

Fanon, Merleau-Ponty and the difference of phenomenology

... but people who cannot suffer can never grow up, can never discover who they are. That man who is forced each day to snatch his manhood, his identity, out of the fire of human cruelty that rages to destroy it knows, if he survives his effort, and even if he does not survive it, something about himself and human life that no school on earth - and, indeed, no church - can teach. He achieves his own authority, and that is unshakeable. This is because, in order to save his life, he is forced to look beneath appearances, to take nothing for granted, to hear the meaning behind the words. If one is continually surviving the worst that life can bring, one eventually ceases to be controlled by a fear of what life can bring; whatever it brings must be borne.

James Baldwin *The Fire Next Time*

One of the most abiding criticisms of phenomenology in both latent and manifest form in recent philosophical discourse is that it must install itself on the basis of the repression of difference. Phenomenology across its authors is assumed to involve a fundamental ground or unity which engenders meaningful activity in the world. That which appears, the phenomenon, is violated by metaphysical over-generalisation, 'Sameness' or 'presence' in the hands of phenomenologists, according to their critics, and this whether the epistemic frame is transcendental or somatic.¹

The problem with such criticism is that it encourages a non-experiential notion of thought. Metaphysics or ontology then becomes a matter for 'thinking', to which any experiential or lived dimension would be derivative or secondary. In the eighties, this reductionism developed a semiological-textual armature, chiefly through the influence of deconstruction in the States. What is interesting in the post-structuralist

¹Among the key critical texts are Levinas' "Meaning and Sense" (in *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings*, Indiana University Press, 1996), Heidegger's "My Way to Phenomenology" (in *On Time and Being*, Harper and Row, 1972), and of course Derrida's early reading of Husserl, *Speech and Phenomena*, Northwestern University Press, 1973.

approach to 'thinking difference' is that its relation to lived experience is never entirely disavowed. As with Heidegger and Levinas in earlier years, phenomenology is suppressed or sublated in the development of theory, but never entirely rejected. We remain unclear about the relations between the body, experience and thought.²

No wonder then that philosophy has been slow to participate in the burgeoning field of 'race studies', and its various offshoots, including the more recent development of 'whiteness' as a category of academic critique.³ I will argue that whilst there *are* problems lurking in the assumptions phenomenology makes about its ground, these problems are not fatal to its future. As recent feminist thinkers have discovered, on the contrary, an encounter with phenomenology, particularly the thought of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, is *needed* today in order to re-establish a relation between lived experience and thought.⁴ In order to challenge a universalist approach to phenomenology and open up a philosophy of race, I shall display one of the profoundest critiques of phenomenology offered this century, that of Frantz Fanon in his paper *The Lived Experience of the Black*. It has been said that Fanon is not 'a terribly sophisticated phenomenologist' - well, I am not sure whether sophistication ought to be a virtue of this discipline.⁵ As I shall show, in fact Fanon's critique of phenomenology quickly exposes the core of its problematic relation to difference. Fanon's text therefore in my view provides a corrective to phenomenology, at the same time as showing how the theorisation of lived experience that is its source can reveal the key issues at work between agency, history and the world, and perhaps most fundamentally, the possibilities for justice.

*

Fanon's most significant philosophical influence is often taken to be the

² See M.C.Dillon's book *Semiological Reductionism: A Critique of the Deconstructionist Movement in Postmodern Thought*, State University of New York Press, 1995.

³ The two key authors inaugurating this are Toni Morrison, specifically her text *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Picador, 1990 and the work of David Roediger.

⁴ For example in the work of Elizabeth Grosz in *Volatile Bodies*, Indiana University Press, 1994 and Gail Weiss *Body Images: Embodiment as Intercorporeality*, Routledge, 1999.

⁵ David Macey, "Fanon, phenomenology, race" p10 in *Radical Philosophy* no.95 May/June 1999. Macey's impoverished comprehension of phenomenology leaves him searching for a biographical explanation as to why Fanon adopted its framework.

existential phenomenology of Sartre. In particular, the connection has often been made that Fanon's thought is closely connected to issues of authenticity and bad-faith and the power of being-for-others.⁶ Whilst Sartre's shadow is undoubtedly cast across many pages of a text such as *Black Skin, White Masks*, it is important to register that Fanon was also engaged in a dialogue with Merleau-Ponty.⁷ I will claim that Merleau-Ponty's inclusive notion of 'world' is both the point of criticism for Fanon and the source of the construction of his ideal of 'disalienation'.⁸ Only by looking at the implicit dialogue between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty that Fanon enacts will we be able to comprehend Fanon's politics of difference. As Fanon's method in *Black Skin, White Masks* is in part phenomenological, an excursus into the chapter entitled *The Lived Experience of the Black*, and an examination of the final chapter, *En guise de conclusion*, will lead to a radical phenomenology of difference. It will also lead to a reformulated genealogy of political ideals, grounded in a phenomenology of the body.

