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Becoming in a colonial world: approaching subjectivity with Fanon

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ABSTRACT

Space and place were the objects of colonial domination, but the transformation of minds – through language, education and more – was where colonialism also shaped subjectivities. For Frantz Fanon, understanding the relationship between the colonial conditions in which one is situated, and the interiorised effects of these conditions, was a psycho-political problem of immediate relevance to anti-colonial struggles. Putting into conversation Fanon scholarship that helps bring into view this relationality, this essay argues that his thinking on the self as a material phenomenon, constituted and re-constituted in dialectical relation to the world, rests on three broad aspects: historicity, embodiment, and creative action. Sustaining fault lines in the experiential effects of colonialism, these can foster conditions of transformation in people's ways of relating to themselves and to one another – the reconstituting of their subjectivities – in contextually determined ways. Understood through these characteristics, Fanon's conceptualisation of subjectivity advances routes of 'becoming' despite and out of colonialism. As such, I propose that even though his self-world dialectic does not look to circumscribe the outcomes of these transformations, it decisively locates the remaking of selves within confrontations with the world that pursue the liberation of others.

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Introduction

In *A Dying Colonialism*, originally published in 1959 as *L'An V de la Révolution Algérienne*, Frantz Fanon thinks on the dynamics of colonial oppression from the vantage point of the fifth year of the Algerian War of Independence against French occupation. 'The Algerian people have decided that, until independence, French colonialism will be innocent of none of the wounds inflicted upon its body and its consciousness', he declares.¹ Although he is

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speaking of a politically specific moment and movement, he is also naming two sites of the effects of colonialism that go beyond the Algerian context: 'body' and 'consciousness'. The link between them signals what much of Fanon's work examines: how colonialism undertakes material and psychic assaults that are inseparable from one another. The social, political and economic structures that European colonialisms implemented around the world for the extraction of natural resources, the occupation of land, the creation of captive markets, and the exploitation of human labour were in a mutually effectual relation with the exercise of power over people's ways of understanding themselves and others. If the 'body' of the colonised in Fanon's words, racialised and belaboured, evidences the violence of a colonialism that pretends to innocence, then as does the 'wound-inflicted ... consciousness' of the colonised. Turning these two loaded words into colonialism's judge, jury and executioner, Fanon implies decolonisation includes the means for people to reconstitute their subjectivities. This article seeks to examine what this could mean, and why such a claim grows discernible in Fanon's thought. Its significance lies, I will propose, in that this claim rests on a conceptualisation of subjectivity that enables Fanon in his context – and us in our still colonial world – to understand the self and its material conditions as ever only transformed together.

The relation between the psychic conditions and the material conditions of colonialism remains a recurring concern in an array of scholarship. Many of these bring conceptualisations of subjectivity with an anti-colonial lens to bear on psychoanalysis, existentialist philosophy, and Africana philosophy. Ato Sekyi-Otu, for example, describes how and to what effect the relationship between 'bodies, space and action' was 'brutally truncated of its dialectical possibilities' under the coercions of colonialism.² This, we shall see, is a major concern for Fanon in his engagement with phenomenology. As Sara Ahmed (2006) among others have discussed, Fanon grapples with the possibilities and limits of the analytical means that phenomenology can provide in describing the experiences of the colonised and racialised body in (colonial) space. If 'the familiar is that which is "at home"', but also how the body feels at home in the world', he queries the aporias that arise in these processes given that, in Ahmed's phrase, 'whiteness is worldly'.³ Fanon's engagement with psychoanalytic categories, too, is agonistic but receptive. He is cognisant of a key relationality between the psychic and the political within the context of decolonisation, without discounting the new horizons that 'epistemic insurrection', in V. Y. Mudimbe's term, may open up – given that 'a particular type of knowledge or episteme conditioned the possibility of representing and knowing about Africa'.⁴ This episteme was, and is, a colonial one, which can mobilise the language of psychoanalysis for its ends.⁵

However, those who stress the psychoanalytical components of Fanon's thought, as do Jock McCulloch, Nigel Gibson and Lewis Gordon,⁶ have

also demonstrated how we can understand this as part of his wider dialectics of liberation, as Fanon engages in ‘a non-reductionistic psychology that is highly inter- and trans-disciplinary’.⁷ Adjacently, those who think with Fanon on the political subject, decolonisation and history, like David Marriott, Anna Agathangelou and Anuja Bose,⁸ have demonstrated how Fanon’s critical engagements with psychoanalysis and Marxism enable his syncretic approach to questions of racialisation, subjecthood and political resistance; complementing this are studies on colonial violence and the body; embodied affect; and Fanon’s sociogeny.⁹ More recently, Daniel José Gaztambide and Ankhi Mukherjee have demonstrated the continued relevance of thinking with Fanon on how colonialism and capitalism shape people’s psychic lives today.¹⁰ Many of these lines of inquiry, and mine, acknowledge that Fanon’s thought lives in a dynamic tension with the aforementioned fields, never sitting at ease in any one of them. However, equally as important as identifying irresolutions is trying to work towards imperfect and contingent syntheses and resolutions, without making claims to finality. While this article does not attempt the gargantuan task of defining subjectivity in all of its philosophical and psychoanalytical inflections, it takes its cue from these genealogies of interdisciplinary inquiry. All mobilise a notion of the self, for all of its indeterminacies, as something of ‘psycho-political’ substance,¹¹ and consider it one site of confrontation with colonial power.

