

Blocked Bodies: moving from Merleau-Ponty to Fanon in the experience of racism

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ABSTRACT: The central claim argued for in this paper is that racism is primarily expressed and felt bodily in a way that certain forms of (inter-)action become predestined and others foreclosed, i.e., the ambiguity of bodily (inter-)action is blocked. If in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy the ambiguity of the body is described as a productive resource for interaction, in racist encounters, however, the body is best described by restriction. The experience of the racialized body as being blocked is delineated, alongside an explanation of the structures of the racializing body. This examination is rendered visible in terms of the circular logic of fear. Fear is characterized by its self-perpetuating circularity which helps establish borders and encloses communities with binding force. Thereby, a framework is developed which highlights the bodily habitualization of racial identities. I will pursue the argument by drawing on resources from thinkers such as Frantz Fanon, Audre Lorde and Ta-Nehisi Coates and undergird their experiences of racism with the anti-racist phenomenologist thought of Sara Ahmed, Linda Martín Alcoff and Alia Al-Saji.

KEYWORDS: Merleau-Ponty, Fanon, critical phenomenology, racism, affective ankylosis, bodily blockage

The AA subway train to Harlem. I clutch my mother's sleeve, her arms full of shopping bags, christmas-heavy. The wet smell of winter clothes, the train's lurching. My mother spots an almost seat, pushes my little snowsuited body down. On one side of me a man reading a paper. On the other, a woman in a fur hat staring at me. Her mouth twitches as she stares and then her gaze drops down, pulling mine with it. Her leather-gloved hand plucks at the line where my new blue snowpants and her sleek fur coat meet. She jerks her coat closer to her. I look. I do not see whatever terrible thing she is seeing on the seat between us — probably a roach. But she has communicated her horror to me. It must be something very bad from the way she's looking, so I pull my snowsuit closer to me away from it, too. When I look up the woman is still staring at me, her nose holes and eyes huge. And suddenly I realize there is nothing crawling up the seat between us; it is me she doesn't want her coat to touch. The fur brushes past my face as she stands with a shudder and holds on to a strap in the speeding train. Born and bred a New York City child, I quickly slide over to make room for my mother to sit down. No word has been spoken. I'm afraid to say anything to my mother because I don't know what I've done. I look at the sides of my snowpants, secretly. Is there something on them? Something's going on here I do not understand, but I will never forget it. Her eyes. The flared nostrils. The hate.

(Lorde 1984, 147f.)

I. Introduction

The short scene above written by Audrey Lorde illustrates a great deal of what racism is about. The little girl in the story finds herself implicitly compared to a roach crawling between the seats in New York City Subway. The repulsive reaction of the women in the fur coat transforms the body of the little girl – not only in the perspective of the woman, but also in the way the girl looks at herself. It is the girl who is projecting some sort of guilt upon herself. Thinking of whether there is dirt on her snowpants or how she potentially misbehaved – trying to solve the unsolvable riddle while the woman in the fur hat is rushing away in disgust and hate. During the whole scene, no words are spoken. This shows how well racism also works outside of the sphere of hate speech and physical attacks. Racism is grounded in bodily interactions – it is both expressed and felt bodily. In racist encounters certain ways of (inter-)action become predestined and others foreclosed, i.e., the ambiguity of (inter-)action is blocked. A blocked ambiguity means in this context that the openness towards others cannot be upheld. Here, the racialized body becomes dehumanized. This dehumanization is, as Ta-Nahesi Coates puts it, “not merely symbolic – it delineates borders of power” (Coates 2017b, XIV-XV).

In Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, the ambiguous bond between ourselves, others, and the world is described as a productive resource. However, in racist encounters the Merleau-Pontian phenomenology of the ‘I can’ turns into a phenomenology of the ‘I cannot’ both on the racialized and racializing side. The argument is divided in three parts: the first briefly describes Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the body in its ambiguity, as an object among objects and simultaneously the center of subjectivity. Moreover, Merleau-Ponty’s conception of the unconscious is going to be introduced. The second part confronts the first, in the form of a negative mirroring, with the blockage of ambiguity in racism. The experience of the racialized body as being blocked is delineated, alongside an explanation of the structures of the racializing body. Third, the examination of the previous part is rendered visible in terms of the circular logic of fear. Fear is characterized by its self-perpetuating circularity which helps establish borders and encloses communities with binding force. Not only are the feared bodies affected by an affective politics of fear – so too are the fearing bodies. Finally, the discussion opens up to develop an account of race as visible and contextual. I will pursue the argument by drawing on resources from thinkers such as Frantz Fanon, Audre Lorde and Ta-Nehesi Coates and undergird their experiences of racism with the anti-racist phenomenologist thought of Sara Ahmed, Linda Martín Alcoff and Alia Al-Saji. Thereby, I adopt Lisa Guenther’s framing of *critical phenomenology* which “situates lived experience in a material, historical, and social context that is both prior to the individuation of any given subject and also shaped by the historical sedimentation of perceptual practices” (Guenther 2019, 191).

Throughout the argument, the differentiation between racism and racists by Lewis R. Gordon is adopted: While racists “are people who hold beliefs about the superiority and inferiority of certain groups of racial designated people” (Gordon 2017, 297), “racism is the system of institutions and social norms that empower individuals with such beliefs” (ibid., 297). This differentiation holds on the one side that racists are only strong through a system which empowers them, on the other side it emphasizes the necessity to examine the underlying structures in which it is possible to articulate and act in a racist fashion.

