



'To Escape and Yet Remain': Refashioning Tradition

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Thus, religious passions will finally die down and we shall have only political enemies in Africa. (Alexis de Tocqueville¹)

Introduction

In his brilliant study, *Whither Fanon?: Studies in the Blackness of Being*, David Marriott underscores the importance of thinking about time and inheritance. Investigating the work of Frantz Fanon, Marriott reminds us that Fanon teaches us “a very simple thing” understood by the dispossessed everywhere: “that to exist as black is to experience the extremity of a dereliction in which the future and past converge in an interminable war of guilt and condemnation in which one’s part is the constant corpsing of one’s own social role.”² But, as Marriott continues, we learn Fanon revised how he addressed this simple and yet difficult truth. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon holds up a mirror to the alienated subject in order to authenticate the egoic image that causes suffering to the patient. In this earlier Fanon, the goal is “a corrective self-seeing” in an imaginary schema; “it is,” Marriott writes, “the progression from blind (non-specular and thus hypnotic or, as Fanon notes, unreal) identification to true and authentic self-identification.”³

Marriott continues, however, and argues that by 1958 Fanon completely changes his tune as the cure becomes more aporetic.⁴ For Fanon, Marriott explains, “to return the image to the analysand is no longer to disalienate him; rather it is to risk trapping him in another objectification no less imaginary than before, locking him into an endless aggressivity of depersonalization.”⁵ Instead, learning from the clinic during the Algerian War, Fanon comes to understand that the dissymmetry between me and not-me opens “onto a more vertiginous absence between the *I* and the *it*, and this absence cannot simply be represented by disalienation, nor is it simply linked to colonial

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¹Alexis de Tocqueville, cited in Anidjar, “Can the Walls Hear?,” 261.

²Marriott, *Whither Fanon?*, xv.

³*Ibid.*, 62–3.

⁴*Ibid.*, 63–4. Later on, again, Marriott underscores how one common misreading of Fanon is to read his theory of violence as a Hegelian struggle in which colonizer/colonized are a version of master/slave. Marriott writes “I am not saying that this reading is wrong, and certain aspects of it could be read into *Black Skin, White Masks*; but in *The Wretched of the Earth* decolonial violence is far from its Hegelian origin and refers to a struggle that that is not to the death, but *with and from* death, a struggle that seeks to go beyond the death in life that, however dialectical, no philosophical anthropology has yet grasped, and that reveals a certain aporia within the language of sovereignty” (228). Also see Marriott, *Haunted Life*, 55. For a different reading of dialectics and Fanon, see Ciccariello-Maher, *Decolonizing Dialectics*, 70–3.

⁵Marriott, *Whither Fanon?*, 64.

racism.”⁶ The questions for Fanon in *Wretched of the Earth*, therefore, are not about real fantasies or illusions, not about the allegorical or fictive body, not about a dialectical opposition between active and passive being. Instead, in his clinical work on wretchedness, Fanon efforts to “describe an experience of non-sovereignty that is not conceived as a state of exception (or of escape) but as the (non)signifying place for *the one who is black*.”⁷ Indeed, wretchedness itself “designates the way in which the subject is immiserated or affected by its own impossibility or nothingness.”⁸

In arguing for this reading of Fanon, the shift from *Black Skin, White Masks* to *Wretched of the Earth*, Marriott takes us through an analysis of the work of David Scott and his reading of Fanon. In *Refashioning Futures*, David Scott, too, considers time and inheritance. He asks if the accurate reconstruction of the past of a religious identity is the crucial point of a theoretical intervention. He ponders, instead, if such a historicist analysis should be followed by an emphatic “But so what?” The importance of asking “so what” is that it allows us to begin to refuse “history its subjectivity, its constancy, its eternity” and “interrupt its seemingly irrepressible succession, causality, its sovereign claim to determinacy.”⁹ The question “so what?” requires, in other words, one answer for history’s prominence and providence as well as that we consider other possible formations of community, temporality, and inheritance not anchored by the weight of “history.”