With flag independences still years away, Fanon and Aimé Césaire singled out questions of subjectivity constitution in the historical transition to come in the mid-twentieth century. Space and place were the objects of colonial domination, but the reformation of minds – through language, education and more – was where subjectivities could be, and were, shaped. However, colonialism’s methods of thus ‘securing discursive reproduction and stability’ for its extractive and exploitative material goals were also always undercut by the colonised’s resistance.¹² Suggesting a fundamental relation between transformations in the self-perception of the colonised and the end of colonialism in perpetuity, Aimé Césaire asks in 1939: ‘Who and what are we? / A most worthy question!’¹³ Césaire was joined by other thinkers and political actors of the twentieth century’s independence decades in reflecting on how, and why, colonised people’s social and psychic ways of being in the world are in a mutually effectual relationship with their political and economic conditions. Chinua Achebe described the anti-colonial energies of his youth as a ‘mental revolution’ that brought about ‘a reconciliation with oneself’.¹⁴ Thomas Sankara spoke of ‘mental colonisation’ in the same breath as foreign debt and food aid dependency as obstacles faced by a newly independent Burkina Faso.¹⁵ And Fanon remains an essential guide in any consideration of these various layers of interrelatedness between the material conditions of colonialism, and its psycho-political effects upon those on whose backs it is built. In exploring how ‘any ontology is impossible in a

colonised and acculturated society',¹⁶ he explores why the 'mental revolution' of knowing 'who and what we are' cannot leave that 'colonised and acculturated society' intact.

In the following sections, this article attempts to trace – via three intersecting ideas – how Fanon emplaces the self, in material terms, into a dialectical relation between itself and the world. My aim is not to claim heretofore unstudied insight into a densely studied figure, but to orient select critical inquiries mentioned above towards answering why 'living through'¹⁷ and out of colonialism can also be understood as an ongoing process of subjectivity constitution. Rather than provide a definitive answer to this question, Fanon's thinking on subjectivity as a material phenomenon, constituted and re-constituted in dialectical relation to the world, brings into view three broad aspects to it: historicity, embodiment, and creativity. These characteristics or conditions make possible the transformation of people's ways of relating to themselves and to one another – the reconstituting of their subjectivities – in contextually determined ways.

The historicity of subjectivities

Prathama Banerjee writes that 'the colonized were recast as lacking valid modes of practice and thus lacking politics ... Colonial historians and ethnographers criticised the colonized for lacking in historical acumen and living in an uneventful, changeless social continuity'.¹⁸ This reinforced the so-called 'impossibility' of the colonised having subjectivities that were historical – ever-changing through their lived experiences across time – and agential – able to act upon the structures of material reality. As *Black Skin, White Masks*, in Lewis Gordon's words, follows 'a quasi-anonymous black hero' who tries in good faith, chapter by chapter, to live 'simply as a human being' through the 'options offered the black by modern Western thought', he soon discovers its 'impossibility'. All available options call 'for living simply as a white', for they re-inscribe 'whiteness as the "normal" mode of "humanness"'.¹⁹ The protagonist then decides, with the tone of one assuring the reader this is the erroneous conclusion that such a world at first gives rise to, that he 'will quite simply try to make [himself] white: that is, [he] will compel the white man to acknowledge that [he is] human' (p. 73). As *Masks* proceeds, however, the pain and rage of this attempt lends itself to Fanon's actual task: that of analysing colonialism's systemic and subjective machinations for the goal of, in his words, freedom from the 'arsenal of complexes that has been developed by the colonial environment' (p. 19).

As creations of concrete environments, to transform these 'complexes' that circumscribe subjectivities will first require the work of confronting colonialism's denial that those it subjugates relate to, and are produced by,

their environments over time. Fanon calls this the ‘restructuring of reality’ (p. 34). A need to ‘restructure reality’ can only be identified from the understanding that, foremost, there are historical actors within that reality. A relationship between one’s material conditions, and one’s lived experience of those conditions over time, must be asserted and examined. To that end, Fanon sets out to reclaim the subjectivities of the colonised as an accumulation of history, with agency. Amongst and through its critiques of French thinkers who have written on colonialism, including Jean-Paul Sartre and Octave Mannoni; its consideration of interracial relationships within the context of a stratified anti-black society like 1930s Martinique; and the painful ‘journey’ of its narrator through and out of the internalisation of his racialisation, *Masks* will politicise every stage, whether a dead-end or success, of a transformation in his protagonist’s subjectivity – in his way of relating to time, his body, and to others.

