul

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Antillean society is a neurotic society, a *comparison* society. Hence we are referred back from the individual to the social structure. If there is a flaw, it lies not in the 'soul' of the individual, but in his environment.

– Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*

Martinique is full of little French villages.

– Naipaul, *The Middle Passage*

What is Martinique to Frantz Fanon and to V.S. Naipaul? And who is Fanon to Naipaul, Naipaul to Fanon? This is our intellectual imaginary, our space, in what follows.

At first glance, they are two very different, if not outright opposed, thinkers. Naipaul, for all of the writerly brilliance, is famous for his critical dismissal of the Caribbean as a non-place. This dismissal underlies the melancholy of his essays, travelogues, and much of his fiction. *Naipaul, writer of the spiritually homeless*. Fanon, for all of the complexity of his thinking, is famous for his blunt and radical anti-colonial politics, his commitment to the future of Black people in his early work, then later to the colonized more broadly, and his commitment to a new future of and for the human. These commitments add an important flair to his rhetoric and plenty of urgency to his arguments. *Fanon, writer of the revolutionary moment*.

But I want to ask a contrary question: could it be that Fanon and Naipaul, in the end, have largely, if not precisely, the same understanding and critical assessment of the Caribbean? This might seem more a provocation than sober analysis, but my motivation actually lies in a key conceptual and analytical shift in Caribbean thought. I am thinking specifically Édouard Glissant's remark in *Caribbean Discourse* that Fanon *acted* on his ideas, a

remark that *suggests* and has been read by some as a moment of praise or reverence, which is a reading that reflects the primary mode of scholarly engagement with Fanon: edification and iconicity. But that is not Glissant's aim at all. Glissant, the thinker of *Antillanité* without restraint or boundary, does not in *Caribbean Discourse* understand Fanon as simply a praiseworthy man of action. Rather, Glissant wants to underscore how (or even *that*) Fanon chose to leave Martinique for Algeria because, like Naipaul, Fanon saw only desolation in the Caribbean cultural landscape. This is the mid-century moment, indeed; there is nothing particularly exceptional here. Aimé Césaire, Fanon, and Naipaul each dedicate the best of their intellect to documenting the abjection of the Caribbean as a cultural, political, and theoretical geography. And then Fanon *acted* on that. In a strange kind of temporal leap, a time puzzle embedded in acton, Algeria is for Fanon a kind of *future nostalgia*, a place where and for which one longs for what one knows is to come. Violent resistance, new identity formation, openness to/toward radical transformation, and the unprecedented art of postcolonial statecraft – this is Fanon's Algeria, but always an Algeria *avenir* and *à-venir*. It is that move toward a future nostalgia, bending time back ahead, then behind, that surely distinguishes Fanon from Naipaul. Naipaul will sit with abjection, absorb the melancholia of his (and Fanon's) diagnostic, and refuse the promise of reinvention, remaking, and new forms of being *after* the apocalypse.

Fanon: the hopeful messianic.

Naipaul: the abject wanderer.

In the sketches of Fanon and Naipaul that follow, then, I will argue that the differences between Fanon and the early Naipaul are largely at the level of affect and rhetorical sensibility – a difference that reflects and produces another kind of relation to time. The past interrupts the future in Fanon's work, irrupting into the present and opening the possibility of new forms of the human. Radical, revolutionary action and becoming. The time of hope. The past drags across the existential stretch of historical memory in Naipaul's work, a contagion akin to a negative sublime that produces wandering, homeless postcolonial subjects, the strange and estranged ruins of Mr. Biswas' house, men set adrift at a bend in the river. Timeless melancholia. Between hope and melancholia, there is Martinique, an interval toward an immovable present – little French villages – or another present, then future – a shift in environment, Algeria as nostalgia that comes from the future. Across these differences, and motivated by it, Fanon and Naipaul fundamentally agree about the character of the Caribbean as a colonized, then postcolonial, space. For both, the Caribbean is *abject space* – a shared commitment, between Fanon and Naipaul, to the notion that the Caribbean has no history and must either be abandoned (Naipaul) or be completely made new (Fanon).

My argument here is rooted in a nine-year period, 1952-1961. This period is their shared mid-century moment, a moment full of independence

struggle, global south revolution, and visions of possible ways of being *after* the colonial. I'm thinking, in particular, of how we see such important or even uncanny resonance between Naipaul's travel journal *The Middle Passage* and Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* and essays from the mid-1950s. In Naipaul's reflection on Martinique in *The Middle Passage*, he recalls the saying that it's as if a "highway" runs from Fort-de-France to Paris in order to underscore the terms of colonial alienation. This mythical highway, this absolute proximity of the metropole to Caribbean consciousness, leads Naipaul to the famous conclusion that "History is built around achievement and creation; and nothing was created in the West Indies."<sup>1</sup> Though it deploys a very different rhetoric, Naipaul's conclusion is not altogether different than Fanon's characterization of Martinique in the same period. Fanon's claim that Martiniquans are "an ironic people" in a 1955 essay extends his account of colonial alienation in *Black Skin, White Masks*. The function of colonialism inside the psyche as guilt, shame, and inferiority further informs Fanon's brief, yet decisive, remarks on blues, jazz, creole, pidgin, and other vernacular cultural forms; the rejection of vernacular cultural formation is rooted in a vision of the world as object *at its very foundation*, without resistance or difference – a robust afropessimism. Fanon's conclusion to *Black Skin, White Masks* and his reflection the new humanism in *The Wretched of the Earth* brings that rejection of vernacular culture to conceptual fruition by eschewing history and imagining a future without precedent.

What are we to make of this unexpected proximity? To begin, it brings the postcolonial question of "the new" to the fore. How is the future to be imagined? In the postcolonial moment, we must imagine the future as a new culture, society, and politics. What is the relation of the new to the past? We learn from Fanon and Naipaul that any *radical* sense of the new proceeds from the abjection of life under colonialism. Further, and thinking after Fanon and Naipaul and their moment, that abjection of life lies at the root of critical questions raised by theorists of creoleness and creolization – in particular, the works of Derek Walcott and Glissant, but also Kamau Brathwaite, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphael Confiant. The creolist question returns thinking to vernacular forms and identifies in those forms – *pace* Fanon and Naipaul – complex, everyday strategies of resistance, voice, expression, and their own senses of the new. In that return to the vernacular, the meaning of decolonization, in its cultural context, takes on a very different tenor and aim, a tenor and aim that reveals key, even foundational aspects of Fanon's and Naipaul's thinking that *themselves* have to be decolonized.