II. Thinking Ambiguity

II.a. Bodily Ambiguity

Terminologically, ambiguity is not the same as ambivalence. While ambivalence hides contradictions and imposes a definite perspective, ambiguity describes a multiplicity of perspectives (see Merleau-Ponty 1964, 102f.; see Langer 2003, 90). In other words, ambiguity arises “when

two images are preserved even when the identity of their object is recognized” (Landes 2013, 20f.). Merleau-Ponty situates ambiguity at the very core of human existence: “Thus, the ambiguity of being-in-the-world is translated by that of the body, and this is understood through that of time.” (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 98) In the following part I am going to leave the ambiguity of time and of being-in-the-world mostly aside and focus on bodily ambiguity.¹

For Merleau-Ponty’s account of the body it is necessary to introduce the distinction of the lived body (*Leib*) and the objective body (*Körper*), which he draws in reference to the phantom limb syndrome.² He places the body as the subject of perception to resist the view of taking the body as a mere instrument used cognitively to pursue certain goals. He argues that we possess “preconscious knowledge” (Carman 2008, 102) because we find ourselves always bodily situated in the world:

The theory of the body schema is implicitly a theory of perception. We have learned to again sense our bodies; we have discovered, beneath objective and detached knowledge of the body, this other knowledge that we have of it because it is always with us and because we are bodies. [...] But by reestablishing contact with the body and with the world in this way, we will also rediscover ourselves, since, if one perceives with his body, then the body is a natural myself and, as it were, the body is the subject of perception. (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 213)

Here the notion of habit becomes central in Merleau-Ponty’s thought. That implies that, through bodily habituation, which manifests itself in the body schema, we gain a certain perspective of and access to the world. This access becomes the root of understanding which underlies conscious and reflective understanding.³ Merleau-Ponty proclaims that “insofar as my body is polarized by its tasks, it *exists towards* them, [...] and the ‘body schema’ is, in the end, a manner of expressing that my body is in and toward the world” (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 103).

The experience of the body is ambiguously as it is both “a natural object just like other natural objects” (Weiss 2008, 134) which simultaneously remains “the subject of my perception, the centre of my conscious (as well as pre-reflective) experience” (*ibid.*, 134). The body is not only the objective body but predominantly the lived body. Between these two poles our experience of the body migrates. Hereby, the possibility of bodily habituation plays the central role for Merleau-Ponty. Through habituation we gain access to the world and form pre-conscious knowledge which manifests itself in the body schema. The body constitutes meaning while establishing the body schema. This yields the conclusion that the body is ontologically open to “a temporality of the body (in habit and perceptual learning), to space (in movement), to language (in expression) and to others (in intersubjectivity)” (Morris 2008, 118). The acquisition of habits makes this ontological openness possible. Bodily ambiguity is here predomi-

1 See e.g., Langer (2003, 87–106) and Weiss (2008, 132–141) for a detailed description of the interconnectedness of the ambiguity of the body, time, and being-in-the-world.

2 Patients suffering from the syndrome continue to feel the presence of an amputated limb. Merleau-Ponty concludes that it is the intuitive understanding of our body which is disrupted in these cases. Suffering from the phantom limb syndrome, the lived body is still attuned to spread out in the world through the missing limb. Central for his account of the body is that it is not possible to know the body other than by living it. Neither can one’s body be accounted for in terms of relational causality nor the awareness of one’s body as mere thought (see Merleau-Ponty 2012, 150).

3 Merleau-Ponty rethinks the notion of intentionality as essentially bodily in stating that we can understand motility as basic intentionality (see Merleau-Ponty 2012, 139). Movement becomes meaningful because the body is not *in* space or *in* time, but “*inhabits* space and time” (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 140). Instead of referring every object we encounter to our possibility of moving through or around the object, we correlate practically. That means we do not continuously calculate the distance of objects to the position of our body. Rather the phenomenon of motor intentionality provides a connection between the projected world in intuition and the constructed world in thought.

nantly described with an ease in habit acquisition and bodily movement. That is as a productive repository of occupying space.

II.b. The Unconscious

Introducing the concept of the unconscious is important for the discourse of racism in its diverse manifestations. I am going to defend the claim that through the linkage of the unconscious to our bodily habituation, many facets of racist habits can be addressed in a more suitable fashion. The theory of the unconscious, against which Merleau-Ponty positions himself, goes back to Freud. While Freud positions the unconscious in the mind, Merleau-Ponty situates it in the bodily “sedimented practical schema” (Kozyreva 2018, 206). In his view, the unconscious structures the field of perception which, in turn, is structured by the body:

[The unconscious has] to be sought not at the bottom of ourselves, behind the back of our “consciousness” but in front of us, as articulations of our field. It is “unconscious” by the fact that it is not an *object*, but it is that through which objects are possible, it is the constellation wherein our future is read --- It is between them as the interval of the trees between the trees, or as their common level. (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 180)

The critique consists of two fundamental convictions: First, it is misleading to regard the unconscious as an examinable object. This is, secondly, based on the argument that the past is not encapsulated, but present in our experience as atmosphere (see Landes 2013, 228). Neither is it the opposite of consciousness, nor an agency operating outside of the sphere of consciousness. It is the “very perceptual consciousness in its ambiguity, opacity, multiplicity of meanings, and unending quest for interpretation” (Stawarska 2008, 62).

Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of the unconscious as “sedimented practical schema” (Kozyreva 2018, 206) refers to his account of the ambiguity of the body. First, it takes up the account that perception is bodily structured along with the resulting ambiguity. This ambiguity consists of the thought that the body is both “what perceives and what stays invisible for itself” (ibid., 206). It grounds itself in the notion of past as not being encapsulated but being present in our experiences as atmosphere. Starting with the notion of the past, two forms of memory must be distinguished: First, memory as construction entails that the past as it is remembered did not happen in this very form for it is being constructed in the present as past. The second notion of memory as conservation does not entail remembering in a representational view, but rather remembering in a mode of oblivion (see ibid., 205).⁴ This form of memory is no longer oppositional to forgetting but works on “the pre-reflective level of embodied existence” (ibid., 208). This becomes transformed in Thomas Fuchs’ account of body memory which is “unseen but present through bodily dispositions, familiarities, habits, unintentional avoidances and omissions” (Kozyreva 2018, 209; see Fuchs 2000, 76). This implies that body memory transforms our lived body and space, which is constructive for the background against which objects, people, and interactions are perceived as well as judged (see Kozyreva 2018, 210). Neither does the forgotten disappear, nor is it necessarily given to consciousness, it is indistinctly given in a “dimension of escape and absence” (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 436).

The role of the unconscious as the background against which perception is possible, places its role as a necessary part of perception. Moreover, if the unconscious is and is not perceived, being the background of perception – “filling the gaps between the trees” – it certainly renders our field of perception. Therefore, it is constructive whether a situation might seem threatening, promising or exciting. This elucidation gives us a hold of the way we perceive and judge

⁴ In reference to Merleau-Ponty’s lecture course at the Collège de France (1954-1955): *On Institution and Passivity*.

others, depending on our mostly unconscious personal history, acquired habits, avoidances, and omissions.

Merleau-Ponty situates the self in an intersubjective sphere. Simultaneously, we are for ourselves and for the others. That means we are centered outside of ourselves in an atmosphere of sociality while individuality is upheld: “I am everything that I see and I am an intersubjective field, not in spite of my body and my historical situation, but rather by being this body and this situation and by being, through them, everything else.” (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 478) I take this to mean that there is no self except in relation to the other and to the phenomenological world. There is not only the lived present in its social setting being constitutive for the self but also the past and the bodily habits become a constitutive part of one’s self.⁵ Importantly, there is the possibility of violence against the other as Merleau-Ponty remarks: “From the moment I exist, I act, I seduce, I *encroach* upon the freedom of others.” (Merleau-Ponty in Landes 2017, 178) This violence, either in the form of active oppression or failure of recognition, becomes existential if intersubjectivity is at the core of our being-in-the-world. How the possibility of violence is socially institutionalized and how it finds its expression in different forms of interactions I will analyse in the context of racism.

III. Blockage of Ambiguity – the Bodily Experience of Racism

The attempt of the following argument is neither to deliver an exhaustive explanation or even description of racism, nor to develop generally applicable tools for counter-acting racism. The issue does not permit us to leap to conclusions or to cherish over-simplified, self-deceptive attempts to trivialize racism and its underlying structures. It is not that the problem of racism has lost urgency or is decreasingly worrisome, rather the opposite is the case. Oppressive structures function in a more nuanced fashion, seemingly invisible for those who want to live a dream. Because essentially what is strived for is the dream of ‘racism-free’ liberal societies. In Ta-Nehisi Coates’ words:

The Dream is treehouses and the Cub Scouts. The Dream smells like peppermint but tastes like strawberry shortcake. For so long I have wanted to escape into the Dream, to fold my country over my head like a blanket. But this has never been an option because the Dream rests on our [the racialized] backs, the bedding made from our bodies. (Coates 2017a, 11)

Beneath the veil of ignorance, it rumors, the ugly face of racism shows itself in the most splendid way. Even further, as recent developments in self-proclaimed liberal states underline: racism continues to become more socially accepted, openly proclaimed, and put into action.

These developments, as well as the lack of ideas of how to respond to them, blatantly show the necessity to take a step back and frame the discussion of racism in different terms. It is important to explicate its underlying structures, especially its highly coalescent structural dependencies from both sides – the oppressed as well as the oppressive.

III.a. The Blocked Body

In the following part I deal in detail with the bodily experience of racism – the blockage of the body through the racializing gaze which turns the Merleau-Pontian phenomenology of the ‘I

⁵ I owe much thanks to the anonymous review made by Martín Mercado Vásquez for pointing me at the discussion of freedom in *Phenomenology of Perception*. Herein, Merleau-Ponty highlights the dialectic between self, other and the world (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 458–483). Thus, intersubjectively bound to the world, habit formation also includes the degradation of freedom.

can' into a phenomenology of the 'I cannot' (see Ahmed 2007, 161).⁶ I claim that the experience of being bodily blocked is necessarily constituted by racializing perception which I am going to analyze hereafter. One of the central concepts developed by Fanon resonates with Merleau-Ponty's body schema, but contrasts it with the impossibility to move freely due to the racializing gaze. A short description helps to clarify Fanon's concept of the *historico-racial schema*:

In the white world the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema. Consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity. It is a third-person consciousness. The body is surrounded by an atmosphere of certain uncertainty.⁷ (Fanon 2008, 90)

Fanon describes a distance to his body – somehow he loses his grip on the body and the world. This is accompanied with the experience of heteronomy. The 'own-ness' of his body is disrupted and its place is taken by the negating activity of 'being not'. Similarly, Sara Ahmed describes the existential experience of racism as a "pressure upon your bodily surface" (Ahmed 2007, 161). In her view, this pressure becomes a restriction of what the body can do. The constant negation thereby antagonizes the possibility of being familiar with the world, of inhabiting the world in and through action, due to the heteronomy of the body. Fanon further describes his experience of "a definitive structuring of my self and the world – definitive because it creates a genuine dialectic between my body and the world" (Fanon 2008, 91). The racialized subject, following Fanon's description, finds itself in a pre-structured world which blocks possibilities to inhabit and to act in the world. Fanon conceptualizes the resulting experience of heteronomy as follows:

Beneath the body schema I had created a historical-racial schema.⁸ The data I used were provided not by "remnants of feelings and notions of the tactile, vestibular, kinesthetic, or visual nature" but by the Other, the white man, who had woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, and stories. (Fanon 2008, 91)

Besides not being able to establish his body schema Fanon describes the creation of a new *historico-racial schema*.⁹ The plasticity of fabrication is salient in his description. A form of heteronomy arises which builds on stereotypes that circulate in the society. The clout of such collectivized beliefs, myths and attitudes to 'epidermalize' on the individual body can be seen in its lucidity. Those "thousand details, anecdotes, and stories" (Fanon 2008, 91) become constitutive for the own identity which is felt as imposed upon the self.

