

**RACE, REFLECTION AND PERCEPTION:  
A DIALOGUE BETWEEN FRANTZ FANON AND MAURICE MERLEAU-PONTY ON  
THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL DIMENSIONS OF RACIALIZATION**

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## **Abstract**

What does it mean for human beings to be perceived as belonging to a race? And how does the process of racialization—becoming raced—function for human beings? In this thesis, I aim to develop a formal account of racialization by putting Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *The Visible and the Invisible* (1968) and *Phenomenology of Perception* (2012) into conversation with Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* (2008). My analysis engages with Merleau-Ponty’s critique of reflection, in which he argues that reflection distorts the relationship between perceiver and perceived by misconstruing our perception of things, thereby obstructing our ability to grasp them as they are or recognize how they might differ from the constructions imposed by reflection on them. I extend this critique to what I call “racist reflection” to discuss how race is used to interpret the materiality of the body in two ways: 1) by categorizing it as belonging to a race; and 2) by laying the groundwork for racial bias, which then serves to judge individuals perceived to belong to that race. I then turn to Frantz Fanon’s concepts of the historical racial schema and the epidermal racial schema to explore how racialization disrupts the body schema by altering the body’s intentional arc and producing a raced subject. In this process, the body’s capacity for habitual action is denied, forcing it into a reflective mode of engaging with reality. Finally, I apply this framework by reflecting on the murder of Ahmaud Arbery, considering how racialization shaped his encounter with Gregory McMichael, Travis McMichael and William Bryan and its tragic consequences.

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## Introduction

### The Murder of Ahmaud Arbery

On February 23, 2020, shortly after 1 pm, Ahmaud Arbery, a 25-year-old Black man living in the city of Brunswick in Glenn County, Georgia, in the United States of America, was shot and killed by three white men while jogging near his home in Satilla Shores. According to police reports, Ahmaud was confronted by Gregory McMichael and his son Travis McMichael, who claimed Ahmaud resembled a burglar and suspected that he was involved in a series of break-ins in the area.<sup>1</sup> Upon seeing Ahmaud, the two men grabbed a pistol and shotgun, got into Gregory McMichael's pick-up truck, and started chasing after him. The McMichaels were then joined by their neighbour, William Bryan, who, upon seeing them racing by, got into his vehicle and started chasing Ahmaud. The three men used their vehicles to stop Ahmaud from escaping.<sup>2</sup> Travis, armed with the shotgun, exited his father's truck with his gun pointed at Ahmaud. Ahmaud then approached Travis, and the two men began fighting over the shotgun, ending with Travis firing the gun two times and fatally shooting Ahmaud.<sup>3</sup>

When those three white men saw Ahmaud, they did not see a son. They did not see a former high school football player who once dreamt of playing in the National Football League. When

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1. Richard Fausset, "What We Know About the Shooting Death of Ahmaud Arbery," *The New York Times*, August 08, 2022. <http://www.nytimes.com/article/ahmaud-arbery-shooting-georgia.html>.

2. Rich McKay, "Why a viral video is key evidence in trial of men accused of killing Ahmaud Arbery," *Reuters*, October 26, 2021. <http://www.reuters.com/world/us/why-viral-video-is-key-evidence-trial-men-accused-killing-ahmaud-arbery-2021-10-25/>.

3. Richard Fausset, "What We Know," 2022.

they saw Ahmaud, they did not see someone who loved working out and playing sports. They did not see someone trying to make a name, no, a life for himself by working two jobs.<sup>4</sup> When those white men saw Ahmaud, they saw a Black man, but not just any Black man. They saw a “dirty n-word,” someone who did not belong in the same space as them. Running? What reason would he have to be jogging in their neighbourhood? Exercising? To be fit? To be healthy? How absurd! No, when they saw Ahmaud, they saw someone ready to commit a crime. They saw a threat. Their look, the white look, turned onto Ahmaud and locked him in a suffocating gaze, which fixed his gestures and attitude to what they thought of him and denied him the ability to freely inhabit the world.<sup>5</sup> “Look! A Negro!”<sup>6</sup> That is what those men saw when they confronted and killed Ahmaud

In this essay, I put Frantz Fanon in conversation with Maurice Merleau-Ponty to offer a phenomenological reflection on the murder of Ahmaud Arbery, and with it, I will discuss the general issue of the embodied experience of race and how that relates to the possibility of habitual life for Black people in an antiBlack world. In a racialized world, the perception of an individual belonging to a race is dependent on the manner through which the materiality of the body is interpreted through the racialization process. At the level of embodiment, racialization disrupts the body's capacity to engage in habitual activities in the world. To show this, I focus my analysis on Fanon's essay “The Lived Experience of the Black Man” to examine the experience of the Black body in an antiBlack world through a discussion of the following passage:

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4. Rich McKay, “Who was Ahmaud Arbery?” *Reuters*, February 8, 2022. <http://www.reuters.com/world/us/who-was-ahmaud-arbery-2022-02-07/>.

5. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox. (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 89.

6. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 89.

And then we were given the occasion to confront the white gaze. An unusual weight descended on us. The real world robbed us of our share. In the white world, the man of color encounters difficulties in elaborating his body schema. The image of one's body is solely negating. It's an image in the third person. All around the body reigns an atmosphere of certain uncertainty...I make all these moves not out of habit but by implicit knowledge. A slow construction of myself as a body in a spatial and temporal world - such seems to be the schema. It is not imposed on me; it is rather a definitive structuring of myself and the world – definitive because it creates a genuine dialectic between my body and the world. ... Beneath the body schema [,] I had created a historical-racial schema. 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. ... As a result, the body schema, attacked in several places, collapsed, giving way to an epidermal racial schema.<sup>7</sup>

I argue that the antiBlack world does not have space for Black people, such that, for Black people to exist and occupy space, they must make space for themselves in the world. To show this, I examine the relationship between body image and the possibility of bodily expression in the world to discuss the following: (1) the world and how one's “share” in it can be robbed; (2) the image of the body and the role it plays in structuring bodily experience; and (3) the relationship between the epidermal racial schema, antiBlackness and the implicit impossibility of habitual life for Black people in an antiBlack world.

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7. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 90-92.

## Chapter 1: The white look in an antiBlack World

### 1.0 Introduction

When those three men encountered Ahmaud, they did not see a man, a human being, simply existing in the world. Rather, when their eyes caught sight of him, their gaze wrapped his body in an air of suspicion. Ahmaud's body appeared to them as the presentation of an idea, the idea of what they thought it meant to be Black. The moment they looked at him, their gaze deployed an image of Black criminality as their look, guided by a racist reflection, reduced Arbery to an image of a Black guy up to no good, which in turn reduced his body's ability to freely operate and express itself in the world.

In this chapter, I offer an analysis of the process of racialization by examining the tension between racist reflection and racializing perception, which I, in turn, ground in a discussion of the relationship between the white look and the Black body in an antiBlack world. In the first section, I develop an account of how racializing perception works by putting Merleau-Ponty's *The Visible and The Invisible* (1968) in conversation with Lewis Gordon's *Black Existentialism & Decolonizing Knowledge* (2023). To do this, I develop an account of how racializing perception operates through a mode of reflection that is grounded in a negative expression of the concept of race, which I call racist reflection. Under racist reflection, the human body is perceived as representing a "race," while the "race" which the body is said to represent is used to refer to all that body is said to do and how it ought to operate and be understood in the world. In the second section, I develop a brief sketch of the historical development of the concept of race to describe race as a product and instrument of a historical reflection on the materiality of the body as seen from the outside. In the third section, I then turn to Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*



(1993) to explore the relationship between the look and the human body. I focus my discussion on the look as it pertains to seeing from the outside, where the body appears to us as an object in the world, to discuss how racist perception alters the way a Black person is seen in the world. In the fourth section, I turn to *Black Skin, White Masks* (2008), mobilizing Fanon's concept of the image of the body to discuss how the look, guided by racist perception, operates for Black people in an antiBlack world.

### 1.1 Perception and the Problematic Nature of Reflection

I begin this discussion with an account of Merleau-Ponty's critique of reflection from *The Visible and the Invisible*. I discuss the manner through which reflection gets in the way and disrupts the interconnectedness we, as perceivers, have with things in the world through the impositions of ideas which change what it is encountering. Reflection misconstrues our perception of things and, in so doing, does not allow us to understand perception, or allow these things to tell us what they are or how they could be different from what our reflection says of them. First, I discuss how reflection develops an account of things it perceives by disrupting the perceptual bond between perceiver and perceived. I then explore the problematic aspect of this formulation by discussing how reflection runs the risk of alienating perception from the lived relationship the perceiver has with the world and things through the introduction of a bifurcation between perceiver and perceived, which treats them as separate from each other.

Merleau-Ponty argues that in our commerce with the world, what is perceived is dependent on how it is perceived, and perception is dependent on what is perceived; perceiver and perceived are intimately intertwined with each other, as the perceiver and what is perceived are the reverse

of each other. Through this intertwining, the body learns from the way things in the world, as bodies, develop around and affect it. Now, reflection itself is a central element of the perceiver's intertwining with the perceived as it names what we do as knowers of what we perceive. However, in naming what we are perceiving, reflection runs the risk of treating the thing perceived as if it is independent of the perceiver, or treating itself as if it is independent of the perceived by suspending the perceptual bond, that is, the entanglement of the perceiver has with the perceived in the world in order to develop and express an understanding of that which it is perceiving. Merleau-Ponty writes:

I see, I feel, and it is certain that for me to account for what seeing and feeling are, I must cease accompanying the seeing and the feeling into the visible and the sensible ... I must contrive, on this side of them, a sphere they do not occupy and whence they would become comprehensible according to their sense and their essence. To understand them is to suspend them...The philosopher, therefore, suspends the brute vision only in order to make it pass into the order of the expressed.<sup>1</sup>

Merleau-Ponty argues that reflection, in an effort to develop an account of perception and things it perceives, misses the essential relation of dependency that binds perception and the thing perceived together by installing itself beneath perception, transforming the perceiver and perceived into objects of thought in order to express its understanding of them, dissolving their unity and interdependence, and thereby failing to understand them.<sup>2</sup> Through the suppression of the bond,

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1. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and The Invisible*, 36.

2. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and The Invisible*, 11-12.

we end up in a situation where, as he argues, there is “ a thing perceived and an openness upon this thing which reflection has neutralized and transformed into perception-reflected-on and thing-perceived-within-a perception-reflected-on.”<sup>3</sup> For instance, when the perceiver (*G*) encounters the perceived (*I*), reflection disrupts the perceptual bond between them by transforming *G* and *I* into *F* and *J* – representations shaped by reflection’s own interpretation. By suspending the direct connection between *G* and *I*, reflection seeks to develop its understanding of both, not from their actual engagement but from what it presumes to know about them. In this process, *G* and *I* are lost to thought, and instead, new constructs – *F* and *J* – emerge as the objects of reflection. *F* and *J* are products of reflection, replacing the authentic presence of *G* and *I*. As a result, reflection imposes an artificial bond between *F* and *J*, overriding the natural perceptual relationship that originally binds *G* and *I* in the world.

Merleau-Ponty argues that when reflection acts without attending to the bond between perceiver and perceived, understanding then translates “into disposable significations, a meaning first held captive in the thing and in the world itself.”<sup>4</sup> According to Merleau-Ponty, perception begins before thought (reflection) and to be in the world is to be constantly perceiving things. The mistake is made when we attempt to treat thought as if it precedes perception, as if it is not built on perception.<sup>5</sup> Presuming its own authority, it installs these ideas upon these things instead of being open to these things telling it what is. Presuming to have a superior perspective on what it is inspecting, it runs the risk of “condemn[ing] itself to putting into the things what it will then

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3. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and The Invisible*, 38.

4. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and The Invisible*, 38.

5. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and The Invisible*, 38.

pretend to find in them.”<sup>6</sup> Whether it be perception or a thing perceived, reflection installs itself underneath experience and, as such, does not allow things to speak for themselves.<sup>7</sup> In so doing, reflection takes the form of a prejudgment where reflection tries to understand perception and things perceived in accordance with some notion it holds of them, which comes from not allowing what is before it to freely express itself to it as something thought rather than it. Merleau-Ponty writes:

reflection... prejudges what it will find, then once again it must recommence everything, reject the instruments reflection and intuition had provided themselves, and install itself in a locus where they have not yet been distinguished, in experiences that have not yet been worked over that offer us all at once, pell-mell, both “subject” and “object,” both existence and essence and hence give philosophy resources to redefine them.<sup>8</sup>

What Merleau-Ponty is telling us is that it is through our experience that we become able to reflect upon things and develop an understanding of them, that perception supports reflection, that reflection is derivative of perception. The error is made if we do not go first to perception and find out how it operates but assume that reflection in its own authority and in terms of its own nature can grasp perception. However, by suspending the bond between perceiver and perceived and transforming perception into “perception-reflected-on” and perceived into “thing-perceived-within-a-perception-reflected-on”—that is, through the process of making them objects for thought—reflection imposes a subject-object bifurcation on our perceptual relationship by treating

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6. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and The Invisible*, 38.

7. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and The Invisible*, 12.

8. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and The Invisible*, 130.

the perceiver and the perceived not as a whole but as separate independent things in the world. Through the subject-object dichotomy, we lose track of the fact that these two elements exist together, in relationship with each other, where what we call “objects” are the outward appearances of things that we are constantly perceiving, and what we call “subject” is an independent perspective perceiving those things. However, as Merleau-Ponty tells us, they are not separate, independent things in the world. Rather, perception and the things perceived are fragments of what he calls “flesh”; these two fragments, if we are to speak of them in a separate sense, occur together in the world through the perceptual bond, where they are the obverse and reverse of each other, not two separate entities. Although Merleau-Ponty rejects the use of terms such as “subject” and “object,” he is basically telling us always to remember that there is as though a subject in the object and an object in the subject; by attempting to separate them and treat them as two separate elements, we ignore the lived perceptual relationship that characterizes our experience and through which we come to an understanding of things in the world and their situation in that world.

Moreover, reflection, by prejudging things in the world, imposes an interpretation that defines the boundaries within which an object is understood and articulated. This process attempts to provide thought with a complete understanding of the object, reducing the world to a series of meanings determined by reflection itself. All occurrences of an object, whether directly or indirectly, are treated as manifestations of these pre-established meanings. In this way, reflection positions thought as the only valid perspective, operating through an alienating mode of understanding where meaning is solely the result of reflection’s interpretation of perception and the perceived world. For example, in the relationship between perceiver (*G*) and perceived (*I*), reflection transforms *I* into *J*, using *J* as the default model for apprehending all future instances of *I*. This rigid framework denies the possibility of perceiving *I* in any way other than through *J*. As

a result, *I*'s existence and expression in the world become contingent on *K*'s interpretation, which is filtered through *J*. Thus, what is perceived, *I* is continually reduced to *J* by *K*, thereby limiting how *I* can be understood or experienced.

All things considered, reflection, although not inherently a negative endeavour, runs the risk of not truly apprehending the things it is perceiving because, by subordinating all occurrences of an object to an overarching interpretation of that object, it limits the ways in which we can experience the world and things in it. As Merleau-Ponty writes:

The illusion of illusions is to think now that to tell the truth, we have never been certain of anything but our own acts, that from the beginning perception has been an inspection of the mind, and that reflection is only the perception returning to itself, the conversion from the knowing of the thing to a knowing of oneself of which the thing was made, the emergence of a “binding” that was the bond itself. ...the doctrine finally replaces our belongingness to the world with a view of the world from above.<sup>9</sup>

Reflection runs the risk of losing contact with reality in its attempt to make sense of it. Things exist and, because of perception, are always in relationships with each other, free of reflection. As such, if reflection cannot account for the bond between perception and its object, then it cannot truly apprehend what that object is because it cannot account for how that object engages with the world.

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9. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and The Invisible*, 37.

## 1.2 Race, Racism, Reflection and History

The concept of race is the product and instrument of a historical reflection on the materiality of the human body aimed at determining who counts and who does not as “human beings.” Race is grounded in an in-group versus out-group dynamic where the in-group is counted as human or encompassing all that there is to be human, and the out-group is considered less than human. The in-group/out-group distinction has been used globally in different societies where the in-group epitomizes what it means to be human and what one needs to do or have to achieve humanness.<sup>10</sup> Lewis Gordon describes different occurrences of the in-group/out-group dynamics, such as the slave versus citizens narratives in the ancient Greek world to the Christian versus non-Christian divide in Medieval Europe, that laid the conceptual foundations for the emergence of race as a way of thinking about humans.<sup>11</sup> According to Gordon’s historiography, the explicit racializing configuration arose during Moorish rule of the Iberian Peninsula and the rise of Christendom as Christians, i.e., the in-group, through a form of theological naturalism, grounded their claim to “true humanness” by framing “the outsiders at first as those who rejected... Christianity” and deploying this configuration through the concept of “raza.”<sup>12</sup> The term “raza,” initially used to refer to breeds of horses and dogs, was applied to the Moors and Jews of African descent to describe them as less human, animal-like and of a negative lineage compared to

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10. Lewis Gordon, "Race Theory." In *Encyclopedia of Political Theory*, ed. Mark Bevir. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2010. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412958660>.

11. Lewis R. Gordon, “Race in the Dialectics of Culture,” in *Black Existentialism & Decolonizing Knowledge: Writings of Lewis R. Gordon*, ed. Lewis R. Gordon, Rozena Maart, and Sayan Dey (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023), 40.

12. Gordon, "Race Theory."

Christian populations of the Iberian Peninsula.<sup>13</sup> Following the defeat of the Moors and the subsequent move to establish a legitimate Christian “state,”<sup>14</sup> inquisitions were carried out against populations of Moors and Jews who had converted to Christianity under a pretense of blood purity to ascribe to Moors and Jews origins other than Christian, leading to the deployment of various degrees of social stratifications against the converted Moor and Jewish populations.<sup>15</sup>

During the period of European colonization and the global economic, social, and political domination of the Americas, Asia, Africa, and Oceania (1492-Present), colonizers, laypeople, academics, scientists, clergy, and intellectuals used the concept of race to organize and construct new colonial societies under the premise that the white Europeans were inherently superior to those they dominated and subjugated.<sup>16</sup> For example, in their initial encounters with the Indigenous peoples of the Americas, Spanish invaders used the term “raza” to describe the Indigenous people, based on the misconception that the Indigenous populations were members of the lost tribes of Israel, that is, that they were Jews.<sup>17</sup> Histories, religious and scientific reasonings and stories were then fabricated to justify the European “right” to subjugate, assimilate, and, if need be, eliminate those under their domination. In the essay “Anti-Cartesian Meditations: On the Origin of the Philosophical Anti-Discourse of Modernity,” Enrique Dussel argues that much philosophical discourse in Spain following the early interactions of Spanish colonizers with Indigenous people

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13. Gordon, “Race in the Dialectics of Culture,” 40.

14. The term “state” here is not used in the contemporary sense of the modern nation-state, because this process happened before the Peace of Westphalia (1648).

15. Gordon, “Race Theory.”

16. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 65.

17. Gordon, “Race Theory.”



of the Americas was aimed to justify Spain's "right" to global expansion along with the cultural, political and social domination of the Americas and its peoples to for the sake of "civilizing" these populations. For example, take Dussel's reference to the argument of Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, a theologian and official historian of the Spanish imperial court, made during the Valladolid debate (1550-1551):

It will always be just and in conformity with natural law that such [barbaric] peoples be subjected to the empire of princes and nations that are more cultured and humane, so that by their virtues and the prudence of their laws, they abandon barbarism and are subdued by a more humane life and the cult of virtue.