## The West Indies as History

In his 1962 travelogue *The Middle Passage: The Caribbean Revisited*, Naipaul offers a series of impressions of a cluster of Caribbean islands, remarking on the (putatively) stalled cultural formation he sees, the often destitute or

pathetic yearning he detects, and, throughout those impressions offers a conception of history *after* colonialism. Or, perhaps better put, Naipaul asks: what has happened to history in the Caribbean? And what are we to make of the Caribbean after its history? What was made of the Caribbean, and what remains in colonialism's aftermath?

But before that bit from *The Middle Passage*, let me pause for a moment to recount the crux of his argument, such as it is, in the chapter on Martinique. Here, Naipaul tells a story of Martinique one would expect. The island is afro-Caribbean, yet administered at every level by the French *even in the absence of the French*. This "even in the absence" is crucial. Colonialism, of course, is more than the domination of one geographic place by another locale. Colonialism manifests, in Naipaul's book, in his long descriptions of Martiniquan manners, values, habits, linguistic distinctions – descriptions which mirror Fanon's account of the importance of diction in *Black Skin, White Masks* – and Naipaul notes the presence of a very French antisemitism even in the absence of any Jewish presence. Frenchness, which is akin if not equivalent to whiteness, is the colonial *aspiration*. And so, in a passage that sounds like something from the opening chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks*, Naipaul writes:

At all levels in Martinique race is important and inescapable. This is one reason perhaps why Martiniquans are all Frenchmen. All cannot be white, but all can aspire to Frenchness, and in Frenchness all are equal.<sup>2</sup>

Naipaul, like Fanon, offers this vision of "equality" as a satirical, perhaps tragic and most certainly melancholic, commentary on how the wake of colonialism overwhelms desire, not just in terms of the fraught sexuality Fanon outlines in the central chapters of *Black Skin, White Masks*, but in the very desire to be. *French* is not just a language, a tool, or a geographic location. French and Frenchness is being itself.

Naipaul's description of Martinique is not merely observation. Rather, it is infused with a larger question of H/history and its meaning in the West Indies. If colonialism operates at the level of the repressive and ideological state apparatuses (something his chapter on Martinique details), and that operation produces a near-absolute identification of the colonized with the terms of their alienation, we have to ask: what does this reveal about the colonial condition in the colony? For Naipaul, it reveals the consequences – which are not only island-specific, but endemic to the archipelago as a whole – of colonialism's radical transformation of historical consciousness. That is, the brutality of Europe in the West Indies does *not* produce a landscape of ruins from which memory reactivates traces, and so the post- or anti-colonial critic and creative does not (or simply cannot) revitalize what has been rendered impotent (*pace* Césaire) by centuries of violence. Such revitalizing work is left to the fantasies of Négritude and other forms of pre- (and perhaps post-) black Atlantic nationalisms. Naipaul understands the brutality of

H/history embedded in the Caribbean landscape to be a signal of nothing except its own nothingness. The New World has never been new. Therefore, it has never been a world. In a famous passage, Naipaul writes:

How can the history of this West Indian futility be written? What tone shall the historian adopt? Shall he be as academic as Sir Alan Burns, protesting from time to time at some brutality, and setting West Indian brutality in the context of European brutality? Shall he, like Salvador de Madariaga, weigh one set of brutalities against another, and conclude that one has not been described in all its foulness and that this is unfair to Spain? Shall he, like the West Indian historians, who can only now begin to face their history, be icily detached and tell the story of the slave trade as if it were just another aspect of mercantilism? *The history of the islands can never be satisfactorily told. Brutality is not the only difficulty. History is built around achievement and creation; and nothing was created in the West Indies.*<sup>3</sup>

I quote at length because this passage bears within it some of the most complex issues of theorizing Caribbean memory, history, and identity. As well, it underscores key themes treated in the body of *The Middle Passage*, functioning as a thread that ties (or promises to tie) together a range of mediations as Naipaul travels from the metropole(s) to Trinidad, Guiana, Surinam, Martinique, and Jamaica. At each stop, brutality doubles itself in the abyss of non-creation. There is no history to be told. There is only melancholy and the aspiration to *be* the metropole. The metropole is being. Being is alienation *in* and *as* existential aspiration.

How does Fanon understand Martinique, and therefore the Caribbean as such? This question concerns both how Fanon's work works as a theory of the colonized and what it means that Fanon left the Caribbean for Algeria. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, the work in which we find the most thorough description of the West Indies, Fanon describes the Caribbean as a prison *without prospect*. The alienated Caribbean, as we know from both Naipaul and Fanon, sees Europe as liberation, but the schema of race, nation, and identity fates this strategy to failure. In his description of the prison and prospectless landscape, Fanon turns to Césaire's *Notebook*, which serves as a kind of ur-text for theorizing the meaning of place in the West Indies. Fanon writes:

The black Antillean, prisoner on his island, lost in an atmosphere without the slightest prospect, feels the call of Europe like a breath of fresh air. For we must admit that Césaire was overly generous in his *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*. The city of Fort-de-France is truly lackluster and shipwrecked. Over there on the slopes of the sun is...

And then Fanon quotes Aimé Césaire's *Notebook*:

...the city – flat, sprawled, tripped up by its common sense, inert, winded under the geometric weight of its eternally renewed cross, at

odds with its fate, mute, baffled, unable to circulate the pith of this ground, embarrassed, lopped, reduced, cut off from fauna and flora.<sup>4</sup>

This particular engagement with Césaire, brief as it is, turns Fanon's attention to the senses and landscape, and so how colonialism infects, damages, and even destroys the colonized subject at every level, all the way to our sensual embodied presence of the world. Place is uninhabitable *except* as or in the mode of alienation. Martiniquans are an "ironic" people. Words and values aren't grounded, but, at best, set at play. When that play of word and value is run through the epidermal schema of racism, the particular form of alienation described in *Black Skin, White Masks* takes root not only in the black body, but also in the landscape and place called the Caribbean. Naipaul's remark that nothing was created *here* starts to resonate even more with Fanon.