Fanon first seeks to understand how the colonial world at every turn renders disalienation for the colonised – their being in ‘human reality in-itself-for-itself [*la réalité humain en-soi-pour-soi*]’ (p.218) – out of reach. This provokes questions of how and to what end colonialism has constructed, and maintains, the appearance that its own inventions – such as race – set the terms for subjecthood. When in *Masks* he provides corrective to Octave Mannoni’s ethnopsychiatry by analysing Mannoni’s ‘pernicious misunderstanding, [which] gives the native no choice between dependence and inferiority’,²⁰ Fanon is also pinpointing the ahistoricity of this view. The apparent timelessness of its structures is an insidious but potent claim of colonialism. Demonstrating how colonial ethnopsychiatry’s ethnicity-based differentiations between human psyches always rests on what Ankhi Mukherjee calls ‘concept metaphors’ that exist only in relation to the European,²¹ Fanon illustrates its fundamental irrationality, then counters these so-called differences by thinking on the historicity of the subjectivities of the colonised.

He does so through what Sara Ahmed calls ‘the question of direction’ with regards to the emergence of subjectivity. Such concept metaphors work to ensure ‘objects appear cut off from histories of arrival’.²² The colonised ‘appear’ as objects waiting to be put to use (labour), and will cease to ‘be’ (of use) if not put and kept there. The colonial logic at work here posits there exist subjectivities that have no movement, physical, temporal or intellectual. Historicity bestows ‘direction’, which is why readers of Fanon like Gordon and Nelson Maldonado-Torres stress that, if there is a universality to the unconscious in his thought, it is the desire for (and a dialectical movement towards) freedom. That desire is also the desire to be able to become: to recover the multiple, time-bound processes that yield consciousness of oneself within the world. As Stefan Kipfer argues, ‘the spatial aspects of Fanon’s work are neither a function of an epistemology of

nonrepresentability (as in Bhabha's work) nor in contradiction with his concerns about temporal transformation'.²³ But we shall see that such (re-)constitutive movement, precisely because of its anti-colonial potential, is met at every turn with the lie that one only becomes fully human upon transformation towards what a European colonial worldview has designated as universal. In challenging it, Fanon's historicising bent relies on associating the 'self' and 'world' in a particular way.

To help concretise this, we can look to a frequent refrain in Fanon Studies: Hegel's 'Lordship and Bondage' in *Phenomenology of the Spirit* (1807), and Fanon's engagement with its ideas within the contexts of slavery and colonialism. My aim in underlining this here is not to open up a comprehensive discussion on Fanon and Hegel, of which there are several,²⁴ but to raise Fanon's historicising approach to subjectivity at 'the point of realisation' where Hegel 'falls silent', in the words of Susan Buck-Morss.²⁵ *Masks* challenges Hegel's dialectic not only through the addition of the colonial context, as the above studies examine, but also engages there with the question of selfhood. What the dissatisfied protagonist of *Masks* is incensed by is the dead-end that mutual recognition amounts to in a colonial world. Seeking to transform one's subjectivity within an unchanging environment is not only a paradox, but it only leads one to conclude that, 'for the black man there is only one destiny. And it is white'. As David Marriott offers, 'to see whiteness as the destiny of blackness means to question everything',²⁶ and this begins to render historicisable what colonialism presents as static and timeless: the colonised subject. 'There is in fact a "being for other," as described by Hegel, but any ontology is made impossible in a colonized and acculturated society,' Fanon argues (p. 89). His confrontation of the paradox that is 'the Slave [reaffirming] the Master's exclusive right to give rights' by awaiting his recognition makes possible abandoning the notion of achieving subject-status under the same social order that makes people objects.²⁷ In other words, if there is a field of action in which the 'formative activity' of the Hegelian slave takes place, then the slave's activity is also historical: it is the time-bound coming-into-being of another kind of spatio-temporal order, emerging in tension with the master's order.

Fanon is thinking dialectically here about the relationship between questions of ontology and the historical processes that have led to a set of concrete and intersecting conditions. These conditions are those of a (literal) ill fit. He writes in *The Wretched of the Earth* that, since 1954, he has 'drawn the attention of French and international psychiatrists in scientific works to the difficulty of "curing" a colonized subject correctly, in other words making him thoroughly fit into a social environment of the colonial type'.²⁸ He points out what he feels should be self-evident to his fellow practitioners: that the opposite of subjectivity constitution (reconciliation to objecthood) is what indicates 'health' in such an environment. While this

may seem a pessimistic diagnosis, a dialectic involving the self and the world is gestured towards here. In the case of the above example, Fanon illustrates this dialectical relation at work for colonialism, producing and reproducing oppression. However, thus associating 'self' and 'world' has now opened up not only new psychiatric questions – questions to which a colonial medical establishment has given him no answers – but also political ones.