...

And if they reject such an empire, it can be imposed on them by way of arms, and such a war would be just according to the declarations of natural law... In sum, it is just, convenient, and in conformity with natural law that those honourable, intelligent, virtuous, and human men dominate all those who lack these qualities.<sup>18</sup>

Ginés de Sepúlveda's argument, and others similar in kind to it, was grounded in three premises aimed at positioning Indigenous peoples of the Americas as inferior to the Spanish: 1) they are barbaric, ignorant, uneducated and lack the capacity for learning; 2) they engage in acts, such as human sacrifice, that are sinful, criminal and against natural and divine laws; and 3) they were not Christian.<sup>19</sup> Through these premises Spanish intellectuals concluded that European culture is

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18. Enrique Dussel, "Anti-Cartesian Meditations: On the Origin of the Philosophical Anti-Discourse of Modernity," *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 13, no. 1 (2014): 22.

19. Bartolomé de las Casas, *In Defense of The Indians*, trans. Stafford Poole (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1970), 18-19.

superior to cultures different than Europeans, and domination of the Americas is thus “justified.”<sup>20</sup> A just war was then called for against the Indigenous peoples of the Americas, aimed at “civilizing” them by converting them to Christianity and, in turn, bringing them under the yoke of the various European powers.

Following the 1600s, Gordon argues that a move to a secularized examination of human beings as a part of nature began to take root, and a naturalistic, non-theological notion of race emerged. In the emerging scientific discourse, this took the form of an “assertion of primitiveness” aimed at showing the superiority of members of the white European races over those they dominated.<sup>21</sup> In “The Concept of Race in the Human Species in the Light of Genetics,” Ashley Montagu argues that in the early days of the European Enlightenment era, scientific and anthropological discourses initially used the concept of race as a convenient placeholder for recognizing that “all human beings belonged to a single species” and to distinguish “between certain geographic groups of man.”<sup>22</sup> However, scientists and anthropologists, through the convergence of Aristotelian ideas on species, scholastic theology on special creation, Enlightenment-era biological and anthropological ideas, and Darwinian evolutionary theory, alongside social and political prejudices, moved to the idea of race as a “matter of fact” of our natural existence, presenting that someone’s race tells us all we need to know about a person's worth.<sup>23</sup>

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20. Dussel, “Anti-Cartesian Meditations,” 22.

21. Gordon, “Race Theory.”

22. Ashley Montagu, “The Concept of Race in the Human Species in the Light of Genetics,” in *The Concept of Race*, ed. Ashley Montagu (Toronto: Collier-Macmillan Limited, 1969), 3.

23. Montagu, “The Concept of Race,” 16.

Through a project of European colonialism, race then became an institutionalized reality, as European powers instituted a new way in which human bodies were perceived, understood and lived in the world. Race then became a way of thinking about the human body and human life, and with that, a racist form of reflection emerged based on the underlying assumption that white people are superior to other races.<sup>24</sup> An understanding of human beings as belonging to different races emerged as European colonizers transformed themselves into the white race and those they dominated into Black, brown, red, and yellow races.

However, what underpins the understanding that human beings belong to different races and allows this understanding to “come to life” is a racializing perception, which is then developed and mediated through a racist reflection. Perception is always “doing its thing,” as it is caught up with the world and the things through the perceptual bond. Racist reflection breaks the bond between perceiver and perceived through the imposition of racist ideas about the human body, transforming the body into a racialized body in the process. For example, when we turn our eyes on our bodies, what we see immediately is an object which is the real manifestation of billions of years of evolutionary development. Now, under the concept of race, skin colour or pigmentation, for instance, which reflects the levels of melanin that have accumulated in the innermost layer of the epidermis, is given a meaning that goes beyond the natural fact of pigmentation. As a move of reflection, thought takes skin pigmentation, which here is characteristic of the object it is perceiving, and assumes that this reflects said body’s value in the world and then brings into being that body as a racialized body. A more concrete example of this can be seen in the configuration of the Black race, where dark skin is apprehended through the category of Black. In an antiBlack society, dark skin is viewed as a sign of impurity and inferiority by the white European racist

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24. Gordon, “Race in the Dialectics of Culture,” 45.

reflection and interpreted as undesirable and ugly. Through these determinations of dark skin, the body to which this skin belongs is perceived as ugly, dirty and something to avoid. Through this process, a racializing perception emerges grounded in the essential claim of the superiority of a specific group of human beings, where the human body is treated based on these claims and a world is constructed to bring the concept of race to life.

In his critique of reflection, Merleau-Ponty argues that reflection, by prejudging what is encountered in perception, obstructs a genuine perceptual relationship with the world. This occurs through the imposition of our preconceived ideas about things onto the actual things we perceive. I contend that this issue, highlighted by Merleau-Ponty, lies at the heart of racist reflection. Although Merleau-Ponty disavows the use of the terms “subject” and “object,” discussions of racist reflection are rooted in these terms. They describe attempts to disregard someone's agency by viewing their body in the world as an object. Racist reflection seeks to deny the perspective that racialized bodies possess regarding the world. When perception comes to life, the perceiver fails to see the other—as a racialized being with their own perspective. Instead, in the process of racialization, this perception reduces the racialized Other to a mere object, prioritizing interpretations of that object over the insights that perspective might provide. Consequently, racist reflection misconstrues what is being perceived and deploys the concept of race to assert an understanding based on preconceived notions.

Racist reflection ultimately stands in for genuine perception, creating a distorted racializing perception in which the perspective of the perceived is conflated with an external, objectifying view. Under this formulation, racism manifests through the operations of racist reflection, wherein the perceiver's relationship with the racialized Other is neutralized. For instance, reflection fails to recognize its own perspectival relationship with Black individuals. By denying the unique

perspective that a Black person has on the world and imposing preconceived notions of what it means to be Black, racist reflection reduces the Black person to a mere Black "object" in the world.

Moreover, under a racist paradigm, bodily perception is grounded in the racialization process, where what is perceived is constantly being racialized, that is, being made to refer to some race-based ideas. For the perceiver, racializing perception is underpinned by a racist reflection that uses the concept of race to refer to the idea that there exists an indissoluble association between mental characteristics, such as personality and intelligence, and physical characteristics of the body, such as physical type, heredity, blood, hair texture and facial features, to determine who matters and who does not in a given society.<sup>25</sup> Racist reflection operates through a hypothesis of the meaningfulness of race as a means of determining the materiality of the body as a racial object in the world. Racist reflection then locks on the visible elements of the body by using the concept of race to develop an understanding of the body as a thing seen in the world. In so doing, by the perceiver imposing on the body ideas of what they think they are perceiving, reflection misconstrues the perception of the perspective at hand with that of an object by treating the body as an object to be defined from the outside, not as a perspective upon the world.

Racist reflection, then, refers to the ways in which the concept of race is used to mediate our understanding of our bodies and, by extension, the world in which we live in terms of a lived reality of race. It offers a negative and restrictive understanding of things and people in the world by using race to make the claim that one group is superior because they count as more human compared to other groups based on the interpretation of the materiality of the body. For racist reflection, and with that racializing perception, the materiality of the body, such as skin colour and

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25. Montagu, "The Concept of Race," 14, 24.

hair texture, is a sign of an individual social, political and moral worth as it describes how that body is valued in a racist world.

### 1.3 The white look in an antiBlack world

I now turn my discussion to a specific form of racism, antiBlack racism, to describe how racist perception operates through the essential claim that white people are superior to Black people. To describe a society as racist is to deploy the claim that racism, the idea that a group is superior to other groups based on their race, plays a central role in the formulation of the social and political order of that society and is expressed through the possible forms social life can take for members of that society. In the antiBlack world, racist perception attempts to limit the Black person to the role of an object in the world, thereby denying the validity of her perspective on the world. I focus my discussion on the type of perception, sight, to describe the body as a thing seen in the world, with this seeing being heavily influenced by the racialized understanding of what is being perceived. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon argues that in an antiBlack world, the white look, when cast onto Black people, is something that is suffocating and alienating.<sup>26</sup> For Black people, the white look is a look that does not offer a reciprocal discourse in which two perspectives, that of the perceiver and the perceived, are in contact and engaging with each other. The look of the other, the perspective of the perceiver cast toward the perceived, describes a perspective through which things are seen from the outside, where everything that the look is

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26. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 89.

directed towards and encounters appears to be an object in the world – even other people.<sup>27</sup> By treating the Black person as an object in the world, the white look, as the look of the other, does not aim to overcome the object relation it casts towards Black people. Rather, the racializing gaze of the look denies the perspective of Black people as perceived perceivers and treats them only as things perceived in the world, thereby rendering “Black” as an object in the world.

To understand how the white look operates, let us first describe the experience of the look in general. When I turn my eyes on to the man sitting in front of me at the bar, he at first appears to me as an object out in my world. What I see when I look at him is a man seated slightly upright in a chair. He has one leg resting on the table in front of him and the other slightly pulled back on the floor. I see his right hand resting on his lap. Meanwhile, his left hand is slowly gliding over his left leg. In his right hand, he is holding a cup. He is wearing dark blue jeans, a Black jacket and tennis shoes. Now, I see his right arm move from his lap to the back of his head as he speaks to someone seated across from him. He appears to me as an object of my gaze acting out in the world, but I don't simply perceive him in that way. To perceive the Other as solely an object is to rob him of his lived relationship with the world and thereby lose the context in which that person exists. To look at the Other as solely an object is to lose track of their situation in the world. When I turn my gaze to the man at the bar, I see him *as* someone who has a life I know nothing about. I get a glimpse of this from the conversation he is having with the man in front of him. I overhear him talking about his work, his interests, his family and other things going on in his universe of activity. When I look at him, I get a glimpse into a world that I am not a part of, into a discursive universe I will never know. At this moment, I realize that he is something more than an object; like me, he

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27. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1992), 342.

has a perspective on the world. And, when he turns his eyes onto me, I enter into a relationship with him where I then become an object in his gaze, an object which he interrogates and attempts to understand, and also sees (all other things being equal) as a perspective.

