

FRANTZ FANON

*Alia Al-Saji***1. A phenomenology of racialization: spectacle and affect**

Late in *Peau noire, masques blancs*, Frantz Fanon says: “we need to touch all the wounds that score the black livery (*toucher du doigt toutes les plaies qui zèbrent la livrée noire*).”¹ And then, citing Aimé Césaire: “for life is not a spectacle, for a sea of sorrows is not a proscenium, for a man who screams is not a dancing bear” (PN 181/187/164; Césaire 2017, 94). While Fanon often deflects questions of formal method (PN 12/12/xvi), to touch the wounds of racialization, to make them felt and to dwell in them, brings us closest to his phenomenological method. This allows us to understand why a phenomenology of racialization is a *phenomenology of affect*, and not primarily a phenomenology of (visual) perception or the visible.² At stake is affectivity that remains beneath the level of intentional sense-giving (even as it motivates perception and emotion), more atmospheric or thalassic than object or act.³ Yet, this Fanonian approach also questions and reconfigures phenomenology—just as his work, in its irreducible methodological plurality, questions psychoanalysis, psychiatry, political philosophy, and ontology. The challenge is not only that of “expressing” or “inventorying the real” (PN 134/137/116; 181/187/164), when Fanon has insisted on the multiplicity of racialized and colonized experience and on the differential positionalities within Blackness (PN 14/14/xviii), and when that “real” has been repressed through the spectacle staged in its place (Hartman 1997, 39). I argue that the difficulty for phenomenology is threefold: the risk of specularization (Section 1); how racialization structures affect, calling into question immediacy (Section 2); and the failure of phenomenological reductions to account for the weight of colonization (Section 3).

First is what I would call the methodological trap of *specularization*—the tendency to take phenomenology to be equivalent to making experience visible. Even when the invisible workings of the flesh are revealed in their activity as well as their passivity (to use Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s vocabulary), their being rendered a spectacle introduces not only the danger of “thingification” (“*Chosification*”; Césaire 1955, 23), but also the circumscription and elision of the very affectivity that I am trying to describe. For a phenomenology of racialization, this is doubly problematic, since it means converting the experiences of racialized subjects—suffering, enjoyment, reaction, redress, and resistance, even the “feeling of nonexistence” (PN 135/139/118)—into phenomena available to a racializing and surveilling gaze.

More so, it exposes and spreads out the racialized body: “my body was returned to me spread-eagled, disjointed, recoated, draped in mourning on that white winter’s day,” says Fanon (PN 111/113/93). Not only does this spatialization elide the nonlinear temporalities of racialized experience, it also distorts lived space, pulling and projecting the body onto a spatial grid wherein experience can be seen, grasped, and measured.

This repeats the logic of racialization that fixes and dissects the body (for “white looks”), cuts instantaneous cross-sections of its experience, making it again the slave of an appearance (PN 113/116/95).⁴ But this appearance has itself been constructed—recoating and wearing out the body (*rétamé*), plunging it in mourning (*endeuillé*) as Fanon says—through a process of colonization which has recalcitrantly rephrased and adapted itself in a *longue durée*.⁵ What is at stake here is the assumed transparency and self-evidence of experience that is given in the immediacy of affect. Neither is affect unmediated, since colonization structures it from within, nor can it be made externally perceptible without loss. Eschewed is the density, opacity, temporality, and ambivalence of racialized affect that cannot be easily expressed in visual or discursive terms (because these dimensions are also overdetermined by colonization).