While the categorisation of human societies under colonialism and the formation of the modern psychoanalytic subject are inseparable,²⁹ the category of the psyche has not remained unchanged when it has been challenged and utilised by peoples whom its early assumptions denigrated.³⁰ In seeking psychoanalytic answers for the colonised subject's state of alienation and distress, the fact that Fanon begins from the colonised having subjectivities that they can intervene in and transform in some way is a crucially historicising move. 'As soon as I desire I am asking to be considered. I am not merely here-and-now, sealed into thingness. I am for somewhere else and for something else,' he says (p. 170), pointing away from mutual recognition and towards a 'somewhere and something else' – towards the material world, in other words, both as it is and as it could be. This is the generative place from which *Masks* can pursue the 'question of direction', as its protagonist can now seek out what – if not recognition ('becoming white') – one becomes *for*. As imperialism's refusal to imagine the psychic sovereignty of the colonised individual is revealed to be politically and economically expedient for sustaining its own structures, Fanon lands upon the future as the direction ('I am for somewhere else and something else'), that is, both a future world rid of colonialism, and his future self in that world. In pivoting from his abandonment of recognition to embracing an indeterminate future, Fanon implies subjectivities which emerge changed in unpredictable ways upon encountering the conditions of colonialism are subjectivities contiguous with liberation, because to be able to change is to be historical.

The contexts of these investigations in *Masks*, to recall, are the societies of mid-century Martinique and France: two locations of the same imperialism with different but related race, class and gender dynamics. These intersect in various ways to delimit the subjectivities of the racialised, be they manifest in a Martinican who believes 'that one is white if one has a certain amount of money' (p. 26) or a white Frenchman 'who counters [Fanon's] irrationality with rationality, [Fanon's] rationality with the "true rationality"', so that '[he] couldn't hope to win' (p. 111). The direction for 'becoming' is here is no direction at all, but stasis under the guise of movement. The suffering of the self's capacity to create itself, to act from its experiences of material reality, and to build interdependencies with other subjectivities, are some of its consequences. To counter these will look different in different contexts, but all require the discovery and assertion of the historicity of subjectivities of the colonised. The protagonist of *Masks*, who 'cannot hope to win' on

terms that make ‘any ontology impossible’, must instead reorient his actions towards a future beyond colonialism as the place and time that ‘he is for’ (p. 170). Becoming, thus historicised, can be in dialectical relation with the material world, instead of with the oppressor’s lack of recognition. Although the latter, too, shapes the world, the colonised must not mistake it for the world.

Embodied experience

Fanon’s emphasis on the body, and in embodied experience, offers a further pillar to his conceptualisation of subjectivity. Studies that take up questions of embodiment in Fanon include Majid Sharifi and Sean Chabot on biopolitics, violence, and dignity (of the body); Carolyn Ureña’s work from a Disability Studies perspective; and Lewis Gordon on masculinity, manhood, and the ‘zone of nonbeing’ in *Masks*.³¹ Others like Neetu Khanna incorporate affect and emotion in relation to the body in order to explore a set of relations between embodied experience and political feeling, within the context of decolonisation. While agreeing that such sets of relations are fundamentally related to how ‘a collective revolutionary consciousness must both arise from and transform the psychic trauma of racialisation’,³² Fanon’s attention to corporeality suggests that this notion of the ‘visceral’ (embodied experience and political feeling) is always already implied by his understanding of subjectivity as only ever an embodied subjectivity.

A phenomenological view of the self, as understood through one of Fanon’s influences Maurice Merleau-Ponty, posits it is formed through our daily, and mostly mundane, physical encounters with the world around us.³³ But, Fanon argues, embodied experience in a colonial world that creates the social category of race, then locates it upon the body so as to secure an economic system as normative, is oppressive of the very possibility of consciousness of oneself as an embodied, yet still unified and coherent, whole: the latter becomes ‘solely a negating activity’ (p. 85) for a non-white body. In seeking to apply phenomenology’s mutually constitutive interaction between subjective consciousness and the materiality of the world to his own body, Fanon is left asking why the embodied subject these interactions yield is assumed to have what Gayle Salomon terms ‘an “underneath” that is untroubled by dramas and dilemmas of racial or sexual difference’,³⁴ given that the (colonial) space that body is in is oriented, or rather disoriented, by the latter differences.

Sara Ahmed argues there is a glimpse of such an ‘underneath’ in *Masks*, found in Fanon’s description of his body ‘at home’ in the process of directing his arm to reach for his cigarettes when he wishes to smoke. It shows, Ahmed posits, ‘the body before it is racialised’, before ‘the disorientation affected by racism diminishes capacities for action’.³⁵ This disorientation occurs in the

next, much discussed scene: ‘*Maman*, look – a Negro! I’m scared!’.³⁶ However, Fanon tells us prior to this scene that ‘the black man on his home territory is oblivious of the moment when his inferiority is determined by the Other’ (p. 90). Even when ‘at home’ in his body, Fanon insists ‘the world’, and especially location, effects self-perception. For example, although there do exist ‘minor tensions between the cliques of white Creoles, Mulattoes, and Blacks’ in the Antilles, he reflects, ‘when we were given the occasion to confront the white gaze ... an unusual weight descended on us. The real world robbed us of our share’ (p. 90). This is not, then, a straightforward description of moving from an experience of ‘a body before it is racialised’ to a body ‘made black’ then ‘weighed down’ accordingly. Where one stops and the other starts is more ambiguous here; Fanon is suggesting that there is more than one racial-historical schema that bodies inhabit simultaneously, effecting one’s self-perception. Rather than whether or not there is a ‘body before racialisation’ – before it exists emplaced in a particular historical and social location – what Fanon finds a more urgent consideration is that European colonialism has done something altogether different (‘an unusual weight’) thanks to the social, political and economic power of imperialism. It turns one of many fluid racial-historical schemas into a rigid racial-epidermal schema, and thus stops some bodies from becoming. It is ‘unusual’: it disrupts the ‘usual’ constitution of subjectivity through embodied interactions with space.