It is not difficult to show how *The Lived Experience of the Black* involves a dialogue with Merleau-Ponty. The most obvious references are given in the first few pages of the text, with Fanon's substitution of Merleau-Ponty's notion of 'corporeal schema' (*schéma corporel*) first of all for the '*schéma historico-racial*' and secondly in terms of the '*schéma épidermique racial*.' Put briefly, the corporeal schema in Merleau-Ponty's work refers to the body's agency and its work in relating to and disclosing the historical world. At all stages in his oeuvre, Merleau-Ponty espouses a pre-dualistic ontology which affirms the reproductive synergy between body and world. He writes,

We grasp external space through our bodily situation. A

⁶ This is the tendency of Lewis R. Gordon's interpretation. See his book, *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man*, Routledge, 1995.

⁷ Gordon's book acknowledges the influence of Merleau-Ponty on Fanon, without developing the nature of the dialogue in depth. See p14. Also, in his essay "Fanon's Body of Black Experience" (in *Fanon: A Critical Reader*, Blackwell, 1996). Ronald A.T. Judy spends the first page discussing Markmann's problematic translation of the fifth chapter's title, including mentioning Robert's tracing of *l'expérience vécue* to Merleau-Ponty's translation of *Erlebnis*, as a prelude to relating Fanon's text to Hegel's concept of experience.

⁸ Merleau-Ponty writes, "...we must learn to find the communication between one consciousness and another in one and the same world. In reality, the other is not shut up inside my perspective of the world, because this perspective itself has no definite limits, because it slips spontaneously into the other's, and because both are brought together in the one single world in which we all participate as anonymous subjects of perception" (*Phenomenology of Perception*, Routledge, 1962, p 253).

"corporeal or postural schema" gives us at every moment a global, practical, and implicit notion of the relation between our body and things, of our hold on them. A system of possible movements, or "motor projects," radiates from us to our environment. Our body is not in space like things; it inhabits or haunts space. It applies itself to space like a hand to an instrument, and when we wish to move about we do not move the body as we move an object. We transport it without instruments as if by magic, since it is ours and because through it we have direct access to space. For us the body [...] is our expression in the world, the visible form of our intentions.⁹

The corporeal schema lies *between* the body and the world, as that which engenders communication between one and the other. This does not imply an exchange between two independently subsisting entities suspended from temporality. Rather, this communication, which Merleau-Ponty elsewhere describes as 'more ancient than thought' (*plus vieille que la pensée*)¹⁰ is the moment where body and world re-order each other according to a 'perpetual contribution'¹¹ of reciprocal transfer. Being 'embedded' within a cultural-historical horizon therefore means, in Merleau-Pontyan terms, that that horizon itself is open to be altered, transformed or disrupted. For example, no-one could separate the history of the guitar from its players. Somebody comes along, 'learns' the guitar and manipulates it as never before, and the history of guitar music is altered. With fingers and stance, their body communicates with the guitar through a pre-thetic schema that opens up the parameters of possibility (and therefore the history) of the instrument,¹² at the same time as transforming the player's life. Moreover, even those who will not change the history of guitar music themselves are liable to be 'altered' as their practice develops and that music communicates itself through their increasingly expressive being.

⁹ "An Unpublished Text by Maurice Merleau-Ponty: *A Prospectus of His Work*" in *The Primacy of Perception*, Northwestern University Press, 1964, p5.

¹⁰ *Phenomenology of Perception*, p254; *Phénoménologie de la Perception*, Editions Gallimard, 1990, p294

¹¹ *Phenomenology of Perception*, Ibid.

¹² Contenders along the way include Charlie Christian, Wes Montgomery, Django Reinhardt, Jimmy Hendrix and Derek Bailey.

Ultimately, Merleau-Ponty's concept of the corporeal schema reveals the relation between agency, freedom and temporality. For Merleau-Ponty, the corporeal capacity of the body allows for a 'communication' with the expressive patternings of the cultural traditions to which it belongs or has attached itself. Within the interplay between body and world prior to intellectual representation, the possibility of the creative inflection between both engenders a corporealised conception of freedom. The body is 'free' to the extent that it can participate in the transformation of its expressive horizons. As with the guitar player, this conception of freedom entails a fundamental relation to the historical: being free involves the body's capacity through expression to transfigure (and be transfigured by) what is given as history. In this way, Merleau-Ponty's notion of the corporeal schema leads implicitly to a conception of history as characterised essentially by *difference*. Each moment of a culture's transfer across time through the agency of bodies is at the same time the site of its own differentiation. Moreover, there is therefore no 'originary' moment to any culture: every culture that attempts to assert its sameness across time has to repress the difference at work in its origin in every present. Although there is some ambiguity in Merleau-Ponty's thought here, it is on the whole the case that he posits this relation between agency and historical freedom as a condition of *habitation*. In other words, it is a matter of habit and inhabitation that we perpetually contribute to the differentiation of our historical world (our 'habitus'), from one moment's action to the next.

