

A Phenomenology of Racialized Lateness

ALIA AL-SAJI

1. INTRODUCTION: RACISM, COLONIALISM, AND PSYCHIATRY¹

If racism is reflected not only in economic, social, and political conditions, but also structures lived experience itself, then anomalies and breakdowns in experience cannot be studied as purely individual afflictions in racial societies. The study of the ways in which racism is lived – of “aberrations of affect”², embodiment, agency, and I would add temporality – raises the question of how psychopathology may crystallize social pathology. As Frantz Fanon noted, “anomalies of affect” are normal in racist societies.³ If colonization and its aftermaths touch our psyches and affect our bodily selves,⁴ then, in societies with lingering legacies of colonialism, slavery or settlement, both racializing and racialized subjects will experience alienation, albeit in structurally different ways. The imbrication of the individual and the social in psychopathology presents a chal-

1 An earlier version of this paper appeared in *Insights*, Vol. 6, no. 5 (2013). Acknowledgement is due to the Institute of Advanced Study at Durham University (UK) in reproducing the paper.

2 Fanon, Frantz: *Black Skin, White Masks*, Charles Lam Markmann (Trans.), New York 1967, p. 8/6. Throughout this paper, I cite Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* with English pagination then French pagination (Fanon, Frantz: *Peau noire, masques blancs*, Paris 1952). Citations are formatted as follows: Fanon: *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. (English pagination)/(French pagination).

3 Fanon, Frantz: *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 10/7 f., 191 f./155.

4 As Kelly Oliver has argued in Oliver, Kelly: *The Colonization of Psychic Space: A Psychoanalytic Social Theory of Oppression*, Minneapolis 2004.

lenge to any phenomenological study of racialized experience, including my own; for to do justice to that experience, phenomenology must attend not only to the intersubjective and first-personal constitution of meaning, but to social structures and historical situations that may appear, at first sight, to lie beyond the scope of its description. This means that the phenomenologist will need to be both *critical* – extending the scope of the phenomenological reduction to the naturalization of social oppression in experience – and *interdisciplinary*, drawing on social theory and histories of colonial racism to contextualize the experiences at stake. This reflects a phenomenological methodology that I attempt to develop throughout my work on racism. In this paper, I draw on the Martiniquan philosopher and psychiatrist Frantz Fanon and on postcolonial Latin American thought to help me understand constructions of the past in colonialism and racism.

When theorists of colour attempt to give accounts of themselves – phenomenological descriptions of ways of being racialized – they often borrow the language of psychopathology. W. E. B. Du Bois, for example, offers a poignant description of the sensation of “double-consciousness”: “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.”⁵ Or again Maria Lugones loosely likens her experience of “ontological confusion” – of living in different worlds, with different norms and frames of reference – to schizophrenia.⁶ While this language is sometimes metaphorical, it is rarely accidental.⁷ In Fanon’s case it is neither. In what follows, I turn to Fanon and in particular his book *Black*

5 Du Bois, W. E. B.: *The Souls of Black Folk*, Brent Hayes Edwards (Ed.), Oxford 2007, p. 8.

6 Lugones, Maria: Playfulness, ‘World’-Traveling, and Loving Perception, in: Ann Garry/Marilyn Pearsall (Ed.), *Women, Knowledge, and Reality. Explorations in Feminist Philosophy*, London/New York 1996, pp. 419-433, here 424.

7 I am concerned here with psychopathology as it arises through, and in contexts of, racism. But it should be noted that the language of imprisonment is also frequently used in first-person descriptions of how it feels to be racialized. Du Bois, for instance, describes the ever narrowing circles of racialization as follows: “The shades of the prison-house closed round about us all: walls strait and stubborn to the whitest, but relentlessly narrow, tall, and unscalable to sons of night who must plod darkly on in resignation, or beat unavailing palms against the stone, or steadily, half hopelessly, watch the streak of blue above.” (Du Bois: *The Souls of Black Folk*, p. 8). And Fanon also draws on this trope, see *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 35/27, 112/91; and Fanon, Frantz: *A Dying Colonialism*, Haakon Chevalier (Trans.), New York 1965, p. 51 f.

