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Judging Fanon

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[1] What follows depends on the idea that there is a link between how we read Fanon and his blackness. This is an obvious observation but one which has led, nowadays, to a series of debates on certain key themes or tropes; first of all, because there is a (political) crisis in the meaning of blackness; then, because afro-pessimistic analysis has exposed the twists and turns of what it means to be *socially dead* (a death whose meaning is neither present nor simply historical, a permanent *mort à bout touchant* as described by Fanon); finally, because the opposition between black pessimism and optimism has become so obvious that we must begin deducing its effects.

[2] As opposed to the optimist, who is on the side of life, let us call any pessimistic reader of Fanon a *death-reader*; between the two, lies the actual text: books and essays written and published during a time of crisis, war, torture, and death. There is virtually no compatibility between the optimist's language and the pessimist's (they frequently coexist in one and the same individual); but to read Fanon is to come across something altogether more difficult, or singular; reading begins at the point where either becomes *impossible* (in the sense of an aporia).

1. Socially Dead

[3] How to read Fanon and/or his blackness? Let us distinguish two types of reading. The first makes Fanon the addressee of a certain demand that has everything to do with how he reads blackness (or, more accurately, with how he positions blackness as an object always traversed, or ruined by, the abusive truths of whiteness). In "The Case of Blackness", first published in 2008, Fred Moten memorably and powerfully argues that Fanon's work is linked to a peremptory assertion (which is itself disavowed) of *blackness as a kind of death-driven nonbeing, or pathologically impure object*; it's a view that, in Moten's terms, positions blackness as the referent of an objectifying encounter—with racism—and blackness as the thing that racism represents.^[2] Fanon's famous analysis of *le vecu noir* is, then, judged to have relegated, via 'a complex disavowing claim', black lived experience to the status of an object whose meaning is always prescribed.^[3] Accordingly, this would mean that any reading of Fanon has to answer the following (pessimistic) prescriptions: that there is no such thing as black social life, and/or blackness

is a 'pathology' in 'close proximity to the criminal'.^[4] Hence, the form of black social life is essentially one of *fugitivity*: blackness *is* insofar as it is *not*, for it can never *be* (whiteness). Whence the belief (which Moten also wants to ground as an ontic-ontological difference between human and racialized being), that blackness can only be invoked, always regulatively, as a movement between 'an original impurity' and a normative social logic or frame that it necessarily can never coincide with nor escape.^[5] The suggestion is that blackness, in Fanon's work, is nothing more than the impure element of a social frame or pathological code, and that the validity of this code, in the normative tasks of law or ontology, can only project blackness as a state of *decay* always calculable and confined as such, except now in the fugitive form of a social incompleteness that is neither a form of life nor a form of death. Blackness is thus ejected from the social life of things, which means that it can only be known pessimistically in the exclusion that includes it. The problem, however, is not to know if blackness is a form of social death, but if, when confronting that death, another order can present itself whose relation to law and ontology 'is reducible neither to simple interdiction nor bare transgression'.^[6] The Fanonian message to the black subject can therefore be defined as one of capacious ruination, in which the role of blackness in the world is essentially one of abnormality or *fall*, in whose aberrant movement blackness (as thing or *chose*) is reduced to an object (*objet*) of racism. However, what if blackness were to be defined otherwise, as the figure for an 'absence or excess' withheld from 'the horrific honorific of "object"?'^[7] What if black culture and language were to be seen not merely as a discursive effect, born out of subjugation, but as the very thing that calls into question the illusory privilege of whiteness and of race? For Moten, such escape 'would be the cause for black optimism' as well as a more optimistic reading of Fanon; we could then say that when the emphasis falls on what blackness *is* (as a mode of fugitive sublimity) rather than on what it fails to *be* (as flaw or impurity), another message becomes possible.^[8]

[4] Crucially, Moten presents his argument not as a 'refusal' of Fanon, but as a 'demand that we read' his texts as if 'for the first time'.^[9] This would mean that any reading of Fanon must begin naively (etymologically speaking), without prejudice or prescription: it's a demand that recalls phenomenology's approach to things/*sachen* (an approach in which reading is both a bracketing and a reduction). This scene is immediately complicated, however, in that naïve reading, which in this hypothesis or story is to begin without judgment, reappears in the prescription that we read naively. Indeed, if naivety is demanded what would it mean to prescribe Fanon's texts as the addressee of that naivety? And if one accepted, with Moten, that such naïve reading constitutes neither a refusal nor judgment of Fanon, and if it were decided that such reading could also be named a refusal of refusal (of Fanon's disavowing claim), then the complication only spreads. That demand for naivety, which describes itself as black optimism, is in turn derived from a certain reading of Heidegger. It is from the latter that Moten rapidly determines what it means to give the 'case' of blackness a hearing, to register the optimism of its outpouring despite the 'horror of its making', or the horror from which it was made.^[10] The word 'case' must be understood as both a tribunal and its hearing, but 'case' too in the sense of psychopathology: here Moten does not explain why, nominally speaking, the case of blackness should take the form of a juridical dispute between Fanon and Heidegger, nor why that dispute should be settled by the latter's account of

'representational thinking'.^[11] In terms of the law applicable to this case, Fanon's crime, then, would be his failure to think beyond law or pathology, or to imagine a new set of possibilities as defined by Heidegger's ontological naivety—but also that the latter's claim to return representation to its ontological ground (as too in Moten's constant implicit claim to give blackness a hearing) merely means that Fanon's own critique of ontology is inevitably reduced to a litigious politics of representation.

