

FRANTZ FANON'S DECOLONIZED DIALECTICS: THE PRIMACY OF THE AFFECTIVE WEIGHT OF THE PAST¹

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Drawing from the critical phenomenology of Alia Al-Saji, Christina Sharpe's notion of "the wake," and Jan Slaby's work on affect, this paper offers a critique of George Ciccariello-Maher's (2017) formulation of Frantz Fanon's decolonized dialectic. I argue that Ciccariello-Maher's formulation, while excellent in most respects, nevertheless contains a significant lacuna. While he is correct to point out that Fanon's critique of universal reconciliation forces his dialectical activity to remain firmly rooted in the present, by failing to fully draw out how the past always already weighs on the present, Ciccariello-Maher runs the risk of obscuring the *affective weight* of Fanon's historical critique. This is problematic for the way it obscures the full range of ethical possibilities that stem from this particular affective experience—possibilities that Jan Slaby (2020: 189–95) makes clear via Christina Sharpe's notion of "the wake." In other words, while Ciccariello-Maher seems to frame Fanon's recourse to infinitely deferred reconciliation as a reflection of the "ethical nihilism" (2017: 62) that characterizes the system of oppression he is responding to, a reformulation of Ciccariello-Maher's observations with respect to affectivity re-frames this infinite deferral as an "embodied ethics of being and knowing" (Slaby 2020: 189). I will ultimately argue that this reformulation helps us understand Fanon's parting words in *Black Skin White Masks*—"Oh my body, always make me a man who questions!" (Fanon 2008b: 206; 1952: 188)—as a call for the type of ethics suggested by Sharpe's notion of "the wake" (2016).

Keywords: Frantz Fanon, Black studies, critical phenomenology, affect theory, decolonization, decolonized ethics, temporality

1. The concept of "the affective weight of the past" is borrowed from Alia Al-Saji and forms a constituent element of her critical phenomenology of hesitation, which I will be drawing from in Section 3.* See Al-Saji, (2018: 331–59), and Al-Saji (2014: 133–72). While the phrase "the affective weight of the past" only appears in the former, I direct readers to the 2014 essay to get a sense of how her thinking on this theme has developed—Al-Saji refers to her 2018 piece as a "corrective to [her] previous work on hesitation" (2018: 336), so reading both essays in tandem is helpful.

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IN Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*² and *The Wretched of the Earth*, the concept of history—its meaning and value with respect to the racialized colonial subject—operates on a number of different levels. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon seems to suggest that any viable future relies on a rejection of history—as he states in the final chapter of the book, “I am not a prisoner of History. I must not look for the meaning of my destiny in that direction” (Fanon 2008b: 204; 1952: 186). In *The Wretched of the Earth*, however, he seems to offer a different framing of history, stating, “decolonization, as we know, is a historical process: that is to say that it cannot be understood, it cannot become intelligible nor clear to itself except in the exact measure that we can discern the movements which give it historical form and thought” (Fanon 1961/1963: 36).

The conceptualization of history being employed in each statement is clearly different. The first refers to history as *European history*,³ or, in other words, to History as a constituent element of coloniality, an element whose teleology bolsters the recalcitrance of structural racism by ‘justifying’ and reifying racialization. The second sense of history is more complicated. It is something produced by what Alia Al-Saji refers to as *the affective weight of the past* (Al-Saji 2018), an affective weight which forces Fanon to reject the false universalism naively promised by the Hegelian dialectic and instead construct his own *decolonized* dialectic. However, as George Ciccariello-Maher argues in *Decolonizing Dialectics* (2017), the impulse to separate Fanon’s overture along historical lines is misguided: his decolonized dialectic is not only present in *The Wretched of the Earth*, but also in *Black Skin White Masks* (albeit with different dialectical terms).⁴

Ciccariello-Maher argues that Fanon’s dialectic is characterized by “its attentiveness to nonbeing, the violent projection of identity to set frozen history into motion, and a radical open-endedness that foregrounds rupture at the expense of closure” (2017: 71). Put differently, Fanon’s decolonized dialectic—in stark contrast to the Hegelian dialectic—does not end in universal reconciliation, but is rather characterized by an openness to “an unpredictable future in which the horizon of universal reconciliation is infinitely deferred”

2. Throughout this paper I cite Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* with English pagination (Fanon 2008b), followed by the original French pagination (Fanon 1952).

3. What Alia Al-Saji refers to as “white ‘civilizational’ history.” See Al-Saji (2013: 2–13).

4. As Ciccariello-Maher states, “Those who would divide Fanon’s overture—distinguishing *Black Skin White Masks* from *Wretched of the Earth*—often do so by neglecting his decolonized dialectical vision. . . . [H]owever, I argue that it is precisely this dialectical framework that Fanon would later transpose in an attempt to understand the Algerian revolution and decolonization more broadly. Both the Algerian context and the historical moment were different, however, and these differences would fill Fanon’s dialectics with new content. The Negritude Movement had passed, in his view, from dialectical vanguard to a conservative force in African political life. In its place Fanon would turn to national consciousness. . . .” (2017: 71).