Skin, White Masks, in order to analyze the temporal structure of racialized experience – what I am calling *racialized time*.

I focus on Fanon for several reasons. Fanon trained and practiced as a psychiatrist, working in hospitals in colonized Algeria and later Tunisia, but his writings employ the philosophical frameworks of existential phenomenology (Sartre in particular, but also Merleau-Ponty). This joining of psychiatric practice and phenomenology is mediated and complicated by Fanon's anti-racist and anti-colonial activism; this activism was arguably motivated by Fanon's experiences of racialization (as a Martiniquan in France), but he also later presents it as emerging out of his psychiatric practice in Algeria. It is in colonized Algeria that he realized the inefficacy of a psychiatry that elided social structures of oppression, and the need for treatment aimed at decolonizing not only the psyche but also the social, as difficult and vexed a project as that may be.⁸ Even before this, however, Fanon had proposed *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) as a “clinical study” of racialization⁹ and a form of “sociodiagnostic”, aimed at making “disalienation” possible.¹⁰ In the chapter on the lived experience of the black man (“l'expérience vécue du Noir”), Fanon presents a first-person phenomenological account of how it feels to become racialized – to discover one's race. More than a description of a series of effects, the chapter unfolds a process of racialization that is affectively charged, embodied, vacillating and ambivalent. The reader is asked to live with Fanon through the slow fragmentation of bodily affectivity and deferral of agency as the circles of racialization tighten.¹¹ While his account is often read in terms of embodiment and space, and while temporality remains implicit in his narrative, Fanon provides the tools to understand the experience temporally. Significantly for my purposes, Fanon acknowledges at the beginning of *Black Skin, White Masks* the importance of time in understanding racialization, describing the architecture of the work as rooted in temporality.¹² This is

8 See Fanon: *A Dying Colonialism*. For more on Fanon's decolonized or revolutionary psychiatry, see Vergès, Françoise: To Cure and to Free: The Fanonian Project of “Decolonized Psychiatry”, in: Lewis R. Gordon/T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting/René T. White (Ed.), *Fanon. A Critical Reader*, Malden 1996, pp. 85-99; and Bulhan, Hussein A.: Revolutionary Psychiatry of Fanon, in: Nigel C. Gibson (Ed.), *Rethinking Fanon*, Amherst 1999, pp. 141-175.

9 Fanon: *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 12/10.

10 Ibid., p. 11/8.

11 Ibid., p. 112/90 f.

12 Fanon notes: “The architecture of this work is rooted in the temporal. Every human problem must be considered from the standpoint of time. Ideally, the present will always contribute to the building of the future.” (Ibid., p. 12 f./10).

substantiated, I will argue, by the structuring role that the past plays in the lived experience of racialization – a role that Fanon abbreviates in his reference to a “historico-racial schema” in the phenomenological account he offers. In this paper, it is my aim to take up Fanon’s brief references to time and to elaborate the work done by the past, in particular, in structuring racialized time.

We should be mindful from the start that what Fanon offers is *one* experience of racialization; the experience he describes is neither definitive nor exhaustive. Beyond it lies a multiplicity of racialized experience, and Fanon acknowledges the limitations of his positionality – a Martiniquan, living under French colonialism, a doctor, in a time when slavery is no longer living memory – and of his sensibility – socially and intellectually engaged. Certainly, Fanon’s account is that of a black man; and black women are mostly unheard in the book. But as I read *Black Skin, White Masks*, its aim is also to draw out structural overlaps with other racialized experience, while remaining cognizant of differences. Indeed, Fanon sees phenomenology as providing a method precisely for this; rather than collecting facts and behaviour, he notes, it allows the understanding of a few concrete experiences in their structuring meanings.¹³ Significantly, it is when it combines phenomenology and social critique that *Black Skin, White Masks* is most successful in my view. In the chapter on the lived experience of the black man, Fanon captures, I contend, a fragmenting tendency of racialization, its retrospective colonization of the past, that allows us to glimpse its temporal logic.¹⁴