The ideological appropriation of the skin by racism - what Fanon simply calls epidermalization - is pushed deeper into the psyche and its possibilities by language and diction. Language is in part embedded in the landscape as the aural dimension of identification and place, but, as Fanon is quick to note, the aurality of identity is never placing, but always dis-placing. He writes:

All colonized people - in other words, people in whom an inferiority complex has taken root, whose local cultural originality has been committed to the grave - position themselves in relation to the civilizing language: i.e., the metropolitan culture. The more the colonized has assimilated the cultural values of the metropolis, the more he will have escaped the bush. The more he rejects his blackness and the bush, the whiter he will become.<sup>5</sup>

This passage touches on familiar themes from the early Fanon, namely, the relationship between inferiority complex and the metropole and the racialization of both. But he also sketches the peculiar geography of this dynamic by writing space and landscape through the deep intellectual, psychological, and cultural work of language. I think Fanon scholarship has for the most part understood the work of language on psyche and culture (Fanon's theory is not especially complicated), but I wonder if the link between language and place has been fully appreciated. History makes Martinique a prison. Language seals that prison in the psyche.

Language is everything in *Black Skin, White Masks*, and in some ways sets the terms of decolonization - both in terms of deepening the meaning of colonialism and therefore deepening the meaning of violence - in that text through *The Wretched of the Earth*. The "everything" of language becomes a matter of political action in the later Fanon, but that politics is rooted in the cultural question. Two short passages make this clear. First:

To speak means being able to use a certain syntax and possessing the morphology of such and such a language, but it means above all assuming a culture and bearing the weight of a civilization.<sup>6</sup>

And second:

To speak a language is to appropriate its world and culture. The Antillean who wants to be white will succeed, since he will have adopted the cultural tool of language.<sup>7</sup>

Language, like the intersubjective construction of the body's meaning, carries a racial schema. Language is ideological in Althusser's sense, in that language, for Fanon, both produces and reproduces the racialized and racist society in which it is rooted. Language as *Bildung*. Language as the bearing of the weight of a civilization's racism inside the black body and psyche. The racialization of language, the claim of Négritude upon which Fanon draws so strongly, thereby threads together the alienation "from fauna and flora" to the abstraction of language, imagination, intellect, and tradition to the body. We see this in Fanon's short remark on moral consciousness, where he writes:

Moral consciousness implies a kind of split, a fracture of consciousness between a dark and a light side. Moral standards require the black, the dark, and the black man to be eliminated from this consciousness. A black man, therefore, is constantly struggling against his own image.<sup>8</sup>

The affective life of Fanon's subject is therefore not just a description, but also (or instead) a systematically elaborated structure in which affective life is a symptom that draws out the deeper, broader structures that mark Martinique as a landscape of abjection. And so, with this accumulation of elements of anti-black colonial racism, Fanon has completed his argument for the provocative claim that "[t]here is nothing comparable when it comes to the black man. He has no culture, no civilization, and no 'long historical past.'"<sup>9</sup>

Was anything *made* or *created* in the West Indies?

## Origin Landscapes

In "Reading and Writing," Naipaul offers a short meditation on Joseph Conrad's work, work with which he feels a surprising and almost elliptical affinity, and Naipaul there turns to autobiography in order to describe the relationship between reading and a sense of place. This is important because it inscribes the question of place - what it means to belong, and therefore to flourish outside conditions of inexorable alienation (colonialism's cultural effect), but also what it means to be adrift in alienation - in language and storytelling. Writing and reading both reflect and create a sense of connection or disconnection to the world; in a word, writing and reading are ideological in the very same measure that they are existential (can we really separate the ideological and the existential under colonialism and in its wake?). Naipaul writes:

But when I went to the books themselves I found it hard to go beyond what had been read to me. What I already knew was magical; what I

tried to read on my own was very far away. The language was too hard; I lost my way in social or historical detail...When it came to the modern writers their stress on their own personalities shut me out: I couldn't pretend to be Maugham in London or Huxley or Ackerley in India.

I wished to be a writer. But together with the wish there had come the knowledge that the literature that had given me the wish came from another world, far away from our own.<sup>10</sup>

This distance becomes for Naipaul question of audience, but here in this passage it is a question of how to understand literature, influence, and culture as the *precondition* of writing. Reading makes writing, not in the sense that one must see *exactly* oneself in order to write without alienation (that's much too strong), but instead that a sense of *how* and *why* one belongs to a place *and* in a tradition is crucial. In "Conrad's Darkness and Mine," an essay devoted exclusively to Conrad's work, Naipaul revisits the theme:

To be a colonial was to know a kind of security; it was to inhabit a fixed world. And I suppose that in my fantasy I had seen myself coming to England as to some purely literary region, where, untrammelled by the accidents of history or background, I could make a romantic career for myself as a writer. But in the new world I felt that ground move below me.<sup>11</sup>

This passage describes, in particular, Naipaul's time at Oxford and shortly after, where his life felt an utter failure, but it also describes how that particular moment embodies the larger question of the Antilles, colonialism, and the possibility of writing. And then, elsewhere in the same essay:

It came to me that the great novelists wrote about highly organized societies. I had no such society; I couldn't share the assumptions of the writers; I didn't see my world reflected in theirs. My colonial world was more mixed and secondhand, and more restricted.<sup>12</sup>

This last description is revealing and instructive. The mixed character of the colonial world is akin to Fanon's description (in the voice of a wounded soldier) of that world, and being black within it, as an *amputation*. A certain ideology of purity orients both Naipaul and Fanon, and they distinguish themselves from Césaire – whose relation to that same ideology produces the mourning that becomes Négritude – by the melancholia of Naipaul's reflections on place and the radical optimism in Fanon's imagination of a future. Naipaul's melancholy, and we can see this in the famous account of the Tulsis family home's decay and its oppressive disorder, is linked to a sense of ruin without promise; place, alienation, and death come from H/history, the house collapses, and so Mr. Biswas imagines a house of his own. Fanon's description of Martiniquans as "an ironic people" has the same fundamental resonance. Ironic, never sincere, the cultural and psychological space of Fanon's West Indies is unrooted and, in its unrooting, unproductive of

anything other than alienated mimicry (think here, again, of his reflections on diction in *Black Skin, White Masks*).