(Ciccariello-Maher 2017: 70). According to Ciccariello-Maher, Fanon's resistance to universal reconciliation firmly roots his dialectics in the temporal *present* "at the expense of all determinism, teleology, and preemptive reconciliation" (2017: 53).

The aim of this paper will be to demonstrate that Ciccariello-Maher's framing of Fanon's decolonized dialectic in *Black Skin White Masks*, while excellent in most respects, nevertheless contains a significant lacuna. While he is correct to point out that Fanon's critique of universal reconciliation forces his dialectical activity to remain firmly rooted in the present, by failing to fully draw out how the past always already weighs on the present,⁵ Ciccariello-Maher runs the risk of obscuring the *affective weight* of Fanon's historical critique. This is problematic for the way it obscures the full range of ethical possibilities that stem this particular affective experience—possibilities that Jan Slaby makes clear via Christina Sharpe's notion of "the wake" (2020: 189–95). In other words, while Ciccariello-Maher seems to frame Fanon's recourse to infinitely deferred reconciliation as a reflection of the "ethical nihilism" (2017: 62) that characterizes the system of oppression he is responding to, a reformulation of Ciccariello-Maher's observations with respect to affectivity re-frames this infinite deferral as an "embodied ethics of being and knowing" (Slaby 2020: 189). I will ultimately argue that this reformulation helps us understand Fanon's parting words in *Black Skin, White Masks*—"Oh my body, always make me a man who questions!" (Fanon 2008b: 206; 1952: 188)—as a call for the type of ethics suggested by Sharpe's notion of "the wake" (2016).

I will begin with a discussion of *Black Skin, White Masks*, focusing on the fifth chapter, "The Lived Experience of the Black Man" [*L'expérience vécue du Noir*]. This chapter is widely acknowledged to be the book's "centerpiece" (Ciccariello-Maher 2017: 49), as it is here that Fanon provides a first-person phenomenological account of the experience of racialization. Drawing primarily from the work of Al-Saji (2013; 2020), Jan Slaby (2020) and Christina Sharpe (2016), my aim here will be to unpack Fanon's account of racialization, focusing on how he links this experience to temporality in a way that foregrounds the past while simultaneously opening up possibilities for a (decolonized) ethics of the present. I will then put this reading of Fanon into dialogue with Ciccariello-Maher's reading (2017), articulating the ways in which Ciccariello-Maher's account seems to elide the possibility of reading Fanon's decolonized dialectics through the ethical terms of "the wake." I will conclude with an analysis of the final chapter of *Black Skin White Masks* (2008b; 1952).

5. As Jan Slaby puts it, "while affect happens in the present and instigates, pre-figures and transitions to the future, it is decisively anchored in *what has been*: in a materially sedimented past which continues to weigh on all conceivable ways of being." See Slaby (2020: 173).

1. “The Lived Experience of the Black Man”: Racialization, History, Affect

The fifth chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks*, “The Lived Experience of the Black Man,” should not be read as a linear narrative set on articulating what racialization “is,” as if it contained some essence that all racialized subjects experienced homogeneously. This would run the risk of turning racialized experience into a spectacle of suffering, a danger Al-Saji refers to as “the risk of specularization,” or “the tendency to take phenomenology to be equivalent to making experience visible” (2020: 207). As Al-Saji explains (partly via the work of Saidiya Hartman⁶), what makes this tendency particularly dangerous for a phenomenology of racialization is how it acts to “conver[t] the experiences of racialized subjects—suffering, enjoyment, reaction, redress, and resistance, even ‘the feeling of nonexistence’—into phenomena available to a racializing and surveilling gaze” (2020: 207), thereby rendering the experience of racialization (and the embodied person experiencing and expressing it) as legible, graspable, and easily circumscribed by white logic.⁷ Specularization thus contributes to the “thingification” [*chosification*]⁸ of the racialized subject, which, in turn, not only “immures the witness to [their] pain” (Al-Saji 2020: 208)⁹ but also fixes them as “a reality which is at once ‘other’ and yet entirely knowable and visible” (Bhabha 1983: 23). While suffering is certainly at the forefront of what Fanon is describing in this chapter, what he wants to relay is not spectacle but rather *affectivity*—a “density, opacity, temporality, and ambivalence . . . that cannot be easily expressed in visual or discursive terms” (Al-Saji 2020: 208). Accordingly, what he provides is a non-linear phenomenological account of the different (sometimes overlapping) levels on which subjects experience racialization. The level pertinent to the present discussion is the temporal: racialization engenders different logics of time,¹⁰ and these structure the way racialization is embodied and experienced.