[5] We know that the case of blackness (and its juridical rhetoric) includes at least two questions: what is this thing called blackness and how is it to be represented? The junction at which these two questions meet in *Peau noire, masques blancs* is that of a *flaw*: this flaw is born very specifically from an experience of ruination 'that interdicts any ontological explanation'.^[12] In the colony, the phenomenological form of social power is never immediate, that is to say, a relation of representation, but a confrontation that designifies, and, at the same time, resignifies social relations once they are racially *determined*, a confrontation in which both being and law acquire new significations born out of disavowal (what Fanon defines as the lactifying desire for substitution or separation of the black from the *négre*, and of the white from its other) and of amplification (the recoding of the social and symbolic order by racial signifiers of precarity and threat, fear and impoverishment). Saying that there is a question whether blackness is disavowed in Fanon, a disavowal whose meaning is in dispute, does not, however, explain why Moten continues to use the language of ontology and of law to explain Fanon's writing on blackness as a phenomenology. The etymology of the word 'case' also includes that of contingency and of fall (*lapsus*); that is to say, the meaning of blackness is not prescribed, and has no prior signification before it is raced. This contingency or fall (the *lapsus* or trauma of racialization) denotes not a prescribed imperfection but refers to the time, paradoxically enough, in which the black comes face to face with its own contaminating filiation with the *négre*, a confrontation that is never simply in the order of an object, but is that of an exposure that is also the work of a certain concealment; it is a moment in which any simple history (of escape or confinement, mimicry or identification) is necessarily the *impure avowal of an imaginary longing for a colorless presence, meaning, or proximity*. If one accepts, along with Moten, that blackness *always escapes* its positioning in either law or representation, and if it were to be shown that neither that law (or its history) nor that representation (or its history) can capture 'the case blackness makes for itself in spite of and by way of every interdiction', according to which this case names both a specific pathology and object, then why hold onto this juridical rhetoric (with respect to the case) to present that which apparently always escapes law and representation?^[13]

[6] By writing blackness as ceaseless fugitivity, Moten has moved towards a position in which blackness is only black when it exceeds its racist disavowal. Or, the blackness of blackness can only be recognized as black in so far as it escapes the racism of its history: but what allows us to see this escape is not blackness, but its racist disavowal. Or, in order to reconcile blackness with that which blackness supposedly is, Moten has to rely on the narrative of its constraint or pathology, which he cannot do without: this pathology enables Moten to avoid the disavowing naiveties of Fanon but only in so far as he too reads naively, or optimistically. A third possibility would make this disavowing claim, that Moten wants to make deliver up its secrets, a sign of how Moten himself disavows how racist disavowal complicates his reading of what he describes as Fanon's phenomenology, in which impurity inevitably generates a

pathological meaning. Or again: if Fanon hears what Moten does not hear (in terms of his reading of the case), this is because Moten can only affirm blackness as affirmation, not because it escapes pathology, but because *blackness is experienced only as the activity of escape, but one which never escapes the ontology of such production*. It follows that blackness cannot escape its own fugitivity; its constitutive moment is traversal (or, what constitutes it is its force of subversion with regard to the pathological classifications of blackness). If Fanon fails 'to investigate more adequately the change from object to thing', one could also suggest this failure fails to address, or forecloses, that other scene in Fanon; in short, how the very distinction between object and thing refuses to engage with the Fanonian unconscious (in which the object is neither simply *represented* nor simply *fugitive* to the languages of law, ontology, or difference).^[14] The form of this problem seems to be linked to what can appear to be a persistent equivocation in Moten's reading of Fanon between apparently ontological claims and the use of the aesthetic-political to somehow escape ontology. This situation, which would demand new formulations of the relationship between ontology and the aesthetic-political, is perhaps programmed by the logic of a presentation which needs to see a radical break between them, a necessity whose prescription is also thus disavowed.

[7] This scenario is not an easy one to follow, and might therefore be described as itself Fanonian. Moten defines as black a situation in which the obligation to steal away goes along with a 'movement of escape' that is not criminal and cannot be 'enframed' as such. Moten states this movement as follows: blackness is 'an ensemble always operating in excess of that ancient juridical formulation of the thing', it is 'a stolen, transplanted organ always eliciting rejection', and, 'the lived experience of blackness is, among other things, a constant demand for an ontology of disorder, an ontology of dehiscence' and so on.^[15] Aside from noting the logical instability of this 'always': namely, if x is always escaping then it cannot be said to ever entirely escape, it is clear that, according to Moten's own logic, these descriptions leave it completely undecidable whether blackness is fugitive because it never quite escapes (its enslavement, its impurity), or whether it always thereby escapes how it is rendered black, or not, precisely because it is not an object. Moten refers to this situation as the 'special ontic-ontological fugitivity of/in the slave' which he says is 'necessarily unaccounted for in Fanon'.^[16] I am not going to provide any detailed commentary on this word 'necessarily', although it would not be difficult to construct an argument showing that Fanon, in so far as he insists on the necessary mis-recognition of blackness as black, is in fact in some senses the most radical discourse of why blackness remains unaccounted for. Nor would it be difficult to argue that Fanon escapes the hold of the pathological/normative opposition. I shall also try to resist the temptation of denouncing a very general tendency to present the operation of disavowal as a 'critique' of what Fanon himself says about racist disavowal, of assuming that when Fanon says that black lived experience names both a specific discourse of misrecognition and the symptom of that misrecognition, that attempts to name misrecognition, such as Moten's, which attempt to position Fanonism as a misrecognition of what blackness is, would themselves not generate further cases of misrecognition, or escape the naivety of such optimism. Instead, I shall narrow down the scenario still further and consider something like the logic of escape in Moten's engagement with phenomenology, especially with respect to his own representations of the aesthetic-political. This restriction will seem only the more excessive in

that I shall appeal to only a very small part of Moten's case history, ignoring notably all of what he says about art here, and concentrating on what he says about theft, in the sense of stolen from or dispossession.

[8] After citing Heidegger's famous reading of the jug in the essay, "Das Ding", Moten argues that Fanon confuses the black's 'becoming-object' for the thing that blackness is, which exceeds the jurisdiction of racist discourse and its formulation of an 'impure, degraded, manufactured (in)human who moves only in response to inclination, whose reflexes lose the name of action'.^[17] So that in contradistinction to Fanon, Moten wants to present 'the inadequacy of any ontology to blackness' as the inadequacy of 'calculation to being in general' and then show how blackness as lived is 'a constant demand for an ontology of disorder, an ontology of dehiscence'.^[18] The problem with this approach is its particular determination of history as filiation: Moten's commitment to black social life, to its vitality, leads him to provide, in section one, an anything-but-Fanonian history of racist philosophy (in which blackness is always the sign of negation). This is the context in which Fanon sets out his reading of blackness as interdiction or flaw. Because he fails to read this context, Moten is obliged to read the figure of impurity as part of a history of philosophy rather than as one of Fanon's essential points critiquing philosophical historicity, which queries how the being of the black has been understood in both the history of philosophy and the philosophical history of the concept of 'race'. Consequently, Fanonism is viewed as an aberrational consequence of that history, rather than one of its sharpest critiques.