Generated by the ‘*Maman*, look!’ incident is, as Ato Quayson describes, an ‘affect of terror’, which is crucially also an immobilising affect.³⁷ The powerful image of dismemberment Fanon paints by describing his now-unrecognisable body being ‘given back to [him]’ is a moment of total mundanity on the one hand – a child doing what a child does, unself-consciously speaking – and a towering power imbalance on the other, where we witness the implosion of a man’s phenomenological experience of his own body. In that moment, he is no longer able to ‘intellectualise differences’ between his own and others’ bodies so that there is ‘nothing dramatic about them’ (p. 90) – which is not quite the same as no longer being in ‘a body before it is racialised’.³⁸ Rather, as Lewis Gordon describes, ‘the n—r who awaits his or her appearance’ in the mind of ‘the white’ is interpellated into existence, unconsciously, by the child, and Fanon unconsciously turns in response.³⁹ Rather than the unsurprising fact of this white child’s early socialisation into anti-blackness, or that colonialism instructs us in the meanings to be ascribed to some bodies (‘I’m scared!’), what Fanon prioritises analysing here is why his body responds in seeming confirmation of this racial-epidermal schema. Part of the shock of the event for him is his bodily reaction. ‘I thought that what I had in hand was to construct a physiological self, to balance space, to localise sensations’ (p. 178), he says. These are elements of proprioception: a process through which we apprehend and make sense

of our own bodies. Upon being interpellated, Fanon queries why his proprioceptive process is overridden by an ‘internalised inflection of a social reflex’, which causes him to turn in response to the child’s description.⁴⁰ As critical commentary on this scene has argued, this is a portrait of objectification – of Fanon’s reduction at that moment to merely the ‘concept metaphor’ of ‘the Black’.⁴¹ But it is also about the disruption, under colonialism, of an unconscious process vital to embodied subjectivity. David Lloyd captures the political nature of the disruption at work here when he writes that the ‘body’, in ‘the developmental schema of colonial modernity’, is ‘waiting to become subject’ by ‘becoming white’.⁴² What is a body-in-waiting if not a corpse, shorn of embodied subjectivity in the here and now?

This moment yields more than what is already known to Fanon from both his lived experience and his professional practice: that a social invention (race) inscribes various meanings upon his and others’ bodies, which helps its founding structure – colonialism – propagate itself. Any psychic effect of such a world, like ‘inferiority complexes’, Fanon ascribes to the same process in the same order: ‘First, economic. Then, internalisation’.⁴³ When the resources to be drawn for one’s subjectivity constitution (resources consisting of experiences in the material world) indicate at every turn that you are an object, or a subject-yet-to-be, there seems to be no escaping what Stephanie Clare and Pramod K. Nayar call colonial biopolitical regimes. There, ‘the body is the centre from which the dehumanization and loss of dignity proceeds’.⁴⁴ However, Fanon’s treatment of the body, even in such a scene of abjection, is also affectively charged by the dialectical relationship between self and world that it sustains. This charge is liberatory potential. For there is also a *why* borne of this moment: why do the colonised know themselves not to be things, despite the fact that even their embodied experiences in a colonial world tell them otherwise? The internalisation of that world – to the extent that one’s own muscle and nerve ‘reflex’ can be a response in the affirmative – still does not seem to result in subjectivities that are a seamless reflection of ‘the economic’ (xv). More than one kind of bodily experience arises, and yields valuable information both on how the ‘internalisation’ of ‘the economic’ is happening, and how it is being observed and resisted, simultaneously.

As such, embodied experience as conceptualised by Fanon is not foundational because of some self-evident authenticity, but because it yields knowledge of ‘the raw material with which we construct identities’.⁴⁵ If, from a phenomenological point of view, ‘the normative can be considered an effect of the repetition of bodily actions over time’ where colonialism constrains the racialised body to certain actions and not others (thereby putting ‘some objects and not others in reach’)⁴⁶ to break a repetition can also reshape space for anti-colonial action. Fanon’s example of the Algerian *fellah*’s so-called indolence in the face of being put to labour illustrates this.

'The duty of the colonized subject, who has not yet arrived at a political consciousness or a decision to reject the oppressor, is to have the slightest effort literally dragged out of him', he writes.⁴⁷ It is yet just potential – the potential of a bodily action over time, in this case its 'idleness' (ceasing labour), to put rebellion within reach. Here, Fanon suggests embodied experience can give rise to resistance, but not necessarily sustained resistance informed by knowledge of the powers structuring that experience.