As Saidiya Hartman has argued—in refusing to reproduce the scene of the beating of Aunt Hester from Frederick Douglass’ 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*—the routine and repeated display of the slave’s pained body at once reinforces “the spectacular character of black suffering” and circumscribes and naturalizes that suffering (Hartman 1997, 3, 20). While scenes of violence claim to give evidence of black sentience, they instrumentalize suffering and make it legible and familiar. This immures the witness to that pain, while inviting them to projectively grasp and measure it, opening it to voyeuristic repulsion and enjoyment (3–4). For Hartman, the hypervisibility of racialized bodies risks reproducing the affective economy of slavery—where the fungibility of the slave body as commodity makes it an “empty vessel,” dispossessed and vulnerable to projection and prosthesis (21). Even empathetic accounts repeat this specularization and projective reduction (Hartman 1997, 17–19). Through the spectacle that defines their pain and puts it in its place, racialized subjectivity comes to be selectively seen as *limited sentience*—as circumscribed humanity, person, and property (Hartman 1997, 35). In a move that uses the subjectivity and sentient embodiment of the racialized as instruments against them, the very spectacle—exposure and assumed transparency—of black affectivity becomes a tool to intensify subjection.

This risk of specularization looms large when *Peau noire, masques blancs* is read as explicating the sense, and shedding light on the constitution, of racialized and colonized suffering through the application of a predefined phenomenological method—a reading I resist here. Instead, I argue that Fanon works to interrupt specular and spectacular renderings of suffering and colonial violence. What he puts his finger on, and puts us in touch with, are the structuring and destructuring times of colonization, in their quotidian and pathologizing normalcy; Fanon’s memory of the child on the train saying “*Tiens, un nègre!*” is a terrorizing example in its repetition and everydayness (PN 109/112/91). “*Toucher du doigt*” (PN 181/187/164) means both to touch with one’s finger and to put one’s finger just there at the source of the wound and flaring of the pain. The touch that Fanon advocates is neither optimal grip, violent grasp, nor uniform pressure, nor can it be predicted in advance. His writing touches colonial wounds; by palpating these wounds and dwelling in them, it resuscitates colonial wounds as *feelings* that are flesh, and does not leave them behind as if their scar tissue was merely a numb object of the past.

2. Touch and affective memory

Fanon seems to reiterate here Edmund Husserl's phenomenological discovery in *Ideas II* that the hand that touches the surface of a table, as it moves across it, also feels itself touched. Husserl describes *touch-sensings* (*Empfindnisse*) given through the dynamic and fluid intertwining of kinestheses (sensations of the movement of my own body) and sensations of being-touched (Husserl 1998, 146). Rather than being intentional, *sensings* are reflexive and non-objectivating, founding the lived-through sensibility of my own body—indeed, the possibility of having a *lived* body (Al-Saji 2010, 18–19). Since touch is not a compartmentalized sense, sensings happen anywhere where the body is touched. The whole body is a touch-surface, but skin also folds in on itself and flesh has felt depth (Husserl gives the example of the heart (1998, 165)). Thus, the body can also touch itself, as in Husserl's famous example of one hand touching the other (1998, 144–145). This self-perception doubles and localizes sensings on the skin and gives the body as a field of sensings—appearing to itself as *living body* (*Leib*) and not mere extended physical body (*Körper*).

Yet, Fanon's method of touch is at once more painful and more temporally complex—in at least three ways. First, that upon which Fanon's method touches has already been touched and wounded by colonial violence, recursively in a *longue durée*. This past and ongoing colonial (de)structuration cannot be bracketed to focus on a domestic scene of innocuous touch, as Husserl does⁶; there is no flesh that has not been touched, reconfigured, through *colonial duration*.⁷ For the colonized, the very sensibility of flesh registers the weight of this duration—as memory immanently woven into its texture—and responds to the instituted violence of the colonial world. Colonized flesh is “susceptible” (PN 114/116/96), Fanon notes, “sensitive” (PN 117/120/99)—hypersensible and prickly.