We are now in a position to begin to explain Fanon's substitution of terms. In *The Lived Experience of the Black*, Fanon's opening argument is that a phenomenology of blackness cannot be understood in the context of the 'Black among his own.'¹³ It is only in the encounter with whiteness and more specifically the white imagination that an analysis of the experience of skin difference, of being the black other, can be undertaken. For Fanon at home in the Antillean setting of Martinique, the coercion and internalisation of racial inferiority could not be encountered as a form of experience. Before entering the 'white world', Fanon was content with 'an intellectual comprehension of these tensions.'¹⁴ It was only after Fanon moved to Paris that he began to be aware of the pre-

¹³ *The Lived Experience of the Black*, p2.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* p2

intellectualist dynamics of the interracial encounter. With the first explicit reference to Merleau-Ponty's terminology, Fanon writes,

In the white world the man of color faces difficulties in the elaboration of his bodily schema.¹⁵

Fanon proceeds to explicate Merleau-Ponty's notion of corporeal schema in the following paragraph. He ends the paragraph with the summary statement,

A slow construction of my self as a body in the midst of a spatial and temporal world, such seems to be the schema. It is not imposed on me; rather, it is a definitive structuring of the self and the world - definitive because in this way an effective dialectic is settled between my body and the world.¹⁶

Fanon clearly concurs initially with Merleau-Ponty's insight that the self and the world are constructed through the work of the *schéma corporel*. However, his detour through phenomenology is adopted in order to theorise the interracial encounter of black bodies in the west. It immediately becomes clear that in this case Merleau-Ponty's terminology is inadequate,

Below the corporeal schema I created a historico-racial one. The elements that I used were provided to me not by "residual sensations and perceptions primarily of a tactile, vestibular, kinesthetic, and visual order," but by the other, the White, who has woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes and stories.¹⁷

The move announced here against the primordial unity of the perceived world in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is dramatic. Fanon is suggesting that Merleau-Ponty's conception of the corporeal schema, hitherto the iterative locus of the reciprocal emergence of self and world, is undercut or undermined in the case of the black subject in Europe. Rather than ascribing to an inclusive conception of the field of corporeal

¹⁵ Ibid. p2

¹⁶ Ibid. pp2-3

¹⁷ Ibid. p3

communication, Fanon points to a fundamental asymmetry between blacks and whites and their active relation to 'the world' in Europe. In the interracial encounter, the White is able to participate in the schematisation of the world, whilst the Black may not, for his skin-difference closes down the possibility of free agency. A white *mythos* inserts itself between the black body and its self-image, becoming the 'elements used' in a reflexive understanding of black subjectivity. In contesting the terms of Merleau-Ponty's account of bodily freedom, Fanon provides a genealogy of the existential *unfreedom* of the black body in the racialised encounter. His account in *The Lived Experience of the Black* operates as a non-linear narrative, a scrambled descent into hell with ever more entrenched levels of alienation and the black body-in-pain in operation. Fanon introduces his piece as 'the fragments put together by another self'. I shall now highlight aspects of the schizoid path of this descent.

Fanon sets up the historico-racial schema by way of a simple narrative which recurs as a fragmented refrain throughout the rest of the essay. It is the experience of a white child saying to his mother on a train, "Tiens, un nègre!" ("Look, a Negro!") This is the overture to alienation for the black subject. To begin, the experience is taken lightly. "Look, a Negro!" It was true. I was amused."¹⁸ This amusement is annulled as the child continues badgering his mother, this time adding to the expression of the gaze a component of fear. The fear of the child is read as the outcome of all that Fanon's skin represents. The child is no longer merely pointing to the skin difference as a form of naive wonder at a rare site—the curiosity of seeing (perhaps for the first time close up) a black human being. The child, this allegedly pre-coding type, has in actual fact already imbibed various presuppositions beyond the simple physicality of skin difference. That is, the black skin is already operating as a kind of metonym for the child, representing a specific imaginary-historical construction of otherness.

I could not be amused anymore because I already knew of the legends, the stories, history, and especially, the *historicity* I learned from Jaspers. Then the corporeal schema collapsed, assailed at various points, yielding to a

¹⁸ Ibid. p3

racial-epidermal schema.¹⁹

The ontological violation of the train episode is therefore given a more dramatic context because of the gaze being expressed by a *child*. The power of the gaze described resides in its demonstration that racist attitudes in Europe have permeated to the level of the 'innocent'. More significantly still, the careful reader will have noted that this last passage marks a subtle but important slippage, from the 'historico-racial' schema to the 'racial-epidermal schema'. The passage from the corporeal schema to the 'historico-racial' schema is intended to reveal that Merleau-Ponty's claim in favor of free historical agency on the part of able-bodied beings *tout court* is false. How then is this further passage from the historico-racial to the racial-epidermal schema to be understood?

