

Absent is any acknowledgement that many of the most important developments within the social sciences in the past half century have been due to increasingly effective refusals on the part of Europe's former and so-called 'primitive' subjects to play a role in the working out of western anxieties.

A full accounting of the influence of colonial exchange and fallout on European philosophy might fall beyond the scope of this book. But for a historical genealogy which traces the slippage of epistemes across the boundaries thinkers might imagine themselves to obey, and which describes key moments in an ongoing project of imperialist symbolic violence, *Sacred Channels* could have done more to contextualise these epistemic debates and point to the entangled confluence of military, cultural and epistemological encounters. As Hui has shown, scholars of media and technology might learn from contemporary anthropologists' attempts to take up the task of thinking against the modern from both within the western philosophical tradition and through engagement with entirely different intellectual traditions. This is a risky project, but, much like the project of rethinking western thought under the conditions of ecological and technological transformation, it is one that is becoming difficult to avoid.

Since *Sacred Channels*' initial publication in 2004, Hörl, like so many others, has turned his attention towards this latter task and towards the problem of what he

has described elsewhere as the 'becoming-environmental of computation'. His concerns with the onticity of communication and with the possibility of a non-intuitionist sense were already present when he first wrote *Sacred Channels*, as the treatments of Bataille and Heidegger demonstrate, but the new preface's retroactive framing of the book's stakes indicates that these concerns have only solidified since:

Even if reveries about the end of all sense have produced an entire formation of theory in media and cultural studies, it has now become questionable to what extent the concepts and conceptual strategies of this formation can still be used to work through the techno-ecological formation and to what extent this latter task requires entirely different ontological-political sets of tools that stem from a new, neither intuitive nor symbolic but, precisely, ecological-environmental image of thinking. This is what many people are working on in the most varied of ways and where one of the great challenges of thinking in our time is to be situated.

In demonstrating what might be gained from greater reflection on the origins of current frameworks for understanding computation, materiality and communicative entanglement, Hörl's history of epistemic confusion and cross-fertilisation lays valuable groundwork for this project.

Megan Wiessner

## Freedom is a constant erasure

David Marriott, *Whither Fanon? Studies in the Blackness of Being* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018). 448pp., £74.00 hb., £23.99 pb., 978 0 80479 870 9 hb., 978 1 50360 572 5 pb.

Freedom is a difficult matter because sometimes we cannot separate what liberates us from what imprisons us, and sometimes, despite our conscious protestations to the contrary, we simply do not want to. This uncomfortable insight is at the heart of David Marriott's bold book, *Whither Fanon? Studies in the Blackness of Being*, which argues that the black subject (who Marriott refers to in the French as *négre*) 'unconscious[ly] consent[s]' to his or her own unfreedom, and that in the act of decolonial revolution, an emancipation that is not a humanistic re-inscription of mastery or sovereignty can

never be ensured. It is not that liberation is impossible, however, only our traditional conceptions of it. Marriott argues that it is precisely because the black subject unconsciously consents to his or her own unfreedom that blackness allows us to conceive of liberation anew.

Blackness becomes *like* philosophy, insofar as 'philosophy is critical of any simple notion of liberation ... or reparation that could deliver it from the contingency that it itself is.' Blackness is another scene of philosophy, inventing 'another relationship to [the] world', which Marriott terms 'tabula rasa' after Frantz Fanon in *The*

*Wretched of the Earth*. For Marriott, the insight into and connection between blackness and the politics of invention culminating in *tabula rasa* was first formulated by the Martinique-born revolutionary psychiatrist but has been lost in interpretations of his work, which reduce his thinking to already-existing philosophies, whether existentialism, dialectics, phenomenology, postcolonialism or decolonial revolution. Addressing Fanon scholars like Lewis Gordon, Achille Mbembe and Sylvia Wynter, as well as the contemporary field of Afro-pessimism, Marriott's *Whither Fanon?* comprises a massive re-reading of Fanon's corpus, rehabilitating his clinical theories and advocating for the specificity and relevance of his ideas for the contemporary moment by reclaiming Fanon as the thinker of blackness and invention *par excellence*.