One could say, Fanon’s corrective self-seeing that Marriott highlights is the task of David Scott’s “so what?” “So what?” is a corrective self-seeing in relation to time. It secures the possibility of a disalienation in the acceptance of an incomplete escape from time. It promises an authentic reflection of identity for the present that recognizes, but forgoes the past: “so what?,” he asks, turning around from the past to work through the ruins of the present. However as Marriott would note, if we follow Fanon, the question of “so what?” in relation to the past should become an agonizing one. The question will be unable to interrupt history, although it will hint at a constant pausing, especially in relation to blackness, which is itself a “kind of guilty liaison;” it is unresolved, a “hesitation.”¹⁰

Following the split between a 1952 and 1958 Fanon, I want to turn back to David Scott’s earlier work on Sri Lanka, most notably his book *Formations of Ritual: Colonial and Anthropological Discourses on the Sinhala Yaktovil*, published in 1994, and read its split from the 1999 *Refashioning Futures* alongside David Marriott’s critique of historicism. I argue that *Formations of Ritual* presents an anti-historicism not tied to corrective self-seeing, disalienation, but is more aligned with *The Wretched of the Earth* and its emphasis on non-sovereignty. I present an unorthodox reading by tracing resonances of anti-historicism in the work of Marriott and Scott triangulated with the work of Talal Asad and his interlocutors. I begin by examining Marriott’s critique of Scott before attending to the disjuncture within Scott’s own work. In his first book, Scott

⁶Ibid., 64.

⁷Ibid., 65.

⁸Ibid., 65. Camille Robcis, on the other hand, argues that Fanon remained committed to disalienation. She writes, “to set up what he considered a truly disalienated and disalienating psychiatry, a psychiatry close to the notion of ‘national culture’ that Fanon theorized in his last and best-known book, *The Wretched of the Earth*” (305). See Robcis, “Frantz Fanon, Institutional Psychotherapy,” 305.

⁹Scott, *Refashioning Futures*, 105.

¹⁰Marriott, *Whither Fanon?*, 217, 224.

rejected historicism by focusing his attention on the temporality of tradition rather than conceding it, as we shall see, tragedy. I then consider how we can read their work more productively together especially in relation to Islam by drawing on Talal Asad and his anti-historicism. In particular, I will focus on Marriott's readings of the Islamic tradition and Islam as a discursive tradition. A discursive tradition troubles, as Omnia El Shakry has it, "a temporal unfolding" and, instead, allows us "to contemplate the convivial presence of the past in the historical moments that we are analyzing, as well as its co-presence in the present and in the future."¹¹ Asad's understanding of a discursive tradition then, to appropriate Marriott's writing, subverts "the imposition of a prescient point of view" from which a discursive tradition can be read or known.¹²

I argue Marriott's understanding of what Fanon calls invention and the temporal complexity of the leap into the tabula rasa can be read productively together with Asad's and Scott's framing of discursive tradition.¹³ More specifically, if, as Marriott writes, "the tabula rasa does resist any narrative or archaeo-teleological schema that would reduce it to a final meaning," an abyss of itself, and, if invention is "discontinuous" and "a radical overturning of that which has ossified or become a fetish," then a discursive tradition such as Islam and Fanonism crucially coincide.¹⁴ They coincide, I argue, since they can neither be reduced to strategies of a melancholic present nor the historical recuperation of a distinct past – both of which maintain the distinctions produced by secular colonial rule.¹⁵ Instead, the reorientation toward the abyssal, invention, undoes the economy of representations that drive the postcolonial question "so what?" in relation to a tradition's past. Against asking "so what?" to a past, we must consider the question of the leap – "to escape and yet remain" in relation to the historical.¹⁶ I conclude by attempting to re-configure this question in relation to Marriott's own understanding of Islam alongside the various divisions enacted by colonial rule.

An allegorical present

Focusing on Scott's reading of Frantz Fanon, Marriott directs our attention to how "Scott presents a generalized critique of Fanon's narrative of liberation" by placing doubt onto the concept of alienation.¹⁷ For Scott, Marriott explains, Fanon theorizes alienation as a discursive reality that is absolute and totalizing, that colonialism is constituted by, as Scott writes, "an essence, namely a totalizing principle of degradation and dehumanization."¹⁸ Anti-colonial liberation, therefore, is an attempt to overcome alienation. The narrative emplotment of the struggle for decolonization occurs in a romantic register, ending when national liberation is secured.¹⁹ Scott challenges the romantic rendering

¹¹El Shakry, "Rethinking Arab Intellectual History," 564.