2. RACIALIZATION AND EMBODIMENT: EPIDERMALIZED RACISM

What is meant by racialization? In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon shows how racialization is not only a process by which the identities of self and other are constituted (an othering process à la Jean-Paul Sartre); it is a socially pathological othering with important structural features. This othering involves a projective mechanism by which what is undesirable in the self is projected onto the other; the result is a negative mirroring whereby the other is constituted as that

13 Ibid., p. 168 f./136; citing Jaspers.

14 Here, an overlap may be discerned, but also a difference, with other accounts of black racialization, and specifically with Du Boisian “double-consciousness”.

which this self is *not*, or does not take itself to be.¹⁵ ‘Black’ is oppositionally constructed as that which ‘white’ identity disavows. Through this racialization, difference no longer appears to be relational or fluid; difference is made into opposition and hierarchy, so that identities appear to be mutually exclusive and in-themselves terms. What allows this hierarchy to be seen as a feature of the world, and racializing operations to remain hidden from view, is the way in which race is perceived as belonging to visible features of the body (such as skin colour). Racialization hence relies on the naturalization of projected and oppositional difference to the perceived body of the racialized subject.

Moreover, racialization not only structures the ways in which bodies are represented and perceived, it describes the ways in which colonialism and white supremacy divide bodies politically, economically, spatially and socially in order to exploit and dominate them.¹⁶ Racialization is, then, the historical, social, epistemological and affective process by which races are constructed, seen and, when interiorized or epidermalized, lived. The power of Fanon’s account of racism is twofold, in my view, for he is interested both in the *naturalization* of race, its constitution in relation to visible bodily markers that come to unconsciously stand in for race, and in its *rationalization*, the ways in which racism takes itself to originate as a mere reaction to the racialized other. He shows that it is of the essence of racism to forget the histories and operations of power, which constitute it, and to scapegoat or blame its victims.¹⁷ What Fanon reveals in his account of racialization is that the construction of race in the imaginary has more to do with drawing lines of domination and privilege, with demarcations of “whiteness”, than with the concrete racialized others who are its ostensible objects. In other words, there is an ignorance constitutive of racism that is not merely accidental, but that sustains its operations – a forgetting which actively hides racializing mechanisms and misconstrues its objects. Racism is am-

15 See Fanon: *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 191/155. Such undesirability is, of course, itself constituted in the collective unconscious in the process of colonizing the other.

16 This is what Ladelle McWhorter calls biopolitical racism (McWhorter, Ladelle: *Racism and Sexual Oppression in Anglo-America: A Genealogy*, Bloomington/Indianapolis 2009) and what Falguni Sheth has called the technologies of race (Sheth, Falguni A.: *Toward a Political Philosophy of Race*, Albany 2009). As I will show in this paper, this racial mapping is also temporal.

17 Fanon: *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 194/157.

bivalent, relying on an epistemology of ignorance, to use Charles Mills' term.¹⁸ As Fanon notes, “[t]he European knows and he does not know.”¹⁹

It is important to remember that the racial imaginary to which Fanon refers – the imaginary mapping of racial dichotomies and hierarchies along lines of othering – is shared by all subjects living in a racial society. This imaginary functions, according to Fanon, as a kind of “collective unconscious” – one that is neither innate nor pre-given, but rather cultural and acquired.²⁰ This imaginary represents, then, an unreflected acquisition, or more accurately, a cultural imposition;²¹ it is acquired through childhood education, language, media, stories, and images.²² As a result, particular ways of imagining, thinking, and seeing become normative. It is for this reason that Fanon calls the racial imaginary ‘white’. This is not to imply that it is restricted to phenotypically white subjects; but rather that it upholds a social mapping of ways of being where habitually ‘white’ forms of being are privileged as normatively desirable for all subjects. Significantly, this account allows for racial imaginaries to be both historically dynamic and multiple, to differ for different racial societies as well as within each society. What is defining of a racial imaginary is *how* it draws borders that attempt to stabilize social categories of racialized othering and manage racial formations.²³ Even as those borders shift, in policing who is included/excluded, the othering mechanism remains in force. That it draws borders means that within a racial imaginary a certain splitting takes place; “two frames of reference” come into effect.²⁴ These frames not only define different subject-positions along racial lines, but also differentially configure the kinds of past and fields of possibility available to subjects, as we will see below.