[9] This leads Moten to present a history of Fanonism that puts Fanon in the same company as that of Daniel Patrick Moynihan (!)—suffice it to say I think that it's a horrible philosophical travesty of Fanon to present his work as the antecedent of this anti-black moralist from the US. Moten knows all this too. Whence the effect of decontextualisation: the price paid for the naivety of his reading never essentially goes beyond a restricted set of prescriptions that, even when they take the form of endless questioning, are necessarily disavowed. One consequence of this is that Moten's own placing of Fanon in a tradition dominated by the representation of black pathology is *also* dominated by the need to present Fanonism as, paradoxically, a pathological object. Lastly, let us recall that Moten's philosophical reading of Fanon wants to question what he sees as a particular, pessimistic inflection, which is marked by the absence of black social life. It's a reading in whose exposition the discontinuity of black social life is determined as a kind of pious optimism, or in Moten's terms a paraontological form of resistance. The case of blackness, in Moten's transcription of Heidegger, has no code of law or body of jurisprudence or rule of representation to determine its ontology for 'its relation to law is reducible neither to simple interdiction nor bare transgression.'. The law for the case of blackness must be found, invented. But if the black judge or critic has no law at hand, it would seem that the possibility of judging is given in the name of an aesthetic-political optimism: our task here (that of 'judging Fanon') puts us in the situation of having to judge the case which thus prescribes judgment – of blackness as pathology—without grounding its being in or as pathology: Moten therefore repeats the pathological presupposition of a judgment (of black pathology) in the attempt to judge it non-pathologically. The phrase 'Fanon is too pessimistically black' names an example (which cannot just be an example) of this situation. Fanon is too black (or not black enough) because he can only see blackness as instituted out of violence and pathology, out of the lived

experience of racism, and this violence returns to question the institution of black social life even as it constitutes it. In a brilliant article called "The Social Life of Social Death", Jared Sexton, wondering what happens when blackness determines itself as essentially 'pathological' (Moten's word), suggests that Fanon (as opposed to his blackness) names the limits of this very situation.^[19] The question of the pathologization of blackness is then, says Sexton, 'a reinscription of (black) pathology that reassigns its cause and relocates its source without ever getting inside it'; 'another way of putting this might be to say that they [the thinkers of blackness as pathology] are caught in a performative contradiction enabled by disavowal'.^[20] If, for Sexton, Moten is a repetition of that 'black' disavowal, then Fanon is another, displaced, repetition of Moten's repetition.

[10] In Sexton's reading, which is my second powerful example of how to read Fanon, the oddness of this disavowal is that it must take into account the necessity of black social life as lived fugitivity (in the form of the case, the aesthetic-political): he goes on to elaborate this question in terms of an essential 'affirmation' inhabiting blackness in its constitutively pathological drive to be the case, the movement of escape, which cannot be lived as such. Blackness has an essential relation to social death even when read optimistically, and this consecution is neither to be simply celebrated nor simply deplored. And, more crucially, at some point blackness must attempt to take *itself* as a case without naively compromising its defense or execution, stating the law of blackness as law (as case), but knowing that this 'law' is caused in the first instance by the kinds of social death at work in black social life. In the case of Moten, blackness's relation to law cannot act as a case, in that it precedes or is not reducible to a 'simple interdiction nor bare transgression' of law: whether this be figured in terms of pathology or not, it is clearly a situation of theft, if only in that it is stolen from the law as the very possibility of its jurisdiction. In the paradoxical terms which Moten finds in any attempt to derive or legitimate black pathology (see section 1), his disavowal can only, as Sexton suggests, produce simultaneously a denial or a refusal of the very institution of blackness (as socially dead), which allows that disavowal to be made. To do so he has to absolve the violence which presides over the anti-black world, and in so doing do violence to the freedom made possible by that violence: this is Moten's command to *avow* the social life of blackness and its aesthetic affirmation. This violent secondary attempt to erase primary anti-black violence can be presumably repeated indefinitely as anti-blackness continues to rule the world. (As such, writes Sexton, this is a theft 'that creates the crime and its alibi at once'^[21]).

[11] This crime, this alibi (which would have to be read with Fanon's notion of the tabula rasa, and its implication of a writing that abolishes all forms of inheritance) is clearly complex, to say the least.^[22] In the essay, 'Medicine and Colonialism', Fanon suggests that "the colonized, like all the people in underdeveloped countries and all the dispossessed everywhere, do not see life as blossoming and fruition but as a permanent struggle against *atmospheric* death": this omnipresent death, this *mort à bout touchant*, "tends to make of life an incomplete death", in which small and large acts of resistance are not so much a "refusal of life" but an all-too-human response to this "close and contagious death" (DC, 128). Thus, a *resistance* to colonialism is both instituted and marked by this incomplete life-death. By refusing western medicine, by making western therapy into a clandestine struggle over life *and* death, the

colonized know that it is through the promise of the cure that the *law of colonialism reaffirms itself*. Thus the patient *vanishes* or releases himself, writes Fanon, from the passive objectivity of colonial pathology; and while this confirms the western view of the colonized as feckless, for Fanon these acts are the site of a coalescence of a struggle in which life and death are openly or implicitly in conflict: i.e., by shutting himself up alone with his disease, fastened to it, coiled up in its fascination and pain, its emptiness and voluptuousness, the colonized produces social death as the symptom of an overwhelmed body, in whose dispossessed life and incomplete death the rottenness of western pathology is revealed as a discourse of cure without ultimate justification or legitimation, a cure within which the rule of law and propriety is sustained by force and violence. There is then something rotten in this encounter between medical efficacy and the racialized body that infuses the cure with an element of violence and compulsion.