Sartre's analysis in *Being and Nothingness* is helpful here. Sartre argues that through the look of the other, we are brought up against our existence for others. The look of the other alters how we operate in the world: the possibility of being looked at pulls us into a relationship with something that is not simply present, a perspective which we must account for. Sartre writes:

With the Other's look, a new organization of complexes comes to superimpose itself on the first. To apprehend myself as seen is, in fact, to apprehend myself as seen in the world and from the standpoint of the world. The look does not carve me out in the universe; it comes to search for me at the heart of my situation and grasps me in the irresolvable relations with instruments... But suddenly [in] the look [there is a] alienation of [the] self, which is the act of being-looked-at, involves the alienation of the world which I organize... [my world] escapes me so as to organize itself into a new and different oriented complex – with other relations and other distances in the midst of other objects.<sup>28</sup>

Through the look of the other, the other's perspective on the world is infused into my perspective, my relationship with myself and the world, where it calls upon me, demanding that I acknowledge it. Her look pulls me out of my world and places me in the midst of hers.<sup>29</sup> To respond is to pull her out of her world and place her into mine. In so doing, we become a privileged perspective in each other's worlds.

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28. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 353.

29. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 353.



Through the look of the other, we are initiated into the world of the Other, which reveals different dimensions of my being in the world that were typically not salient for me before. When I come in contact with another individual, their look offers a perspective outside of myself through which I am interrogated, as well as a perspective on the world. In our perception of each, through the look, our hold on the world is decentered and reorganized. The look pulls me into a new world, where in this new world, this new environment, I must constantly take into account the Other as my actions are now in relation to the Other and seen through the perspective of the Other. The look of the other appears, then, as an alienating outside perspective, which disintegrates my hold on the world. However, ordinarily the Other also experiences this alienation because when I turn my eyes on her, I take her out of her world just as she takes me out of mine, and now we share this relation to each other and are impacted by each other. This is because the look of the other is always accompanied by the look from self, such that when her look falls upon me, I look back and cast onto her my perspective through which I interrogate things and engage with the world in general.<sup>30</sup> In an ideal situation, when we acknowledge the Other as a living perspective, we can move beyond the object relation and treat them like the perspective who is trying to act in the world. This is because to acknowledge the look is to respond to the call of the Other by transcending the Other's object relation, returning them to that muted relationship with the world and giving back to them "the lightness of being [they] had lost" when they entered the world that is outside of them.<sup>31</sup> That is to say, by acknowledging the perceived as a perspective on the world, we recognize the fact that they are a perspective we are constantly affecting and being affected by.

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30. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 356.

31. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 89.

That is the ideal, which presents what is missing from racist perception: this “giving back.” In the antiBlack world, the white look, when cast onto Black people, does not call for a reciprocal discourse with its Other. The white look does not ask the Black person to tell it who she is. Fanon writes:

Locked in this suffocating reification, I appealed to the Other so that his liberating gaze, gliding over my body suddenly smoothed of rough edges, would give me back the lightness of being I thought I had lost and taking me out of the world, put me back in the world. ... But just as I get to the other slope, I stumble, and the Other fixes me with his gaze, his gestures and his attitude, the same way you fix a preparation with a dye.<sup>32</sup>

To be seen as *Black* removes the possibility of an individual going from self-as-object to self-as-perspective. Guided by racist reflection, the white look, which is the look of the other for Black people, does not operate on a liberatory basis. Instead, the white look attempts to keep the Black person in an object mode of relating to reality, in terms of which they are not seen as an active agent in the world. Gordon argues that in an antiBlack world, the white look conditions Black people such that the determinations cast upon the Black person through the look over-determines the Black body and the Black experience.<sup>33</sup>

In the antiBlack world, racist reflection operates through the hypothesis of the inexistence of the Black perspective by denying Black agency. Fanon writes:

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32. Fanon, *Black Skin, White*, 89.

33. Lewis R. Gordon, *Fear of Black Consciousness* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2022), 80.

The white gaze, the only valid one, is already dissecting me. I am fixed. Once their microtones are sharpened, the Whites objectively cut sections of my reality. I have been betrayed. I sense I see in this white gaze, that its arrival not of a new man but of a new type of man, a new species. A Negro, in fact! <sup>34</sup>

Under racist reflection, the white perspective operates through the essential claim that whites are the superior race and places itself over and above Black people. The white look is not open to the discursive possibilities the Black look has to offer because it does not register the Black person as having a perspective on the world. Through the white look, the antiBlack world tells Black people what their role is in the world and how the Black body is seen and understood in their world, and denies the possibility of things being different. In so doing, the white look treats the Black look like a variant of its own perspective, not a perspective independent of it. When talking about the relationship between the seer and the seen, Merleau-Ponty writes, “the seer is caught up in what he sees, it is still himself he sees: there is a fundamental narcissism of all vision.”<sup>35</sup> The look of the Other, in its exercise of outside perspective, pushes forward by the ideas that perspective uses to express its understanding of what it is perceiving. For the white look, caught up in its narcissism, Black identity and meaning are expressed through the white perspective. Or, as Lewis Gordon tells us, the white self “does not see the self as conditioned by the Black but as a point of reference looking onto the Black looking back onto the white as a white perspective.”<sup>36</sup> And Black people then are treated as objects of a perspective and not a perspective in itself.

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34. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 95.

35. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 139.

36. Gordon, “Race in the Dialectics of Culture,” 46.

## 1.4 Racializing Perception, the Image of the Body and Reflection

In an antiBlack world, racializing perception is shaped by a racist reflection that operates beneath the surface of perception, creating a negative and alienating relationship between the Black body and the world. Racist reflection relies on a distorted image of the body, produced through reflection, which misrepresents the perceived body. In this context, perception becomes disconnected from the experience of the perceived, resulting in a skewed understanding of the perceived as perception is severed from its involvement in and dependence on the perceived. The image of the body is an image produced by reflection that distorts the perceived body; Fanon describes it as “an image in the third person,” which gives us the body as it appears to and is represented by the Other.<sup>40</sup> In the essay “What Is an Image?,” W. J. T. Mitchell argues that an image is a “sign that pretends not to be a sign, masquerading as ... a natural immediacy and presence.”<sup>37</sup> Through the use of images, we capture and deploy a meaning in the world to re-present our experience of reality to others. Images help us discuss, describe, and understand what it is we are experiencing, and when applied to the body, an image posits how it is seen from the outside. The image of the body, then, is a reflective instrument guiding perception’s mediation of the body as something seen in the world.

In an antiBlack world, the image of the body rooted in the idea of Black inferiority seeks to portray the Black body as inferior, unclean, and morally depraved, often using degrading images such as the savage or the animalistic. Features like dark skin, kinky hair, wide hips, and thick lips are distorted to support the notion that Black individuals are less than human—depicted as wicked, ugly, and inherently flawed. Fanon tells us that the image of the Black body was fabricated by the

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37. W. J. T. Mitchell, “What Is an Image?,” *New Literary History* 15, no. 3 (1984): 529.

“white man”; through the historical development and use of the concept of race to interpret the human body, the “white man” fabricated an over-arching conceptual representation of Black bodies to mediate their experience of Black people.<sup>38</sup> For example, take the image of the Black body depicted as something animal-like. In *Fear of Black Consciousness*, Lewis Gordon traces back this image to the term “raza,” “which pre-white Europeans used to describe and depict” the supposed sub-human animal-like status of “the Moors and Afro-Jews.”<sup>39</sup> Through the term “raza,” light-skinned Europeans, before the explicit construction of white Europeans, fabricated an animal-like image of Moors and Afro-Jews, which articulated the supposed “negative lineage” of their impure origins.

Fanon argues that “the image of one’s body is solely negating” for two reasons: first, it serves as an external depiction of the self; and second, it undermines the validity of the Black perspective on the world.<sup>40</sup> The self has little control over the construction of this body image, as it relies entirely on how the Other chooses to perceive them. The image is shaped by the ideas held by others, who, as perceivers, impose their interpretations onto the perceived body. Through this lens, the Other reduces the perceived body to an object in the world, transforming it into a mere reflection of their own perceptions. Consequently, the creation and reliance on this image restrict the ways in which the body can be experienced, closing off the possibilities for the perceived to express themselves in the world. The image of the body, therefore, functions as a tool of reflection, enabling the Other to construct an understanding of what they are observing. Ultimately, this image dictates how the body is comprehended in relation to society, culture, and interpersonal dynamics.

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38. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 91.

39. Gordon, *Fear of Black Consciousness*, 77.

40. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 90.

Second, the image of the body serves as a foundation for reducing the Black body from a perspective on the world to an object within it. Through this image, racist reflection attempts to dictate how the Black body should interact with the world, projecting the idea that Black individuals are inherently inferior. The concept of race is employed to make negative judgments about the body, where physical characteristics—such as skin colour, facial features, and hair type—are used to create a distorted representation. This representation conflates the materiality of the Black body with animalistic notions, portraying it as less human than other bodies, particularly the white body. In this way, the image of the body is constructed to depict it as an object seen from the outside, treated as a mere thing in the world, stripped of its richness and complexity. And just as reflection severs perceiver from perceived, so racist reflection severs the Black perceiving body from its intertwining with the perceived world.

## 1.5 Conclusion

When Ahmaud was attacked, he was confronted not just with physical violence but with an abstract image of his body—specifically, the Black body shaped — by racist reflection and perceived through a white look. This racializing perception depicted him as a threat, objectifying him as something to be feared, chased, and, if necessary, eliminated. The white gaze, the look cast upon him by the McMichaels and Bryan, offered Ahmaud no opportunity to express himself or to explain his presence in the same space as those white men; they showed no interest in understanding him. Through this gaze, Ahmaud’s claim to the world was violently denied as they brutally took his life.