As well as a parallel description of place – with all the implications of history and memory – this is a question that produced so much critical reflection in the 1950s and 1960s in the Caribbean: what is an audience? And, particularly, what is an audience in colonized space for the anti- or post-colonial writer? To where does that writer write? As we have seen, Naipaul's writer writes from a fundamentally alienated place, toward a writerly culture – and here we would have to pose the question of audience that occupied so many anglophone writers in the 1950s and 1960s – that is still to come. But for Fanon, the writer, like every intellectual, is engaged, in the act of writing itself, in the process of decolonization, both as a charge for internal transformation and as an efficient cause in anti-colonial struggle. For both Fanon and Naipaul, writing is a question of the new, the future, the to-come which is, for the West Indies, unprecedented. What are we to make of this compulsion to think the new in such radical terms?

Let me pause, shift registers, and turn to two passages in order to open up the question of landscape, history, and culture. The first passage is from an old 1920s blues and string band lyric, a lyric and song that has many variations across genres in African American music, but returns each time to this turn of phrase:

If trouble don't kill me / I believe I'll never die

The lyric comes up a lot in profoundly sad and mournful songs, of course. It is a blues song. A song of mourning of life given only to death, which then produces fantasies of evasion, flight, and escape from the only thing known: trouble. But it is also a dance tune. I am thinking about this lyric alongside a passage from the “Coda” to Marisa Parham's *Haunting and Displacement* book. Parham writes, on death and blackness:

In speaking of a population generally familiar with the facts of living too hard and dying too soon, there is nothing new in saying that narratives of mourning and loss are foundational to African-American subjectivity and, by extension, black cultural expression. Perhaps such reaping is inevitable.<sup>13</sup>

These two snippets fit together in that they both begin with the notion of *troublin'* not as an event in life, but the condition of African American life itself. Trouble kills; Parham talks at the close of *Haunting and Displacement* about this notion of “ghetto miasma,” the idea that, folded into the 1920s lyric, trouble is not just beleaguerment, but it will kill you. It is life, which is death. Life is unimaginable without trouble, so if it weren't for *troublin'*, how could death even be imagined?

My interest in this pairing – death and trouble – comes back to this consideration of Naipaul and Fanon, as well as a longer set of questions that

run through my readings elsewhere of Césaire and Lamming. For Naipaul and Fanon, and perhaps even at times Lamming, the Caribbean landscape is an unqualified, uncomplicated space of death. History and memory are the history and memory of the kind of massive, total and totalizing sense of *troublin'* that can only mean dying too soon after a life that was much too hard. We could in this context – of Naipaul and Fanon, but also of the black Americas more broadly – read the opening of Césaire's *Notebook* as a kind of *ur-text* for such thinking. The poem begins with a terrifying set of images from the Martiniquan landscape. Césaire writes:

*Au bout du petit matin, the extreme, deceptive desolate bed sore on the wound of the waters; the martyrs who do not bear witness; the flowers of blood that fade and scatter in the empty wind like the screeches of babbling parrots; an aged life mendaciously smiling, its lips opened by vacated agonies; an aged poverty rotting under the sun, silently; an aged silence bursting with tepid pustules, the awful futility of our raison d'être.*<sup>14</sup>

I quote this passage in full because it expresses the sentiment – which is really a metaphysics – of the Caribbean moment at the end of World War Two, thereafter: there is only and everywhere death, and death suffocates all possibility. Death is then doubled by colonialism. That is, death is the character of the landscape and its existential effects and affects and death is the end of possibility. This is why *Notebook* calls for the end of the world; Césaire's apocalyptic thinking is a response to this double effect of death.<sup>15</sup>

Death is also the condition for Naipaul's and Fanon's conceiving the Caribbean as abject space at every level, from the detailing of the police and commodity trading in the chapter on Martinique in *The Middle Passage* to the ideological apparatus of language, expression, and world in the opening chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks*. For both Fanon and Naipaul, there is just death here – their here, the West Indies – and so asking what it means to think and fashion life after colonialism, their shared postcolonial moment in the 1950s and into the 1960s, is tantamount to asking what is possible when there is only death. The answer is already written into the question: nothing is possible. This is the lesson to be drawn from Fanon's and Naipaul's accounts of the Caribbean, leaving the latter unmoored and melancholic, prompting the former's departure from the Americas and engagement with a wider, global struggle of the colonized where, perhaps, historical process could be conceived otherwise than indulgence of death.

But is death simply the impossibility of life? Or is death also a place in which complicated, haunted, and also profoundly beautiful senses of life take root? Are melancholy and flight our only modes of thinking in the colonial, then postcolonial landscape?

If trouble don't kill me, I believe I'll never die – this is the persistence of death and the impossibility of thinking or imagining without death.

Colonialism, like all those other persecutions of Black bodies, people, and life, is a landscape of death. By design. But inside that death world and its abjection is also a secret and secreted form of life, because this song, this lyrical turn, makes of death not only the quiet human beauty of a mournful blues lyric (could Fanon have been more wrong in describing the blues as a performance for white folks?), but also the playful, loud, shouting, sexy, hilarious, ecstatic dance of a string band tune. Or the rage of a juke player. Or the flirtation of the barrelhouse singer. And so on. This, for me, suggests a way of widening – and perhaps deepening – the question of vernacular cultural forms and their function inside abject space. It is not simply that such forms exist and have to be reckoned with (though that would be enough), but also that in many ways vernacularity is linked to death and, in that link, refuses the claim that death is finality and expiration.