In my view, the slippage is Fanon's attempt to provide a *genealogy* of racial essentialism. To begin with, his analysis closely resembles the Sartrean model for alienation:

I existed in triplicate: I was occupying space. I moved toward the other... and the evanescent other, hostile yet not opaque, transparent, absent, disappeared. Nausea...²⁰

Here Fanon reproduces Sartre's threefold model of the subject in relation to others. The subject is first of all an outlook upon the world, the locus of perception, a *pour soi*. In encountering the other, the subject is forced however to acknowledge a view of itself from the outside, as a contingent difference within the world, as an 'other'. The subject therefore becomes aware of its 'being-for-others.' This tension between a subjective and an objective account of the subject's embodiment must be resolved, for as it stands the two views are opposed. As is well known, for Sartre this resolution, the dream of a *for itself in-itself* is a futile one.²¹ The 'double consciousness' schism between being experienced as an other in relation to one's own interior experience can only lead to the unresolved *third* modality of nausea and abjection. The 'occupation of space' therefore

¹⁹ Ibid. p3.

²⁰ Ibid.p4

²¹In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre writes, 'Everything happens therefore as if the in-itself and the for-itself were presented in a state of disintegration in relation to an ideal synthesis. Not that the integration has ever *taken place* but on the contrary precisely because it is always indicated and always impossible.'(Sartre,1958:623)

refers to the moment of being-for-others, when the body begins to lose its internally constituted freedom and is reduced to a lump presence through exteriorisation. Fanon's response, that of 'moving towards the other', is the response of refusing the abjection of physical reductionism by attempting to adopt the constitutive agency of the other - hence the *movement* towards the other. The other's rejection then appears in the form of a non-recognition, a fading-away. The black subject can neither accept an internally derived body-image nor the exterior view, at the same time as being refused the final possibility of adopting the exterior view as a form of agency in-itself. The resulting despair and sickness is not left alone however, for there is still the existential framework of a caricatured history:

I was all at once responsible for my body, for my race, for my ancestors. I ran an objective gaze over myself, discovering my blackness, my ethnic characteristics; and then I was deafened by cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, slave-ships, and above all, above all else, "Sho' good banana'." ²²

The gaze of the child is the domino-effect, which, with the experience of nausea, leads to a questioning of bodily freedom and the paralysis of agency. Instead of the body being located in the present of a 'communication more ancient than thought', of being the site of a possible inflection of the cultural givens of bodily patternings, the black 'subject' experiences his own skin as the metonym for a parodic primitivism. In contrast to an autonomous relation to the reproductive inflection of history which Merleau-Ponty's corporeal schema suggests, history is cast upon the black subject in the moment of despair as a being-for-others. Black skin is indissolubly connected to a history constructed by a white imaginary. The black subject finds himself no longer in the present of possible transformation, but thrown back into a past that was never his own. Fanon writes, "The Negro, however sincere, is the slave of the past."²³ Fanon therefore is showing that he is in strong agreement with Merleau-Ponty's insight that freedom is the freedom to inflect the world, and to enter into a corporeal dialogue with historical grounds. But Fanon's point is that this freedom is expressed to the black subject in the

²² *The Lived Experience of the Black*, p4.

²³ *Black Skin, White Masks*, Pluto Press, London, 1986. p225.

form of a *denial*. As Fanon's analysis of his own experience shows, the politics of exclusion embodied in the child's gaze disables the corporeal schema. This disabling is at the same time an alienation of the subject from the possibility of historical freedom in the present.

It is at this juncture that we can understand more fully the grounds for the slippage between the historico-racial schema and the epidermal schema. The former moment marks the inauguration of being *pour soi* succumbing to the European framework of being for others. The body-image of the black subject is spliced asunder by historical means: an autonomously constructed self-image is thwarted by a fantastical parody of history. The entrance into Europe of black subjects is at the same time a movement into an all-encompassing frame of historical reference that black agency can do little to resist. The second moment, that of the *racial epidermal* schema, occupies a later stage in psycho-somatic disintegration and alienation. Instead of remaining an *historical* ascription of identity (albeit a false one supplied by a white mythos), the schema becomes 'naturalised' as a *condition* of skin. The epidermal marks the stage where historical construction and contingency is effaced and replaced with the facticity of flesh. The colour of skin now appears to be intrinsically significant. With the outset of epidermalisation, we are at the edge of being-for-others sedimenting into an essence, a 'fact' of blackness. Fanon is therefore demonstrating that essentialism is a discourse derived from a perversive repression of history. By marking the two stages of the 'historico-racial' and then the 'racial epidermal', he is therefore contesting the view that essentialism, and in particular black essentialism, is grounded in a biological problematic. For Fanon, the essentialisation of blackness is the product of a concealed perversion of history. It is only once this concealment is consolidated (through epidermalisation) that questions concerning the *biological* ground of race arise. The distinction he makes between two stages of schematisation or epistemic enframing therefore allow biologicistic discourses around race to be seen as phenomena derivative upon a prior perversion of history that is subsequently concealed.