Since a racial imaginary is shared by all subjects in a society – just as a racial world is a shared world – the pathological effects and affects of racialization will be felt by both racializing and racialized bodies, albeit in structurally different ways. I have described the pathologies of racializing ways of being and seeing in

18 Mills, Charles W.: *White Ignorance*, in: Shannon Sullivan/Nancy Tuana (Ed.), *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*. Albany 2007, pp. 13-38.

19 Fanon: *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 199/161.

20 Ibid., p. 188/152.

21 Ibid., p. 191/154.

22 Ibid., p. 146/118 f., 152/124.

23 The idea of race as a “border concept” is elaborated by Bernasconi, Robert: Crossed Lines in the Racialization Process. Race as a Border Concept, in: *Research in Phenomenology* 42 (2012), pp. 206-228.

24 Fanon: *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 110/89.

a previous paper.²⁵ Here my focus will be on experiences of being racialized – that is, experiences in which racialization is internalized, or, to use Fanon's more embodied term, “epidermalized”.²⁶ This is not necessarily the experience of every person of colour in racial societies. As Fanon notes, it is possible, however paradoxically, to live in the Antilles without “discovering” one's blackness; one enacts and identifies with normatively white ways of being, while one's race is not brought into question. Racism remains implicit. An encounter with a racializing gaze transforms this state of affairs, however, for this gaze interpolates the black subject by identifying him with his skin colour and positioning him within a racialized frame of reference (linked to a black past). This makes racism explicit in ways that are consciously and affectively lived (though not, as yet, necessarily reflectively worked-through). What is experienced is a bodily transformation – or, to use Fanon's terms, an “amputation”²⁷ and distortion.²⁸ Looking closer at Fanon's phenomenological narrative in *Black Skin, White Masks*, I argue that a temporal transformation or fragmentation²⁹ is also at stake.

“Tiens, un nègre! [Look, a Negro!]”³⁰ It is beginning with these words that Fanon recounts his experience of the racializing gaze. This gaze, we discover, is that of a child on a train, directed at Fanon as he is travelling through France. Prior to this racializing encounter, Fanon tells us, he lived his body unreflectively, with movements and gestures implicitly known. Fanon refers this lived embodiment to a body schema [*schéma corporel*], tacitly structuring his relation to the world.³¹ In a Merleau-Pontian vein, he describes this as a “slow composition of my *self* as a body [within] a spatial and temporal world.”³² But Fanon's account diverges from Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, for Fanon notes that another schema already underlies the body schema and co-exists in implicit tension with it. This is the unconscious racial imaginary, the map of implicit racism shared by all subjects in a racial society.³³ Fanon calls

25 Al-Saji, Alia: A Phenomenology of Hesitation: Interrupting Racializing Habits of Seeing, in: Emily S. Lee (Ed.), *Living Alterities. Phenomenology, Embodiment, and Race*, Albany 2014, pp. 133-172.

26 Fanon: *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 11/8.

27 Ibid., p. 140/114.

28 Ibid., p. 113/91.

29 Ibid., p. 109/88.

30 Ibid., p. 109/88, 111/90.

31 Ibid., p. 111/89.

32 Ibid. Translation corrected.

33 Sullivan, Shannon: *Revealing Whiteness: The Unconscious Habits of Racial Privilege*, Bloomington 2006, p. 103.

this a “historico-racial schema.”³⁴ While its elements, he says, “had been provided for me [...] by the other, the white man, who had woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories”³⁵, Fanon emphasizes its historicity.³⁶ This schema, in other words, has to do with the past.