[12] It is therefore surprising to read that this situation is one in which Fanon shows his 'ongoing ambivalence toward the supposedly pathological'.^[23] Moten's mildly parodic sketch of this version as a story in which anticolonial resistance is both symptom and cure could well be read as a refusal to read what Fanon himself says about the contagion of social death in the colony. There has been a great deal of discussion, and long before the advent of Afro-pessimism, of the different points of view that Fanon adopts to affirm the lived social death of the colonized. A way of connecting this death to his psychotherapeutics, or more broadly to his analysis of the colonial body, would be to consider what he says about that body's contraction and/or mortification; in other words, to see the truth of that body in its subsequent alienation, or rigidity, to make this body reveal itself as a form of resistance (not even necessarily a conscious one) to the signifieds of colonialism. The atmosphere of certain-uncertainty defining this body affords an example: the sheer material facticity of that atmosphere is secreted in the body (both clandestinely and literally) which is subsequently blown apart, distended, reassembled; this body becomes virtually multiple insofar as it is injured and unreal, obsessed and petrified, a body that would assume its affirmation insofar as its injury becomes an unspeakable piece of the real, simultaneously performing delirious disorder and a conserving desire as it undergoes torture, petrification, and the seeming infinitude of total war. It is therefore not easy to see why Moten should describe this multiply injured body as a dialectical reversal (of political consciousness and cure), rather than what Fanon describes as its structural vocation: that is, not to decode (the case), but to *override* or *overwrite* both law and criminality, resistance and complicity with the advent—whether perverse, or paranoiac, imaginary, or neurotic—of decolonial war. In Moten's account this structure is read (very quickly) as a political prescription (to resist) that is also positioned as a natural will to resistance. It's a reading that is at once psychological and normative, scorning what remains indescribable, inassimilable: the shock or accentuation of the revolutionary moment that is both destructive and reinventing. So Fanonism now becomes a text whose political prescriptions are contradicted by its psychotherapeutic demands, in so far as the liberatory narrative of revolution inevitably forecloses the now normative notion of the cure. The problem with this reading is that the notion of resistance is projected as a *telos* rather than grasped as an event that exceeds all such narratives. This is too limited a reading: unless we conceive of the incomplete death that seizes—*this* life, *this* body—as the very thing which refuses to be exhausted by categories of resistance or pathology, we will fail to read, in short, what Fanon means by the permanent hemorrhaging of this black body which ultimately no art or politics can stem, precisely

because in the movement of its history there are few categories that wish to touch it without being made dirty or hysterical.

2. Atrophy

[13] Can this be thought of in Fanon's terms? For him, '[le négro] is not [n'est pas]. Anymore than the white man' (Fanon, BS, 231). Too many readings of Fanon want to say what this 'n'est pas' is, to explain it away as mere negation in the manner, say, of Freud or Hegel. It seems necessary to be able to locate blackness in terms of what negates it, or, more precisely, to be able to attach predicates to it to make it recognizable (it seems to be characteristic of these readings to assume at least the possibility that blackness can be incorporated as a thing, or else as an identity or subject whose demands can be met and its referent duly agreed on). If only Fanon would come clean as to what this 'is' is then it would be easier to decide what it is not, and so appropriate or denounce it. Moten talks about blackness as a thing, for example, to which predicates of disorder and deformation can be attached, even though he will at some point insist on its 'inadequacy' to the 'calculation of being in general'.^[24] Or in Sexton, who refers to the inescapability of black social death, we read: 'In this we might create a transvaluation of pathology itself, something like an embrace of pathology without pathos'.^[25] I do not know precisely the reason for this word 'pathos': a pathology without pathos does not escape the claim that this is what blackness is in so far as it too can be rendered as a pathological thing or presentation—and it is clearly neither simply an affirmation nor a negation of blackness to say that we would have to presuppose the sense of this apathetic blackness in order to understand notions of its transvaluation. For Sexton, this apathy comes into being 'where thought breaks down, at its limit'.^[26] Or, 'must one always think blackness to think antiblackness'.^[27] What such a question leaves out (and in leaving it out is doubtless true to the anti-pathos it describes) is any notion that blackness has no locatable referent or unequivocal name, but is something that escapes all attributes, including the unity of an ontic-ontological fugitivity or again the hypostatized name of 'absolute dereliction'.^[28] Here again when Fanon says the *négro is n'est pas*, the scenario set up leaves unresolved, or unspecified what blackness *is* in the name of trying to get what seems to be a less identifiable, more aporetic, hesitation or movement. To represent this hesitation as optimism or pessimism is simply to reduce its meaning to a desire, rather than engage with Fanon's refusal to represent or name. Is Fanon, in the never-quite instituted institution of blackness as being or negation, in this refusal of the pre-eminence of the question of disavowal, in fact repeating the apathetic violence of blackness towards its 'pathology'? Is this a misrecognition *before* the *meconnaissance* (of blackness) as described by Fanon? Would this question, which I cannot presume to answer here, send us back to what Sexton describes as 'one of the most polemical dimensions of Afro-pessimism as a project: namely, that black life is not social, or rather that black life is *lived* in social death', a sort of originary life-death or death-in-life: a sort of double emphasis in exactly the sense that Fanon later calls, much more laconically, but perhaps more problematically, '*mort à bout touchant*'? (DC, 128-29) Is this the possibility that allows for the exacerbated forms of litigation and theft which I chided Moten for not classifying and thematizing? This 'n'est pas' (of the black) is not a possible object of knowledge or judgement, but it does refer us to what, in *Peau noire, masques blancs* Fanon calls the abyss (BS, 14).

This abyss which is before any earth or world, tribunal or judgement, before the determination of 'the whole possibility of and desire for a world', before even the indubitability of law or object (BS, 27), is obviously linked to the *n'est pas* and consequently begins, always violently, where *le vecu noir* undergoes the shock of a sudden shift or a reversal in its phenomenal existence. At the same time, however, this utterly naked declivity is not something that can be known, or rendered, or propositionally named *as such*: for the alive dead thing that blackness is evades being judged, and should never be confused with the predicates of racism. Indeed, one could argue, apropos of Frank Wilderson, in *Red, White, and Black*, that this 'great black hole' is a priori excluded from the logos of human being, and this is why it always remains other with respect to itself.^[29] The thing that blackness *is* is not—and accordingly, our relation to it—the mark of a rupture which is both exterior and *radically* intimate, an abyss which is situated at the limit of judgment, thought, and desire: a monstrosity without center or end. The uncanny position of this rupture is confirmed. These notions are not rhetorical: when Fanon refers to 'the unidentifiable, the unassimilable' there is an attempt to locate what is situated very specifically at the limit of the human: blackness is defined not by its exorbitance, nor by its censorship, but by the way that it is always imaginarily misrecognized as a limit-work, rather than what, on the contrary, makes it so singular and disturbing as the unnameable event of an infinite postponement.