Fanon’s account of the process of racialization reveals that it is instigated by an encounter with the racializing gaze of a white Other: “In the twentieth century the black man on his home territory is oblivious of the moment when his inferiority is determined by the Other. . . . And then we were given the occasion to confront the white gaze. An unusual weight descended upon us. The real world robbed us of our share” (2008b: 90; 1952: 89). For Fanon, this “share” refers

6. See Hartman (1997).

7. See Hartman (1997: 17–19), Al-Saji (2020: 208), Sharpe (2010: 1–3; 2016: 116–17).

8. See Césaire (1955), Al-Saji (2020: 207).

9. As Sharpe puts it, specularization “does not confirm or confer humanity on the suffering black body, but all too often contributes to what Jesse Jackson calls . . . ‘an amazing tolerance for black pain . . . [a] great tolerance for black suffering and black marginalization’” (2010: 2).

10. See: Al-Saji (2013; 2014; 2018).

to ontological recognition itself. When confronted with the racializing gaze of a white child on a train in France—“Look! A Negro!” (2008b: 89; 1952: 88)—Fanon reports an experience of ontological negation:

Locked in this overwhelming objectivity, I appealed to the Other so that his liberating gaze, gliding over my body suddenly smoothed of rough edges, would give me back the lightness of being I thought I had lost, and taking me out of the world put me back in the world. But just as I get to the other slope I stumble, and the Other fixes me with his gaze, his gestures and attitude, the same way you fix a preparation with a dye. (2008b: 89; 1952: 88)¹¹

So, rather than being met with recognition (the “liberating gaze”), Fanon is met with negation—an experience of existing outside of the I-You dyad that leaves him alienated. However, unlike the alienation described by Sartre (where alienation foregrounds meaning-making), the alienation experienced by Fanon is both individual *and* social. As Kelly Oliver describes it, “the double alienation unique to oppression is crystallized in that moment when an individual realizes that she is denied individuality and access to meaning making by a culture that chains her to a group identity” (2001: 35).¹²

While astute, what Oliver’s notion of “double alienation” fails to capture is the fact that, for the subject who is oppressed by racialization specifically—as Fanon makes clear—these chains are largely temporal.¹³ In other words, the sense of “fixedness” that Fanon describes¹⁴ is the (alienating and negating) sense of being “chained” to a racialized group identity that is ‘justified’ and reified by its location in a “closed, anachronistic and racialized past” (Al-Saji 2013: 2)—“I was responsible not only for my body but also for my race and my ancestors. I cast an objective gaze over myself, discovered my blackness, my ethnic features; deafened by cannibalism, backwardness, fetishism, racial stigmas, slave traders, and above all, yes, above all, the grinning *Y a bon banania*” (Fanon 2008b: 92; 1952: 90).¹⁵ Fanon famously describes the affectivity of this experience through a critical reformulation of Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the body schema.¹⁶

11. Translation modified. While Philcox translates the beginning of this paragraph as “Locked in this suffocating reification . . .” (2008b: 89) the original French states: “*Enfermé dans cette objectivité écrasante . . .*” (1952: 88).

12. See also Al-Saji (2013: 7–8).

13. See Al-Saji (2013: 8).

14. See Fanon (2008b: 18, 89, 95, 175; 1952: 27, 88, 93, 161).

15. “Deafened” is not the most accurate translation; the original French reads: *et me défoncèrent le tympan*.

16. For a discussion of this theme that deepens the presentation I give below, see Al-Saji (2020), particularly the third section, where she provides an excellent account of the ways in which

While the phenomenological reduction of Merleau-Ponty assumes that establishing a common body schema requires you to bracket social and historical structures—only applying them to the common body schema after it has been established¹⁷—Fanon asserts that such structures cannot be bracketed in this way, as *they represent a constituent element of one's body schema*. As Al-Saji formulates it, while Merleau-Ponty's description of the phenomenological reduction "allows the subject to step back and distance itself from, or rupture its familiarity with, the world—and, following Eugène Minkowski, allows 'leeway' (*spielraum*) and room to breathe," Fanon's critical reformulation reveals that, for racialized subjects, the world cannot be bracketed in this way, as it relentlessly "stifles and weighs on their bodies," prohibiting the "spatiotemporal leeway . . . from which Merleau-Ponty begins" (Al-Saji 2020: 211). Put differently, for Merleau-Ponty, one's body schema is—in Fanon's words—"not imposed," but rather represents "a genuine dialectic" between embodiment and the world that results from "a slow construction of [the] self as a body in a spatial and temporal world" (2008b: 91; 1952: 89). Fanon, however, points to the ways in which, for the racialized subject, this is simply not the case.¹⁸

This is because racialized subjects are trapped between "two systems of reference" (Fanon 2008b: 90; 1952: 89). The first is the History that they are excluded from and that represents the common world of meaning assumed by the body schema of Merleau-Ponty; the second is a "closed, anachronistic and racialized past" (Al-Saji 2013: 2) where the racialized subject is located and identified with the "deafening" stereotypes listed above. The result of this positioning is the formation of "a historical-racial schema" (Fanon 2008b: 91; 1952: 90) which "attacks" the body schema and replaces it with "an epidermal racial schema" (Fanon 2008b: 92; 1952: 90). The epidermal racial schema therefore reflects the "imprisonment" (Fanon 2008b: 92; 1952: 91) of racialization; the way it structures and circumscribes how bodies of color can relate to the world, preventing them, as Fanon puts it, from being "a man among men" (2008b: 92; 1952: 90)—or, in other words, from gaining ontological recognition.