In an antiBlack world, the image of the Black body fosters a negative relationship with reality where the white look, as a form of racializing perception, pulls Black individuals into a state of existence defined as the Black Other, a condition in which they are marginalized and stripped of agency. This gaze operates on the premise of annihilating the body and the world as a lived reality. Racist reflection misconstrues and distorts the perceiver's relationship with the perceived, giving rise to a racializing perception that produces a racialized reality. The perceiver then employs ideas such as Black criminality and inferiority to interpret and judge the materiality of the Black body.

But how does this process unfold? In the next chapter, I will explore Fanon's ideas on the epidermal racial schema and historical race through Merleau-Ponty's concepts of flesh and body. This examination will illuminate the transformation of the natural body into the racialized body and shed light on Blackness as an embodied experience.

## Chapter 2: Race as an Embodied Experience

### 2.0 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I argued that the image of the body describes the ways through which the body is thought of, understood, and depicted by others as something seen in the world. Fanon tells us that upon entering the world, the Black person is confronted with an image of the Black body, which reduces the Black person to the status of a mere beast in the world. Under the weight of the image of the body, the Black person experiences an alteration of her body, as he writes, in which case her body schema collapses and is replaced by the historical racial schema and ultimately the epidermal racial schema. In this chapter, I explore the collapse of the Black person's body schema through the concept of embodiment.

In this chapter, I aim to discuss what it means to respond to the call of the Other in a racialized world. To do this, I examine the relationship between the epidermal racial schema, the historical racial schema and the human body through Merleau-Ponty's redefinition of the body schema to describe how racist perception alters the self's experience of the world through the thematization of the body. First, I turn to Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* and Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, along with John Russon's essay "Embodiment and responsibility: Merleau-Ponty and the ontology of nature" (1994), to analyze the relationship between the historical racial schema, epidermal racial schema, and the body schema to thereby discuss the Black person's response to being perceived as Black. In so doing, I examine the relationship between the body as an object and the body as a subject in the world to discuss the body's situation in the world as Black. In the second section I argue that racist perception can alter



the underlying intentionality which grounds our experience of the world. I then end with a discussion on habit, where I explore the relationship between movement and racist ideas of the Black body to describe the embodied Black experience.

## 2.1 The AntiBlack World and The Body Schema

I begin this chapter with a discussion of the embodied Black experience in an antiBlack world, using an analysis of Fanon's concepts of the historical racial schema and the epidermal racial schema to describe the process of racialization.

There is a moment that many Black people can attest to when they realize that they are Black—when, as Fanon tells us, they discover their blackness.<sup>1</sup> At this moment, they find that they are treated as different, bad, and unworthy in relation to whites and other races. The Black person comes to experience their being in the world as Black, not in a positive sense, but as something negative, in terms of which various forms of restriction are imposed upon them due to their Blackness. The Black body is not allowed to freely express itself in and towards the world but is restricted to activity deemed appropriate by the world.

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon argues that the imposition of racial determinations upon the Black body leads to a situation wherein the Black person, he writes, “encounters difficulties in elaborating his body schema.”<sup>2</sup> The concept of the body schema refers to the implicit, pre-reflective knowledge we have of the unity of the body in relation to itself and the things it interacts within the world. It is, as Fanon writes, “a slow construction of myself as a body in a spatial and

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1. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 202.

2. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 90.

temporal world – such seems to be the schema. It is not imposed on me; it is rather a definitive structuring of myself and the world – definitive because it creates a genuine dialectic between my body and the world.”<sup>3</sup> In the antiBlack world, racializing perception, guided by or pulled along into the world through racist reflection, attacks the “actual” body of the Black person through the imposition of a negatively constructed idea upon the “actual” body of the person deemed as Black. Racist ideas of Blackness impose a fabricated, theoretical reality onto that body which disrupts the sense of the body’s availability to itself as implicitly aware of where it is in the world and how it should engage with itself and things in the world. The Black person, Fanon writes, has no choice but “to wear the livery the white man has fabricated for him.”<sup>4</sup> Fanon proposes that this livery is the historical racial schema, which narrates the meaning of Blackness for the Black person and tells how the Black body is to operate in the world. The historical-racial schema gives rise in turn to another schema, the epidermal racial schema, wherein to be Black is to find one’s body available to one through the interpretations that others have of one’s skin, as the imposition of Black idea upon Black skin creates a situation in which the skin comes to be the definitive factor in interaction with others.

The body schema is the preliminary pre-reflective attitude and awareness the body has of the world when it is engaging in a specific situation and objects in the world. In the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty describes the body schema as “a manner of expressing that my body is in and towards the world.”<sup>5</sup> Jan Halák in *Body Ecology and Emersive Leisure (2018)* expands

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3. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 91.

4. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 17.

5. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes, (New York: Routledge, 2012), 103.

on Merleau-Ponty's articulation of the body schema by describing it as "the 'point of departure' that we need to have at our disposal while confronting a particular situation in the world and the objects in it...[; it is] a preliminarily established reference level, in regard to which all the particular contents of experience make sense in the first place."<sup>6</sup> Merleau-Ponty tells us that there is a deep intertwining of the body and the world and the task by which the body is confronted, along with things it must engage with to fulfill these tasks. Through these tasks, the world calls on the body and demands that the body act and respond to it. The awareness of these tasks permeates the body through the body schema as this awareness is the body's implicit knowledge of its location and of the location of its parts and the things with which those parts interact. The body schema is the body's underlying, implicit awareness of its availability in and to the world.<sup>7</sup>

In the antiBlack world, racist reflection attacks and weakens the body schema of the Black body through the imposition of the racist idea of Blackness which takes the body to be a racial object in the world. Various narratives, images, histories and ideas contribute to support this hypothesis. In the racialized world, the Black body is caught up in the racialization process and treated as an object of racializing perception and racist reflection, where it is embedded into a centuries-old societal process of race formation. Fanon describes the narrative constituting the racialized body as the historical racial schema. The historical racial schema is the underlying process and overarching interpretive scheme through which the cultural world established the meaning of race as a way of understanding the materiality of the body. In "Too Late: Fanon, the Dismembered Past, and a Phenomenology of Racialized Time," Alia Al-Saji describes the

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6. Jan Halák, "The concept of 'body schema' in Merleau-Ponty's account of embodied subjectivity," in *Body Ecology and Emersive Leisure* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 41.

7. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 102.

historical racial schema as the “naturalization of race,” where the racialized body is constituted in relation to perceived bodily occurrences, which are treated as markers of the body's racial reality.<sup>8</sup> The historical racial schema weaves the Black body together “out of a thousand details, anecdotes and stories,”<sup>9</sup> and institutional mechanisms such as the education system, state and private policy initiatives, language and different forms of media production were mobilized around it. Through these systematic intentional and nonintentional efforts, a racially based understanding of the world emerged and grounded a particular understanding of human bodies in relation to that world.

For the Black person, the historical racial schema which Fanon articulates is a reflection, that is, a product and instrument, of the historical reality of the colonialization and enslavement of dark-skinned Africans in the Euro-modern world, which was grounded in the Black person's existence as property to be owned by the Other. In *The Black Jacobins* (1989), CLR James described how European enslavers on the African Coast, as well as French colonizers, plantation owners and state officials in the then-French colony of San Domingo (present-day Haiti), fabricated the image of the docile, brutish, lazy African slave to justify their extremely cruel treatment of enslaved African populations on the island and those en route to different slave ports. Under the colonial enterprise, Black bodies—that is, the bodies of enslaved Africans—were treated solely as property, as objects to own and wield however the white man wished. James describes how the legal apparatus was used towards this end and, with it, how different aspects of French colonial society came together to protect and further entrench the object-oriented, property treatment of Africans as he writes:

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8. Alia Al-Saji, “Too Late: Fanon, the dismembered past, and a phenomenology of racialized time.” In *Fanon, Phenomenology and Psychology*, ed. Leswin Laubscher, Derek Hook and Miraj Desai (New York: Routledge, 2021), 137.

9. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 89.

Legislation passed for the protection of the slaves remained on paper in face of the dictum that a man could do as he liked with his own. “All laws, however just and humane they may be, in favour of Negroes will always be a violation of the rights of property if they are not sponsored by the colonists. ...All laws on property are just only if they supported by the opinion of those who are interested in them as proprietors.” This was still white opinion at the beginning of the French Revolution. Not only planters but officials made it quite clear that whatever the penalties for the ill treatment of slaves, these could never be enforced. The slaves might understand that they have right, which would be fatal to the peace and well-being of the colony.<sup>10</sup>

The notion of property was central to the deployment of the objectifying gaze of the colonial regime. Colonists used the idea of property rights to deny the perspective of Africans and deployed ghastly, cruel methods to further entrench this relationship with the Other. The notion of the Black body as an object to be owned, dominated and utilized for and by the Other became a central tenet of the historical racial schema, wherein white people, whose racist ideas mediate their perception of Black bodies, treat the Black body as something they own and have every right to define and tell how it operates in the world.

The historical racial schema is the discourse that counts itself as the perceiver and the object of its discourse as the perceived. It dominates and eliminates the discourse of the “perceived” about themselves. The discourse of the perceiver is a product of a racializing perception that is guided by a racist reflection. It shows itself in the narratives posited from the outside as a means of

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10. C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, 2nd ed. (New York: Random House Inc, 1989), 22.

interpreting the way the racialized body appears to act towards their Other. The Black body is formed through a history of being dominated by the white other where stories of Blackness are fabricated by the perceiver to sustain, support and evaluate the racist interpretation of the materiality of the body. As C. L. R. James notes, the “negro” is spoken of as being below the rank of human operated in turn as a manner of denying the perspective the enslaved had on the world.