[14] Throughout Fanon's work there are many forms of blackness as both object and thing, and they all imply a concomitant expulsion of blackness from the graph of desire. They range from what may seem to be merely fetishistic investments, to what is explicitly connected to accounts of an atrophic disappearance or lytic rigidification of desire (used by, for example, subjects whose object relations can not be found in reality, but only refound in a kind of phantasmic real, or real fantasy). To understand this work is to also understand Fanon's radical questioning of analysis and psychotherapy. The assumption that guides this analysis is very similar to Freud's reading of *verneinung*, but for Fanon (and in ways that recall Lacan) blackness must be understood not as a metonym of a lost object, nor as the material mark of a deprivation, but as the structure of a never-having-had. In particular, we must not confuse this structure with either loss or lack; what matters is our *relation* to its impossibility, a relation which must here be understood more grammatically than logically: in the history, texts, and legacies of anti-black racism there is always an imaginary misrecognition of an object that has no ontological resistance to its signifying predicates, and one whose libidinal reproduction only exists when caught up in language. For Fanon, critical-therapeutic activity is thus essentially an activity of reinvented judgement, respecting the case in its singularity, finding the appropriate rule always only after the event. This peculiar temporality, much more than any periodizing hypothesis, is what constitutes the lived life of blackness (which is anything but escape or theft).

[15] This still involves a certain number of worrying presuppositions, notably that the two poles of blackness and whiteness are occupied by a kind of caesura or ellipsis, or a kind of 'dead end' unspecified as such: 'the *nègre* is not. Anymore than the white man'. The scenario I want to look at is one in which what Moten calls Fanon's 'pathological insistence on the pathological' is something that might be called a psychopolitics of atrophy, or possibly 'petrified life' (as for example in the case histories that close *Les damnés de la terre*), in which the colonial body is caught up in something like hysteria, or

obsessional neurosis.^[30] Even if (as is largely the case here) that petrification is used as a metonym for colonial culture, the atrophy presupposed is only detectable as the heterogeneous movement of an originary division from which being and nothingness emerge. Conversely, that atrophy or lysis, in its very complication and its irrationality, obeys neither law nor representation but a mysterious commandment that comes to the black subject from his or her own history—perhaps even from his or her own body? And here, perhaps unavoidably, we would need to return to those pages in *Peau noire, masques blancs* in which Fanon describes a black-white being who is on guard against his white-black self beginning with the very identity of the body that is and is not black, that is and is not dead.

[16] We might say, as a matter of fact, that any reading of Fanon, today, begins effectively (and not by the utterance of a naïve hope) with the inescapability of this *mort à bout touchant*, with the always violent shock of its decrepitude, a lysis where the solidarity of self and language breaks down, neither of which permits a diagnosis of internal renewal however multiple and dialectical. The *n'est pas* which seems to be underlying the notion of black social life and death must not, however, be overestimated; it is part of an epistemological break, which compels us to revise the key reference points of Marxism, Freudianism, and phenomenology for how we conceive of the Fanonian object. As I see it, the word *object* must here be understood as a limit-work or fragmentation: it does not refer to a series of ontological displacements or dislocations, but to the radically symbolic work of racialization; it exists only when caught up in the discourse of racialization (or rather it is *n'est pas* for the very reason that it signifies a kind of explosion, or dissemination; the abyssal aftermath of a black hole in words, meanings, and structures). Let us now trace in more detail how the black subject is traversed by this object: this object which is *n'est pas*.

3. The Two Discomforts

[17] According to Alice Cherki, in 1958 Fanon wrote 'an extremely significant case study' which 'is surprisingly reminiscent of Freud's famous "Rat Man" and owes much to certain findings of Ferenczi'.^[31] With regard to Fanon's own reading of Freud or Ferenczi, Cherki has little or nothing further to say, nonetheless she writes: this 'report reveals' that the *idea* of transference makes Fanon feel 'extremely uncomfortable' because he finds 'his centrality burdensome'.^[32] Why this insistence on the discomforting idea—rather than the intense emotional affect—of transference? What is being addressed here within this reading of a discomfort that, we are told, 'does not stop transference from occurring'?^[33] There is nothing to be done with such transference but to perform its discomfort it seems. Two possible answers come to mind.

[18] The first is historical and concerns Fanon's changing relationship to psychoanalysis from 1952 to 1958: for Cherki, that relationship became 'much more nuanced'.^[34] Hence, she writes of Fanon's changing relationship to the Oedipus complex, homosexuality, and the unconscious, but also his acquisition of a specific kind of analytical knowledge, or technique, according to which he acquired an 'extremely attuned ear': she refers to Fanon's concern with the 'repetitive patterns of signifiers', 'the denials and lapses' or parapraxes, and, finally, the question of transference. Where does this discomfort with transference come from? Cherki sees it as a sign of Fanon's reading in search of personal answers.

Now, in fact, Fanon's concern with transference, in its earliest occurrence, was essentially defined by a concern with how the black can only perform itself as a sovereign subject with a capacity for power, desire or will, insofar as it is able to project and so imagine itself as a white persona or mask. If transference is, according to Freud, understood as 'the most primordial form of emotional tie to an object', in Fanon's analyses of black neurosis transference is reconceived in specular terms, as an imaginary relation to an image, or an imago in which the black is already masked, that is to say, is unreal or artificial. By the same token, what Freud defined as an affective and essentially blind emotional tie, becomes in Fanon a concern with the unwitting repetition of an artificiality that also denotes an essential inner nothingness. Cherki's contribution to this narrative is unduly biographical, and nowhere more so in her notion of Fanon's discomfort. Here we find posited, apropos of a case history that has never been published, an analysis that recalls one of Freud's most difficult, enigmatic texts dealing with torture, anality, and homosexuality: that of the Rat Man. What we have here is a form of disavowal, less a negation, present in Fanon's wish not to be seen as the patient's father, but to be his doctor; or, as Cherki cites it: 'In the fullness of time, he stops responding to the patient's wish—"I would have liked you to be my father," by saying, "I cannot be your father, I am your doctor"'.^[35] She concludes: 'the young man in question made incredible progress. As did Fanon'.^[36] Let us call this wish not to be the father, Fanon's discomfort with the whole language of white paternity, its symbolic centrality and authority as both an organizing idea and institution; it is in this withdrawal that a new *therapeutic* is born as both an institutional project and a politics.