Importantly, as Ali-Saji argues in "Too Late: Racialized Time and the Closure of the Past," the epidermal racial schema does not simply describe the

Fanon's reformulation of the phenomenological reduction builds off of and then critically departs from both Husserl and Merleau-Ponty.

17. As Merleau-Ponty clearly states in the preface to *The Phenomenology of Perception*, "Heidegger's 'being-in-the-world' appears only against the background of the phenomenological reduction" (1945/2012: lxxviii), which is to say, against the reflective act of "loosen[ing] the intentional threads that connect us to the world in order to make them appear" (1945/2012: lxxvii). See also Al-Saji (2020: 210–11).

18. "In the white world," Fanon tells us, "the man of color encounters difficulties in elaborating his body schema" (2008b: 90; 1952: 89).

process of becoming conscious of one's own racialization: "this consciousness does not sufficiently account for the feeling of *belonging* to a stereotyped black past that Fanon describes" (2013: 6). This sense of belonging, she explains, is rooted in the (de)structuring¹⁹ effect of colonialism, the way it wipes out the pre-colonial past and "institutes" (Al-Saji 2013: 7)—that is, firmly establishes as reality—the two systems of reference articulated above. Thus excluded from History, the racialized subject is forced to "inhabit" the closed past of "stereotyped remnants, isolated fragments, and colonized distortions" (Al-Saji 2013: 6). The result, Al-Saji asserts, is that "the fixity and closure of this past cannot simply be shrugged away or easily re-imagined. It is felt in the possibilities racialized subjects have for living the present; it is lived in racialized ways of being in time" (2013: 7).

By Al-Saji's account (2013), this is how we can understand Fanon's feeling of always being "too late":²⁰ the feeling of being chained to (or imprisoned in) a racialized past is the feeling of arriving in a world where all possibilities for meaningful action have already been "predicted, discovered, proved, and exploited," a world where the resources have already "been exhausted" (Fanon 2008b: 100; 1952: 97). As Al-Saji notes, this should *not* be understood in the Sartrean sense of entering into a world whose pre-existence is alien but in which one can nevertheless make meaning (2013: 8). What Fanon is pointing to, rather, is a world where the possibilities for any meaningful action have already been pre-defined in relation "to other (white) bodies" (Al-Saji 2013: 8), a world where taking up these pre-defined possibilities always leads to the same vicious circle: no variation, no *doing otherwise* is possible. As Al-Saji (2013) puts it, "The structure of possibility allows repetition but not creation or variation: it is a closed map" (8).²¹

19. I have chosen the term "(de)structuring" as the brackets highlight the concurrent experience of the "duality of times" noted by Al-Saji (2013): colonialism disrupts and de-structures the past that was (i.e., the pre-colonial past), and restructures the present according to the logic contained in the anachronistically (de)structured past.

20. See Fanon (2008b: xi, 100, 101, 196; 1952: 5, 97, 98, 179).

21. These statements require an important clarification. In my reading, expanded upon in Section 3, what is being diagnosed and characterized here is the zone of nonbeing, not the conscious act of dwelling it, which does contain creative possibilities. This, then, is how we can read Fanon's assertion that, while this zone is indeed "a veritable hell," it is nevertheless something that "the black man [can] take advantage of" (2008b: xii; 1952: 6). The square brackets here must be explained; the full quotation states "In most cases the black man cannot take advantage of this descent into a veritable hell," but the preceding lines identify this zone as a place where "a new departure can emerge," so what he is saying is that it is possible for the Black subject to take advantage of this zone, albeit with much effort, through a particular mode of consciousness (see also Footnote 35). Sharpe also echoes this sentiment when she states, "if we are *lucky*, we live in the knowledge that the wake has positioned us as no-citizen" (2016: 22, emphasis mine).

As Jan Slaby argues in “The Weight of History: From Heidegger to Afro-Pessimism,” the phenomenological account of racialized experience²² reflects something about the temporal character of affectivity more generally:

Underneath the bodily dynamics of a present bout of affect there is an enduring, much less volatile thicket of affective being-in-the-world. It is an effective layer of experience that manifests the past in the mode of its continued weighing on individual and collective being. The past—what *has been*—lingers on, individually and collectively, within the depths of corporeal comportment and within the material texture of social, institutional, worldly formations. (2020: 174)

This insight is important for the way it highlights the “affective hetero-constitution of subjects”—or, put differently, for how it identifies the ways in which “domain specific affective dynamics” (such as the weight of a past (de)structured by slavery and colonialism) contribute to constituting specific types of subjects (Slaby 2019: 76). Epidermalization can thus be said to represent a form of affective hetero-constitution, one that results in a subject characterized by nonbeing.²³ Significant for the present discussion is the way Slaby links this to Christina Sharpe’s notion of “the wake.”²⁴

“The wake” is a robust conceptual metaphor that well-captures the affectivity of the historical weight being discussed. It accomplishes this through four interrelated senses of the term: not only does “wake” refer to the track left on the water’s surface by a passing ship (a reference to the Middle Passage), it also refers to the aftermath of any disruptive event (natural or historical), to the state of becoming awake (“woke”), and, finally, to a ritual of mourning (“a gathering of survivors”) (Sharpe 2016: 21).²⁵ While the first two senses refer to the (de)structuring effect of disruptive historical events like slavery and colonialism, the third refers to one becoming conscious of these effects, “a state of heightened attention” (Fanon’s hypersensitivity).²⁶ The final sense is a form of commemoration and care for the dead that “more specifically denotes a form of mutual care, pointing to a *lived ethics of situated knowing and of being* in the light of a constitutive historicity of ‘absolute dereliction’ (Fanon)” (Slaby 2020: 189).