Although it may sound initially a strange suggestion, in the midst of Fanon's painful genealogy of alienation and essentialism, I find it hard to resist detecting the emergent dynamics of hope. In a similar manner to Foucault's investigations into the birth of disciplinarity in modernity being at once implacable *and* contingent, Fanon's narrative of alienation

marks the path of what has been done and can therefore be *undone*. As I understand it, the function of a genealogical history is to expose the ideology of historical logic and necessity as the reified legitimation of force. If a genealogical undercurrent to Fanon's text gathers plausibility, then its facility is to expose the processes of black alienation in order to prepare the ground for their *unravelling*. Fanon's hope then is that there is no necessity or inevitability in the corporeal schema ceding to the racial-epidermal schema. However, within *The Lived Experience of the Black*, this subterranean movement of resistance is masked to an extent by Fanon's desire to remain faithful to the profound sense of hopeless alienation at work in the black existential situation.

For instance, later in the essay, this sentiment is expressed succinctly in two words, "Too late."²⁴ From this mournful shibboleth everything that pertains to Fanon's analysis of existential dread unfolds. The black subject enters the arena of interpersonal encounters in the colonial situation with his or her history already constructed and given. The already given history, the parodic primitivism most powerfully represented by cannibalism, is the form of the denial of ascribing historical agency to the black subject. 'Everything has been foreseen, discovered, proven, taken advantage of. My nervous hands rein in nothing; the vein is exhausted. Too late!'²⁵ Given a temporal expression, nausea renders impossible the simplest bodily gesture. Heidegger's elementary criteria for being-in-the-world, the categories of being 'ready-to-hand' (*Vor-handen*) and 'present-at-hand' (*Zu-handen*) are denied. At the brink of the decomposition of self and world, all Fanon's hands can do is shake. The limit point of this incapacitated alienation comes when Fanon finally acquiesces to the onslaught of the alienating gaze and *internalises it*. At two points in his essay Fanon describes this moment with acute force,

On that day, disoriented and incapable of being outside with the other, the White who unmercifully imprisoned me, I took myself far away, very far away indeed from my being-there, thus making myself an object.²⁶

²⁴ *The Lived Experience of the Black*, p12.

²⁵ *Ibid.* p12.

²⁶ *Ibid.* p4.

I sit down at the fire and I discover my livery.²⁷

Here, the white imaginary perspective intrudes to the extent that it becomes a self-inflicted inferiorisation. Again however, in the midst of despair, the flower of hope appears. For Fanon is clear that the black subject is not merely an unwilling victim in the procession towards incapacitated alienation. There is then a *complicity* at work in the reification of a parodic and inferiorised black body-image. As Fanon writes later in the *Black Skin, White Masks*, 'I have ceaselessly striven to show the Negro man that in a sense he makes himself abnormal.'²⁸ The black subject mimics the white gaze, and in a panopticon-like manner, the white other no longer needs to be there.

*

Fanon's analysis of black *Erlebnis* under colonialism and imperialism clearly deeply problematises orthodox phenomenology, and in particular the thought of Merleau-Ponty. The equality that Merleau-Ponty assumed exists across all able-bodied beings is nullified and rendered naïve by the black experience. In *The Lived Experience of the Black*, Fanon pushes this critique further, in the direction of problematising a more fundamental category of western thought - ontology itself:

When one has admitted once and for all that ontology leaves existence aside, one sees why it does not allow for understanding the being of the Black. It is not a question of the Black being black anymore, but rather of his being black opposite the White.²⁹

For Fanon, the encounter between 'being' and difference leads to the dehiscence of ontology itself. Fanon repeats the Levinasian move here of construing ontology as the field of the Same.³⁰ Ontology is therefore revealed as a strategy of legitimation for the repression of autonomous difference. More particularly, for Fanon, ontology conceals the work of

²⁷ Ibid. p5.

²⁸ *Black Skin, White Masks*. p225.

²⁹ Ibid. p1.

³⁰ Levinas writes, "Western philosophy has most often been an ontology: a reduction of the other to the same by interposition of a middle and neutral term that ensures the comprehension of being." *Totality and Infinity*, Duquene University Press, 1969, p43.

the white mythos in *constructing* the image of blackness which black people in his view have subsequently adopted in a reflexive comprehension of 'black being'.