Fanon describes in his concept of the *historico-racial schema* the experience of being blocked in and to his body. In reference to Fanon's concept, Ahmed describes a shift of the classical phenomenological perspective. In terms of racism the body is no longer in an expansive movement of possibility. Instead, the experience for the racialized subject is one of impossibility:

⁶ The aim is not a mere critique, but rather to think with and through (to use Fred Moten's term) Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. In this way, I want to push towards the bodily manifestations of racialization. For a broader critique of the elision of race in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, see Fielding (2006, 71–89).

⁷ I understand Fanon here, in the line of Lewis R. Gordon, as already describing his deferred relation to his body: "Fanon confessed being locked in a state of certain uncertainty as compared, in existential terms, to the original condition, the body at home with itself. That body, fluid in its movements, was free to reach to the world with expectations without fear of collapsing into itself." (Gordon 2015, 139)

⁸ Sara Ahmed argues that the historical-racial schema functions out of the scope of classical phenomenology, since it is established beneath the body schema. This can partly explain the lack of such descriptions in Merleau-Ponty's work (see Ahmed 2007, 153).

⁹ A further analysis of the *historio-racial schema* and its underlying structuring of the Merleau-Pontian *body schema* can be found in Staudigl 2012, 31–33.

[I]f classical phenomenology is about “motility”, expressed in the hopeful utterance “I can”. Fanon’s phenomenology of the black body would be better described in terms of the bodily restriction, uncertainty and blockage, or perhaps even in terms of the despair of the utterance “I cannot”. (Ahmed 2007, 161)

In this line it can be argued that the phenomenological conceptualization of the Merleau-Pontian ‘I can’ as a basic mode of bodily movement is a result of the privileged position of not being blocked due to not being commonly racialized.¹⁰ My claim is that not being blocked means to have the possibility to freely adopt and sustain bodily ambiguity in habit acquisition. In contrast, the establishment of the *historico-racial schema* leads to the experience of a blocked bodily ambiguity. At least two questions arise: First, how does it feel to live with the permanent possibility to get blocked bodily? Second, what is the structural background against which it is possible for some bodies to move freely in space while others are being restricted in their attempts to inhabit the world?

Brian Massumi provides a useful conceptualization of the importance of movement in today’s society. Following his argumentation, capitalist societies become composed out of gateways, checkpoints, and thresholds in a “continuous space of passage” (Massumi 2015, 26). What is controlled at every checkpoint is the right to passage – to access – which mostly works on a subliminal level. This proceeding goes nearly unnoticed and automatic. The possibility of being stopped turns into a question of not only physical motility but also social mobility. That means, in a society where passage is core, being stopped literally, fixed with a gaze or to feel bodily blocked amounts to the experience of an ‘I cannot’. It becomes the prevention of participation.¹¹

Importantly, the phenomenon of being blocked is not restricted to skin color. Ahmed describes the example of possessing a Muslim name which is for her to be restricted to certain stereotypes which block her bodily possibilities:

[It is] to inherit the impossibility of a body that can “trail behind”, or even to inherit the impossibility of the body’s reach. For the body recognized as “could be Muslim”, which translates into “could be terrorist”, the experience begins with discomfort: spaces we occupy do not “extend” the surfaces of our bodies. (Ahmed 2007, 163)

Merleau-Ponty describes the adoption of new habits in terms of an extension of possibilities. Contrastingly, Ahmed’s experience is one of blockage, stemming from the persistent possibility of being exposed, due to an imbued identity and its associations.¹² This is distinct from Merleau-Ponty’s view: extending the body schema through adoption of habits is an extension of space and comfort. Contrarily, I claim that the general mode of the racialized body is to be blocked. Crucially, this possibility takes the form of a habit itself which amounts to the experience of discomfort, as Ahmed describes it.

10 Of course, as Iris Marion Young points out, the ‘I can’ in Merleau-Ponty is accompanied by an ‘I cannot’. Significant here is whether they are juxtaposed or superimposed to each other (see Young 2005, 36f.). The latter, by giving rise to contradictory manifestations, pushes towards the framing of the blocked body, which I develop throughout the paper. However, by no means I by no means want to draw a seamless analogy between racism and sexism here. Accordingly, this paper addresses the bodily manifestations of racialization in its own terms.

11 I take racism as *one* form of how prevention of participation can articulate itself. Certainly, there are other forms to be restricted of participation due to class, race and gender sometimes openly and systematically, but most of the time at a more nuanced level.

12 Here I follow Linda Martín Alcoff’s understanding of identities as visible. Her concept of *visible identities* takes race to be “socially constructed, historically malleable, culturally contextual, and reproduced through learned perceptual practices” (Alcoff 2006, 182). See as well 4. Race as Visible Identity.

Beyond this, a coercive phenomenon arises that accompanies this possibility to be blocked: the experience of being objectified. Following Martha Nussbaum, objectification can take different forms and is better understood as an umbrella term for different phenomena of oppressions, as opposed to a fixed meaning. Nonetheless, central is that something is treated “*as an object* what is really not an object, what is, in fact, a human being” (Nussbaum 1995, 257). Fanon elusively describes in *Black Skin, White Masks* the experience of being objectified:

“Dirty nigger!” Or simply, “Look, a Negro!”