Although the racializing gaze does not create this schema (racism preexisted the encounter on the train and made it possible after all), this gaze displaces Fanon’s positionality with respect to that schema and relates him explicitly to a black past. Whereas prior to his interpolation as black, Fanon could imagine all “civilizational” history as his own, he was now limited to those historical elements that made up a stereotyped black past. Thus, he says, “I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, [slavers,] and above all else, above all: [*Y a bon bananaia*].”³⁷ Affectively and explicitly lived in this way, the historico-racial schema undermines the body schema. As Fanon notes, “assailed at various points, the [body] schema crumbled, its place taken by a racial epidermal schema.”³⁸ This final schema is that of the naturalization of race to one’s own body; race is no longer simply a historical construction or a concept, but comes to be lived as a property of one’s body, and specifically for Fanon, of one’s skin. History, in other words, is naturalized. The past is no longer lived at a distance, as past, but is experienced as a fixed and overdetermining dimension of the present. To understand this, I will look more closely at the historico-racial schema, before asking after the temporal experience at stake in the crumbling of the racialized body that Fanon describes.

3. THE HISTORICO-RACIAL SCHEMA, OR THE RACIALIZATION AND COLONIZATION OF THE PAST

How does the historico-racial schema come to undermine the body schema? Although we may at first be tempted to understand this disruption as the effect of

34 Fanon: *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 111/90.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid., p. 112/90.

37 Ibid., translation corrected. The French phrase ‘*Y a bon bananaia*’, which Fanon employs here, is difficult to translate into English. It recalls to the French reader a well-known brand of cocoa drink mix that uses in its advertising and on its tin the caricature of a grinning black man (supposed to represent a Senegalese tirailleur, a colonial infantry soldier).

38 Ibid., translation corrected.

the historicico-racial schema becoming conscious – the dissonance created when racism becomes explicit – this consciousness does not sufficiently account for the feeling of *belonging* to a stereotyped black past that Fanon describes (a belonging that does not necessarily entail uncritical acceptance). More so, it does not account for the ontological weight and fixity with which this past is felt to bear on the present. What is required, in order to answer this question, is an understanding of how the historicico-racial schema constitutes a racial past within which it positions the racialized subject, at once displacing other pasts. More specifically, we need to ask how the past itself – our shared past which weighs on and informs the present – is colonized and racialized.

In attempting to explain how “[t]he black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man”³⁹, how he lacks a sense of reality, Fanon notes:

“Overnight the Negro has been given two frames of reference within which he has had to place himself. His metaphysics, or less pretentiously, his customs and the sources on which they were based, were wiped out because they were in conflict with a civilization that he did not know and that imposed itself on him.”⁴⁰

Racialization takes place, in other words, not only in the present but also at the level of the past. There is a form of othering within the past that splits it into “two frames of reference”, dichotomously constructed. While the dominant frame is that of white “civilizational” history, the second frame positions colonized and racialized peoples as foils to this history, as swept up in it without contributing to it. We would lose the tension and complexity within this racial past were we to understand one of the frames as representative of an authentic black past. Fanon’s point is that the racialization and colonization of the past represses other pasts and rewrites them.

While Fanon tries not to dwell on the past (precisely because of the affective loss and disempowerment it engenders), Latin American postcolonial thinker and sociologist, Aníbal Quijano, allows us better to understand the transformation that takes place at the level of the past in colonialism and racism.⁴¹ Quijano describes the colonial construction of time, a construction that is also a constitution and molding, since it has economic, social, and political dimensions, as well

39 Ibid., p. 110/89.

40 Ibid.

41 Quijano, Aníbal: Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America, in: *Nepantla. Views from South* 1/3 (2000), pp. 533-580.