[19] We know that 1958 was a period of exile and crisis for Fanon, in which there was, so to speak, maximum exposure to the political dimension of his therapy (and of his death—a year of assassinations and disappearances, including attempts to assassinate him). It was during this year in Tunis that Fanon wrote *L'An Cinq de la Révolution Algérienne* (translated as *A Dying Colonialism*), a book which includes the same therapeutic displacement of paternity in the name of a new politics (of both the subject and the clinic); but it is certainly this same principle of (analytic) discomfort which comes to define Fanon's sensitivity to what he refers to repeatedly as hysterical suggestion, the use of hysteria as persecutory support in the colonized ensuing misrecognition of their own reality. What we have here is a certain sequence: from Freud to Fanon, father to doctor, hysteric to revolutionary, which we can designate as the attempt to find the articulation of a certain authority and to analyze revolution itself as an hysterical event. The contraction of the colonized as a mortified body, or muscular rigidity and stiffness, is central to this 'hysteria' which Fanon sees everywhere as the defining symptom of colonialism. Words are trapped in the corporeal imagoes that captivate the subject, they become marked by a colonial ideology of the referent: the petrification of speech and language, dream and desire by which the black subject performs its hysterical ambition and jouissance. It is not simply to make the subject see what is hidden by colonial discourse, but to make him recognize the imaginary dimensions of his history and language: the colonized must learn to distinguish psychological subjectivity from their capacity for raced mutilation, the dismemberment and lesions of racism. The analyst's *responsibility* or ethics is to introduce the subject to that moment or event when it can confront the real—or what is rotten about the real. On this point, Fanon offers a profound rethinking of the clinic as a collective therapeutic system adapted to the language and

temporality of the colonized, whose petrified speech is the point of origin for the discourse of treatment and cure.

[20] Nor is this all: catharsis of affects, body, petrification; in Fanon's case histories torture has a force which the subject must carry as a *force de rupture* that is both an interrupted movement and an immobilization. This movement is thought differently from that of persona or mask and suggests a reconceptualizing of transference as an interrupted form of the *n'est pas*. This leads to a second major therapeutic development, as important to Fanon's political as to his clinical thought: that of the *mirror as mask*, which is not to be confused with his earliest insight into *the mask as mirror*. As we know, *Peau noire, masques blancs* presents itself to the reader as a mirror of disalienation, in the sense of a corrective self-seeing. For the early Fanon, the progress of analysis is a progress in self-consciousness, and its dialectical mainspring is the analyst as a reflecting mirror of disalienation. It is the progression from blind (non-specular and thus hypnotic or, as Fanon notes, *irreal*) identification to true and authentic self-identification: the subject must free itself from the roles he plays and mimes through the alienation imposed upon him by the racial imagoes of culture, consequently the subject finally *recognizes himself* in his alienated delusory image and thus passes from ignorance to knowledge. If in 1952 transference is the projection of an intrusive, suggestive, petrifying image, it is the specular identification through speech of the imprinted (and therefore invisible, unimaginable) image hidden from his gaze that the subject is initially captured by: namely, the alienated form of his (white-identified) ego. In his first book Fanon wants to hold a mirror up to that alienated subject, so that through the reading of *Peau noire, masques blancs*, he can be free from the constraints of an imago of which he is unaware; until the moment when he can finally see himself in the mirror, and thus once again to know himself in it, he will remain the mime or suggestion of a racist self-image. Hence, the object of the cure is not to suppress the egoic image from which the patient suffers, but rather to authenticate it as the subject's true image, so that he can recognize (rather than misrecognize) himself in it. In other words, you *are* the *négre* that you denounce; you are the sacrificial remnant of a shame which preexists you and your being: the imposed 'reality' of the white object. So in Fanon's earliest work, identification is conceived in specular terms as a relation to an image, and analysis is conceived as the simple dialectical dissolution of that specular image, and yet, in 1958, that mirroring is seen as the manifestation of something rotten, or decayed, or as something frozen, not quite living. Here reading is no longer a question of recognizing oneself in the mask as mirror; on the contrary, the issue is not to recognize oneself in the mirror, to shatter it and move on, but to see beyond the void, or absence hidden by it, a deathliness, meaning by that name a mirroring that, in relation to the object, has no reflection. What difference is there between the de-alienating mirror of the analyst and the captivating mirror of the specular image? On the one hand, the mirror captures, freezes, and alienates the subject by expatriating him in an image that dominates, subjugates and suggests him. On the other hand, and simultaneously, it permits him to see himself—that is, to separate himself from his image by seeing himself in front of himself. Thus it should not surprise us that disalienation has its own transference politics like other organizations, and that disalienation in its petrified and petrifying form is incapable of knowing itself (dis-alienating itself) *except* in the mode of self-vision (which is the mode of alienation, of being outside one self).

[21] This is what Fanon still seemed to believe in 1952, but by 1958 (if not earlier), in the essays on therapy and colonialism, he has completely changed his tune: to return the image to the analysand is no longer to dis-alienate him; rather, it is to risk trapping him in another objectification no less imaginary than before, locking him into an endless aggressivity of depersonalization. It's an insight that comes to Fanon via his treatment of the tortured and torturing subjects of the Algerian civil war. In 1958 the cure becomes more aporetic. Here we come across Fanon's later presentation of the object that, from 1952 to 1958, changes from an imaginary schema to a schema of the real, from a specular disalienation to a more unnameable n'est pas. First of all, let us recall that the object in 1952 is conceived as the expression of an imaginary dereliction, or as the focus of an interiority constituted out of a wounded narcissism whose meaning represents a sign, or rather the interlocution of a negrophobic disturbance. In the later case histories, the basic dissymmetry between the *me* and *not-me*, explained by black disavowal, opens onto a more vertiginous absence between the *I* and the *it*, and this absence cannot simply be represented by disalienation, nor is it simply linked to colonial racism: consequently, the object here refers to a deep, often circuitous fall or descent whose lapsus is received by the subject as a mirroring without content, in which the subject is not reflected back to itself as a diminished or distanced whiteness, but as a no-thing, or non-being, marked by the absence of what specifically constitutes *le vecu noir* as the site of a specular reversal.