22. He cites not only Fanon, but also Al-Saji and other contemporary phenomenologists and critical phenomenologists working on gendered and racialized embodiment. A sampling of the discourse he draws from is well-represented by Al-Saji (2013), Ahmed (2007), Hartman (1997).

23. As noted above, Fanon wants to be “a man among men,” but he is denied the ontological status this positioning requires.

24. See Sharpe (2016: 1–22).

25. See also Slaby (2020: 189–95).

26. “I slip into the corners, my long antenna encountering the various axioms on the surface of things”; “I have become a sensor” (Fanon 2008b: 96, 99; 1952: 93, 97).

As Slaby summarizes, the wake thus refers to a fundamental entanglement between the descriptive and the ethical: to become “woke” to the factual condition of the (de)structuring effects of slavery and colonialism simultaneously necessitates a “keeping wake” in the form of “an embodied ethics of being and knowing” (2020: 189). As Sharpe describes it,

Living as I have argued we do in the wake of slavery, in spaces where we were never meant to survive, or have been punished for surviving and for daring to claim or make spaces of something like freedom, we yet reimagine and transform spaces for and practices of an ethics of care (as in repair, maintenance, attention), an ethics of seeing, and of being in the wake as consciousness; as a way of remembering and observance. (2016: 130–31)

Importantly, this embodied ethics (“woke work”) does not frame the affective experience of racialization as a “transformative dynamic that opens up the present towards the nascent and new” (Slaby 2020: 174), but rather as “a way of inhabiting the past” that is characterized by “a stance of unmitigated wakefulness, alertness, and critical wisdom with regard to an ongoing history” (Slaby 2020: 191). Accordingly, this is not a future-oriented ethics, but a present-oriented ethics that bears witness to the affective weight of the past—put differently, this ethics bears witness to how the past, (de)structured by colonialism and slavery, “is not yet past” (Sharpe 2016: 73). It will now be time to put these insights into dialogue with *Decolonizing Dialectics*.

2. Decolonized Dialectics as a Call for an Embodied Ethics of Being and Knowing

In *Decolonizing Dialectics* (2017), George Ciccariello-Maher attempts to mediate the divide between dialectics and postcolonial theory. While postcolonial theory has (rightfully) rejected much dialectical thinking due to its Eurocentric teleology and historical determinism, Ciccariello-Maher seeks to demonstrate—by putting the thought of Georges Sorel, Frantz Fanon, and Enrique Dussel into dialogue with contemporary Venezuelan politics—that dialectical thinking can be decolonized and thus successfully adapted to meet the struggle represented by the enduring legacies of colonialism and slavery. Of interest to the present discussion is the second chapter, “Towards a New Dialectics of Race,” where Ciccariello-Maher addresses Fanon’s decolonization of Hegel’s master-slave dialectic in *Black Skin, White Masks*.

Key to Ciccariello-Maher's account of Fanon's dialectic is the cyclical experience of ontological negation described above. Although Fanon desperately desires a fully reconciled humanity—a "New Humanism" of "Understanding and Loving" (Fanon 2008b: vii; 1952: 5)—he is repeatedly frustrated in his attempts to gain the ontological recognition this reconciliation would require: when he demands recognition through various appeals to the 'universality' of reason he is met with "unreasonable unreason" (Ciccariello-Maher 2017: 60);²⁷ when he demands recognition through a violent²⁸ assertion of black identity via the Negritude movement—"I finally made up my mind to shout out my blackness" [*j'ai pu décider de pousser mon cri nègre*] (2008b: 101; 1952: 98)—he is met with the patronizing and identity-dulling assertion of formal equality.²⁹ He is rebuffed at every turn, denied the status of subject, and forced into a "*objectivité écrasante*" (Fanon 1952: 88).

This, in turn, reveals an ugly truth: "the black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man" (Fanon 2008b: 90; 1952: 89). In other words, the universal reconciliation he so desperately hopes for is revealed to be impossible, something that has a splitting effect on his psyche:

Whereas I was prepared to forget, to forgive, and to love, my message was flung back at me like a slap in the face. The white world, the only decent one, was preventing me from participating. It demanded that a man behave like a man. It demanded of me that I behave like a black man—or at least a Negro. (Fanon 2008b: 94; 1952: 92)

According to Ciccariello-Maher (2017), this is how we can understand Fanon's experience of existing in "triple" (Fanon 2008b: 92; 1952: 90): Fanon feels like a 'man,'³⁰ desperately wants to be a 'man' in the universal sense, but is instead cyclically rendered as either a 'black man' (by the toxically patronizing liberalism of formal equality) or a 'Negro' (the stereotype who can only speak in *petit-nègre*).