as representational and imaginary ones.⁴² His concern is to explain how a Eurocentric civilizational history and modernity were formed. He discerns three processes, which I can only sketch briefly here: (1) The expropriation of the cultural discoveries of colonized peoples as positive acquisitions of colonialism. (2) The elision and repression of pre-colonial pasts, construed as empty, pre-historical, or primitive lands. And (3) the reinscription of a linear timeline in which colonized peoples are relocated as perpetually past to European cultures that are seen as modern and futurally open.⁴³ What were coexistent cultures and temporalities in the colonial encounter become temporally distributed as successive moments along a linear civilizational time. While Europe and its settler states are seen as the “mirror of the future” of humanity and seats of modernity, colonized peoples are projected backward as past.⁴⁴

On my reading, the past with which colonized peoples are identified is no longer their past, for the pre-colonial past has been repressed; rather, it is a past of stereotyped remnants, isolated fragments, and colonized distortions extrapolated back from their oppressed and alienated state under colonialism. This is hence a *closed* past, incapable of development on its own terms and cut off from the creativity that gives rise to an open future. This is a past, moreover, that serves to justify, retrospectively, the need for colonial domination and paternalism, the “white man’s burden”. Linear colonial history thus paradoxically assumes a duality of times (“two frames of reference” as Fanon said): the closed and perpetual past of colonized peoples is subordinated to the open time of European modernity, which is understood to have been “autoproduced” (or at least as arising out of a Greece already belonging to Europe).⁴⁵ This closed past forms a kind of ahistorical or prehistorical time, construed as irrelevant to the present.

Quijano’s account is complex, but it is important to note that he is describing more than a representational or psychological process (although he is also describing this). The colonization of time, which he describes, is a cultural, economic, and political molding that was part of Iberian, French, and Anglo-Saxon colonialism and whose effects endure in the racial societies that issue from them.

42 Drawing on Quijano, Alejandro Vallega astutely calls this “the coloniality of time” (Vallega, Alejandro A.: *Latin American Philosophy from Identity to Radical Extremity*. Bloomington 2014, p. 100). For a detailed study of Quijano’s account of how “the coloniality of power and knowledge” structures time, see *ibid.* (chapters five and six).

43 Quijano: *Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America*, p. 541, 552.

44 Quijano, Aníbal: *Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality*, in: *Cultural Studies* 22 issue 2-3 (2007), pp. 168-178, here p. 176.

45 Quijano: *Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America*, p. 552.

In a certain sense, the power of this representation of history comes from the ways it has actualized and justified itself in the cultural and intersubjective fields – assimilating peoples through what Quijano calls “a long period of the colonization of cognitive perspectives, modes of producing and giving meaning, the results of material existence, the imaginary, the universe of intersubjective relations with the world: in short, the culture.”⁴⁶ The colonized, in other words, were forced to learn – to internalize – the dominant culture in ways that reproduced modes of domination and justified them (recalling Fanon’s notion of cultural imposition). The closed past, with which colonized and racialized peoples are identified, is *instituted* and *inhabited*; it is a lifeworld of habitualities and not merely a representation. This past has taken on reality; it has *been made* through the very processes of colonization and ongoing racialization and by means of the distortions and reactions they produce. Yet these processes of institution are themselves forgotten, covered over by the apparent directedness of colonization to the modern and futural. The ontological complexity of the colonized past – with its impositions, elisions, and resistances – is reduced to the flatness of a self-contained and in-itself past. This becomes *the past* of a (colonized) people, naturalized to them in forgetfulness of both colonialism and their resistance to it.⁴⁷ As through a selective and distorting mirror, one recognizes elements of the past: singular traits generalized, reactions to racism taken out of context, protective rigidity, violence, and anger stereotyped.⁴⁸ This sense of recognition – the vexed and painful belonging to an alienating and alienated past – mean that the fixity and closure of this past cannot simply be shrugged off or easily re-imagined.⁴⁹ It is felt in the possibilities racialized

46 Ibid., p. 541.

47 As Vallega notes in his critique of Quijano, colonization should be understood to have an outside (Vallega: *Latin American Philosophy from Identity to Radical Exteriority*, p. 129). But to forget this outside – to elide the lived experiences, cultures and times of colonized peoples, which are more than the image colonialism imposes – is itself part of the colonial narrative.