Only through a double confrontation with the world's racialisation of his body and with his body's learned response to that world can embodied subjectivity become a location for the critical evaluation of this colonial mechanism. 'The *eye* is not only a mirror, but a correcting mirror. The *eye* must enable us to correct cultural mistakes,' Fanon insists (original emphasis).⁴⁸ A mirror may provide corrective by way of the comparison it makes possible between what appears, and what is actually out there. Even where colonialism seeks to structure experience so that 'for many long days and long nights [the eye is] subjected to the image of the biological-sexual-sensual-n---r' (p. 178), the body is still the location of 'becoming' in directions that cannot all be anticipated and accounted for by colonialism. If 'life in Fanon's writing is the quality of being directed toward the future through action',⁴⁹ when life is tied to embodied movement and action (including inaction, like in the *fellah*'s case – the refusal to become mere muscle), the possibility of decolonisation persists. It persists even when colonial space reinforces that some get to 'become' through their choices over time; some are allowed to 'become' if becoming 'white'; and some are assumed to be inert objects.

This is no blueprint for what a possibility may become, but it is a state of relationality between the material world, embodied experience and subjectivity constitution that renders visible what Fanon calls 'the world I am heading for' (p. 204). Recalling Ahmed's usage of 'orientation', wherein 'the body does things, and space thus takes shape as a field of action' (p. 65), this relation is bound by context. Therefore it may or may not act as a 'correcting mirror' upon the psychic effects of racialisation. But remaining acutely aware of this 'domain of experience that is deeply enmeshed in the world of which it is part', in Derek Hook's words, is the precursor to becoming through and out of these effects.⁵⁰ Corporeality can therefore be understood not just as the arena of colonialism's penetration, but also as a starting point of anti-colonial knowledge, as the body engages with the world in order to change it, and is changed in the attempt.

Creative agency

What is emerging so far is a repeating upon the idea of subjectivity as formed and re-formed through actions that confront the colonial world. But if the negation of one's subjectivity is to be countered through embodied

knowledge of colonialism's workings, which then informs action done upon the world, what to make of Fanon's elevation of 'freedom', as in: 'I have one duty: the duty never to let my decisions renounce my freedom'?⁵¹ This freedom – which I propose to interpret as creative agency – is that which must exist for the radically new to be a constant possibility. However, it is not unmoored: we shall see that it is given direction, constraints and purpose by the fact that many are still unfree. Wherever oppressive social, political and economic conditions can be challenged, there also will be a series of choices that may (re-)constitute your self. Here, Fanon's approach to subjectivity intersects with his theorisation of the process of decolonisation itself as the creation of 'new' men,⁵² informing the third component of his material conceptualisation of the self.

As '[decolonisation] infuses a new rhythm, specific to a new generation of men, with a new language and a new humanity' (p. 2), this social, psychic and political (re-)becoming crucially involves exercising agency ('my freedom') in dialectical relation to the historicity and corporeality of subjectivity, which delimit it. As such, far from a declaration of individualism, this is said within the context of how colonialism structurally redirects embodied action towards cyclical reactions to its oppressions. 'It is understandable that the black man's first action is a *reaction*, and since he is assessed with regard to his degree of assimilation, it is understandable too why the returning Antillean speaks only French,' Fanon writes (p. 19), underlining how colonialism both constricts the creative horizon of racialised subjects, and it presents, as though a matter of fact, that being a good mimic is an adequate approximation of agency. Mistaken for action, that 'quality of being directed toward the future', of being both agential and creative, is systematically blocked. Violent anti-colonial struggle, while generative in many ways for Fanon and which saw many colonised peoples through to the seizing of political and economic power, is one such form of agency that does not alone transform subjectivities in ways that translate into a changed relationship with the material world. This emphasis on the psycho-political stakes of a necessarily violent struggle was shared by many anti-colonial and anti-imperialist actors. From Che Guevara's pedagogy to the community *conscientização* of Paulo Freire,⁵³ efforts put towards liberation were meant to distribute political energies between confronting the old and creating the new.

As many readers of *The Wretched of the Earth* have elaborated,⁵⁴ the 'new concepts' that such political, interpersonal and pedagogical work gives rise to are enriched and enabled by collective struggle. But consciousness of both one's material world as not yet transformed, and in what ways transform it must, are foundational to these pursuits. Describing a black male patient who dreams that he enters a room full of white people, whereupon he suddenly realises that he too is white, Fanon offers that, 'as a psychoanalyst, I must help my patient to "consciousnessize" his unconscious ... Once his

motives have been identified, my objective will be to enable him to *choose* action (or passivity) with respect to the real source of the conflict, i.e. the social structure'.⁵⁵ As such, when the 'new' is sought through a dialectical relation between self and world, between one's consciousness and 'the social structure', not only do actions gain efficacy from being borne of their concrete contexts, but foster agency over reaction. When Hegel's slave achieves self-consciousness by demonstrating that they are not a thing, but a human who creates, Fanon in a sense asks what happens next: why, in other words, would subjectivities in a dialectical relationship with the material world settle for mutual recognition with their master, instead of pursuing *more* 'formative activity' that transforms reality? 'The real leap [of] introducing invention' (p. 179) is the material world being acted upon creatively by people who have always known themselves not to be things.