Thus, second, that which Fanon's method touches feels itself touched not only in the present but also in its wounded and misrepresented past, remembering and reliving the wounding, in a mode of affect-memory (which is more than recollection). This past weaves through Fanon's nonlinear phenomenological account.⁸ It can be felt in the affects of punishments from *Le Code Noir* that flare up, spasmodically, within the present: “I tried to escape without being seen, but the Whites fell on me and hamstrung me on the left leg” (PN 126/130/109), says Fanon, living through the punishment for a fugitive slave who has tried to escape a second time.⁹ The immediacy of affect, assumed in the Husserlian picture of touching-touched, is interrupted and deferred. Fanon makes us feel the colonial glue (past and present) that *mediates* sensing and structures the auto-affective interval between touching and touched.¹⁰

So much so that, rather than discovering one's own *living* body (*Leib*) through self-touch, as Husserl does, what Fanon often encounters is a *carcass*—the living death of the enslaved (Hartman 1997, 106), the famished body-as-fodder of the colonized, their hollowed-out stereotypes—that touch needs to warm back to feeling, if not to life (PN 9/9/xiii). There is an unpredictable temporal interval between touching and a wound coming back to feeling; phenomenological touch finds its tonality and texture in the wound and the colonial duration that it holds, but this needs preparation and waiting. Moreover, the interval is overloaded with foreboding, stifling, and taut (PN 136/140/119); and much of our “sensitivity” as colonized subjects may be oriented to protecting against reliving colonial violence—shuddering and contracting so as to avoid its touch (PN 114/117/97). Rather than moving away or moving on, Fanon's “*toucher du doigt*” advocates other modes of waiting and dwelling in the interval, and with colonial wounds, without inscribing a teleology

of healing or hope.¹¹ Elsewhere, Fanon describes this as descent into “le grand trou noir” (PN 14/14/xviii, PN 189–90/195/172; citing Césaire 2017, 148).

If Fanon escapes the trap of specularization, then it is by inventing a different phenomenology. Rather than applying a “neutral” phenomenological method to racialized bodies, this *critical* and *anticolonial phenomenology of affect* takes its point of departure within experiences of racialization, in their colonial durations, creating concepts as responses to their calls. Indeed, Fanon’s phenomenology holds together affects of racialization in a temporal palimpsest that plunges us into differential temporal rhythms of colonization, without giving us a position from which to survey them. As “socio–diagnostic” (PN 11/11/xv), this phenomenology is not mere description; for by making us feel social structures, it makes possible other ways of existing and changing them (PN 97/100/80).¹²

3. The affective weight of colonization

While *Peau noire, masques blancs* can be read as a phenomenology of colonized experience (Antillian, Malagasy, Arab, African), once we attend to how colonization works, it becomes clear that there is no dimension of “modern” life, no region of being, that is left untouched by it. Colonization cannot be compartmentalized or reserved to the “colonies,” nor can it be circumscribed as a layer added to societies being colonized, a supplement that leaves the rest intact. In arguing that French colonization of Madagascar provoked “an absolute wound”—that Madagascar “underwent destructuralization” (PN 94/97/77)—Fanon’s argument has ontological dimensions. Fanon’s aim is not simply to calculate the destructive effects of colonization, against arguments for its partial “civilizing” benefits.¹³ Rather, Fanon insists that there is colonization *of being*—destruction, corrosion, pathology, and rot on multiple levels and through differential temporalities—which is why *Les damnés de la terre* aims to decolonize being (Fanon 2002, 40). Indeed, this is not only an “existential deviation” (PN 14/14/xviii) on the individual level, which transmutes both the body schema and its emotional and physiological reactions (PN 17/19/3); it is also a structural transformation of the social, economic, and political sphere. More precisely, we can understand the corrosiveness of colonization to be at work within the individual and the social, in literal, imaginary, and metaphorical senses inseparably.