Through this experience of racialization, Fanon is thus able to diagnose "a zone of nonbeing" (2008b: xii; 1952: 6) surrounding the racialized subject, the

27. As Fanon puts it, "I was hated, detested, and despised, not by my next-door neighbor or a close cousin, but by an entire race. I was up against something irrational" (2008b: 98; 1952: 95).

28. As I will expand upon shortly, I am using the term 'violence' in the same sense articulated by Ciccariello-Maher, as a form of *appearance* which ruptures the "universal ground" imagined by Hegel's dialectic (2017: 61).

29. "When they like me, they tell me my color has nothing to do with it. When they hate me, they add that it's not because of my color. Either way, I am a prisoner of the vicious cycle" (Fanon 2008b: 96; 1952: 94).

30. Before he is confronted with the racializing white gaze.

very existence of which points to a fault line³¹ in the Hegelian dialectic: it can only function by “presume[ing] equality from the outset” (Ciccariello-Maher 2017: 55). In brief, the Hegelian dialectic imagines that “self-consciousness exists *in itself* and *for itself*, in that and by the fact that it exists for another self-consciousness; that is to say, it is only by being acknowledged or recognized.”³² Accordingly, it is Hegel’s assertion that the path to self-consciousness is contingent upon recognition by an Other, a process that occurs as follows: the simple self-consciousness imagined by Hegel encounters the Other, identifies the Other as another self-sufficient essence (i.e., “sees *itself* in the *other*”), and sets out to sublimate this Other self-sufficient essence in order to become certain of itself.³³ This process of sublation, “a process of cancelling while also preserving” (Ciccariello-Maher 2017: 54), is formulated as a “life and death struggle” where “each proves his worth to himself, and . . . both prove their worth to each other” (Hegel 1807/2010: 187). While Hegel famously formulates this dialectic using the language of “master and slave,” the framing presumption of equality comes from the fact that “both parties enter into conflict with the same standing (universal *Grund*, or Ground) and either could theoretically emerge as victor or vanquished” (Ciccariello-Maher 2017: 55).

Fanon’s diagnosis of the “zone of nonbeing” thus reveals that the struggle towards reconciliation (i.e., dialectical movement) is forestalled from the outset: the racialized subject exists *beneath* the universal ground imagined by Hegel, and, accordingly, is never recognized as another self-sufficient essence to begin with—no struggle ensues, no reconciliation is reached.³⁴ In other words, the existence of the “zone of nonbeing”—“an extraordinarily sterile and arid region, an incline stripped bare of every essential from which a genuine new departure can emerge” (Fanon 2008b: xii; 1952: 6)³⁵—thus reveals to Fanon the need to *decolonize* this dialectic to account for the existence of the racialized subject.³⁶

31. “Fault line,” because this zone is *subterranean* (Ciccariello-Maher’s terminology), a region below the presumed universal ground of reason that has only become apparent through rupture. See Ciccariello-Maher (2017: 58).

32. G. W. F. Hegel as quoted in Fanon (2008b: 191; 1952: 175).

33. See Hegel (1807/2010: 179–87).

34. See Ciccariello-Maher (2017: 55–58). Cf. Fanon (2008b: 191–92; 1952: 175–76).

35. This translation requires some clarification as it allows for a potential misreading of what Fanon is expressing here, which in the original French states, “. . . *une rampe essentiellement dépouillée, d’où un authentique surgissement peut prendre naissance*” (1952: 6). In other words, the grammar of the Philcox translation makes it possible to read Fanon as saying this zone is stripped bare of the essentials necessary for a genuinely new departure, while the French seems to be communicating the exact opposite; that the diagnosis (and indeed conscious inhabiting) of this zone of nonbeing represents the very conditions of possibility for “*authentique surgissement*.” Markmann does a much better job of communicating this in his translation, which reads: “. . . an utterly naked declivity where an authentic upheaval can be born” (2008a: 2).

36. See Ciccariello-Maher (2017: 50).

Fanon's first move is thus to try and 'jumpstart' the Hegelian dialectic of recognition through the violent assertion of Black identity, a "making oneself known" (Ciccariello-Maher 2017: 54) that seeks to provide racialized subjects with the necessary ontological resistance. However, as Ciccariello-Maher notes, this move is immediately thwarted: "formal equality enters Fanon's framework as a threat, dulling identity and whittling down the oppositions necessary for continued dialectical motion, something that must be similarly combatted" (2017: 54).