¹²Marriott, *Whither Fanon?*, ix.

¹³A *tabula rasa* is, as Marriott writes, "an inscription that is always the abyss of itself, for it is written on nothing" (276).

¹⁴Marriott, *Whither Fanon?*, 275.

¹⁵See Asad, *Secular Translations*.

¹⁶Marriott, *Whither Fanon?*, 313.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 20–1.

¹⁸Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity*, 94.

¹⁹In *Conscripts of Modernity*, Scott writes that *The Wretched of the Earth* is a programmatic articulation of such understanding of colonialism and, therefore, anti-colonial criticism. Scott writes, "This strategy enabled the formulation and sharp expression of the anticolonial demand – the unequivocal demand for immediate sovereignty. The anticolonial demand operated through the construction of a picture of colonialism as denial, terror, and violence" (Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity*, 94–5).

because our problem-space is no longer the same as Fanon's.²⁰ Today, he argues, "we inhabit the normative terrain of that threshold."²¹ Reaching the threshold requires a different reading of Fanon, a new problem-space, since otherwise it would be "a romance, the self-indulgent nostalgia of late modernity, to read Fanon as though we were about to join him in the trenches of the anticolonial national liberation struggle."²² This "degodded" narrative arc where Man transcends over disalienation collapses history into allegory as Marriott argues.²³

Against continued romance, Scott turns to tragedy since "what is at stake in critically thinking through this postcolonial present is not simply the naming of yet another horizon, and the fixing of the teleological plot that takes us there from here," rather the refusal to be seduced by the normalization of the present.²⁴ Tragedy is essential since it questions, Scott continues, "the view of human history as moving teleologically and transparently toward a determinate end, or as governed by a sovereign and omnisciently rational agent."²⁵ But, as Marriott writes, "Scott's commitment to an anti-teleological reading of history leads him to provide, in his critique of Fanon, a teleological history of postcolonial tragedy."²⁶ The present and its ends, put another way, retain dominion and provide the tragic and ultimately strategic conditions to question Fanon, colonialism, and a given tradition in the search for a present postcolonial politics.²⁷ Or, to rephrase Basit Iqbal, tragedy's exposure of failures continues to rely on the present's self-description in which catharsis emerges in "the futility of any final understanding."²⁸

Otherwise put, historicism is not simply faith in a secularized, yet eschatological historical process.²⁹ Historicism is also constituted when the present becomes an end that tethers the past since the present is determined by the past – and whether that present is tragic or an ideal end is immaterial.³⁰ Scott can render the present tragic in a melancholic relation to the past, but the relation to the past remains the same. To decide what is past in order to reshape an allegorical present already concedes the structure of time to historicism. Scott, therefore, as Marriott rightly notes, "is unable to resign himself to any narrative of the past based on allegory, and unable to renounce any narrative of the present that would do away with allegory."³¹ Scott, put another way, remains historical in tragically proclaiming an incomplete escape even while trying to question the reach of history itself.³²

²⁰A problem-space is, as Scott writes, "a context of argument and, therefore, one of intervention. A problem-space, in other words, is an ensemble of questions and answers around which a horizon of identifiable stakes (conceptual as well as ideological-political stakes) hangs" (4). See Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity*. I return to this below.

²¹Scott, *Refashioning Futures*, 204. Marriott rightly critiques this invocation of "we."

²²*Ibid.*, 204.

²³For collapsing into allegory, see Marriott, *Whither Fanon?*, 21. For "degodded," see Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom," 263.

²⁴Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity*, 2.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 12.

²⁶Marriott, *Whither Fanon?*, 21.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 26. Or as Marriott writes in relation to Mbembe: "Fanon's revolutionary description seems like one of those many tragic narratives of liberation whose salutary unease we continue to be inspired by even if we can no longer share its passions or convictions" (71). See Marriott, "The Becoming-Black of the World?"