In arguing that blackness is akin to philosophy, *Whither Fanon?* is a welcome addition to a spate of books that take blackness as a schema within which to theorise in or from, such as Fred Moten's *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (2003), Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016) and Calvin Warren's *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism and Emancipation* (2018). *Whither Fanon?* is a dense book and, at times, difficult to follow because Marriott presupposes that the reader already has a sophisticated knowledge of Fanon's oeuvre and less than seamlessly develops his ideas in tandem with Fanon's thought. Nevertheless, the rewards of reading it are well worth the effort for the unique and provocative theoretical framework in relation to Afro-pessimism and Black Studies the book provides, especially concepts which have thus far remained undertheorised in readings of Fanon's work.

Marriott's book is divided into two main parts, which are each essentially devoted to one major theme. While I imagine Marriott would not agree with this characterisation, given his opinions on 'critique' articulated in 'The becoming-black of the world?' (see *RP* 2.02 (June 2018)), I understand Part 1, entitled 'Psychopolitics', to be an attempt, in the Kantian vein, to establish the 'proper' limits of (non-)freedom for the black subject, prompted by the question which, he asserts, drives Fanon's work: 'why do people disavow what could truly liberate them?' Advancing the Fanonian concepts of *socialthérapie*, 'real fantasy' and '*n'est pas*', Marriott concludes that freedom is impossible for the black subject *as black*.

The early Fanon of *Black Skin, White Masks*, published

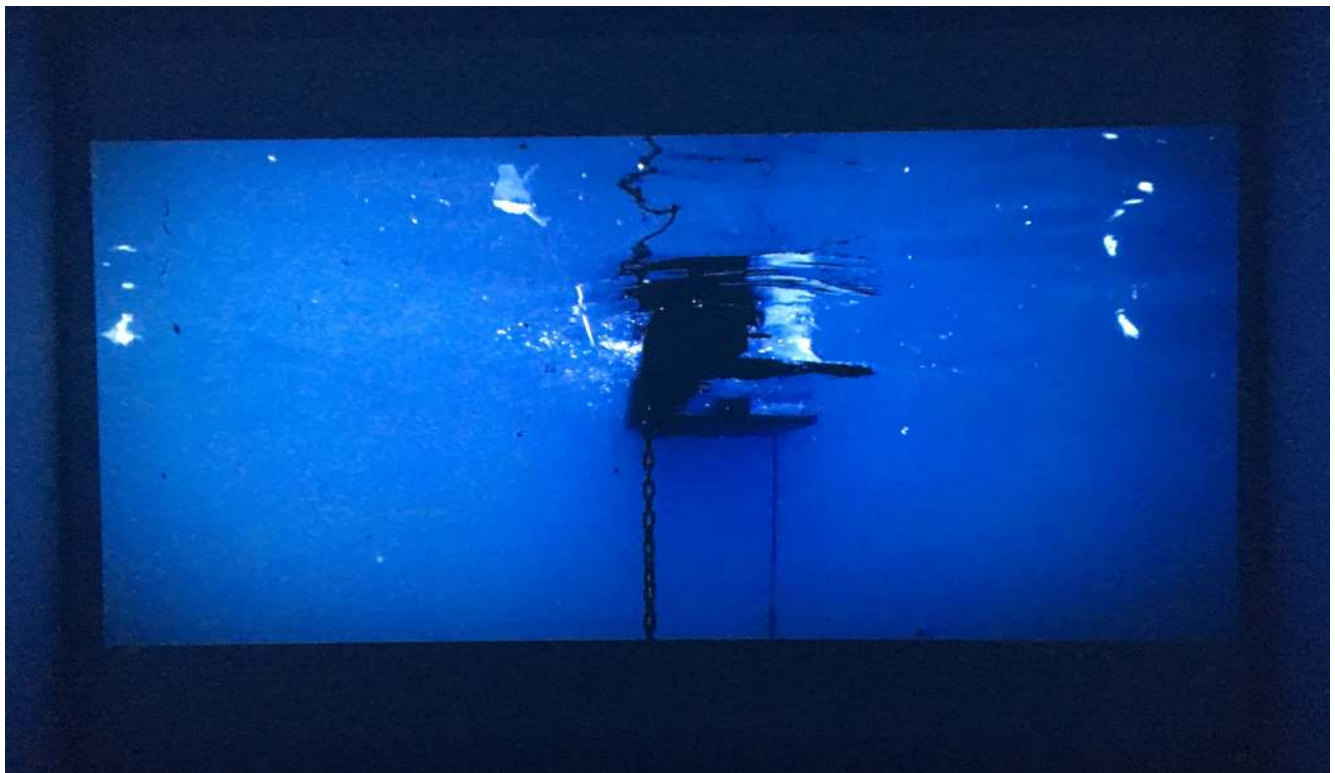
in French in 1952, retained an emphasis on the imaginary, arguing that while the black subject experienced him or herself alienated in the mirror as a diminished whiteness, there *existed* a submerged self that the black subject disavowed but could recognise and consent to as black. With the development of Fanon's conception of *socialthérapie*, generated between 1952 and 1958 in a series of published articles penned with François Tosquelles and Jacques Azoulay (now collected in *Alienation and Freedom*), Marriott argues that a development in Fanon's thinking on blackness occurred. For Marriott, the distinctive theoretical purchase of Fanon's *socialthérapie* in contradistinction to Fanon's mentor, Tosquelles, whose methodology attempted to alter the clinic, reintegrating both doctor and patient into a common sociality, was that it realised that such a common sociality in the space of the colony could not be used as a criterion of health for colonised subjects (who Marriott refers to in the French as *colonisé*) because of its racist dimensions. At this point Marriott turns Fanon's concept into his own, contending that because there is no space to live outside of racial phantasms governing society and the clinic, *socialthérapie* shows how the symptom functions not on an individual level, as argued by psychoanalysis, but rather 'how the symptom is *lived* as collective experience.' For the colonised it is lived as the effect of a racism which cannot be discerned as a cause transcendent to the symptom, but, as a cause-effect, it is lived as a dimension of the symptom itself. In essence, *socialthérapie* shows, in contradistinction to Freud's theorisations of group psychology, how a group can be psychically constituted at the level of the symptom by processes of racialisation. This is an extremely novel insight and in Marriott's hands *socialthérapie* becomes a limit-concept of racialisation / freedom inside of which the black subject is reflected back as a 'no-thing' or '*n'est pas*', in which his or her blackness is fundamentally non-existent, while his or her whiteness is an inescapable 'real fantasy' outside of which there is no stable existing concept of freedom. This particular interpretation of Fanon's later works leads Marriott to the conclusion that blackness is an exclusion from the ontological plane and 'without hesitation, it can be said that blackness is not consistent with the notion of conscious consent.'