This threat does not cause Fanon to give up Black identity, but rather reaffirms that the "counterontological violence" of making oneself known is a viable tool. Ciccariello-Maher explains it as follows:

Fanon's counterontological violence has nothing at all in common with that of its enemies. Rather than establishing hierarchical distinctions that disqualify a part of humanity from access to Being, this is a violence that undoes those very same exclusionary barriers, tearing down the ontological walls separating Being from mere (non)beings, and setting the two once more into dialectical motion. (2017: 63)

Understood in these terms, the violent assertion of Black identity represents a rupture in the universal ground imagined by Hegel—a means of laying its irrationality bare and thereby disrupting the logic of its teleology—but only if it can dodge the paralyzing threat of formal equality. This is why Fanon views Sartre's *Black Orpheus* as such a betrayal: the "mechanism" (Fanon 2008b: 117; 1952: 112) represented by the violent assertion of Black identity is only effective insofar as it is formulated as an *ongoing rupture* set on dismantling the "ontological hierarchy" masked by the false promise of universal reconciliation (Ciccariello-Maher 2017: 62). In other words, when Sartre makes the mistake of not seeing this—instead locating Negritude within the Hegelian dialectic, as a "weak stage" that would ultimately "pave the way for synthesis" (Fanon 2008b: 112; 1952: 107–8)³⁷—Fanon feels as though he had been "robbed of his last chance" (2008b: 112; 1952: 108). Accordingly, "Fanon Privileges the moment of rupture, diremption, and division that unleashes dialectical motion, and . . . shuns reconciliation to place weight on the present moment" (Ciccariello-Maher 2017: 71).

What I would like to highlight about Ciccariello-Maher's account is the way it seems to needlessly narrow the ethical possibilities that stem from Fanon's decolonized dialectic. According to Ciccariello-Maher, Fanon's decolonized dialectic is not chosen, but is rather imposed on him by the "ethical nihilism" (2017: 62) of the system he is seeking to disrupt. Accordingly, through the formulation of a dialectic with infinitely deferred reconciliation, Fanon is (by

37. See also Jean-Paul Sartre (1949).

Ciccariello-Maher's account) submitting himself to the fact that "'the absence of a Self-Other dialectic in racist situations means the eradication of ethical relations.'" ³⁸ While the recalcitrance of structural racism indeed renders any ethics of recognition/universal reconciliation impossible—which is what Ciccariello-Maher is articulating here³⁹—I argue, following Sharpe and Slaby, that it does not render impossible the "embodied ethics of being and knowing" represented by "woke work." In other words, by failing in his discussion of the zone of nonbeing to fully articulate the complex relationship that exists between the past, the present, and affectivity—a relationship I will expand upon below—Ciccariello-Maher elides the ethical possibilities that stem from dwelling in this "hellish zone" (Gordon 2007: 11).

3. The Past as Creative Force in the Present⁴⁰

As argued above, while Ciccariello-Maher's account of Fanon's decolonized dialectic highlights how Fanon's diagnosis of—and dwelling in—the zone of nonbeing exposes the fact that an ethics of recognition is denied to racialized subjects, what he does not do is provide an account of the ethics that are made possible by this diagnosis/conscious dwelling. In "Hesitation as Philosophical Method—Travel Bans, Colonial Durations, and the Affective Weight of the Past" (2018), however, Al-Saji offers an important account of the past-present-affective relationship, one which I believe helps clarify this lacuna in Ciccariello-Maher, and which, moreover, provides a useful conceptual framework for understanding the complex temporality at play in Sharpe's ethical formulation. Above, following Slaby, I presented Sharpe's embodied ethics as a present-oriented ethics that bears witness to how the past, (de)structured by colonialism and slavery, "is not yet past" (Sharpe 2016: 73). Here, I use Al-Saji's critical phenomenology of hesitation to explain how the affective weight of the past can be thought of "as creative force—or tendency—rather than stable deposit" (Al-Saji 2018: 341), something communicated by Sharpe's formulation albeit not as explicitly. Important for this task is a distinction I noted in the first section,⁴¹ which I will now lay out in full.

This distinction is between Fanon's diagnosis of the zone of nonbeing—the state of being objectified, *fixed*, and "chained" to a stereotyped racial identity—and his conscious choice to dwell in this zone, a choice which reframes

38. Lewis Gordon as quoted in Ciccariello-Maher (2017: 57).

39. See, specifically, Ciccariello-Maher (2017: 51, 57–58, 61).

40. The idea of "pastness as creative force" is borrowed from Al-Saji (2018: 341).

41. See Footnote 21.

this imprisonment as a deliberate (and rupturing) *occupation*.⁴² In Ciccariello-Maher's account, this dwelling is best thought of as a revolutionary form of counterontological violence; an act of *making oneself known* that, by firmly rooting itself in the temporal present, disrupts the teleology and premature reconciliation represented by the Hegelian dialectic. However, as I argue via Al-Saji, the presentness of this act of dwelling has more significance than his reading lets on. As indicated in the quotation provided above, it is Al-Saji's assertion that "the affective weight of the past" refers to *more* than simply "the process by which the past, or some part of it, becomes present (actualization)" (2018: 341). To be more specific, while affective weight does signify this process—something well-expressed in Fanon's description of the experience of an "*objectivité écrasante*" in his diagnosis of the zone of nonbeing—it also refers to "pastness as creative force" (Al-Saji 2018: 341), something more accurately portrayed by his deliberate occupation of this zone.