James writes:

What was the intellectual level of these slaves? The planters hating them, called them by every opprobrious name. “The Negroes,” says a memoir published in 1789, “are unjust, cruel, barbarous, half-human, treacherous, deceitful, thieves, drunkards, proud, lazy, unclean, shameless, jealous to fury, and cowards.” It was by sentiments such as these that they strove to justify the abominable cruelties they practised. And they took great pains that the Negro should remain the brute beast they wanted him to be. “The safety of the whites demands that we keep the Negroes in the most profound ignorance. I have reached the stage of believing firmly that one must treat the Negroes as one treats beast.” Such is the opinion of the Governor of Martinique in a letter addressed to the Minister, and such was the opinion of all colonists.<sup>11</sup>

The historical racial schema is fabricated through the deep history of colonial domination and racist reflection, which gave birth to a racialized world. The ways in which white colonists used race to justify their treatment of enslaved Africans, alongside the Indigenous populations of the Americas, laid the ground for a system of institutionalized discrimination and disempowering of bodies which were deemed as less human. A system which spans centuries and multiple

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11. James, *Black Jacobins*, 17.

generations and, through its deep entrenchment in the world, is still alive and utilized in the present to describe the meaning of perceived material bodies as seen from the outside.

Through the historical racial schema, the body acquires race as a point of departure for its being in the world. The imposition of racist ideas reduces the body's pre-reflective ability to operate and relate to the world by limiting the body to the status it has in the interpretations put forward by others who are perceiving it. As such, Fanon positions the historical racial schema as "beneath the body schema" in a racialized world.<sup>12</sup> That is to say, the historical racial schema tells us that the body represents a race and dictates how that representation will be acted out in the world.

Through the historical racial schema, we come to an understanding of how racialized bodies ought to operate in the world as the narratives which underpin them offer them their point of departure for action in the world. Through this process, the body as a point of nature, the "actual body," is disrupted and altered. The historical racial schema displaces the body schema of the Black body, informing the individual of what it is permissible for them to do in the white world. That is, instead of the Black person having a vague sense of the availability of their body in relation to things in the world, in the antiBlack world, the awareness of the Black body as a body in the world is based on a narrative constructed by the world. *How does this happen? How does the historical racial schema attack the body schema?*

I argue that the historical racial schema weakens the body schema by disrupting the body's intentional arc. As Merleau-Ponty writes, "the life of consciousness... is underpinned by an 'intentional arc' that projects around us... [and] creates the unity of senses, the unity of senses with

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12. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 91.

intelligence, and the unity of sensitivity and motricity.”<sup>13</sup> Intentionality refers to the orientation the body takes towards things in the world. Intentionality unifies movement with perception by situating us in the world with “things” we project as meaningful and significant.<sup>14</sup> The body’s relationship with things in the world is one of reference toward the world, in which our body, inhabiting space, is projected towards things in the world.<sup>15</sup> It is through the intentional arc, Merleau-Ponty tells us, that the body is projected into and towards the world. The body moves toward things and operates and acts in the world; this is what it is to be a body; it is situated in and toward the world and always takes an approach to it in a proto-reflective, implicit sense. The body experiences the call of the world, and its bodily situation determines how that call is articulated by the world. The body’s intentional arc underpins how we relate to our temporal placement, for instance, or to time (past, present and future); how the body’s physical situation is composed and where it is located in the world; and what ideas we hold about the world and our place in it, or our ideological situation. The body acts meaningfully towards things in its world. The things with which the body interacts with in the world make a call upon the body, a call that the body “captures” through the body’s spatiotemporal relationship with the world.

Merleau-Ponty argues that the body implicitly posits an original intentionality because it is an “I can” which orients bodily functions “toward the inter-sensory unity of a world,” where the motor experience of the body offers the body a “manner of reaching the world and object... that must be recognized as original, and perhaps as originary.”<sup>16</sup> Russon describes the “I can” of the

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13. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 137.

14. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 139.

15. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 140.

16. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 137, 141.



body's being in the world as "the determinateness of our experience, which is always a product of evaluating the possible ways of bodily involvement and interaction in the world."<sup>17</sup> That is, the "I can" of the body describes how the body comes into contact with the world and how this contact is taken up by and through the body. Through the historical racial schema, we see the socio-political reality of race as a fundamental element of the structuring of the cultural world, attacking the "I can" of the body by reducing the possibilities of "can," that is, of specific acts and processes it stipulates for specific bodies. In so doing, the historical racial schema disrupts the body's intentional arc, and when the bodies that inhabit that world see race, they block that intentional arc.

Fanon argues that the historical racial schema, a product and a living element of the cultural world, attacks the body schema in a multitude of ways, both explicitly and implicitly, and comes to operate as the body schema for the racialized body. In this process, the concept of race comes to "possess us," and by possessing us these ideas are brought to life through the lived experience of race.<sup>18</sup> That is, if the body is said to be in the world as something racial, and if this idea has come to dominate and shape the world, then its way of inhabiting the world is affected. Put more concretely, if there are Black bodies, these bodies are forced to enact themselves, and to relate to the views of others, within the confines of the Black idea.

Through the historical racial schema, Black people find themselves confronted by ideas, images, and narratives which position them as receiving and not making their meaning, as objects and entities who exist not in their own terms but in the terms of others. By disrupting the body

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17. John Russon, "Embodiment and responsibility: Merleau-Ponty and the ontology of nature," *Man and World* 27 (1994): 294.

18. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and The Invisible*, 151.

schema and, with that, the body's intentional arc, the historical racial schema alters the being in the world of the racialized body. To speak of the body's being in the world, Merleau-Ponty argues that we are talking about the pre-objective perspective that the body has of the world and its situation in it. Through the concept of Being in the world, Merleau-Ponty is referring to a "sort of inner diaphragm... [which] determines what our reflexes and our perception will be able to aim at in the world, the zone of our possible operations, and the scope of our life."<sup>19</sup>

The historical racial schema, then, alters the body's being in the world through the imposition of racializing constructions on the body, which is then expressed through the epidermal racial schema. The epidermal racial schema refers to the manner in which we conduct our lives in terms of a racialized reality; that is, how we live in the world through the materiality of our bodies. Al-Saji describes the epidermal racial schema as the rationalization of race in terms of the "ways in which racism takes itself to originate as a mere reaction to the racialized other."<sup>20</sup> In that sense, the epidermal racial schema refers to the internalization of race, which follows the collapse of the body schema due to the historical racial schema. Race is treated as the deciding factor for determining how the body inhabits and engages with the world.

If we take the figure-background formulation from Merleau-Ponty to describe how the materiality of the body is perceived through racializing perception and lived out through the epidermal racial schema, the skin of the racialized body becomes the figure, and it presents that body as belonging to a specific race. The self who finds that they are racialized finds that when they show up in the world, their skin is what stands out, what matters, and it is through their skin that the rest of the body is understood. When Fanon talks about the historical racial schema leading

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19. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 81.

20. Al-Saji, "Too Late," 179.

to the collapse of the body schema and the epidermal racial schema emerging in its wake, what he is giving voice to is the manner in which the individual, upon entering the racialized world, comes in contact with an interpretation of the body that is not theirs, that long preceded them, and that disrupts the original manner in which their body is available to them in the world. It imposes upon them an identity which they must take up and embody in order to operate in this world. The individual now experiences their body as available to them through racial determination, which means they find that what they can do in the world, and how, is defined first through their skin. To be in a racial society as racialized, in the ways in which we understand race now, is to live skin first. To embody this is to integrate this situation and to have to create a life for oneself through it.

The epidermal racial schema, like the historical racial schema, is formed through the convergence of the discourse of the perceiver and perceived. However, in the terms of the epidermal racial schema, the discourse of the perceived is negated and the discourse of the perceiver comes to dominate. In the terms of the epidermal racial schema, the Black body is lived as a grappling with how it is seen from the outside in an antiBlack world. As Fanon tells us, to be Black is to be “overdetermined from the outside,” where the Black person is a slave to her appearance in the world.<sup>21</sup> To be over-determined means to be determined to such an extent that the determination, in attempting to describe what it is perceiving, acts as something erasure-like instead of something enabling. That is, the determination provides the content to the subject by telling it something about itself, where it comes about, and how it will be taken, constituting its situation. Sartre writes that the situation “reflects me at once both my facticity and my freedom.”<sup>22</sup> In this situation, there is a specific facticity, a specific ordering of reality, and it significantly determines my ability to

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21. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 95.

22. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 348.

project myself and my possibilities in the world. For the Black body in an antiBlack world, the body's being in the world is locked by its skin, which is *over-determined*. Through the epidermal racial schema, Black people, Fanon tells us, are made "the eternal victims of [their] own essence, of a visible appearance for which [they are] not responsible."<sup>23</sup> The Black body is imprisoned in the white Other's interaction with the skin.

Therefore, the epidermal racial schema describes the process where the historical racial schema becomes a lived reality where the underlying principle that enables and supports our application of categories to unify things we experience comes to be defined for the Black body through the antiBlack construction of what it means to be Black. That is to say, through the epidermal racial schema, the body internalizes the ideas cast onto it through the historical racial schema and, in so doing, comes to sense and feel the world in racializing terms. As such, the epidermal racial schema refers to the over-determined reality the body experiences following the imposition of the historical racial schema upon it by the world because of the other's interpretation of the materiality of that body.

What we see then in the epidermal racial schema is that the concept of race is used by the Other to formulate an understanding of what to expect from that individual through how the body is perceived from the outside. Moreover, what we see then in the epidermal racial schema is that the concept of race is used by the Other to formulate an understanding of what to expect from that individual through how the body is perceived from the outside. The subject that is posited as internal to that body, as its perspective, is construed in the most basic way, consistent with its character as object. The epidermal racial schema forces an individual to think and live through

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23. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 18.

their body as an object in the world, not as a perspective but as skin, the meaning of which is given by the outside perspective.