In order to make this argument about blackness as '*n'est pas*' however, Marriott elides any differences

between the colonised and the black subject. While Marriott remains faithful to the Fanonian text by utilising the separate terms '*colonisé*' and '*négre*' (presumably) to indicate two different logics of subject formation, in *Whither Fanon?* these terms become conflated to the extent that one no longer knows whether Marriott is referring to the colonised or the black subject, or whether they index the same subject (though if the latter is the case presumably it would be unnecessary to employ the phrase 'black *colonisé*' as Marriott does in Chapter 4). Moreover, he relies on the mental disorders of Algerians and Fanon's experiments on *socialthérapie* conducted on Muslim men and women to craft the ontological argument about blackness as '*n'est pas*', whereas Fanon makes a point of distinguishing between 'Arab' and 'Black' in his own work. I point this out not to nitpick or make the (false) argument that the black subject is not colonised, but to indicate that the structure of colonisation is a more encompassing category than that of blackness applying to all racialised peoples almost without exception, and to make an argument about the latter based on the former seems to take away from the specificity of what constitutes both the colonised and the black subject. In short, it appears as though Marriott employs a 'people of colour framework,' critiqued by Afro-pessimism in order

to make an argument about the psychic and ontological particularity of blackness. At the very least, within the schema of blackness as '*n'est pas*' that Marriott sets out, and in a book whose subtitle is *Studies in the Blackness of Being*, it seems essential to pose the question as to just *who* counts as black here (the Arab, Muslim, *colonisé*, or all three?).