Of the civilizing colonial mission, Fanon notes: “It is utopian to expect the black man or the Arab to exert the effort of embedding abstract values in their *Weltanschauung* when they have barely enough food to survive (*alors qu’ils mangent à peine à leur faim*)” (PN 93/95/75). Because, he adds, they “lack the possibility” (PN 92–93/95/75). Here, material, embodied conditions and foreclosed possibilities, eating and thinking, are held together in the affect of hunger. The overall point is that hunger is an obstacle to conceptual creation. But Fanon is also making the more subtle point that colonization wants to block imagination and invention, and uses all material and affective means to do so, including turning the bodies of the colonized into instruments against them and into material resources to be exploited—kept barely alive while being digested, “walking manure (*fumier ambulant*)” he says citing Césaire (PN 95/98/78; Césaire 2017, 114). The affect of colonized hunger calls for more than nutrition; it calls for inventing sociality and ways of living and dying, on one’s own terms, from the reconfigured ruin of foreclosed and dead possibilities.¹⁴

It is worth emphasizing that there is no affect that escapes the violence of colonization. Both colonial and colonized bodies undergo “aberrations of affect” (PN 8/6/xii)—“become abnormal” (PN 141/143/122)—condemned to non–relationality and the repeated failure of intersubjective reciprocity, if sought along a white–black axis. It is through such aberrant

affect, I argue, that colonialism and racism expose the limits of the phenomenological reduction (in its Husserlian and even Merleau-Pontian formulations). Neither can colonization be bracketed to reveal a core of sense, as if racism were an afterthought; nor can it be put out of play to conceive a universalizable subject free of historical violence. Critical phenomenology cannot stay at the level of constitution of sense, for colonization already structures the phenomenological field of sense and draws the borders that differentiate sense from nonsense (PN 9/9/xiii). In *Analyses Concerning Passive and Active Synthesis*, Husserl points to affection as a level that precedes the constitution of objects, where passivity is on the verge of turning into activity. Affection can be understood from two sides: As the “pull” of the world on my body, or my body “turning toward” that which is affecting it (Husserl 2001, 151). The perceptual field has an “affective relief” that differentially motivates meaning-making: What is noticed, what comes to matter, from that which stays in the background (unconscious “tendencies toward affection” (2001, 149)). But affective relief is shaped by diachronic and synchronic contrast, that shifts contextually and with the direction of bodily desire and sensibility (2001, 150). More deeply than Husserl’s method admits, however, how *contrast* comes to be felt (and by whom) is a function of the colonial duration that structures the phenomenological field.

While Husserl’s account allows for differentially mapped affective reliefs, it insists on the leeway that consciousness feels in relation to the affective pull of “objects”—without which the free practice of phenomenological bracketing would not be possible. Merleau-Ponty’s description of the phenomenological reduction as “loosen[ing] the intentional threads that connect us to the world in order to make them appear” (2012[1945], 14) relies implicitly on a concept of “scope of life.” Such “scope of life” allows the subject to step back and distance itself from, or rupture its familiarity with, the world—and, following Eugène Minkowski, allows “leeway (*Spielraum*)” and room to breathe (2012[1945], 338). While Fanon may agree on “the impossibility of a complete reduction” for reasons different than Merleau-Ponty’s (Merleau-Ponty 2012[1945], 14), he may wonder at the familiarity and comfort of a world in which such spatiotemporal leeway is norm, and from which Merleau-Ponty begins.

If we put affect back in its place and time, as Fanon asks (PN 101–2/104/84), we experience a world that stifles and weighs on racialized bodies—bogs them down (*engluert*) (PN 32/35/18)—without a feeling of leeway. Here, the phenomenological reduction as *suspension* of theoretical and natural attitudes, as putting out of play the object-in-itself and the particularity and habituality of the ego, is not only incomplete but fails to begin or be motivated. Thus, we encounter split modes of affectivity: While colonial affectivity is “ankylosed” and insensitive, colonized subjects are hypersensitive and risk being “tetanised.” But this is not merely a subjective difference; we live split worlds, with starkly different affective relief.