48 To give an example: when some Algerian women return to veiling under French colonialism, this is seen by colonizers as part of the inherent closure and backwardness of that culture. As Fanon shows, the complex motivations for veiling are thus elided, whether as an expression of cultural or national resistance (Fanon: *A Dying Colonialism*, p. 47), a protective reaction against the violence of French colonizers, or a cover for smuggling weapons for the FLN (ibid., p. 61) – to name but a few motivations.

49 Fanon refers to this sense of recognition several times in *Black Skin, White Masks*, most poignantly when he describes watching a film in the cinema and waiting for *himself* to appear on the screen (Fanon: *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 140/113). Fanon

subjects have for living the present; it is lived in racialized ways of being in time. This brings us back to Fanon.

4. “TOO LATE”: RACIALIZED WAYS OF BEING IN TIME

What if, rephrasing Du Bois’ question “how does it feel to be a problem?”⁵⁰, one were to ask Fanon: how does it feel to be racialized? The answer I think would come along these lines:

“Too late. Everything is anticipated, thought out, demonstrated, made the most of [*Tout est prévu, trouvé, prouvé, exploité*]. My trembling hands take hold of nothing; the vein has been mined out [*le gisement est épuisé*]. Too late! But once again I want to understand.”⁵¹

And then the response from the perspective of the racializing other and white time: “You come too late, much too late. There will always be a world – a white world – between you and us...”⁵² But what does it mean to feel that one has come too late to a shared world?

This feeling of lateness cannot merely be understood in terms of the preexistence of the world, a preexistence which characterizes our phenomenological experience of the intersubjective world.⁵³ The feeling of coming to a world that was *always already there*, that contains meanings sedimented through other lives, gives us the sense of that world as real.⁵⁴ But this intersubjective world is

also mentions this “hint of recognition” in an example contrasting the reception of a Tarzan film in the Antilles and in Europe (*ibid.*, p. 152 f./124).

50 Du Bois: *The Souls of Black Folk*, p. 7.

51 Fanon: *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 121/97.

52 *Ibid.*, p. 122/98.

53 As Oliver points out, Fanon’s sense of arriving “too late” differs from the Sartrean notion of being thrown into a world that is not of one’s own making but in which one can nevertheless make meaning (Oliver: *The Colonization of Psychic Space*, p. 15). Oliver explains Fanon’s experience in terms of the concept of “double alienation” (Oliver, Kelly: *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition*, Minneapolis 2001, p. 30).

54 This is what Keith Whitmoyer, reading Merleau-Ponty, has called “ontological lateness”. See Whitmoyer, Keith: Ontological Lateness: Merleau-Ponty’s meta-philosophy, in: *Chiasmi* 12 (2011), pp. 341-358. Racialized lateness is not only differently

not perceived as a completed reality; indeed, it is felt to be inexhaustible and only incompletely given, open to the creation of new possibility. This is not the world of exhausted and used up possibilities that Fanon describes. In order to understand the feeling of arriving “too late”, which Fanon expresses, I will take up Matthew Ratcliffe’s suggestion of exploring the distinct structuring of possibility at stake in different experience.⁵⁵ Indeed, Fanon does not express a sense of limited or truncated possibility, but a different relation to the field of possibility that is the shared white world: a relation of lateness. Racialization, on this account, would also be about managing and mediating our relation to possibility – a mediation in which the racialized and colonized past, described above, plays a structuring role.

The world that Fanon experiences is one where everything has been foreseen and discovered; all seems to be given. It is not that this world lacks possibility, but that the field of possibilities has already been defined in relation to other (white) bodies. More so, these white subjects have already used up these possibilities; they have moved on and left them behind. As Fanon notes earlier in the same chapter, the white other is “[absent], [has] disappeared”⁵⁶. Indeed, this other is always ahead of Fanon, futurally directed so that s/he cannot be caught up with. This positions Fanon as anachronistic; but more importantly it means that the encounter with the other is a missed encounter, that there is no coexistence in a lived present upon which reciprocity could be built.