Undoubtedly, Fanon is correct in asserting the violence wrought by ontology and its phenomenological variant in the repression and concealment of intrinsic difference. It is less certain however that any subsequent appeals to either a specific form of embodied experience or to hope can do without them. What is required is less a rejection of ontology and phenomenology outright and more a critique of the means to which they have been put. My argument is then that any assertion of the *difference* of black lived experience cannot be undertaken without recourse to the terms of a phenomenological ontology. This is partially acknowledged in the conclusion to *Black Skin, White Masks*, where Fanon writes, 'I am a part of Being to the degree that I go beyond it.'³¹ Far from a phenomenological ontology necessarily demarcating (however unconsciously) the community of being that excludes or represses difference, the demand is that ontology itself is rethought (the implicit suggestion of Fanon here) as *differential*. Ontology would therefore mark the boundary of the same and the other. In an older terminology, ontology is re-cast as involving *transcendence within immanence*.³² In this way 'being' as a unified ontological category can no longer cash out in epistemological terms as the apriori given conditionals for experience. The phenomenon is not disclosed on the basis of the assumption of a unified transcendental ground. As we shall see, on the contrary, being is deferred and reconstituted as the form of the ideal, and the conditions of possibility for experience are pluralised. Within the present, ontology would always therefore involve difference – the interplay of immanence and transcendence. What alternatives are there to this solution? If a phenomenological ontology were delegitimated by the experience of difference, difference itself would be rendered impossible to thinking – nothing would be available to thought (save perhaps different strategies of immanence or different forms of will to power). The phenomenon of difference must be therefore understood as that which defers (and deters) being. But this argument moves far too

³¹ *Black Skin, White Masks*. p229.

³² This argument for a reformulation of ontology embracing difference is developed at length in my PhD thesis, *Phenomenology and Difference: the Body, Architecture and Race*, Warwick University, 1998.

quickly. What needs to be accounted for first of all in any phenomenological ontology of difference is the possibility of maintaining the difference of lived experience.

One of the sharpest commentators on the differences of experience that result from different forms of embodiment is James Baldwin. In a short essay called “Stranger in the Village,” he recounts his experiences staying in a Swiss village. Towards the end of the piece, he considers the hypothetical differences between himself and the villagers in terms of varying interpretations of a work of architecture:

The cathedral at Chartres, I have said, says something to the people of this village which it cannot say to me; but it is important to understand that this cathedral says something to me which it cannot say to them. Perhaps they are struck by the power of the spires, the glory of the windows; but they have known God, after all, longer than I have known him, and in a different way, and I am terrified by the slippery bottomless well to be found in the crypt, down which heretics were hurled to death, and by the obscene, inescapable gargoyles jutting out of the stone and seeming to say that God and the devil can never be divorced.³³

Although the cathedral is situated within a common temporal horizon between villagers and Baldwin, the difference of embodiment divides the way in which it is revealed to both as an experiential/imaginary construct. Hence, a common horizon of terms fragments into different worlds of experience. In this way, everything that reveals itself in the world is liable to double readings across embodied difference (of race, class, gender, sexuality..) Works of art, places, stories, traditions are all liable to be fragmented by contestive interpretations. As these counter-interpretations themselves are revealed in the face of the normative view, they therefore tend to reflect the forces of exclusion back to the subject of the experience. In this way, counter-interpretations repeat the pain of marginality. As Fanon writes, on the last page of *The Lived Experience of the Black*,

Impossible to go to the movies without running into myself.

³³ James Baldwin, “Stranger in the Village” in *The Price of the Ticket*, Michael Joseph Ltd., 1985, p89.

I wait for myself. At the interval, and right before the movie starts, I wait for myself. Those in front of me look at me, spy on me, wait for me. A Negro groom is going to appear. My heart turns my head.³⁴

With these experiences of difference and the ‘pain of interpretations’ in mind, we are now in a position to work through the problem of expressing a desire for a community of being without violating difference. In *The Lived Experience of the Black*, Fanon expresses this desire as follows,

All I wanted was to be a man among other men. I had wanted to arrive smooth and young in a world that was ours, that together we would have erected.³⁵

For Fanon, this redemption from the gaze is articulated in terms of a transformative historicity, outlined forcefully in the final chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks, En guise de conclusion*. Freedom for Fanon is first of all freedom from the weight of the past,

The problem considered here is one of time. Those Negroes and white men will be disalienated who refuse to let themselves be sealed away in the materialized Tower of the Past.³⁶

Instead of being mesmerised by the past, the present is attended to as the site of possible transformation and disalienation. The weight of history has therefore to be dismissed. ‘I will not make myself the man of any past. I do not want to exalt the past at the expense of my present and of my future.’³⁷ The only past that is legitimate for the purposes of freedom is a *universal* past. ‘I am a man, and what I have to recapture is the whole past of the world.’³⁸ In a series of passionate pronouncements, Fanon reiterates this desire for an unburdened universality, grounded in the present of agency:

³⁴ *The Lived Experience of the Black*, p32.