It is from a different affective territory that the project of phenomenological reduction becomes imaginable: One that compartmentalizes racism to a surface layer of existence, where colonization can be treated with indifference. Fanon calls this “affective ankylosis (*ankylose affective*),” one of the more puzzling socio-diagnostic neologisms he invents (PN 119/122/101). *Ankylosis* should be read in medical, anatomical, and metaphorical senses at once; it describes a condition where joints become fused and coalesce, so that articulations are restricted and movement is no longer possible between them. Fanon associates *affective ankylosis* with an inability to make the past fluid,¹⁵ to reconfigure, rearticulate, or feel that past differently. What is ankylosed is colonial affectivity—a “white” world that excludes and dominates racialized subjects through gluey formations of time. This is not simply a question of fixity; as an organic pathology, ankylosis diagnoses a past that coalesces and adheres, repeatedly over time, but that may also numb and gangrene.¹⁶ This temporal schema highlights both the *recalcitrance*

and *disregard* that structure colonial affectivity. (And it can be contrasted to the *sensitivity* of colonized affect, described earlier.)

Racialization is a peculiar form of *othering* that cultivates, as its infrastructure, forgetting and disregard of the “others” who are its objects. Racism is affectively ambivalent. Its recalcitrance, Fanon shows, relies on adapting to its social time and place, taking on the guise of prevailing norms (2006, 40). But racism also covers over this rephrasing; it represses the histories and operations of power, which constitute it, and blames its victims (PN 188/194/170). Disavowed is the very *guilt* and corrosive destructuring that colonization brings about—projected onto its *colonized others*.¹⁷ Racialized bodies are, at once, the material and affective labor, the disposable lives that colonization exploits—the “fertilizer” that nourishes colonialism, says Fanon (PN 209/216/190)—and they are the scapegoats upon which the need for colonization and its constitutive violence are projected. Thus, racialization has more to do with drawing lines of domination—policing the borders of “whiteness” and Eurocentric modernity—than with the concrete colonized lives who are its ostensible objects and which it actively misrepresents. More than “active ignorance” (Medina 2013, 39, 57), then, key to understanding the recalcitrance of racism is affective *disregard*.¹⁸

Colonial duration weighs lightly on colonial citizens and heavily on colonized subjects, a differential weighting that translates temporal and spatial leeway. By calibrating the affective relief of the perceptual field, racism already operates at the level of passivity and habituality (for which we remain responsible). It motivates and circumscribes the ways in which contrast is felt in the phenomenological field, what makes sense and what remains nonsense. That which colonized bodies feel most sensitively and acutely, that toward which they turn, often cannot find a way to register its weight within the ankylosed affective field of colonialism (for colonial citizens). In this way, colonized affect and agency are flattened; appearing not only unreasoned but temporally unmotivated, *they do not matter* (and are only recognized within the stereotypical terms that colonization sets out in advance).

Phenomenology is symptomatic of this differential weighting. Fanon’s socio-diagnostic shows how phenomenology needs to redress and decolonize social structures, to be world transformation, in order to create the leeway to reflect. It cannot assume a transparent, unobstructed interval. Racialized subjects are stuck in a colonial past that makes them perpetually *late* (PN 118/121/100), so that their meaning-making lacks traction. With a past impossible to bracket, a future sheared off, the interval in which colonized subjects live is affectively overloaded, sensitive, and “tetanised.” Fanon diagnoses “affective tetanisation” as the useless spasming of the muscles of the colonized.¹⁹ If colonization is *tetanus*, then it is an infection that penetrates colonized bodies through colonial wounds; it leads to spasms that may look externally like paralysis but that hide, in their depth, intense activity and (appropriate) sensitivity to the violence of the colonial world.

I have argued that Fanon invents a phenomenology from dwelling in this affective interval, from touching the wounds of colonial duration that constitute it.