While explicating the nuances of her complex argument fall beyond the scope of the present work, the idea of "pastness as creative force" refers to the "creative capacity of the past to be *reconfigured*" (Al-Saji 2018: 341, emphasis mine), "a matter of both mourning it and creating *different* kinds of relations within it (for there are no means to heal it *as it was*)" (Al-Saji 2018: 348). This, as I will explain below, helps us understand Sharpe's ethics of the present as simultaneously being what Al-Saji refers to as "an ethics of the past" (2018: 339). Put differently, "woke work" is not only a mode of being present that bears witness to the past in an act of conscious mourning and remembrance (a holding wake); it also facilitates a means by which we can understand this past not simply as stable deposit—a dead weight that suffocates and reifies—but as something that is dynamic and relational. As Al-Saji makes clear, what reveals the dynamic relationality of the past is its relationship to the present: "[when] the present becomes past (virtualized) . . . new relations are woven into the past" (2018: 342). This is why the past is "differentially remembered, cognized, and felt by differently positioned subjects" (Al-Saji 2018: 337).

While the white subject can thus adopt an attitude of "disregard and indifference" towards the past of slavery and colonialism, the racialized subject experiences the past as "intensively structuring" (Al-Saji 2018: 338)—it circumscribes their very being. What the ethics of "woke work" both articulates and facilitates, then, is the endless work of consciously occupying this negating experience of the past, making it known, and *articulating different relations within it*. It is a rejection and disruption of white attitudes of disregard and indifference, of white-washing and avoidance. In other words, by living in the wake (a mode of being in the present that is simultaneously a conscious occupation of the past), Black

42. My thinking on this is informed by Al-Saji (2018).

subjects reveal “the creative capacity of the past to be *reconfigured*” according to their experience, which, in turn, “makes room for different ways of living” (Al-Saji 2018: 349). This should not be understood as “progress” (a step towards reconciliation), but rather as a mode of “putting breath back in the Black body in hostile weather” (Sharpe 2016: 113).

4. An Embodied Ethics of Questioning

I will now provide a reading of the conclusion of *Black Skin, White Masks* that frames the “infinite deferral” and “presence” of Fanon’s dialectics in the ethical terms of “woke work.” The conclusion contains Fanon’s parting reflections on the various diagnoses he has laid out in the preceding chapters, and here the theme of history seems to be at the forefront of his mind. He opens the chapter with a quote from Karl Marx, the beginning of which states, “‘the social revolution cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future. It cannot begin with itself before it has stripped itself of all its superstitions concerning the past . . . ’” (2008b: 198; 1952: 181). While this quotation may seem to be in line with Fanon’s later statements about rejecting history—“I am not a prisoner of History. I must not look for the meaning of my destiny in that direction” (2008b: 204; 1952: 186)—a closer reading reveals that this rejection is not a denial of the generative potential contained in the affectivity of the past.

In other words, Fanon’s rejection of “white ‘civilizational’ history” (Al-Saji 2013: 2) is only successful if he insists on firmly rooting himself in the temporal present, where the affective weight of the past reveals a rupture that demands reconciliation be infinitely deferred. While Fanon “weeps” (2008b: 119; 1952: 114) once he comes to terms with the impossibly long struggle this route (the only one available) represents, he nevertheless insists that this does not signify the end of creativity—“in the world I am heading for, I am endlessly creating myself” (2008b: 204; 1952: 186)—and, moreover, frames this task of “endless creation” in productive terms: “as a man, I undertake to risk annihilation so that two or three truths can cast their essential light on the world” (2008b: 202; 1952: 184). As Sharpe argues, becoming “woke” is not only to become conscious of how History has positioned black bodies as “no-citizens,” but also to allow “the knowledge of this positioning [to] avail us [with] particular ways of re/seeing, re/inhabiting, and re/imagining the world” (2016: 22)—is the possibility of “re/seeing, re/inhabiting, and re/imagining the world” not one of the “truths” Fanon is risking annihilation to reveal?

I believe that it is, and that this helps us understand his parting words as a call for an embodied ethics of being and knowing. The closing words of *Black Skin, White Masks* come in the form of a “final prayer”: “O my body, always make

me a man who questions!” (2008b: 206; 1952: 188). The invocation of the question is important here. Not only does the act of questioning signify a critical activity (a raising of doubt or objection), it also reflects a posture of radical openness: “the essence of the question is to open up possibilities and keep them open” (Gadamer 1960/2004: 298). To let one’s *body* generate questions is thus to adopt what Slaby refers to (via Kate Withy) as the “disclosive posture” of “the wake”: “a graceful positioning, . . . a circumspect alertness in face of what to not oversee or grasp, an ongoing readiness to let oneself be carried further towards what is there to be known about one’s situation and the world at large” (2020: 188–98). Viewed from this perspective, Fanon’s final prayer can thus be read as a call to adopt an *embodied* and *decolonized* ethics of the present.

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