³⁵ *Ibid.* p4.

³⁶ *Black Skin, White Masks*, p226.

³⁷ *Ibid.* p226

³⁸ *Ibid.* p226

I am not a prisoner of history. I should not seek there for the meaning of my destiny.³⁹

In the world through which I travel, I am endlessly creating myself.⁴⁰

I am not the slave of the Slavery that dehumanized my ancestors.⁴¹

I am my own foundation.⁴²

Here then, Fanon argues that the present is the site of a potential rupture of what is given to have occurred: the unbearable *weight* of historical being. Fanon's redemption from the past involves not responding or *reacting* to it. Freedom for Fanon involves the active inflection of the 'now', rather than a reactive valorization or reproduction of what has been given. History, as the framework of cultural origins (and therefore projections), is denied.

In these terms, it is not possible to avoid parallels with the account of the relations between history, agency and freedom found in Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, in particular with the latter's notion of a pre-personal communication between the body and its habitus opening up the moment of freedom and the denial of fixed historical origins. Fanon transcends a locked Sartrean dialectical logic by relativising history within the terms of an active present. Fanon's 'endless recreation of himself', his existence as his own foundation, are the echo of Merleau-Ponty's 'resumption at every moment' of the 'perpetual contribution of his bodily being.'⁴³ In both philosophers, rather than a mere moment within the dialectical process, freedom is a function of the present, as the site of a possible transformation of the given. In such a manner, the linearity of the past is broken, and the future is opened to difference, the difference of a transcendence of the same, participating in being by going beyond it.

There is however an important, if subtle difference between the two

³⁹ Ibid. p229.

⁴⁰ Ibid. p229

⁴¹ Ibid. p230.

⁴² Ibid. p231.

⁴³ *Phenomenology of Perception*, p254.

versions of historical freedom. For Merleau-Ponty, as we have seen, the possibility of active inflection in and of the present is given with the ease of a 'perpetual contribution.' It would seem that the present is the site of rupture of the given's linearity, and that this rupture is guaranteed merely by the motility of the agent, as a matter of habit. In contrast, Fanon's freedom from the past involves a great deal more effort and resolve. For Fanon, transformation of the present requires something like a critical resistance to the dominating episteme - an active denial of the mythos that intervenes in the formation of body-images. Without that, black subjectivity in particular is threatened with the weight of a past which disavows and disables the possibility of transforming the present. Once again, this weight cannot simply be off-loaded or deflected through a sort of ontological judo - the structures of complicity and internalization must be negotiated and worked through as stages on the way to autonomously-grounded differentiation. In contrast, the lack of a critical resistance amongst those who approximate to the norm in Europe (white, male, straight, able-bodied) results in a complicit reproduction of the framework that privileges them through the ease of their actions. In this light, Merleau-Ponty's reflections on the body's relation to freedom risk being blind to the aporias of difference. Fanon's critique of phenomenology teaches us that the universal is the end of the struggle, not that which precedes it. *Black Skin White Masks* ends with the most solemn of vows to a vigilancy of the corporeal,

My final prayer:

O my body, make of me always a man who questions!⁴⁴

*

As a result of my presentation of the encounter between Merleau-Ponty and Fanon, the phenomenological ontology of difference introduced above can now be clarified. Being, operating as a unified given (Merleau-Ponty's 'one single world'), is incompatible with an agonistic hermeneutics engendered by bodily difference. As a temporo-historical horizon, being conventionally discloses difference only through the disjunctive movement of *time*, not through the difference of bodies.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ *Black Skin, White Masks*, p232.

⁴⁵ This is in broad terms Heidegger's characterisation of the relation between Being or the *Es gibt* and difference in *On Time and Being*, Harper and Row, 1972