[22] Lastly, this descent into the n'est pas that torture reveals leads Fanon to an important shift in his notions of sovereignty and resistance. Hence, if we return to the colony as a therapeutic project, we may better understand Fanon's effort to try and distinguish a politics of the imaginary from that of the real. The n'est pas is unthinkable in terms of presence, nor can it be represented or made present as a pathology. The corporeal schema is no longer swathed in *real* fantasies or illusions which makes the body into an allegory, or fictive persona, but takes the form of a rigidification in which the 'person' is a dead object filled, so to speak, by its own vertiginous absence, by its own force of disaggregation. These observations suggest that there is something unfathomable in blackness that exactly coincides with what we might call the unrepresentability of its n'est pas: just as there is a point in which racial meaning can no longer signify, which has as its consequence that no signifier escapes the abyss (of blackness), so Fanon is trying, by various ways, to figure this untranslatability as a new form of wretchedness. It would be interesting to know at what moment 'wretchedness' comes to signify, for Fanon, an important change in his relation to psychoanalysis. In *Les damnés de la terre* the word no longer refers to a dialectical opposition between active and passive being, or *ressentiment* and resistance, but designates the way in which the subject is immiserated or affected by its own impossibility or nothingness. Contrary to the current trend to depoliticize Fanon's clinical thought, it is my argument that Fanon's clinical work on wretchedness, on those effected and affected by it, is an effort to describe an experience of non-sovereignty which is not conceived as a state of exception (or of escape), but as the (non)signifying place for *the one who is black*.

[23] It seems to me necessary to remind those who accuse Fanon of a fundamental pathology, to return to this category of wretchedness, which Fanon places at the heart of anticolonialism. Inasmuch as decolonial revolution (understood as such) implies a remarkable reinvention of sovereignty, Fanon's

notion of wretchedness compels us to conceive of revolutionary liberation no longer in terms of a sovereign decision or desire, but as the very exercise of a suspicion, or a discomfort, with the traditional discourse or literature of sovereignty. We can even, with a certain temerity, give this suspicion an historical dimension as a refusal of any sovereign claim to master blackness, or assume responsibility for it, which in its grandiose form prescribes decolonialism itself as a therapeutic result and cathartic demand. The hysterical reading of Fanon's text (of which Moten's is the latest example) would be one then that claims this mastery in a way unknown to itself. It raises the political question of reading—of how we should take responsibility for the interventions of Fanon's own text—but fails to interrogate the blindnesses of its own pious optimism. Again, Sexton is closer to Fanon here insofar as he claims that black social death only becomes intelligible when seen against the background of the issues and questions generated by institutional and political states of emergency. The wretched are neither a foundation nor anti-foundation, but are the figure of a dislocation at the heart of modern sovereignty. Only thus do they come into being. What manifests itself as the law's inner decay in the colony is the fact that rule of law is, in the final analysis, incomprehensible without the wretchedness that ruins it, without which law's ultimate justification or legitimation would not exist sovereignly.

4. The antinomy

[24] This new conjunction of wretchedness and non-sovereignty, which I have just mentioned, might provisionally be called, for lack of a better name, an *antinomy*, since it implies that there is a form of death in life whose everyday struggle expresses a *décalage* or cleavage between sovereign life and black being. Now, this death in life that is *n'est pas* cannot be identified with humanism, even in a new form, or in any case, humanism is far from exhausting it. It involves a perspective of an altogether different scope, whose object cannot be constituted as a simple accident of form, but by the very relation between blackness and politics. This perspective does not imply a lack of interest in humanity, but, on the contrary, a continual return to the racial 'truths', however archaic, in which whiteness is the only proper form of human being. Certain of these truths still have a power of provocation, in respect to a certain idea of language and culture, and for this reason, we must not fail to consider them.

[25] 1. One of the common misreadings of Fanon's theory of violence is to read it as an Hegelian struggle, or that, at least, the struggle between colonizer and colonized is a version of the fight for prestige between master and slave: violence therefore has a progressive purpose in making the colonized the subject of a recognition rather than the thing (*chose*) that is not recognized.^[37] Hence, violence is humanized as a fundamental category of human being. I am not saying that this reading is wrong, and certain aspects of it could be read into *Peau noire, masque blancs*; but in *Les damnés de la terre* decolonial violence is far from its Hegelian origin, and refers to a struggle that is not *to* the death, but to a struggle *with* and *from* death, a struggle that seeks to go beyond the death in life that, however dialectical, no philosophical anthropology has yet grasped, and that reveals a certain aporia within the language of sovereignty.

[26] Decolonial violence, which I have just said is not a dialectics, is engaged in a detoxification that is

radically reinventive, since it implies that decolonialism cannot be identified with a politics, even in a progressive form, but with a language yet to be written. It leads to a *tabula rasa* bringing a judgment into play but one without jurisdiction. This violence receives extremely various contours and expressions, but one thing seems certain: the moment of invention is an event without sense or content; consequently, its appearance always exceeds the representational forms of the political. As a *tabula rasa*, violence has nothing to do with either right nor justice: in a sense it only takes place as a case, but this is a case that falls without order or meaning, through which the colonized is only able express itself disarticulately. As such, it marks the absence of person and of law, and is an advent without jurisdiction. If this is criminality, at least in its decision and pathos, it concerns itself with the blackness that falls, in principle, always outside of law. Or, more precisely, decolonial violence plunges the subject into an abyss whose meaning (Fanon uses the word 'measure') is always unprecedented.