Criticisms aside, with this analysis, Marriott justifiably directs his ire toward those Fanon scholars who would dismiss Fanon's psychiatric writings in favour of his more overtly political writings. The latter are blinded by their concern with Fanon's politics and miss the point that liberation is impossible for the black and/or colonised subject precisely for the psychic reason that the latter do not desire to be liberated from their 'real fantasies,' and because the disavowal (of freedom) is a structural condition of colonisation. Nor is it possible to be liberated from 'real fantasies' as such. For Marriott, what Fanon's work shows is that there is no version of the 'real' which is not 'veiled'. Marriott leaves scholars who dispense with Fanon's psychiatric writings with no ground to stand on, demonstrating that 'psychoanalysis that is always a question of *praxis*' remains essential to Fanon's thought.



Moreover, in articulating this psychoanalytic dimension Marriott contributes, what, I believe, are important and nuanced articulations of whiteness and blackness to the field of Black Studies and Afro-pessimism. While Frank Wilderson III argues that the 'Human' world is imposed on the 'Slave', Marriott accounts explicitly for the psychic mechanism by which this imposition occurs, as 'real fantasy', and the psychic position of the 'Slave' as '*n'est pas*'.

Marriott continues to unfold his complex idea of '*n'est pas*' throughout Part 1, touching upon the topics of negrophobogenesis, guilt, desire and racial fetishism, and culminating in Chapter 7, titled 'The Condemned'. 'The Condemned' is arguably one of the most intriguing chapters in *Whither Fanon?* because Marriott unexpectedly connects Fanon's critique of negritude and decolonial revolution in *The Wretched of the Earth* to Afro-pessimism. Drawing from his analysis of *socialthérapie*, Marriott argues that that decolonial revolution, in its Senghorian guise as negritude/African nativism, is opposed by Fanon because negritude seeks redemption within the past and is consumed by 'the slavish need to will this future appearance of itself as sovereign' closing off the possibility of writing anew the present and the future outside of History. The negritude movement is still 'slavish' for Marriott and freedom is foreclosed to it, precisely because it wills itself *as* black, and he describes this 'slavish' logic of producing the future while remaining entrapped in History as the grammar of the 'future perfect' (I will have done x).

Given this 'slavish need,' and despite the fact that Afro-pessimists invariably want to claim Fanon as their own, it is negritude, according to Marriott, which has most in common with Afro-pessimism. This is not to say that Fanon has no connection to the latter, as Marriott claims he anticipates the idea of social death with his notion of '*mort á bout touchant*'. Reading Jared Sexton's 'The Social Life of Social Death' and Fred Moten's 'The Case of Blackness' together, Marriott argues that they are involved in a 'representational politics' of what 'blackness is'. Admittedly, I was not at all convinced by this point the first time I read *Whither Fanon?*, as both Sexton and Moten try very hard to describe blackness in a non-representational manner. However, Marriott's point is much subtler: both Sexton and Moten try to *describe* what blackness *is*, whether as pathology or fugitivity, re-

spectively, when blackness *is* not, '*n'est pas*', and cannot be reduced to 'phenomenological experience'. Because both Sexton and Moten attempt to produce blackness as existing in the present, which unavoidably relies on past fictions and future projections of blackness, they fall into the same trap as negritude. In making this argument there is a certain manner in which Marriott agrees with his erstwhile student, Asad Haider, who claims, in his book *Mistaken Identity: Race and Class in the Age of Trump*, that Afro-pessimism fosters an 'ideology of identity'. Mirroring Fanon's own famously ambivalent stance toward negritude, however, Marriott favorably argues that Afro-pessimism is also an attempt to include within 'the history of blackness more diverse questions' than those offered by 'traditional identity politics'. This attempt is taken up by Fanon, who Marriott argues, exceeds Sexton and Moten by arguing against the 'ruse of a black world', a phrase by Fanon which Marriott gleefully admits is often viewed with suspicion by black thinkers. But this is precisely the task of black liberation because it involves a logic that would paradoxically produce a blackness *neither* as a '*racial revelation*' *nor* as a '*post-racial evasion*', that is, a blackness which liberates itself by no longer being black at all, at least not in the way we currently understand it: a *tabula rasa*.