## 2.2 Embodiment, the Black Experience and Reflexive Life

Through the epidermal racial schema, skin and the interpretation of it becomes implicated in racialized embodiment. *But why does this happen? What makes the body such a being in the world that it undergoes internal transfiguration when experiencing racializing perception?* In the transition between the historical racial schema and the epidermal racial schema, through the collapse of the body schema, we see how the discourse of the other, as expressed through how one is perceived, i.e. interpreted from the outside, disrupts and alters the discourse of the self. The self then—the perceived—must now find a way to express itself through these interpretations, standing upon them as they engage with and act in the world. This calls for an act of translation, wherein the self takes up the discourse of the other and uses it to interpret itself and the world around it. In doing this, the self embodies the discourse of the Other.

When talking about the body's relationship with the world, Merleau-Ponty describes the body as an eminently expressive space as it is “the origin of all the others, it is the very movement of expression, it projects significations on the outside by giving them a place and sees to it they begin to exist as things, beneath our hands and before our eyes.”<sup>24</sup> The body is the basis of our determinate existence in the world. First, it is our point of origin in the world. Second, it is the foundation and support of one's being in the world. Through the body, we experience things; we act on them, and they act on us; the body is a living part of the world. Merleau-Ponty tells us that

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24. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 147.

the body is not surrounded by the world, nor is the world surrounded by the body; rather, each envelops the other, with each acting on and determining the other.

The world is that which we emerge from and constantly engage with; it is in the world that activity occurs, and the world is what we are always perceiving and attempting to understand. The world is that which is outside of the body, which sustains and makes the body. In the essay “Embodiment and responsibility: Merleau-Ponty and the ontology of nature” (1994), John Russon, in describing Merleau-Ponty’s formulation of embodiment, writes, “the world is what it is for us only because we commune with it bodily, and its meaningfulness is a significance in which we are already implicated.”<sup>25</sup> The body participates in the world through movement, action, and other forms of engagement. At the same time, the world is that which acts on the body by making demands to which the body must respond. In so doing, the body and the world are deeply intertwined with each other, and through this entanglement, the body can be said to lie at the heart of space.

In the world, the body is neither subject nor object; it is a body-in-the-world. I am my body; my body pairs with the world in ongoing, non-reflective ways. It acts; it is; it is situated in the world. Merleau-Ponty describes the body as flesh, a concept he develops to go beyond the subject-object dichotomy, which, grounded in a reflective form of intellectual inquiry, treats the terms object and subject as elements independent of each other. The flesh, Merleau-Ponty writes, is “a sort of incarnate principle that brings a style of being wherever there is a fragment of being.”<sup>26</sup> The external qualities of a thing (the visible) reflect and inspire meanings (the invisible); the body’s visible, material being-in-the-world is the occasion for its developing engagement with invisible,

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25. Russon, “Embodiment and responsibility,” 294.

26. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and The Invisible*, 139.

immaterial meaning, and the meanings in turn fashion the visible. The two sides are always intimately intertwined with each other, and the concept of flesh names this intertwining. Through the flesh, for instance, the invisible is understandable as a product of the visible, and it is a product that, because of its belonging to the visible, can turn around and examine and shape the visible. Merleau-Ponty uses the concept of flesh to refer to the convergence of external occurrence and internal interpretation. Through the flesh, we can see that visible and invisible are always “calling upon” each other to support, sustain and enable the actuality of each other, which in turn brings them both to life. Flesh is a doubling over of thought upon its object and the object upon thought.<sup>27</sup>

To live in the world and, in so doing, to live with others, Russon then tells us, is to be engaged in a project of “interpreting the determinateness of the experienced other so as to ultimately translate the situation as ‘me.’”<sup>28</sup> It is intertwinedly material and meaningful, to put it in Merleau-Ponty’s terms. This process of interpretation and translation is what scholars call embodiment – the process through which the determinacies of a situation are taken up and made to belong to and be experienced by and through the body. According to Russon, the embodied self reflects the body’s situation in the world and what commitments one comes to reckon with within one’s situation. He writes:

Our embodiment is our performance of feeling this call to interpret the other in a particularly strong sense that, as self-conscious, we recognize we face the call to interpret and, consequently, are called upon to interpret our interpreting and raise the question of its adequacy to its own project of being responsible to its other.<sup>29</sup>

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27. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and The Invisible*, 143.

28. Russon, “Embodiment and responsibility,” 298.

29. Russon, “Embodiment and responsibility,” 301.

Embodiment as a process is something that our bodies do materially and meaningfully, because to embody something is to translate it into “me” in the capacity of a self-conscious project, but to do so in a way led by the body and the world. This is because, as Russon writes, “the self is primarily a body... upon which our reflectively self-conscious life is founded and to which our attempts at self-comprehension are directed.”<sup>30</sup> The activity of embodiment is the performance of our selfhood, where it is through our embodiment that we find out and express who we are in relation to the world by, as Russon tells us, “finding out what we are already committed to.”<sup>31</sup> Through our embodiment, we feel the call of the Other, and how we feel about this call, Russon tells us, defines who we are in the world because, as he writes, “to find out who we are, then is to find out how we are called by our world.”<sup>32</sup>

Fundamentally, embodiment then describes how we relate to the world as the world. The body, as discussed earlier, lies at the heart of the world; it is in the world and through the world that we are embodied. That is to say, the body belongs to the world; it is a part of it and made by it. It is through the body that we navigate and engage with the world and, in so doing, come to inhabit the world and develop a habitual form of bodily expression. Habits are formed through the repetition of actions; as Russon writes, “repetition of actions allows us to establish a dimension of familiarity within experiences, which gradually comes to run on ‘auto-pilot,’ or, as Merleau-Ponty expresses it, it becomes a fixed circuit of existence which we effectively ‘incorporate.’”<sup>33</sup> That is to say, through the repetition of actions, things and actions come to be absorbed and incorporated

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30. Russon, “Embodiment and responsibility,” 302.

31. Russon, “Embodiment and responsibility,” 302.

32. Russon, “Embodiment and responsibility,” 302.

33. Russon, “Embodiment and responsibility,” 295.



into our world and, in so doing, into our lives. Russon, building on Merleau-Ponty, argues that life is rooted in habit, where it is through habits and habitual life that we enlarge our body.<sup>34</sup> He writes, “our life is rooted in habits which are, Merleau-Ponty argues, the ways we effectively enlarge our body.”<sup>35</sup> This is because, as Russon writes:

It is by establishing... spheres of habitual being-in-the world that we make possible for ourselves more sophisticated forms of interaction, thereby allowing our world to become more determinate for ourselves, and, reciprocally, allowing ourselves to become more determinate: both the identity of ourselves and of our world becomes something through these dynamics of embodiment and habituation.<sup>36</sup>

For example, take the blind man and his cane, an example used by Merleau-Ponty; at first, when handed the cane, he might not know how it will aid him in moving and engaging in and with the world. But the more he uses it, the more familiar he becomes with it, and it becomes an extension of his being in the world. That is, he incorporates it into his body, enlarging his body to include it, thereby embodying the cane. Once we become intimately familiar with action, a thing, that action becomes the starting point to something new, to new way of engaging with the world, allowing for more sophisticated forms of activity to come about through that action. Through this process, we are able to create new forms of life and new modes of engaging and being engaged with reality.

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Black embodiment is dictated by the epidermal racial schema. To live out the determination “Black” essentially calls for the performance of Blackness, which then, for the purpose of this discussion, means to embody it. The data for this performance, Fanon

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34. Russon, “Embodiment and responsibility,” 294.

35. Russon, “Embodiment and responsibility,” 294.

36. Russon, “Embodiment and responsibility,” 295.

tells us, is found in the historical racial schema, which, at its most abstract level, tells the self what it means to be Black in the world and, in so doing, how the Black body ought to operate under the abstraction of race. This meaning, as we described in the previous section, disrupts the body's ability to freely engage with the world in a way led by the organic body-world relation because it finds that it is already implicated in a specific set of circumstances due to how its bodily occurrence is determined by the Other in the world. To embody one's race, to live life as a racialized individual, is to have the body engage with the world on the basis of an external framework, the epidermal racial schema.

Russon describes life as the process of making contact with the world, as the living organism, he argues, is "always contextualized by its participation in a larger natural system" and is always relating back to its world according to its needs.<sup>37</sup> Life enacts "the claim that 'these are the determinate features of the world which matter and what they really are [are] things which are to be me.'"<sup>38</sup> However, the performance of race, that is, to live out the historical racial schema, suppresses the body's free engagement with the world. One is, as we have seen through the epidermal racial schema, forced to live through others' interpretations of the materiality of one's body. This restriction, although leading to the development of familiar acts, which may appear as habitual, is grounded not in habit but in reflex. Blending with the world is opposed; blending becomes dependent on a conscious deployment of a movement, movement which, although we can get used to it, is not habitual but handed to us from outside. Instead of habit leading to reflexive actions, what we see is reflective action leading to a formulation of habitual action, but that depends on the body being withheld from habitual engagement with the world. The closedness of

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37. Russon, "Embodiment and responsibility," 296.

38. Russon, "Embodiment and responsibility," 297.

the Black situation denies the possibility for habit to form freely, and the demands of the world, with its focus on skin, push the body to act in terms of the results of reflection from outside. That is, instead of the dialectic of habit for the body in the world, what we see in the antiBlack world is white perception and reflection mediating the formation of Black habit.