[27] 2. A second principle, especially important with regard to how we read Fanon's sexual politics, is that blackness cannot be considered an univalent form of *pleasure*. In his reading of how nativism inures itself against colonial repression, where every cultural value is the product of a collective punishment, pleasure (religious, pagan, aesthetic) comes to have the following resonance: there is something frenetic, ghostly, hysterical about it. Fanon writes: 'This magical superstructure which permeates native society fulfills certain well-defined functions in the dynamism of the libido', and, 'we perceive that all is settled by a permanent confrontation on the phantasmic plane.' (WE, 43) Here, law itself becomes magical, in whose erotic jurisdiction the subject is not so much presented as inhibited, and precisely by the ecstasies that terrify and at the same reassure it, and which remedies the 'pure force' of colonialism by an erotism that delimits itself within the limiting force of colonialism (WE, 43). As such, the real violence of the colony becomes indiscernible from the magical superstructure of nativism (its foundation as libido, as terrifying figuration), which it claims as a more archaic form of its own jurisdiction. Defined as law, pleasure—which might be called an eros of subjugation to be distinguished from that of masochism – signifies the institution of an 'avoidance' that is itself disavowed, and represents a dissociation that is essentially turned in upon itself.

[28] 3. Moreover, from a methodological point of view, Fanon's writing on black art accustoms us to a form of libidinal economy that, at the level of psyche and culture, both 'protects and permits' (WE, 44). The economy hitherto that sees art as sublimation, which must immediately be seen as a *work* (of translation), is here deciphered as an 'open book' and at the same time as a *de facto* abandonment to a world of dangerous and dogmatic fictions (WE, 44). Fanon's analyses suggest, on the one hand, that we distinguish levels of dislocation and describe the distinctive elements by which black art is able to establish a completely new form beyond judicial reason; and on the other, he asks us to recognize that, unlike nativist and colonialist practices, these forms make possible something else, as 'the imagination is let loose outside the bounds of the colonial order' (WE, 53). As Sexton has observed, it is the discovery of this passage which gives Fanon's reflections on 'life and death, pessimism and optimism, subject and object, thing and case, blacks and blackness, and so on' the tone of an affirmation written, it seems to me, from a position that is both within and without, within as without the political life of blackness.^[38]

[29] 4. There remains to be discussed one last Fanonian notion that may illuminate the figure of blackness at its very center, since it concerns the motif of slavery. In the chapter on 'recognition', in *Peau noire, masques blancs*, Fanon refers to a governing system of 'fictions' that prevents the black from encountering the object: the subject that seeks to know itself through its history, whether in the aspects of master or of slave, must confront the object so as to lose it and so gain its personhood, not so much in the objectivity of the given, but as ethical social life. Hence, it is possible to see in Fanon's commentaries on Adler and Hegel a blackness which is itself a fiction, that exists only through and as fiction, whose fictioning conforms to different levels of alienated life: political, economic, and ontological. This unity of the fictitious and the repressed authorizes Fanon's rereading of phenomenology and psychopathology: blackness can only in sum recognize itself as a fiction, which is why it turns away from the Other and from any dialectical resolution of itself as a labor that produces and sublates. It is in terms of this impasse that blackness figures the very being of the case that bars it from having both form and content. The black cannot put blackness to work—at least in the way that slavery is thought in metaphysics—for its 'governing fiction' involves the resolution of figures, that is metaphors, or signs, that are absolutely self-referential and contained to the exclusion of anything else, figures and fictions whose action can increasingly be defined as a refusal of a *black* logic of the subject (BS, 212). It is in this perspective that blackness is only ever going to be the subject of a limitation that is the limit of its own fictioning, and first of all insofar as the mirror whose whiteness it masks befalls it as a *n'est pas*.

Notes

1. The following abbreviations to works by Frantz Fanon are used throughout the essay. (BS) *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967); (DC) *Studies in a Dying Colonialism*, trans. Haakon Chevalier (London: Earthscan Books, 1989); (C) *L'An Cinq de la Révolution Algérienne* (Paris: François Maspero, 1959); (WE) *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (London: Penguin Books, 1963). In some instances, the translations have been modified in the interest of accuracy.
2. Fred Moten, "The Case of Blackness", *Criticism* 50(2): 178,179.
3. Moten, "Case", 184.
4. Moten, "Case", 188, 209.
5. Moten, "Case", 179.
6. Moten, "Case", 179.
7. Moten, "Case", 181.
8. Moten, "Case", 182.
9. Moten, "Case", 182.
10. Moten, "Case", 185. This reading of Heidegger raises another notable problem, which we can only mention here: that is, how Heidegger's archaic language of the thing, and all reference to its *hearing* and *revealing* (as a case), remains tied to a metaphysical notion of race that is both its *telos* and point of departure? See Robert Bernasconi, "Heidegger's Alleged Challenge to the Nazi Concepts of Race", in James E. Faulconer and Mark A. Wrathall, eds. *Appropriating Heidegger* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
11. Moten, "Case", 186.

12. Fanon, cited in Moten, "Case", 178.
13. Moten, "Case", 185.
14. Moten, "Case", 181.
15. Moten, "Case", 186, 187.
16. Moten, "Case", 187.
17. Moten, "Case", 186,187.
18. Moten, "Case", 187.
19. Jared Sexton, 'The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism', *InTensions* 5: Fall/Winter 2011. All references to paragraph numbers.
20. Sexton, "Social Life", 24, 25.
21. Sexton, 26.
22. For an elaboration of this trope see David Marriott, "Whither Fanon?" *Textual Practice* 25(1), 2011, 33–69.
23. Moten, "Case", 209.
24. Moten, "Case", 187. In a later essay on "Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)", this tension is repeated in the insistence on the 'refusal of standpoint' and the ongoing desire to define what blackness is (in its anoriginal, paraontological fugitivity). See Fred Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)", *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 112:4, Fall (2013): 738, 739.
25. Sexton, "Social Life", 28.
26. Sexton, "Social Life", 30.
27. Sexton, "Social Life", 31.
28. Moten, "Case", 187.
29. Frank Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of US Antagonisms* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).
30. Moten, <"Case", 208.
31. Alice Cherki, *Frantz Fanon: A Portrait*, trans. Nadia Benabid (Cornell University Press, 2006), 120, 121.
32. Cherki, "Fanon", 121.
33. Cherki, "Fanon", 121.
34. Cherki, "Fanon", 121.
35. Cherki, "Fanon", 121.
36. Cherki, "Fanon", 121.
37. For an example see Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (University of California Press, 2001).
38. Sexton, "Stolen Life", 9.

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