I came into the world imbued with the will to find a meaning in things, my spirit filled with the desire to attain to the source of the world, and then I found that I was an object in the midst of objects. Sealed into that crushing objecthood, I turned beseechingly to others. Their attention was a liberation [...] But just as I reached the other side, I stumbled, and the movements, the attitudes, the glances of the other fixed me there, in the sense in which a chemical solution is fixed by a dye. (Fanon 2008, 89)

Objectification in terms of racism can take two routes: over-determination or under-determination. I claim that they are not necessarily mutually exclusive but can accompany each other in a toxic convergence. Fanon experiences himself as over-determined from the outside: “I am a slave not to the ‘idea’ others have of me but to my appearance.”¹³ (ibid., 96) He has the feeling of being exposed due to his skin color, and moreover, to be “locked in his body” (ibid., 200) by attributes which are associated with his appearance. This amounts to a density of black consciousness which is “immanent in itself” (ibid., 114). He further expresses a felt restrictiveness: “I am not a potentiality of something. I am fully what I am. I do not have to look for the universal. There is no room for probability inside me.” (ibid., 114)

This casts shadow on the description of Merleau-Ponty’s ambiguity of the body. There, I have emphasized the dynamic possibility of recasting the body schema in habit acquisition as continuous self-transcending movement of the body. In contrast, Fanon is locked in his body and a pre-structured world. The burden of being bodily blocked through perception of the white gaze lets us conclude that the racialized body, as Fanon describes it, is already over-determined from the outset (see Ngo 2017, 30).

A similar phenomenon can be identified in terms of under-determination. Alia Al-Saji extends the phenomenological description of Fanon to the example of veiled Muslim women. She concludes that in the public debate, mechanisms are at play which “put Muslim women in positions scripted in advance, where veiling is constituted as the equivalent of *de-subjectification* – a lack of subjectivity, a victimhood or voicelessness, that these images in turn work to enforce” (Al-Saji 2010, 877). While being over-determined due to their bodily appearance, in the same time, the systematics of being under-determined become tangible.

The racialized subject is denied its possibility to be taken seriously which is a lack of recognition. If recognition is delimited by the other from the outset, it is for the racialized subject that “this other remains the focus of action” (Fanon 2008, 191). That means, a hierarchy from the racializing to the racialized subject establishes itself. This manifests a dependence for the racialized subject in its being-for-itself. I argue that the subject becomes bodily blocked, and is no longer capable of the self-transcending movement of the body in habit acquisition. The racialized body is no longer ambiguous in the Merleau-Pontian sense. It is deprived of its ability to move, to take action, to be – in Merleau-Pontian terms – “polarized by its tasks” (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 103). If you are restricted in movement by ascriptions of others onto

13 Fanon’s argument respectively aroused much – as well critical – response due to his differentiation between anti-black racism and anti-Semitism. For a lucid examination of this discussion e.g. Weiss 2010.

your body, it is no longer possible to fully possess your body, in the sense that you ‘lose grip’ on your body and the world.

As I have outlined in this part the racialized body is experienced as being blocked. In accordance with this proposition, Fanon establishes the concept of the *historico-racial schema* which is ‘woven out’ of stereotypes and prejudices circulating in the society. In addition, I have described the effect of being objectified – either as under-determination or over-determination – as the blockage of bodily ambiguity for the racialized subject.

III.b. Boundedness of Stereotypes

In the following, I briefly hint to the temporal dimension of stereotypes which circulate in the society. I argue that the feeling of restrictedness, Fanon describes, has a temporal dimension because of the temporal embeddedness of the stereotypes themselves. To be restricted to certain stereotypes – I claim – tightly coalesces with the loss of futurity and the ability to openly, i.e., ambiguously, live in the present. First, the construction of the *historico-racial-schema* makes the effects for the racialized subject tangible through its reliance on stereotypes. Fanon experiences himself as being woven out of myths, stories etc. which build on and re-enact stereotypes. What matters here is not only the issue of stereotypes *per se*, because it is questionable whether it is possible to perceive others without stereotyping them at all.¹⁴ More specifically, what becomes salient in Fanon’s description, being ‘woven out’, is the temporal structure of stereotypes. Al-Saji notes that “it is a past of stereotyped remnants, isolated fragments, and violent distortions” (Al-Saji 2021, 182) which is imbued on the racialized body. It is now possible to track down the lack of ‘own-ness’ of the body to stereotypes circulating in society. The racialized subject experiences itself restricted to stereotypes which are mostly associated with a negative connotation.

The second contributing layer of the temporal dimension of stereotypes is the notion of *collective unconscious* Fanon develops in reference to C.G. Jung: “[T]he collective unconscious is quite simply the repository of prejudices, myths, and collective attitudes of a particular group.” (Fanon 2008, 165) Fanon develops his notion not in terms of psyche, as C.G. Jung does, but as culturally acquired. In other words, a social imaginary is built, passed on and acquired through “childhood education, scholarly manuals, language, media, comic books, stories, films, and images” (Al-Saji 2021, 180) which makes “particular ways of imagining, thinking, and seeing become normative” (ibid., 180). If the social imaginary - as in Fanon’s case - is a racial one, then certain racial stereotypes persist in the present. This has the particular effect on the racialized subject of being restricted to those stereotypes from the past. Al-Saji defines the characteristics of such a racial imaginary as the building of borders between social categories. Crucially, “even as those borders shift, in policing who is included/excluded, the othering mechanism remains in force” (ibid., 180). This implies that the racial imaginary does not only lead to the exclusion of some people in the society, but is also a collectivized mode of thinking. Since the *collective unconscious* is shared in a society, the subject is affected, regardless of being the racializing or the racialized. Even though the forms in which this occurs are manifestly different. For the racialized subject, the present takes the form of a repetition of stereotypes and fragmented memorialization. Thus, it hinders the racialized subject from living openly in the present in an attitude of ‘own-ness’. Instead, the feeling arises of being “damned” (Fanon 2008, 117) to a distorted fragmentation of the past.