²⁸Iqbal, "Asad and Benjamin," 78.

²⁹Löwith, *Meaning in History*.

³⁰The literature on historicism is vast. I rely on Hacking, *Historical Ontology*; Beiser, *The German Historicist Tradition*; Shakry, "Rethinking Arab Intellectual History." Such historicism, as Ian Hacking writes, "pays little attention to the complex interweavings of past and present" (53).

³¹Marriott, *Whither Fanon?*, 26.

³²Though Scott, too, questions this logic. He notes that good politics are not necessarily tied to good histories (104). Scott, *Refashioning Futures*.

Fanon, on the other hand, questions history, writing “I am not a prisoner of history. I should not seek there for the meaning of my destiny. I should constantly remind myself that the real leap consists in introducing invention into existence.”³³ For Marriott, Fanon’s refusal of historicist time is essential. Invention is not historical, not a recovery, redress, or interrogation of the past, but rather “the figure for a kind of radical untimeliness that entails a leap, and this leap cannot be anticipated, nor can it be prepared for, nor can it be traced back to a prior historical moment to be interrogated as such.”³⁴ Scott’s reading of Fanon misses untimeliness because he argues Fanon offers romantic liberation from alienation, which rests on the understanding that, for Fanon, the subject is constituted through alienation and is, therefore, a matter of repression and repair – a matter of restoring coherence.³⁵ Scott places Fanon’s thought as singularizing liberation. But, for Fanon, invention is, Marriott explains, “bound to a form of *jouissance*, that is, to a kind of radical expenditure without subject or recuperation.”³⁶ Rather than looking to ask “so what?” in relation to the past, one asks “so what?” to interrupt and fracture without a recourse to historical cuts at all, an abandonment of both tragedy and romance.³⁷

Scott’s reading of Fanon wavers into historicism because he forgoes the psychoanalytic element in Fanon’s work that Marriott ably highlights – one cannot think of the political without the psychic, and vice versa. Fanon engages Freud’s *Nachträglichkeit*, (the assignation of retroactive/belated meaning to events), Marriott reminds us, to politically and ethically “question the psychic effects of colonialism.”³⁸ *Nachträglichkeit* evokes, Marriott continues, “a radically unpredictable, unforeseeable play of necessity and chance.”³⁹ There is then in Fanon’s work, most simply, a concern with the unconscious, which “involves positing a subject that is irreducibly alienated from itself” in which meaning and time are destabilized in their belated efforts.⁴⁰ Indeed, in the final chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon writes about unconscious desire while refusing teleology and, instead, considers the interruption of the unconscious that cannot be secured into, for example, a identity. This is a psychoanalytic time which “is fully prepared to affirm the efficacy and priority of delay or failure in personal agency.”⁴¹ In fact, it is precisely the condition of colonial war and the clinic that provided Fanon the ability to talk of “a kind of *vertiginous* subject” destroyed by the literal violence of war.⁴² And, therefore, as Marriott observes, “Fanon’s thinking of tabula rasa disallows this teleological narrative, or at least complicates it to the extent that what decolonial violence amounts to is an affirmation of the endless interruption of the political as such.”⁴³ Again, a leap, which, though constituted by the colonial past, remains irreducible to history.

³³Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 179. Also see Marriott, *Whither Fanon?*, 28.

³⁴Marriott, *Whither Fanon?*, 238.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 23.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 275.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 28.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 294–5.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 298.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 23.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 299.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 23.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 20.