The emphasis on creativity persists throughout *Wretched*, where Fanon describes anti-colonial struggle as 'opening up spheres [people] never even dreamed of' and 'awakening people's intelligence'.⁵⁶ While Ariella Aisha Azoulay puts forward a persuasive caution about how calls for new beginnings can often serve to enhance and reproduce hegemonic violence,⁵⁷ it may be disingenuous to interpret Fanon's emphasis on novelty here as wholly dismissive of pre-existing socio-cultural resources for resistance (such as those found in 'old', or customary, practices). In keeping with his prioritisation of the psycho-political, I suggest the emphasis serves to sustain that the only conditions under which subjectivities can 'become' through and out of colonialism is collective and agential creative action within the colonial world, so as to effect the structures of that world. Fanon argues that, even after the ostensible end of colonialism, people must 'exercise their authority and express their will' as they go about co-creating the new conditions of life (p. 149). If this creative will is blocked after independence, then 'the moment for a fresh national crisis is not far off,' he diagnoses (p. 150). The social and psycho-political resources those creative actions may draw on, and the methods collectivities may employ, are open, drawing as they do from 'all the material means which make possible the radical transformation of society' (p. 250). They crystallise at certain times in dynamic relation to the changing contexts of the struggles at hand.

As with the political limitations to reactive versus creative action, so too with the former's ontological limitations. This is articulated as early as the charged conclusion to *Masks*, where Fanon propounds that the uncovering of cultural, social and intellectual histories destroyed, erased or suppressed by colonialism is to be celebrated only insofar as the liberation of the 'eight-year-old children working in the cane fields of Martinique or Guadeloupe' is also being fought for (p. 205). One's humanity in a colonial world is expressed when – in the face of their own subjection – one 're-claims the subjects and peoples that one encounters in the world and who live in precarious

conditions'.⁵⁸ Majid Sharifi and Sean Chabot discuss how Fanon's clinical writings, too, maintain the idea that 'selfhood cannot be complete without the arduous process of humanizing the Other'.⁵⁹ This creative leap in intention and focus is the difference between power substitution and liberation, and between the internalisation of colonial conditions and the search for 'a new language and a new humanity' (p. 36). In the former, the 'new man' of decolonisation is a master, because there has been 'no breach of the colonial master's ontological horizon or the material expressions of that horizon'.⁶⁰ Fanon does not give the new human content, but as the outcome of a dialectical process, that 'ontological horizon' or that gaze on the world cannot be just another variation on the relations of the hegemonic colonial order. While it cannot be pre-determined, it cannot come into being without engaging in a confrontation with the world for the purpose of freeing others. This is about inventing what becoming 'free' is, when it will no longer equate to becoming (like) a master.

As this vision of collectivity and embeddedness in material conditions suggests, while Fanon does mobilise creative agency, he maintains that the (re-)constitution of subjectivities must also emerge through a rejection of colonialism's logic that agency equals the drive for individualism: 'the only way to break this vicious circle that refers me back to myself is to restore to the other his human reality' (p. 192), because 'only conflict and the risk it implies can make human reality, in-itself-for-itself, come true' (p. 193). I raised the point above that the transformation of subjectivities involves the creative work of conceptualising through and out of the limited possibilities offered by 'becoming (like) a master', but this does not mean a delinking from, or a non-confrontation with, the 'master's ontological horizon and its material processes'.⁶¹ Fanon affirms that one cannot pick and choose those elements in one's own conditions that are somehow 'non-colonial' or 'non-Western' – themselves unstable notions – ensuring only those phenomena shape one's psyche, one's intersubjective relations, or one's embodied experience of the world. What will reshape these is, quite simply, actions that shatter a world where 'eight-year-old children [work] in the cane fields' (p. 205). The psycho-political means available for people's 'dis-subjection [*désassujettissement*]'⁶² are replenished through creative confrontation with the world's colonial structures.

Conclusion

Putting into conversation various Fanon scholarship and attempting to synthesise some of their inquiries can never make claims to comprehensiveness or closure. Fanon's works and life – their interpretation, and their instrumentalisation – are live debates.⁶³ Taking up three intersecting investigations, this article has sought to arrive at a working, though by no means final, conceptualisation of Fanon's relationship between the (re-)constitution

of subjectivities and the material conditions of colonialism. As emphasised throughout, in its contextually determined dynamic, this conceptualisation is if anything precursor and condition, rather than determinant, outcome or revolutionary praxis itself. Colonialism, blackness, racialisation, and their intersecting structures did not, do not, look the same everywhere. What subjectivities and societies emerge from anti-colonial struggle depend on the specific historical, social, economic, cultural and political contexts of colonialism within which Fanon's so-called *damnés* find themselves, and the methods they employ. As Alice Cherki, who worked alongside him from 1955 to 1961, writes: 'the idea that a master discourse, colonial in this instance, could shape the constitution of the individual subjective unconscious is of paramount importance to the entire body of work that has been attributed to Fanon'.⁶⁴ While Fanon's dialectics cannot circumscribe all outcomes, it illustrates why the material for becoming cannot be anything but that which is found in the reality of engaging with that world, in all of its constituent parts, as one seeks those means best suited to the context within which one is seeking to liberate others.