14 This point is also made by Merleau-Ponty: “Other people are always menaced by the possibility of a stereotype within which the role encloses them. They can thereby disappear and leave only their role.” (Merleau-Ponty in Yeo 1992, 43)

III.c. The Racist Gaze

Constitutive for the blockage of bodily ambiguity of the racialized subject is the racializing subject. This view is pinpointed by Fanon in his statement: “It is the racist who creates the inferiorized.” (Fanon 2008, 73) In the following segment I take a closer look at the bodily habits on the racializing side. I defend the claim that racism is instantiated by individual bodily habits which build on prolonged structural dependencies in the society. This amounts to the impression of an “I cannot see or feel otherwise” (Al-Saji 2014, 142) on the racializing side. More precisely: racializing habits mediate on both the perceptive as well as the affective level, leading to a seemingly inevitable conclusion of being innate. First, I am going to elucidate Ahmed’s concept of *white extensiveness* and link her approach to the conceptualization of the unconscious in Merleau-Ponty. This will show that whiteness as a perceptual category can unconsciously structure the perceptual field. Second, I introduce the notion of *affective ankylosis*¹⁵ (Fanon 2008, 101). This provides me with the possibility to explore the socially habituated coloring of perception on the affective level. Central for my perspective on racist habits is that they are self-perpetuating and make it seem that ways of perceiving are not social-historically formed but unalterable.¹⁶

White Extensiveness

Ahmed’s concept of *white extensiveness* aims to highlight “whiteness as a category of experience that disappears as a category through experience, and how this disappearance makes whiteness ‘worldly’” (Ahmed 2007, 150).¹⁷ In the context of my argument whiteness is one side of the recalcitrance of the racializing “I cannot see and feel otherwise” (Al-Saji 2014, 142). This is partly the case if whiteness is conceived as the “background to experience” (Ahmed 2007, 150) which highly resonates the Merleau-Pontian conception of the unconscious. I have laid out that the unconscious is the “interval of the trees between the trees” (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 180). That it is the background against which it is possible to see objects. Moreover, due to Merleau-Ponty, the unconscious has to be understood as sedimented practical schema. I want to connect this framing of the unconscious to a point made by Ahmed:

In the case of race, we would say that bodies come to be seen as ‘alike’, as for instance ‘sharing whiteness’ as a ‘characteristic’, as an effect of such proximities, where certain things are already in place. (Ahmed 2007, 155)

I argue that what is “already in place” is the unconscious structuring of the field of perception which finds its manifestation in the sedimented practical schema of *white extensiveness*. Therefore, whiteness goes unnoticed until you stand out as not being white. Establishing a certain coherence through shared attributes results in a feeling of proximity. So, the perceived likeness is the effect of the established proximity (see Ahmed 2007, 155). In this line Ahmed concludes: “Whiteness becomes reproduced by being seen as a form of positive residence: as if it were a property of persons, cultures and places.” (ibid., 154) Inhabiting whiteness, in turn, means as well to draw a division line, by marking bodies from the basic mode of perception. Race in this picture becomes “a question of what is within reach, what is available to perceive and to do ‘things’ with” (ibid., 154). This procedure goes mostly unconscious, being the background of perception. Additionally, it functions in a form of self-perpetuation because once inhabiting

15 Ankylosis is a stiffness of a joint due to adhesion and rigidity of the bones. Fanon transfers the medical definition metaphorically onto the issue of racism.

16 Al-Saji develops for this phenomenon the notion of „*naturalization* of race” (Al-Saji 2014, p.137)

17 Importantly whiteness in this context is not restricted to skin color (see Ahmed 2007, 159).

a proximity, this tendency becomes a habit – a habituation of a *modus operandi* of perception which is largely unquestioned.

Affective Ankylosis

I have now sketched out briefly how the field of perception can be structured in a way which draws a division line between white and non-white bodies. This perceptual *modus operandi* coalesces with the notion of the unconscious in Merleau-Ponty. In the following part, I take a closer look at the affective level of racism. Hereby, I will rely on the notion of *affective ankylosis* (Fanon 2008, 101) by Fanon. He describes the feeling of coming too late into a world which is not designated for black men:

“You have come too late, much too late. There will always be a world – a white world – between you and us: that impossibility on either side to obliterate the past once and for all.” Understandably, confronted with this *affective ankylosis* of the white man, I finally made up my mind to shout my blackness. (Fanon 2008, 101)

I take *affective ankylosis* as the other side of the racializing “I cannot see or feel otherwise”. The important characteristic of *affective ankylosis* is its immobility. This characteristic can be found in the quote of Fanon and is described by Al-Saji in more detail.