Notes

- 1 Fanon (1952, 181 / 1967, 187 / 2008, 164). Henceforth cited as PN with French pagination, followed by both English translations (1967 and then 2008). I cite primarily the French text, since each translation needs correction, while retaining distinctive virtues.
- 2 While I won’t have space to expand on this contrast, Fanon’s phenomenology should be read as an alternative to Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s primacy of perception, and not as an extension or continuation of it.

- 3 This distinction between affect and emotion relies on Husserl (2001); it is more ambiguous for Merleau-Ponty (2012[1945]). Emotion “proper” is intentional turning toward an object, while affect includes the pre-intentional tendencies or drives that ground this. I read Fanon’s as a phenomenology of pre-reflective affect that often remains non-objectivating and is felt as atmosphere, bog, glue, and in sensings of touch, burning, hunger, and tetanization.
- 4 See also PN 32/35/18.
- 5 “*Rétamé*” recalls the white masks in Fanon’s title, the “livery (*livrée*)” that the black body is made to wear (PN 111/114/94, 181/187/164), and the whiteness that burns it: “Toute cette blancheur qui me calcine ...” (PN 111/114/94).
- 6 Sara Ahmed also points out the protected domesticity of Husserl’s scene and its hidden orientation in *Queer Phenomenology* (2006).
- 7 *Colonial duration* is a term I have coined (appropriating and going beyond Bergsonian *durée*). I mean to emphasize how the colonial past is not a linear continuum of events, but retains, in its texture and sense, the trace of its own temporal becoming. To speak of *duration* is to acknowledge the difference that the weight of time makes for experience (Al-Saji 2018). For an approach that is consonant with mine and that brings together phenomenology and afro-pessimism, see Slaby (2020).
- 8 This is performed by *Peau noire, masques blancs* as it jumps between different disconnected tenses, in particular, the use of the *passé simple* in Chapter 5, juxtaposed with the present. A longer account is needed to track how Fanon’s use of the *passé simple*, a verb tense that does not exist in English, creates a time of pastness that can coexist with the present, but also be distanced from it and keep its opacity (in a protective move on Fanon’s part, I would argue).
- 9 Le Code Noir, article 38: “L’esclave fugitif (...) aura les oreilles coupées et sera marqué d’un fleur de lys sur une épaule; s’il récidive un autre mois à compter pareillement du jour de la dénonciation, il aura le jarret coupé, et il sera marqué d’une fleur de lys sur l’autre épaule.” (also PN 223/230/204 and 209/216/190).
- 10 See Al-Saji (2010) on the debate between Derrida and Zahavi on whether sociality (I would add coloniality) intervenes and structures “autoaffectation” in phenomenology.
- 11 This need to abide within experience, rather than survey it and map its end, is at the source of Fanon’s critique of Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Orphée noir*. (PN 131–132/135/113–114)
- 12 Actively or passively, but consciously. Also PN 163/168/146.
- 13 In particular, Fanon is criticizing Octave Mannoni’s *Psychologie de la colonisation*, which argues that the Malagasy have an aptitude to be colonized, because of their dependency complex to their ancestors. (PN 92/95/75)
- 14 The power of the affect of hunger in slavery, not only for food, but for kin, memory, love, and intersubjective touch can be read in Morrison (2004). I add the affect of mourning—to be able to take time to mourn, without having to move on.
- 15 Fanon plays on the sense of “*liquider*” as liquidating and making fluid. (PN 11–119/121–122/100–101)
- 16 This recalls Césaire’s description of colonialism as gangrene and rot (1955, 12, 31).
- 17 Fanon calls this “the racial redistribution of guilt” (PN 101/103/83).
- 18 My thinking here is indebted to Medina (2013), Mills (2007), Stoler (2011), and PN 192/199/175.
- 19 “Tétanisation affective” (PN 110/113/92) is used by Fanon in medical and metaphorical senses inseparably. See also Fanon (2002, 280; 2006, 11–25) on “the North African syndrome” for how muscular contractions and ticks were constructed in colonial psychiatry to be symptomatic of Arab inactivity and “paresse.”

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