Understood in this sense, 'the link of liberation to realised identity' in Fanon does not at all 'equate the experience of post-independence with a new sovereign identity',⁶⁵ but rather enables a critical understanding of liberation as ongoing and non-linear experiences of confrontation with oppression – a movement more akin to what Laurie L. Lambert describes as the 'queer temporality of revolution'.⁶⁶ This relationality is the grounds upon which the psycho-political problems articulated by the twentieth century's anti-colonial actors, from Achebe to Sankara to Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, are asked. What are their concerns around 'mental reconditioning' and 'decolonising the mind',⁶⁷ if not questions about where the possibilities for lasting change through and out of colonialism lie – guaranteed as these changes are only through the ongoing 'practical actions' of people who are themselves changed in the process?⁶⁸ To approach the historically and geographically specific inquiries this large question poses, recourse to a philosophical and political conceptualisation of the relationship between the colonial world we live in, and the people it produces, is indispensable. Fanon's materialist approach to subjectivity as historicisable, embodied and creative is a fruitful point of departure for asking, in a range of contexts, why and how selves remain to be transformed out of the material structures of colonialism.

Notes

1. Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism*, trans. Haakon Chevalier (New York: Grove Press, 1994), p. 118.
2. Ato Sekyi-Otu, *Fanon's Dialectic of Experience* (Harvard, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 82.

3. Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), p. 132.
4. Daniel Orrells and Pierre-Philippe Fraiture, 'Introduction', to *The Mudimbe Reader* (Charlottesville, VA: Virginia University Press, 2016), p. xxvi.
5. For example, in a speech in Dakar, Senegal, on 26 July 2007, former French president Nicholas Sarkozy proposed that 'the African peasant' has a certain 'mentality' that knows 'only the eternal renewal of time via the endless repetition of the same actions and the same words'. See also 'Sarkozy's Africa vision under fire.' *News24*, 28 Jul 2007, <https://www.scribbr.com/citing-sources/cite-a-newspaper-article/>.
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7. Nelson Maldonado-Torres, 'Frantz Fanon and the Decolonial Turn in Psychology: From Modern/colonial Methods to the Decolonial Attitude', *South African Journal of Psychology*, 47.4 (2017), p. 434.
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12. Tejumola Olaniyan, 'Africa: Varied Colonial Legacies', in Henry Schwarz and Sangeeta Ray (eds.), *A Companion to Postcolonial Studies* (London: John Wiley & Sons, 2008), p. 273.
13. Aimé Césaire, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, trans. Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), p. 23.
14. Chinua Achebe, *Morning Yet on Creation Day: Essays* (New York: Anchor Press, 1975), p. 123.
15. Amber Murrey, *A Certain Amount of Madness: The Life, Politics and Legacies of Thomas Sankara* (London: Pluto Press, 2018), p. 82.
16. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008), p. 89.
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18. Prathama Banerjee, *Elementary Aspects of the Political: Histories from the Global South* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), p. 69.
19. Lewis Gordon, *What Fanon Said*, pp. 22–4.
20. Mukherjee, p. 36.
21. *Ibid.*

22. Ahmed, p. 42.
23. Stefan Kipfer, 'Fanon and Space: Colonization, Urbanization, and Liberation from the Colonial to the Global City', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 25.4 (2007), p. 703.
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28. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), pp. 181–2.
29. See also Warwick Anderson, Deborah Jenson and Richard C. Keller, *Unconscious Dominions: Psychoanalysis, Colonial Trauma, and Global Sovereignities* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 3.
30. Marxist approaches to psychology, as in the traditions of critical psychology and historical materialist epistemology, have also attempted this. See Edward S. Reed, 'The Challenge of Historical Materialist Epistemology', in Ian Parker and Russell Spears (eds.), *Psychology and Society: Radical Theory and Practice* (London: Pluto Press, 1996) and Derek Hook et al., *Critical Psychology* (Cape Town: UCT Press, 2004).
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42. David Lloyd, *Under Representation: The Racial Regime of Aesthetics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), p. 101.
43. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, pp. xiv–xv.
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59. Sharifi and Chabot, p. 254.
60. Harfouch, p. 145.
61. On constructive criticisms of pluriversality in decolonial approaches, see also Gianmaria Colpani, 'Crossfire: Postcolonial Theory between Marxist and Decolonial Critiques', *Postcolonial Studies*, 25.1 (2022), pp. 54–72; Katrine Smiet, 'Rethinking or Delinking? Said and Mignolo on Humanism and the Question of the Human', *Postcolonial Studies*, 25.1 (2022), pp. 73–88.
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63. One recent example is the social media response to Muriam Haleh Davis, 'The US Academy and the Provincialization of Fanon', *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, November 9, 2022. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-us-academy-and-the-provincialization-of-fanon/>.
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68. Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, p. 190.

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