The idea of Blackness possesses the Black self and provides for them the narrative of what they are to be and do in the world. In a metaphoric sense, he feels himself becoming Black. He sees that his world, “the common reason of all milieus and as the theatre of all behaviours,” solicits an action from him within the confines of Blackness.<sup>39</sup> In this situation, the Black person cannot trust their body to operate freely. Rather, they must always be on guard. This is because, as Fanon writes, “all around the body reigns an atmosphere of certain uncertainty... I make all these moves not out of habit but by implicit knowledge.”<sup>40</sup> There is no way to be open to the world as a participatory space for that body. What emerges in terms of body and action is the denial of the form of life and the underlying openness makes possible habitual life. This is because the Black person does not know what to expect when the white person sees him. He can only hope they read his actions, his gestures, the subtle unconscious movements he makes, and his body in general in a positive light. But under the weight of epidermal racial schema, he knows that he can never truly know, and as such, he must always be on guard. Recall at the core of body schema, Merleau-Ponty tells us that there is positioning towards life, in terms of which the body schema is a form of leaning into the perpetual flux of life and being open to the world through our bodies. Through the flesh, we are ideally drawn along in the world self-conscious without explicit thoughtful engagement. However, in an antiBlack world, Black people cannot easily do this. Fanon argues that the Black

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39. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and The Invisible*, 89.

40. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 90

body, in an antiBlack world, makes its moves “not out of habit, but by implicit knowledge.”<sup>41</sup> In an antiBlack world, the situation is “closed”; the Black person cannot occupy space freely and openly.

The antiBlack world calls for a type of hyper-awareness from Black folks who do not have the privilege of this habitual relationship as they must account for how they show up in the world of the Other, from what they wear to how they move in and occupy space. When Ahmaud was killed, he essentially died from jogging in the “wrong” neighbourhood. Many people zone out when they are running, jogging, or simply just working out, turning these acts into a relatively non-reflective activity. However, for Black people to act non-reflectively has been shown to be fatal. The ability to freely operate on and through the world is denied to Black people in an antiBlack world where the Black situation as an alienating mode of relating denies to self-conscious beings, on the experiential level, the full abstract “reversal of consciousness” through which habit as a mode of relating to the world emerges. The white world pushes the body into the world as Black, with the Black body coming to life through the epidermal racial schema. This situation is defined by its coming to be seen from the outside. The Black person comes in contact with the idea of Blackness as it is articulated by the antiBlack world. The Black person finds the ideas of the body as purely negative and which, when surrounding the experiencing consciousness, must be integrated into it, delimiting it, telling it that it is bad, which, then creates in consciousness the negative image of itself, which erodes away at the lived body and offers a new idea of the body which has to become the body.

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41. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 91

## 2.3 Conclusion

In a racialized world filled with racialized bodies, the body schema of a racialized person is made over to reflect external ideas: it stinks; it is ugly and dirty; it is inferior; its meaning is defined by its skin. Blackness as a form of identification is taken to describe a type of lack or deficiency. Through these interpretations of the body, the Black person is projected into the world's lower form of humanity. The body comes to be experienced as a Black body, with the idea of Blackness disrupting the body schema and mediating the body's experience of the world. This all happens because, in our intertwining with the world, who we are is always contingent on being a part of the world and existing with others in that world.

Through the historical racial schema and the epidermal racial schema, the Other determines the body, using physical bodily features to make an assumption about the body and how it operates. Because these ideas are cast on a living object in the world, that is, on a "subjective" body, these ideas suppress the ability of the body to be freely projected into the world. We are entangled with the world and therefore vulnerable to our lived relationships with each other. In the antiBlack world, the Black body is denied its ability to move freely, touch, and encounter reality, to encounter the world as something free and open, and this affects it. That is, in an antiBlack world, the Black person finds that no matter what they do, they will always live life in relation to their Blackness. No matter their status, wealth, living and working conditions, or education level, the first thing that is always seen for them when they appear in the world is their body, with its melanated skin, textured hair, etc. The life of the body is endlessly processed through these negative ideas of Blackness, which the world espouses, and which come to play a fundamental role in the body's ability to move and express itself in the world.

## Conclusion

During the trial for the murder of Ahmaud Arbery, prosecutors, in fighting for a conviction, had to show the jury that the McMichaels and Bryan were not simply racist. Rather, they had to show that bias held toward Black people led the trio to act against Ahmaud in the way that they did.<sup>1</sup> As such, prosecutors turned to the trio's social media and personal text messages to show this. For example, Travis McMichael, the individual who shot Ahmaud, in his comments on various social media posts, would call for violence against Black people, associate them with criminality or accuse them of making life difficult for him.<sup>2</sup> In text messages, he told someone that he loved his job because "zero n--words work with me."<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, in another conversation, he wrote, "we used to walk around committing hate crimes all day."<sup>4</sup> Greg McMichael shared memes on Facebook about the treatment of the Irish in the United States compared to other populations. For instance, one meme said, "when was the last time you heard an Irishman b----ing about how the world owes them a living?"<sup>5</sup> In another post, Greg McMichael claimed that "White Irish slaves were treated worse than any other race in the U.S." William Bryan, the McMichael's neighbour, wrote text messages to his friends where he referred to Black people using different racial slurs.

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1. U.S. Department of Justice. "Federal Judge Sentences Three Men Convicted of Racially Motivated Hate in Connection with the Killing of Ahmaud Arbery in Georgia." August 8, 2022, <http://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/federal-judge-sentences-three-men-convicted-racially-motivated-hate-crimes-connection-killing>.

2. Margaret Coker, David Hakamura and Hannah Knowles, "Racist slurs, violent texts: How Arbery's Killers talked about Black people," *The Washington Post*. February 16, 2022, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2022/02/16/arbery-trial-racist-texts/>.

3. Coker, Hakamura and Knowles, "Racist slurs, violent texts," 2022.

4. Coker, Hakamura and Knowles, "Racist slurs, violent texts," 2022.

5. Coker, Hakamura and Knowles, "Racist slurs, violent texts," 2022.

For instance, investigators found that Bryan used the n-word in reference to his daughter's boyfriend in text exchanges with her. In a conversation with one of his friends, prosecutors showed him running jokes about serving as "grand marshal" of a parade on Martin Luther King Jr Day, a parade he later called a "monkey parade."<sup>6</sup> The focus on racial bias during the trial hinted that these men had a preconceived idea of Black people that dictated how Black bodies would and should operate in the world. This thesis aimed to show how these ideas have a long history, and that they ground how race is lived in the world. For the Black people in the antiBlack world, the Black body, the body, as a "sensible for itself," which is a perspective on the world, is forced to express and understand itself through racial categories.

I focus my discussion on antiBlack racism to explore culturally and socially what it means for bodies to be racialized. In the antiBlack world, the Black person experiences a form of otherness where they are recognized and treated as objects in the world, that is, as non-agents. Merleau-Ponty tells us that if we are to attempt to disentangle ourselves from the perplexities cast upon us in this life, we must turn our investigative efforts towards our experience of the world and examine the lived reality through which these perplexities arise.<sup>7</sup> This is because it is through our experience of the world that things and Other people infuse themselves into my life; as things happen to me and, through this happening, alter how I view and interact with the world. Turning to Fanon, we see race as one such perplexity that life casts upon us where some individuals, through their bodies, are determined as Black, and due to this determination are considered to be inferior. To move beyond this inferiority, we must first examine the experience of the world

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6. Coker, Hakamura and Knowles, "Racist slurs, violent texts," 2022.

7. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and The Invisible*, 35

through which this relationship comes about, where, as Fanon tells us, “for not only must the Black man be Black; he must be Black in relation to the white man.”<sup>8</sup>

Under racist reflection, the Black body is treated as an object in the world. However, Merleau-Ponty argues that the body is not solely an object in the world. He writes, the “body[y] [is] a being of two leaves, from one side a thing among things and otherwise what sees them.”<sup>9</sup> However, he goes on to tell us that “one should not even say... that the body is made up of two leaves... There are not in it two leaves or two layers; fundamentally, it is neither thing seen only nor seer only.”<sup>10</sup> For the body, he writes, “sees the world itself, the world of everybody, and without having to leave ‘itself,’ because it is wholly... this reference of a visible, a tangible-standard to all those whose resemblance it bears and whose evidence it gathers.”<sup>11</sup> That is to say, although the body appears to the Other as an object among objects, through his body’s ability to see, touch and feel things in the world, the body is also a perspective of and in the world.

The body, then, Merleau-Ponty tells us, is an element of the sensible world that is able to perceive itself as a part of that world.<sup>12</sup> The world is the background of the movement; bodily expression is caught up in the immediate unfolding of externality; “there is not first perception followed by a movement, [but] the perception and the movement form a system that is modified as a whole.”<sup>13</sup> For the body, the world is the immediate truth of experience; we have “the

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8. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 90.

9. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and The Invisible*, 137.

10. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and The Invisible*, 137.

11. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and The Invisible*, 138.

12. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and The Invisible*, 138.

13. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 113.



unjustifiable certitude of a sensible world common to us.”<sup>14</sup> Because the world acts upon perception, it forms perception. But through the body’s ability to express and engage with the world, which comes about from the intentional arc of the body, we can project the body into the world. Merleau-Ponty writes, “the subject of movement organized before himself a free space in which things that do not exist naturally can take on a semblance of existence.”<sup>15</sup>

When the body is viewed as an object in the world, it is treated like Merleau-Ponty tells us, “a flexing and extending apparatus” operating in the world, and the world is treated as a pure spectacle with which the body does not merge.<sup>16</sup> However, when the body is treated as a subject, as a perspective on the world, Merleau-Ponty argues that it is viewed as a “power of determinate action” in the world, and the world then acts as a “collection of possible points” for bodily action.<sup>17</sup> Under the subject-object dichotomy, these two dimensions of determination, that is, body as object and body as subject, do not come together, and the body is treated as either a perspective on the world or an object of a perspective. To bring these two dimensions together, Merleau-Ponty calls for a type of hyper-reflection that works against reflection’s tendencies to sever perception from its object, perceiver from perceived. For the racializing body, or the subject of racist perception, this would mean accepting the materiality of its own body, and for the racialized body, or the object of racist perception, this would mean being allowed to inhabit the materiality of the body as the home of perspective. In this way, we would go beyond the binary of body as subject and body as

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14. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 89.

15. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 114.

16. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and The Invisible*, 108.

17. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and The Invisible*, 108.

object to having these two dimensions coming together, which could better enable and support bodies as living bodies in a shared world.

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