Thus Fanon perceives a field of possibility structured according to the past possibles of an absent other. As past, these possibilities lose their contingency and virtuality; they become factual and necessary, the routes to their realization fixed. More precisely, the field of possibility loses its playfulness and imaginary variability. Though Fanon may sometimes be able to take up the structured possibilities already defined, and follow through their realization according to the routes deposited by the other (to the degree that this is permitted a black body in a white world), he does not see them as allowing variation, as being able to be worked out *differently*. The structure of possibility allows repetition but not creation or variation; it is a closed map. This seems ultimately to mean that possibilities are not genuinely felt as *mine*, on Fanon’s account, and it explains his description of the white world as an indifferent and cold world.⁵⁷ This goes deeper

structured, but also questions, in Fanon’s terms, the ontology upon which the former lateness is based.

55 Ratcliffe, Matthew: Phenomenology as a Form of Empathy, in: *Inquiry* 55, issue 5 (2012), pp. 473-495, here p. 483.

56 Fanon: *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 112/90. Translation altered.

57 *Ibid.*, pp. 113-115/91.

than saying that the moral values and norms of the world are defined by a dominant group to which I do not belong. Fanon's description extends, I think, to the practical significances of things and to the organization of lived space; for he implies that the perceptual and practical norms of the white world call for a virtual (white) subject capable of living and acting according to them, one whose body schema provides a system of possible actions that can take up these norms creatively in responding to the beckoning of the world.⁵⁸ The racialized subject is temporally decentered and delayed in regards to this virtual (absent but real) subject, incapable of catching up.

Finally, this perpetual deferral of possibility and lack of coexistence with the white other results, in Fanon's words, not merely in a feeling of inferiority, but in "a feeling of nonexistence"⁵⁹. This recalls the racialized subject's lack of "ontological resistance"⁶⁰, mentioned above, and brings us back to the role of the racialized past. For it is according to the past, by taking it up, reconfiguring it, and playing on its relations, that we can act in the present; whether the past is constituted dimension, memory, or habituality, this past is a resource for agency. But when it is the racialized and closed past that mediates our relation to the world, this dimensionality is distorted – *amputating* agency (to use Fanon's word).⁶¹ The past no longer offers an opening to reconfiguration and to reinterpretation in the present; its possibilities seem fixed. What is closed along with this past is not the ability to move and act as such, but the freedom to improvise. One feels oneself de-passed by the world and others, able only to follow lines mapped in advance and fulfill

58 Here I draw on and rephrase Merleau-Ponty (Merleau-Ponty, Maurice: *Phenomenology of Perception*, Donald A. Landes (Trans.), London/New York 2012, p. 261; Merleau-Ponty, Maurice: *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Paris 1945, p. 298).

59 Fanon: *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 139/112.

60 Ibid., p. 110/89.

61 Fanon likens the internalized effects of racialization to amputation (ibid., p. 140/114).

Given its embodied and agential implications, I think that Fanon's use of this term has deeper resonances that should be explored. There are at least two senses in which such amputation can be understood: (i) In cases where a phantom limb does not arise at the place of an amputated limb, practical possibilities may continue to be perceived but are not felt to be mine. Or (ii) in cases where a phantom is felt but has retained the position and pain of the lost limb, the phantom may continue to offer a means according to which one can experience the world, but it is a dimension which lacks the fluidity that would enable improvised action. This second case offers a way of understanding how the colonized past, while not simply effaced, becomes an ossified dimension for the racialized subject that limits the scope of life in the present.

predetermined expectations.⁶² Recalling the dual times that racialization institutes, the racialized past is experienced as the reduced and negative mirror of a white civilizational past, as an ossified dimension. The amputation it produces is not merely an absence but an alienating contrast; it is felt as fragmentation and anachronism. What Fanon exposes is a sense of de-personalization and of temporal discontinuity, the experience of coming too late to a world that appears overdetermined and far too real.

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62 Ibid., p. 115/92.

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