If Part 1 of *Whither Fanon?* establishes the limits of (non-)freedom for the black subject, Part 2, entitled *Homo Nègre*, is devoted to the second major idea of the book, which is an exploration of the extent to which blackness can transgress the aforementioned limits. Marriott comes to the conclusion that blackness can indeed liberate itself, but only by annihilating itself *as* black, or by 'd[ying] a racialised death', and in this moment blackness becomes philosophy. Let's be clear: by this Marriott is advocating neither a humanism, which he thinks Fanonism is unfortunately often reduced to, nor the 'fantasy of a non-racial universalism', but something altogether different. Just precisely what is meant by black invention concerns the (im)possibility of a black writing or a *tabula rasa*. Having once been a student of the scholar Geoffrey Bennington, it is here that we can spot Marriott's Derridean influences.

Black writing appears to be under erasure at the very moment it is written. But this can mean two things. The first meaning can already be evinced in '*n'est pas*' which is another way of saying that for Marriott blackness can

never *appear*, because it becomes erased or subsumed in 'real fantasy', whiteness or the universal. The second sense of black writing as erasure can be gleaned in the last chapter of *Whither Fanon?* called 'The Abyssal', wherein Marriott undertakes an analysis of Aimé Césaire's *Notebook of a Return to a Native Land* through the lenses of Fanon and Jean-Paul Sartre. While in an examination of Césaire's poetry via the perspective of Sartre, blackness remains trapped in the first kind of erasure, in reading Césaire's poetry through Fanon blackness emerges as the second kind of erasure which Marriott describes as 'corpsing' or 'an excessive collapse by which the world as sovereignly enjoyed give way to laughter and cruelty.' This denotes both an erasing of blackness (as particular) and the (white) universal such that they are both reinvented, a total blank slate of categories. This does not end up in a 'post-racialism' for Marriott because the very concept of race itself becomes annihilated. Black writing ends up being black erasure. In this sense, black writing is equivalent to a *tabula rasa* in its original Lockean formulation in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* wherein

the mind enters the world as a 'blank slate'. For black writing to be truly invention, truly liberation, however, Marriott argues that this erasure has to be *constant*, an 'endless transvaluation', lest another universal be reinstalled in the former's place, even if it is a black universal. This is why he emphasises the verbal form of Césaire's poetry and argues that blackness has to die a 'racialised death' to be incessantly born as something else, naming this grammar of invention the 'future imperfect' (I will have been doing x). And herein lies the ambitiousness of Marriott's project and its avowed connection to the philosophical. For there is a manner in which *Whither Fanon?* repeats the founding gesture of philosophy in its Platonic mode as skepticism of the given world, although it does not invest in the immortal and transcendental realm of Forms. Rather blackness is philosophy in the sense that it *almost* invests in them, but instead of doing so, instead simply repeats this founding gesture ceaselessly, writing and/as erasing itself, reinventing philosophy anew.

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## The presence of the past

Chris Moffat, *India's Revolutionary Inheritance: Politics and the Promise of Bhagat Singh* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019). 238pp., £75.00 hb., 978 1 10849 690 2

The twin defeats marked by the disappearance of the dreams of the late 1960s and the demise of the Soviet Union unanchored the Left from much of the certainty that Marxist notions of History and progress had previously provided to sustain the passion and courage of communist partisans. Yet, such defeat has also allowed the Left to re-examine its own repressed archive in which themes such as courage, shame, hope and utopian vision were as indispensable to political action as any positivist analysis of the movement of History. Recent scholarship has focused on this subterranean undercurrent in communist thought, which emphasises rupture, departure and untimeliness as essential elements of politics over the scientific certainties of Marxist orthodoxy.

Chris Moffat's Book *India's Revolutionary Inheritance* is a welcome addition to the list of works that seek to overcome the tropes of failure and defeat. The main interlocutor of the book is the legendary Indian anti-colonial

fighter, Bhagat Singh, who was hanged by the colonial state at the young age of 23; a stage in life that would be more appropriate for the palatable practices of 'student politics' than for playing a foundational role in the development of a nationalism adhered to by over a billion people today. His life also presents a genealogy of Indian nationalism that sharply differs from the 'non-violence' associated with a Gandhian politics in the West.

Moffat begins with a fascinating examination of Colonial Punjab to which the protagonist belonged. The province was known in official circles as the heart of imperial rule for the heavy recruitment of military personnel into the British Indian Army, as well as for the loyalty of the province's elite to the colonial administration. The book demonstrates how, beyond the apparent calm of authoritarian rule, Punjab was also the centre of some of the most militant upheavals against colonialism. From periodic attempts to incite revolt within