Al-Saji analyzes that racialization does not only work on the perceptual level but also on the affective level. That means the racialized other is not only seen in a different way but also affectively responded to in a certain way. In her view, the affective response is signified by an inaccessibility of the racializing subject. This inaccessibility is structured by a blockage of the “fluidity of the affective sphere” (Al-Saji 2014, 141) which amounts to an affective repulsion of the racialized subject. This transfers the source of the affective reaction onto “the ‘irrational’ and ‘intolerable’ practices of cultural other” (ibid., 141). Instead of questioning the own bodily reaction or even the structural dependencies of the own social scaffolding, the responsibility is put on the racialized subject. This affective blockage on the racializing side has two effects: First, the bodily ambiguity of racialized others is delimited. Second, “the responsivity and self-critical engagement” (ibid., 142) of the racializing subject is short-circuited. In terms of bodily ambiguity, this means ambiguity is blocked in advance, since relevant ways of open interaction in the form of perception and affect are occluded. This partly reveals the way *affective ankylosis* is structured and sustained, namely through its immobility.¹⁸

Wrapping up the outlined structures and effects of *white extensiveness* and *affective ankylosis*, I want to point out that they work as “blindness” (ibid., 139). The concept of *white extensiveness* provides an account of how the field of perception is structured. Moreover, the concept of *affective ankylosis* sheds light on the lack of a critical self-interrogation process on the racializing side. The structures of oppression and privilege that the racializing subject is embedded in, are disregarded and nuanced possibilities of interaction are blocked. Hence, it is not only that the racialized body is impeded in its expression of bodily ambiguity, the racializing body can also be characterized with a blockage of ambiguity. However, it is important to emphasize that this conclusion shall not undermine or euphemize the cruelty of the formations of power established through racialization.¹⁹

18 The affective immobility is analyzed as well in Whitney (2015).

19 As Gilroy famously emphasizes the double-bind of racializing and racialized subjectivity: “They [the racializing subjects] may not have been animalized, reified, or exterminated, but they too have suffered something by being deprived of their individuality, their humanity [...]. Black and white are bonded together by the mechanisms of ‘race’ that estrange them from each other and amputate their common humanity.” (Gilroy 2000, 15)

IV. Affective Politics of Fear

I move on to the question of how much the exaggeration of affects like fear, anxiety, and anger are historically and culturally established and dependent. I focus on the structures and discourse of fear. Fear is characterized by its self-perpetuating circularity which helps establish borders and encloses communities with binding force (see Ahmed 2004, 67, 72). Not only are the feared bodies affected by an affective politics of fear – so too are the fearing bodies.

Fear, in contrast to anxiety, has an object, which is approaching and signified in its latent possibility of passing by (see *ibid.*, 64f.). Paradoxically, the possibility of passing by does not lessen the fear, “but instead of lessening or extinguishing our fearing, this enhances it” (Heidegger in *ibid.*, 65). Moreover, fear can be understood in a temporal sphere as the anticipation of the future in the present (see *ibid.*, 65). The objects which are taken to be fearsome are derived from the social imaginary.²⁰ This establishes and secures a relation of distance and proximity, similar to the concept of *white extensiveness* I have described earlier. Crucially, it is fear which “creates the very effect of ‘that which I am not’” (*ibid.*, 67). In this view, fear creates borders between individuals as some people are categorized as fearsome only by their appearance. Taken as such, the re-creation of fearsome stereotypes gives rise to forms of racialization.

Fear establishes a circularity because it “works to contain the bodies of others, *a containment whose ‘success’ relies on its failure, as it must keep open the very grounds of fear*” (*ibid.*, 67). Moreover, fear does not only have a tendency of circularity but also one of generalization when the fearsome object is lost:

The more we don’t know what or who we fear *the more the world becomes fearsome*. In other words, it is the structural possibility that the object of fear may pass us by which makes everything possibly fearsome. [...] [T]he loss of the object of fear renders the world itself a space of potential danger, a space that is anticipated as pain or injury on the surface of the body that fears. (*Ibid.*, 69)

The combination of the circular movement of fear and the tendency of generalization, i.e., that fear extends itself on previously not fearsome bodies and objects, results in a self-perpetuating circle. This elucidates parts of the recalcitrance of racism’s ‘I cannot feel or see otherwise’. The closure on the affective and perceptive level paves the ground for precast routes of action. Crucially, the determination of a fearsome object restricts its mobility in the way the other’s body is extended (see *ibid.*, 70). This pinpoints the interdependency of the blocked racialized body and the extensiveness of the racializing body.

These structures used for politics do not only help align certain bodies against others, they also make ‘security’ the catchphrase for discourse and political agenda. Importantly, security works inclusively for the ‘we’ but exclusively for the other before which the fearsome subjects have to be ‘secured’. The racializing subject obstructs its self-imposed ideals and promises of liberal society while being constitutive for the structural oppression of alienated others. Moreover, the self-perpetuating circularity of fear takes over the dominance of affect, thought, and discourse. This amounts, in my view, to a deferred self-other relation. The racializing subject limits itself to precast routes of feeling, thinking, and action. These routes are signified by the discourse of fear. The being-for-oneself is centered on the racialized other. The alienation of the racialized subject is taken as a productive resource for the constitution of the own identity. Thereby, distinction instead of reciprocity becomes the *modus operandi* for the racializing subject.

²⁰ Crucially, stereotypes play a significant role in the production of fear: “The production of the black man as the object of fear depends on past histories of association: Negro, animal, bad, mean, ugly.” (Ahmed 2004, 66)

V. Race as Visible Identity

The aim in the following is to develop, in reference to Linda Martín Alcoff, a perspective on the discussion of identity and race. Alcoff defends the view that race functions in the sphere of visibility. This means that race is structured by perception which itself is a learned ability (see Alcoff 2006, 187). The account I have developed so far can be connected with this view. In particular, the discussion of *white extensiveness* and *affective ankylosis* focused on the aspects of visibility and cultural adoption of racist structures. Moreover, if we take identities to be “fluid, complex, open-ended, and dynamic” (ibid., 112), then fixation to an ascribed identity through bodily markers makes it easier to understand how ambiguity can be blocked.