Thus, in the case of Baldwin's cathedral, there would be no way of accounting for differences in the way the building is experienced or imagined, or rather, any such explanation would not be respected as of philosophical merit. Against this, through the characterisation of ontology under development, each present becomes differentiated by different forms of embodiment, as the phenomena disclosed in that present are in turn revealed differently according to corporeal variation. Through our bodies, we belong to relatively different worlds, with different forms of visibility and invisibility, history and value being thereby disclosed. The merging of these worlds through encounters of difference leads inevitably to contested comprehensions of the phenomenon. Being therefore must, in order to maintain this phenomenological plurality and not *repress* it, re-situate itself as a *spatio-temporal* horizon, or rather as the ideal. What is is what is to come. As Fanon says, we are indeed a part of being to the degree that we go beyond it. Being, as the possibility of (comm)unity, becomes the form of the ideal. Moreover, precisely because it cannot be given and does not function as the apriori, being is therefore an *ethical* ideal – it is the ideal of a community that is yet to exist and yet *ought* to exist, as the fulfillment of transcendence within immanence. In contrast, the extent to which a unified world is imposed as the episteme of the present marks the extent to which difference itself will be violated. The ethics of community is therefore the inverse of the repression of difference. In order to maintain this difference (and strive for community), it behooves us as participants in difference to be mindful of the ever-present possibility of a conflict of interpretations. Although the potentials of the present for inflectional agency have been stressed until now, it must be stated that this community has an inescapably *futural* dimension. The project of a community of difference, between those who have nothing in common, is a project that comes *after* experience. Community is unveiled *a posteriori*. It is only therefore possible to affirm a community that is forever 'yet to come.'⁴⁶ Any community of being is therefore a pro-ject, an openly processual entity forever cast into the future as ongoing work.

How can we begin to work towards this community of being? On what basis can *communication* between different beings begin? In what way

⁴⁶ Through different means, I concur finally with a Derridean logic.

does this analysis bear upon relations between others in the present of agency? If the imaginary framework of being-for-others (most sharply represented by Fanon's child on the train) is refused, what is now to take its place across difference? Here, I can offer no more than a suggestion, an allusion to what may turn out to be a 'new humanism': we communicate with and move towards the other by dint of recognising both their capacity and our own for *suffering*.⁴⁷ Fanon's *The Lived Experience of the Black* exemplifies this first step; as a testimony to affliction and psychic fragmentation it communicates the desire for community across difference. At the limit, although the other may look different, speak a language we do not understand, participate in rituals and practice that obey a different rationality to our own, regard the objects and artifacts in our world through a somatic lens that we cannot comprehend - we move toward each other through a common sentience and a shared capacity to suffer. In this sense, the grounds for hope lie where cultural juxtaposition is at its most vehement: in the contemporary metropolis. Richard Sennett ends his magisterial work on the fleshy history of the western city in this way,

Lurking in the civic problems of a multi-cultural city is the moral difficulty of arousing sympathy for those who are Other. And this can only occur, I believe, by understanding why bodily pain requires a place in which it can be acknowledged, and in which its transcendent origins become visible. Such pain has a trajectory in human experience. It disorients and makes incomplete the self, defeats the desire for coherence; the body accepting pain is ready to become a civic body, sensible to the pain of another person, pains present together on the street, at last endurable - even though, in a diverse world, each person cannot explain what he or she is feeling, who he or she is, to the other.⁴⁸

In this paper I have argued that Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body risks privileging a relation between freedom, agency and

⁴⁷ See Robert Bernasconi, "Casting the Slough: Fanon's New Humanism for a New Humanity" in *Fanon: A Critical Reader*. As an alternative to a humanism engendered by internal violence (the view subsequently favoured by Fanon), what is being suggested here is a humanism grounded in injustice and the body-in-pain of the other.

⁴⁸ Richard Sennett, *Flesh and Stone: The Body and the City in Western Civilization*, Faber and Faber, 1994, p376.

historicality that ultimately violates the embodiment of difference such as that interposed by race. Fanon's *The Lived Experience of the Black* and the example from Baldwin display forcefully how difference denies the possibility of an already given community and commonality between human subjects. However, as I have argued throughout, Fanon's critique does not by necessity condemn Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology to a violent ontology of the Same. Rather, Fanon's critique has been used to begin to develop an ontology of difference that lies as the hidden soil of Merleau-Ponty's text. Despite Fanon's strong reservations over the legitimacy of 'ontology', I have argued that only on its terms can emancipatory strategies be thought through. The 'communication more ancient than thought' of the *Phenomenology of Perception* in particular provides the most powerful and resourceful way of thinking embodied free agency grounded in the difference of the present. Only on the basis of a conceptual schema itself present in Merleau-Ponty's work can Fanon's critique result in a productive phenomenology of difference which repositions community as the Ideal, the deferred universal, and not the given.⁴⁹ As I have suggested, the work towards this community begins by allowing for the communication of pain across difference in this present. Thus, a critical awareness of embodied differences between the subject and the horizons of its being does not seek to denounce or renounce justice, community and a 'new humanism' for the sake of irreducibility or a voluntaristic will-to-power. Rather, the phenomenologists' dream of uncovering a pre-thetic community is shown finally to be the goal of those who seek with vigilance to question their bodies in the present.

⁴⁹ Here, I must echo Lewis Gordon's cautionary note in *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man*, '...it is not our intent to continue the long tradition of treating the thoughts of black philosophers as derivative of white ones.' p14. I have only sought to show necessary *parallels* in the opening towards strategies of emancipation, not lines of causality.