This brings me back to the closing paragraph of Parham's *Haunting and Displacement*, where she turns to the inter-generational exchange in Julie Dash's film *Daughters of the Dust*. A discourse about inheritance and claiming on the terms of the abject who, in that inheritance and claiming, are no longer what the colonizer or enslaver or white segregationist makes of them. Parham writes:

In the care and exuberance of her narration we might come to understand how one might meet a ghost with grace and graciousness, and how simultaneously similar and dissimilar the past must always remain, remainder, from the future...Understanding recovery, understanding how lives might again become livable after terrible events, is necessary to the interpretation of any art growing out of such events. I remember and I recall, and this too must be claimed.<sup>16</sup>

How would claiming this ghost, this painful memory and recall, transform our understanding of history – a transformation brought about, let us be honest, by simply taking seriously what most cultural forms have already taken seriously over the past century – and, in that moment of claiming, witness what most immanently problematizes Fanon's and Naipaul's accounts of the Caribbean?

Let us turn to a familiar text that makes a complicated, if not just flatly wrong, claim. A wrong claim that, like so many stumbles, is instructive and clarifying. At the 1956 Paris Congress, Fanon makes a remark that leads to a series of conclusions about culture, history, and the Caribbean as abject space, but is here negotiated through a remark on African American culture. (It is also one of the few places in which Fanon remarks on slavery.) He writes:

The commercial undertaking of enslavement, of cultural destruction, progressively gave way to verbal mystification.

The interesting thing about this evolution is that racism was taken as a topic of meditation, sometimes even as a publicity technique.

Thus the blues – ‘the black slave lament’ – was offered up for the admiration of the oppressors. This modicum of stylized oppression is the exploiter's and the racist's rightful due. Without oppression and without racism you have no blues. The end of racism would sound the knell of great Negro music...

Racism bloats and disfigures the face of the culture that practices it.<sup>17</sup>

This is a remarkable passage, both troubling and revealing at the same time. What is troubling, for me, is straightforward: Fanon is unable to think seriously about vernacular cultural forms without folding them back into the white gaze. This is the part of his thought that still struggles with colonialism's deep effects and affects. Blues, on Fanon's account, is important because it is a certain performance for white people; “Armstrong's music has real meaning only in this perspective,” he writes in that same essay. What Fanon does not see is how these cultural forms are both part of strategies of resistance and survival *and* directed by Black people for other Black people. In other words, this is early work in the formation of tradition. In this case, the formation of tradition as both the African American intellectual tradition *and* American culture as such (the complexity of that is a whole other story and essay).

What is revealing, though, is how this remark (and many others like it) rejoins Fanon's thinking to that of Naipaul. For both, Caribbean history (and more generally the history of black people in the Americas) is always only abject. We just do not see any other accounting. So, the key question for theorizing *after* colonialism for both Fanon and Naipaul is how to begin with nothing or less than nothing. Naipaul is set adrift and his fiction and non-fiction offer plenty testimony to the melancholy and ambivalence that flows from that adriftedness, that homelessness. How different is Fanon, really? Fanon's funky optimism, about which I am never entirely sure how to theorize except as an apocalyptic thought, turns on a complete disavowal of history – I am not a slave to history, we want a pure future, everything hangs on the new humanism to come. It is always the same thing from Fanon, and he never draws upon interstitial histories and cultural formations. That optimism intervenes, along with a political identity of the global South conceived as the category of “the colonized” or “the wretched/damned,” in order to chart a path that avoids melancholy and ambivalence, moving outside Naipaul's affective orbit, in the name of militant precision and decisiveness. (*The Wretched of the Earth* is nothing if not decisive.)

But what really is the difference between melancholy and optimism? They seem to me to be open to one and the same interpretation, given the shared abjection of Caribbean space: symptoms of an inability to retrieve a history of resistance and expression *even under slavery and colonialism*. This retrieval is central to the thought of W.E.B. Du Bois, Alain Locke, and others in the African American tradition, with the emphasis on the Spirituals as a foundation of tradition, but we don't see it in Fanon or Naipaul. Instead, that

moment of recognition has to wait until later, when that generation of thinkers like Walcott, Brathwaite, Glissant, and others – born around the same time, but initiators of a very different orientation of thought – explores and explodes vernacular, pidgin, and creole cultural forms in the name of another future, one that does not eschew H/history, but instead makes that H/history as big as the whole world. Because it always contained a whole world in it.

## History, Conclusion

The meaning of history is too much for any essay, to say the least, but let me conclude with two signature moments that frame my discussion here. At the 1956 Paris Congress, where Fanon delivered his “Racism and Culture” essay, Alioun Diop makes an important set of remarks. Diop remarks that history has “dishonored” black communities and that this dishonor come about not only through the systematic violence of four and a half centuries of slavery and colonialism, but also because *the meaning and significance* of H/history has always been at stake in coming to terms with that violence, both from its beginning in an economic desire through religious imperatives of conversion, civilizing mission, and postcolonial transition. European theorists of history have dominated the narrative that consigns only abjection to Africa and the diaspora. “[S]i cette Histoire, avec un grand H, n’était pas l’interprétation unilatérale de la vie du monde par l’Occident seul,” Diop writes, perhaps the historical meaning of Black people could have been different.<sup>18</sup>

Of course, it is with just that difference that the 1956 Congress wants to begin, following the Bandung Conference one year earlier, which focused so firmly on questions of politics and global South alliance, with a robust *cultural* programme informed largely by the metaphysics of Négritude. We could say that Diop’s remark, framed by Négritude’s epistemology of forgetting and retrieval, induces a sort of sigh. A sigh in the sense that he wants us to stop, consider the damage of the West’s story of History, and exhale at the thought of what *could have been* for people of African origin (Diop’s appeal in unifying the diaspora). Sighing over the thought for forgetting. Perhaps sighing as the work of retrieval begins.