Alcoff establishes an account in which the differences between identities manifest itself through the body. The mostly unconscious way bodies are perceived partly explains the difficulties in overcoming racial tendencies: “Perceptual practices are tacit, almost hidden from view, and thus almost immune from critical reflection.” (ibid., 126) This coalesces with conclusions of the discussion of the blocked body, *white extensiveness*, and *affective ankylosis*. In all these discussions I emphasised the purported naturality of racial categorisation and the oft unconscious structuration. The concept of *visible identities* by Alcoff takes race to be “socially constructed, historically malleable, culturally contextual, and reproduced through learned perceptual practices” (Ibid., 182). On one hand, this perspective does underpin the bodily dependence of ascriptions of identity. This underlines the account developed so far. On the other, it also expresses the subtle possibility to change its historical malleability. But, importantly, the direction in which change is pursued is not defined from the outset. A less optimistic example of how the perception of *visible identities* is learned and socially dependent provides the following scene of *The artificial Nigger* by Flannery O’Connor. She reveals how much the perception of bodily markers as racial is socially habituated. In the story, Mr Head, himself caught in rural poverty, teaches his nephew, Nelson, to identify the black man as the stranger (see Morrison 2017, 20). The following scene takes place in a train to Atlanta where an affluent black man passes by:

What was that?” [Mr. Head] asked.

“A man,” the boy said, and gave him an indignant look as if he were tired of having his intelligence insulted.

“What kind of man?” Mr. Head persisted, his voice expressionless.

“A fat man,” Nelson said....

“You don’t know what kind?” Mr. Head said in a final tone.

“An old man,” the boy said....

“That was a nigger,” Mr. Head said and sat back....

“You said they were black.... You never said they were tan.... (O’Connor in Morrison 2017, 22)

The scene describes, in my view, how much the perception of bodily markers is socially dependent and learnable. In the development of the short story the learned ability of Nelson to identify the stranger – the black man – has the expected response of “exaggerated fear of the

stranger” (Morrison 2017, 22). In order of being taught to identify the stranger Nelson thinks of having acquired a new status which comes along with the “illusion of power” (ibid., 24). This underlines how much racialization is the effect of power articulated in diverse context and with historical prolonging. This pinpoints the necessity for further analysis to take into account the historical institutionalization and reconfiguration of how bodies are perceived, and thereby judged, differently (cf. Spillers 1987; Weheliye 2014). Central for my perspective on racist habits, and ascribed racial identities, is that they are self-perpetuating and make it seem that ways of perceiving others are not social-historically formed but unalterable. This “*naturalization of race*” (Al-Saji 2014, 137) makes the task both necessary as well as challenging to ‘unearth’ the socio-historical ordering produced by racialization.

VI. Conclusion

This essay attempted to elucidate the rigidity of racism and its structures. Against the backdrop of Merleau-Ponty’s notion of ambiguity, it has been possible to examine bodily manifestations and structures of racism. It is important to note that transferring Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of ‘I can’ into one of ‘I cannot’ does not necessarily amount to an outright rejection of the Merleau-Pontian framework. Rather, it opens the floor for re-addressing his concepts. In other words, Merleau-Ponty’s thought remains the crucial backdrop against which it is possible to outline the developed approach. Throughout the argument the concept of the lived body remains the vantage point of the analysis. However, as the conceptualization of Fanon shows, there is much to say about how bodies are seen and judged differently and the severe effect of racialization on the respective bodily habituation.

In this light, I have attempted to show that the racialized as well as the racializing subject face a blockage of ambiguity. Racism is felt and expressed bodily in a way that restricts open (inter-)action and leaves the subject with a deferred self-other-relation. In my perspective, the dual-sided affection is an essential key for understanding racism. It is important to note that the argument neither delivers an exhaustive examination of the phenomenon of racism, nor does it deliver a ready-made solution for counter-acting. For me, it was essential not to, because too easily effects of racism are overlooked.

There is, however, much more to say about the affective structures of racism (cf. Whitney 2015, Palmer 2017, Slaby 2020). Moreover, the institutional side of racism as well as historical socio-epistemological production of effects of racialization have been virtually untouched (cf. in the context of the transatlantic slave trade Spillers 1987; Hartman 1997; Wýnter 2003; Weheliye 2014). Especially, Hortense Spillers configuration of the body as “flesh” (Spillers 1987, 67) in the racializing process of transatlantic slavery marks an important vantage point for the discussion of the bodily effects of racism.

What the presented argument already shows is that racism is not only about holding certain beliefs about certain groups of people – either conscious or unconscious. Framing racism in such a way would overlook an important dimension of human experience and entrenchment in the world – the body. Moreover, it would miss racism’s “fetish object” (Ahmed 2004, 74) – the racialized body. In this perspective, racism is not something cognitive outside of daily situations. Instead, it significantly influences and forms daily experiences. In the last years a steady flow of videos went viral where police officers are beating, tasing or shooting black people in the US. Here it becomes blatant how much racialization forms daily lives. In the case of the killed Michael Brown in Ferguson, Police Officer Darren Wilson reported that “Brown appeared to be ‘bulking up to run through the shots’” (Coates 2017b, XIV-XV). This makes him more and simultaneously less than human in the implicit association which come along with this statement. Moreover, it signifies how racism stems from a way of perceiving racialized bodies and how it inflicts on the racialized body, in this case by concrete death.

The short scene by Audrey Lorde in the preface gives us another hold on how much racism finds its manifestations in daily situations. Crucially, it is not always the case that we can track

it down easily, which is part of the problem. It is therefore essential to raise awareness for the subtle ways bodies are affected by racism. If we recall the scene, the little girl, who has already become a woman while writing the scene down, does not fully understand the reaction of the women in the fur hat. But one thing she will never forget: the flared nostrils, the hate – and neither ought we.

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