What is a sigh? We know the physical act. We inhale and we exhale at some unexpected, always needed, depth. But sighing is so much more; it tells its own story, always so full of affect. The sigh is mournful, full of longing, expelling but also setting an affective relation to time. For what does the sigh long? What is the sigh in the New World context? There are many ways to sigh. Diop’s remark on History with a capital H is the perfect embodiment of the sigh of Négritude. The violence of European historiography and writerly practice dishonors Black history, that much is clear. This violence and dishonor, which induces forgetting in the diaspora at the level of writing and imagination, *ought*, for Diop, to induce a companion longing for the Old World of Africa – the before-times of diasporic peoples. But, of course, neither

Fanon nor Naipaul sigh over the ruins of the Americas. There is no mourning or longing that leads down the path of retrieval. Fanon rejects Négritude, whatever praise he might have for Césaire's *Notebook*, and Naipaul finds no home in south Asia. There is only the absoluteness of beginning (Fanon) and the irreducible, unaddressable melancholy of estrangement (Naipaul). Fanon derides the search for a great black past in *Black Skin, White Masks* as a nostalgia born of the flight from neurosis. Naipaul reads the Ramleela as a sad trace, a kind of cry into the abyss.

Why mention the sigh of History, the sight over ruins? It is to recall Walcott's Nobel lecture, published in *What the Twilight Says*, "The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory." This phenomenal piece begins with the question of the sigh of History, and in the rejection of the sigh – or even just noting that it does not sound or resonate clearly in the Caribbean – and joins Fanon and Naipaul by throwing a deep skepticism over claims to great, retrievable civilizational pasts. Walcott writes:

The sigh of History rises over ruins, not over landscapes, and in the Antilles there are few ruins to sigh over, apart from the ruins of sugar estates and abandoned forts.<sup>19</sup>

In this moment, Walcott cleaves an important space between what Glissant and Antonio Benítez-Rojo call "continental" and "archipelagic" thinking. The sigh of History arises from thinking diaspora on the model of a continent, with natural and firm borders that contain a people. But Walcott, in a clear address to Naipaul, goes further when he writes:

Looking around slowly, as a camera would, taking in the low blue hills over Port of Spain, the village road and houses, the warrior-archers, the god-actors and their handlers, and music already on the sound track, I wanted to make a film that would be a long-drawn sigh over Felicity. I was filtering the afternoon with evocations of a lost India, but why 'evocations'? Why not 'celebrations of a real presence'? Why should India be 'lost' when none of these villagers ever really knew it, and why not 'continuing,' why not the perpetuation of joy in Felicity and in all the other nouns of the Central Plain...?<sup>20</sup>

The claim here is straightforward, but with enormous consequences: without the lure of the sigh (longing is its own kind of comfort and restoration), there is the pleasure of performance. For Walcott, and he catches himself here oscillating between repudiating the sigh and falling back to it in a quasi-colonial habit, the festival is its own event. It refers only to itself, which means, in this case, the pleasure of the song, the costumes, the words, the dialects, the vernaculars, the creolizing food and dance – that is, life itself *in this landscape as home*.

While Walcott complements Fanon and Naipaul in the repudiation of the sigh of History, and so distances himself too from Diop's imagination of

liberating Black people from History as European historiography and writerly practice, he also suggests something quite provocative. The sigh of History might also function as a ghost in Fanon's and Naipaul's work, disclosing, perhaps, a trace of colonialism still at work in each. Perhaps the sigh of History still functions as a regulative ideal, making it possible to understand the terms of cultural success (producing or being unable to produce what is worth longing for) and cultural failure (abject landscape, "nothing was created here") and, in turn, framing vernacular forms of cultural production as derivative, imitative, and degraded versions of a larger civilizational force. Fanon and Naipaul respond to this failure of the sigh of History very differently; radical optimism is very different than wandering melancholy. That is clear enough. But it does make me wonder if in fact Fanon and Naipaul share not only an account of the Caribbean as a landscape of death and abjection, but also a quiet concession to the demands of colonial historiography in affirming the demand for something enormous like civilizational force to both frame an understanding of and a go beyond failed nostalgia, abject landscape, and the strange Fanonian vision of a future of the unprecedented. Colonialism here would function as a kind of transcendental field, delineating the conditions for the possibility of the full range of critical, decolonial, and postcolonial thinking. Perhaps. And if this is right, and we set aside Naipaul's legacy for a moment, then we have to wonder if and how it might it overturn our popular imagination of Fanon? A colonized Fanon? Unimaginable. And yet.

## Audience and Periodization

One of my general aims here in critically re-reading Fanon is to historicize – in the plain sense of periodization – his thought. For me, this means in part critically evaluating how he understands the Caribbean in terms of memory, history, and culture, framed by developments *after* Fanon. Too much work in philosophy and theory begins and ends with Fanon, or reads him as a sort of timeless thinker. But periodizing also means asking how we might frame Fanon's work with the questions of his moment.

In this case, I am thinking about the question of audience. It is one of Naipaul's and George Lamming's signature questions, one that operates both at the level of explicit thematization (they write about it) and in terms of what I'd call a "structuring anxiety." By *structuring anxiety*, I mean an affect and cultural concern of the moment that puts the writer out of place with him or herself. That is, the anxiety of audience arises when the writer writes to a cultural place that has not yet come into being. An interesting temporality, for sure, but altogether disconcerting. For Naipaul, this is expressed concisely and richly in his claim that "nothing was created here," which underpins his larger characterization of the Caribbean as without history. Without a history, the Caribbean, for Naipaul, is without tradition. Without tradition, there is no

audience – audience is as much an abstraction as anything, which is revealed when we think about the writer's relation to the question of tradition. Lamming's "The Negro Writer and His World" elaborates the phases of the writer, beginning with introspection and ending (in the sense of *final purpose*) with a peculiar sense of the universal. But Lamming is also well-aware of how complicated this question is for the West Indian author. How can he write as a Black writer, working through the particularities of Caribbean alienation at home and abroad, without a tradition and audience *to* and *in* which it is all addressed? Part of writing, then, might be – or, lets just say it, *is* – the *creation* of audience. For Lamming. For Naipaul, it is a theme and end unto itself. For both, exile functions as a theme that accounts for the writer's alienation *as* the search for audience, *in* the search for audience, and writing without audience.

Fanon's work does not quite raise the question of audience. So, and this is a speculative remark (what else is a conclusion for?), I wonder if we should periodize Fanon's work with just this question. The question of audience is not a market question, nor is it simply a development of literacy question. It is, rather, a question of how colonialism's colonization of *thinking* constricts the space of thinkable possibilities, and the writer, when structurally anxious, exceeds that space and writes into a place that does not yet have historical location. The novel or poem *of* that excessive new space – and I presume as well the theory – has, in some sense, no time at all.

So when Fanon writes about a break with the past, a break that is clean and absolute, he is in some ways typical of the moment *precisely because it is a moment saturated with the question of writing into a non-space or a space-to-come*. This helps us place Fanon back into his moment, and in it we can ask the sorts of questions of Fanon that we have long grown accustomed to asking of Naipaul: why are all localities reduced to unredeemable alienation? Perhaps part of the problem is that the writer fantasizes too much about the new, rather than seeing the demands on the writer from a hidden, though utterly familiar, sense of the present and how that sense connects communities to place and memory *without exile*. In that sense, I wonder if Walcott's question to Naipaul in the former's Nobel lecture – where Walcott witnesses the Ramleela festival in Felicity and wonders why anyone (Naipaul) would feel compelled to see it as a copy, rather than an event referring only to itself and its place – could not be re-formed and asked back to Fanon regarding his treatment of cultural practices like pidgin, creole, blues, jazz, and so on. Why do those vernacular forms point to the white gaze, rather than to the audience and art of culture?

Rethinking Fanon with that question in mind is one thing. But understanding why Fanon would be framed in that way in the first place might be helped by an understanding of Fanon in the moment of a structural anxiety about audience. And perhaps that also helps us understand the deeper compulsion to write away from the Caribbean, into North Africa, as not just an identification of a shared experience by the colonized (though that

is certainly an important element), but also as a kind of resolution of a deep anxiety typical of that moment in Caribbean intellectual history. People wrote *after* Fanon. People wrote *after* Fanon *for* Fanon, without a doubt, and his transnational appeal is no doubt derived, in large part, from his travel to Algeria and participation in the revolution. But some of that writing *after* Fanon locates itself in the Caribbean, in a West Indian landscape that is rendered very differently than the abject space of Fanon's and Naipaul's work. This is not a matter, simply, of some sort of intellectual Verzus. Not at all. Rather, and this is the argument from periodization, what comes *after* helps us see what came *before*.

What do we see when we re-read *Black Skin, White Masks* after Glissant, after Walcott, after the creolists? What we see is a lesson in how to see. What landscape looks like outside the white gaze. What *Antillanité* might do with abjection and its pre-drawn conclusions. It is to see the possibilities of Fanon's early work – how could we understand vernacular cultural formation without the anxieties he outlines? – but also its limitations. The colonial subaltern made a lot of noise in Martinique. To hear it, to listen to its legacy of resistance and world-making, means stepping away from the relentless futurity of *Black Skin, White Masks* and into another interpretative frame altogether. To sigh over little histories, over big History, and theorize the archipelago as a figure for thought.

To think *this place* without an elsewhere.

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<sup>1</sup> V.S. Naipaul, *The Middle Passage: The Caribbean Revisited* (New York: Vintage, 2002), 20.

<sup>2</sup> Naipaul, *The Middle Passage*, 206.

<sup>3</sup> Naipaul, *The Middle Passage*, 20.

<sup>4</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 5.

<sup>5</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 2-3.

<sup>6</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 1-2.

<sup>7</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 21.

<sup>8</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 170.

<sup>9</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 17.

<sup>10</sup> V.S. Naipaul, *Reading and Writing: A Personal Account* (New York: New York Review, 2000), 6.

<sup>11</sup> V.S. Naipaul, *Literary Occasions: Essays* (New York: Vintage, 2010), 170.

<sup>12</sup> Naipaul, *Literary Occasions*, 168.

- <sup>13</sup> Marisa Parham, *Haunting and Displacement in African American Literature and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 109.
- <sup>14</sup> Aimé Césaire, "Notebook of a Return to the Native Land," in *Aimé Césaire: The Collected Poetry*, trans. Clayton Eshleman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 35.
- <sup>15</sup> On Césaire and apocalypse, see my "Césaire's Apocalyptic Word," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 115, no. 3 (2016): 567-584.
- <sup>16</sup> Parham, *Haunting and Displacement*, 113.
- <sup>17</sup> Frantz Fanon, "Racism and Culture," in *Toward the African Revolution*, trans. Haakon Chevalier (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 37.
- <sup>18</sup> Alioune Diop, "Discours d'ouverture," *Presence Africaine* 8/10 (Juin-Novembre 1956): 10.
- <sup>19</sup> Derek Walcott, "The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory," in *What the Twilight Says* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1999), 68.
- <sup>20</sup> Walcott, "The Antilles," 68-69.

# Book Review

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Jill Jarvis, *Decolonizing Memory: Algeria and the Politics of Testimony* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021)

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Jill Jarvis's book *Decolonizing Memory: Algeria and the Politics of Testimony* is a promising contribution to the flourishing research being done in the field of Memory Studies, that is challenging the Western and in this case the French politics of testimony from the postcolonial point of view. This book can be read from the larger ethical-political perspective in the field of International Relations, where there is a growing demand for Reconciliation Commissions to address archives beyond the legal framework. The book, as the title suggests, brings together both Postcolonial Studies and Memory studies in the context of Algerian history. Adopting an interdisciplinary approach, Jarvis's deconstructive approach to testimony and memory examines how literature archives the two as forms of resilience, as bearers of witness to experiences that surpass both time and space to fill the gaps in official forms of testimony. As more and more nations are demanding compensation from their perpetrators for past violence and crime against humanity on the political front, this book's relevance is heightened with its demand for justice and reform, and not merely to forgive and forget. The work of deconstruction that Jarvis undertakes to break down familiar language through reflections on the idea of Muslim, justice, witness, and revolt among others, she critiques the age-old practices of testimonial interrogations and censure that destabilises the multifaceted embodiment of Empire. "France remains constitutively haunted by the empire that it has tried both to exorcise and atone for (12)" succinctly covers the period of Algerian colonisation in 1830 to France's continued endeavour to redeem and absolve itself from its colonial violence that has been and still remains under the shroud of willful Western amnesia. Jarvis attempts to expose the denial of the paradox of the French Republican values they are so proud of, to demand justice and reform for the most abject.

Jarvis's main subject in the text is the problem of archaization/archives. For her, the history of Western historiography is largely built upon a discourse of domination that is unidirectional and judicially selective, that chooses to archive that which does not tarnish its grand imperial image. Following Lia Brozgal's definition of an archive as "a set of works that evince an archival function and that, together, produce an epistemological system in oppositional relationship to an official archive,"<sup>1</sup> Jarvis postulates that literature as an archive fills in the lacunae in legal forms of testimony and challenges official historical memory. In this view, although literature does not qualify as a verified source through which to access historical memory, it calls to the imagination of the reader for the events to be heard.

Another important theme that haunts the book is that the selection of events to be archived creates a hierarchy, assumes that one event or person is more important than another, and thus negates or dehumanises. While Agamben states that the status of the human is determined and conferred by the law, Jarvis's objective is to show how literature opens the possibility to question and challenge the power of the law to grant the status of the "human" (32).

*Decolonizing memory's* claim that Algeria still looms in the shadows of colonialism, as Todd Shephard also highlights in *Invention of Decolonization*, which is further elaborated by Karima Lazali stating that due to insufficient archaization, France is capable of absolving itself from colonial violence, the range of literary works Jarvis discusses pokes at France's historical amnesia to free memory from the chains of imperialism. This book examines literary works from three periods of Algerian history – colonial, decolonial and the civil wars of the 1990s. Through a close reading of a dozen primary texts, including novels, activist testimonies, autobiographies and poems written in various languages, Jarvis examines these literary experiments that contribute to the archaization of testimonies that transcend both time and space. In the introduction, "The Future of Memory," she sets a tone for justice for Algerians by exposing the ironies and contradictions in the French colonial practices, where to begin with, the laws of citizenship were made ambivalent so that they could modify and interpret at their advantage. The denial of colonial violence as a "crime against humanity" only to be accepted as such in 2017 by Emmanuel Macron, reinforces the silences and silencing of memory.

The first chapter, "Remnants of Muslims" which is influenced by Giorgio Agamben's book *Remnants of Auschwitz*, shows how the status of the "human" can be elevated through literature rather than through the legal system. Casing her argument on Agamben's notion of the "Musulmann" which he defines as "not so much a limit between life and death; rather he [the Musulmann] marks the threshold between the human and the inhuman"<sup>2</sup> and drawing a parallel with the dehumanization in the Nazi camps of World War Two, Jarvis shows how history has repeated itself through the Jews. The epithet Musulmann which Agamben leaves out in the Algerian context, Jarvis

takes it up for them. Through a close reading of Zahia Rahmani's *Moze* (2003), she reveals that official testimony silences reality. For the complete truth to be exposed, firstly the French archives need to be opened and secondly, the French nation-state must be put on trial for the unclaimed crimes. The second novel, "*Musulman*": roman seeks to articulate new forms of revealing the truth which does not exist in the political-legal framework. The absence of witnesses lost to history as testifying subjects should not be a barrier to accepting alternative frameworks of testimony – i.e., literature.

The second chapter, "Untranslatable justice" argues for a possibility of an alternative form of testimony through exploration and exposure of the failures of the mainstream justice system. It does so by a close reading of three activist texts written before the Evian Accords. The chapter begins by asking if testimony as fiction can be considered as truthful, as responsible and as serious as testimony itself. Through Derrida's notion of the untranslatability of testimony and simultaneously its call to be translated in the absence of the bearer of the violence, Jarvis argues that literature comes into contact with the law when the speaker insists that what he/she is saying is the truth. Therefore, how is the witness standing before a judge in court any different from a testimony through literature? Do any of the two forms of witnesses have proof because they are both secondary carriers of the "truth"? The various forms of testimony in the three texts- perpetrator testimony in *Nuremberg pour l'Algérie*, six first-person statements by Jews in detention camps in Paris in 1959 in *La gangrène*, and a court case study of a tortured prisoner, *Djamila Boupacha*, all three advocate for the victims by re-evaluating the official narratives to prove and expose the violation of the agreements by the French state itself, and a demand for their testimonies to be recognized even outside of the judiciary system.

However, as Jarvis argues in the third chapter, the structural disjuncture in the literature presented through a close reading of Yamina Mechakra's *La grotte éclatée* and *Arris* indicates correspondence to the temporal rupture between the Algerian war and the civil wars that followed. According to Jarvis, Mechakra's literary and linguistic techniques of translating pain and mourning by using medical and bureaucratic terminology creates a multitude of anarchives that are not spoken in public but can fit into the loopholes of the tribunal linguistic system, "By cracking the testimonial genre and unsettling the vocabulary of the nation-state, Machakra repurposes its remnants and fragments to create a fugitive literary space of infinite dimension in which other languages can move" (117).

To make this case, in the fourth chapter, "Open Elegy," Jarvis turns towards regional literature by Wacine Laredj and Fadhma Aïth Mansour Amrouche, who recognize that justice cannot be transmitted uniquely by the legal system, but rather that counter-testimonies in the form of anarchives must be encouraged to be written more and more by Algerian writers in their regional languages, thus building and restoring an archive that could or has

been destroyed by the law. What brings the two *Alf Layla wa-layla* and *Histoire de ma vie* by Fadhma close is that their textual constructions are compilations of stories, a multitude of stories woven together.

The book ends with a conclusion titled “Prison Without Walls,” which declares that although the existing judicial system is restrictive in its practices and outlook, literature has the infinite and boundless capacity to attain justice for the most abject of victims. While the first two chapters set a tone for a new model of the justice system for the victims of violence, the third and fourth chapters eulogize the victims as martyrs and shahid. The texts discussed here carry out an extrajudicial form of a trial of the French state and justice system that remains complicit and unaware of the injustices it was helping to perpetuate and preserve.

The only limitation in Jarvis’s text is that it does not take into consideration the second or third-generation writers who neither have a first-hand experience of the violence nor are they witnesses and still claim to be able to speak on behalf of their forefathers. The question that one asks oneself, in this case, is its authenticity or lack thereof.

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<sup>1</sup> Lia Brozgal, “In the Absence of the Archive (Paris, October 17, 1961),” *South Central Review* 31, no. 1 (2014): 34-54.

<sup>2</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 2008), 55.