The question of history and tradition

For Marriott, Fanon requires we consider the leap in relation to a disjointed present because blackness is not simply about allegory or repair. And, yet, in creating a tragic “us,” elegiac and melancholic postcolonial intellectuals, Scott is able to sidestep the question of blackness that Fanon raises. Fanon has “this historical awareness of the present as necessarily self-interrupting, as irrevocably ruptured and discontinuous”; it cannot be reduced to a final meaning.⁴⁴ Blackness cannot be reduced to the present and the repository of historical knowledge it articulates itself through; blackness refuses the security of genealogical constraints.⁴⁵ Blackness is *n’est pas*, which “leaves unresolved, or unspecified, what blackness is, in the name of trying to get at what seems to be a less identifiable, more aporetic, hesitation or movement.”⁴⁶ Blackness must be understood, to be more succinct, as a “structure of never-having-had.”⁴⁷ There is a relation to blackness and its impossibility in time itself, but it cannot be recuperated through the representations of History, relying as History does upon a “carceral register of ends and meanings.”⁴⁸ Yet a fixation on the past remains: a repeating alienation as the colonized subject cannot recover nor represent an egoic presence even though it is precisely what the colonial order requires. The colonized subject remains marked by a delay, a not-yet.⁴⁹ There is then an untimeliness Fanon foregrounds “that does not belong to the order of historical events, but is the origin of the earliest symbolizations by which the subject is constituted, and so both in and beyond the ego.”⁵⁰

Therefore, Marriott argues, Fanon presents “a reading of power as the always interruptive moment of agency, which is not to be confused with coercion or seduction.”⁵¹ Moving away from his critique of Scott, Marriott contends Scott accords with an interruptive reading of agency when Scott comments on the work of Talal Asad, who himself has written extensively on coercion and seduction in relation to the secular.⁵² Scott argues Asad has a tragic sensibility in his investigations and refuses the demands of historicism; Asad has “never been comfortable with Marxism’s Laws-of-History mentality nor with the high-minded and secularist rationalism that have often informed its views of the ordinary and religion” even while recognizing that “domination need not depend on either coercion or consent.”⁵³ Agency is not the overcoming of constraint through the “conscious, reflective intention of a

⁴⁴Ibid., 29.

⁴⁵Ibid., 217.

⁴⁶Ibid., 224. It is important to note, even though I do not have time to dwell on this, but as Marriott writes, “blackness must remain fugitive even to the concept of fugitivity” (215).

⁴⁷Marriott, *Whither Fanon?*, 225.

⁴⁸Ibid., 312.

⁴⁹Ibid., 293–4.

⁵⁰Ibid., 296.

⁵¹Ibid., 296. This is a larger aspect of Marriott’s project as well. As Zakiyyah Iman Jackson writes, Marriott, in *On Black Men*, turns the reading “toward as opposed to averting one’s gaze from the negativity of the historical present” (359). See Jackson, “Waking Nightmares.”

⁵²Marriott, *Whither Fanon?*, 27.

⁵³Scott, “The Tragic Sensibility of Talal Asad,” 136. As Scott notes, Asad does not merely reject Marx and his interlocutors. In the same volume, Asad notes his reliance on Louis Althusser and his understanding of time since Althusser “allows one to address the question of causality in other than mechanical terms” – an understanding “akin to what Althusser used to call structural causality, where time is not a linear sequence of before and after” missed in typical understandings of ideology (290). See Asad, “The Trouble of Thinking.” As Ed Pluth elucidates well: “A structural cause is thus not fully determining of a situation, and this is just what the notion of determination in the last instance is supposed to be getting at. There may well be a dominant shape to a given domain, but there is always more in the domain than what is

unified subject.”⁵⁴ But neither is agency simply reflecting in a fractured and intractable present by a postcolonial intellectual. One only needs to recall, as Gil Anidjar puts it, that “our projections, our readings – the motives we bring to bear, and the seductions of texts and contexts – can, and do, deploy and reinscribe the ‘networks of power’ within which we find ourselves.”⁵⁵

But Asad upends such demands of History, necessarily secular, through his “methodological antihistoricism” and his emphasis on learning within a tradition and not through a tragic sensibility.⁵⁶ That is, as Iqbal writes, “Asad’s critical anthropology is animated not by tragedy but by a methodological antihistoricism, one that can perceive the play of heterogeneous but overlapping temporalities without confirming the chronopolitical entailments of secularism’s self-narration” – a chronopolitics that Marriott decisively dissects in Scott’s work.⁵⁷ For one, Asad’s play of time in his methodological antihistoricism repudiates a tragic sensibility because of Asad’s focus on tradition rather than the individual agent of history.⁵⁸ Instead, Islam is a discursive tradition, Asad explains, because it “relates itself to the founding texts of the Qur’an and the Hadith” while addressing “itself to conceptions of the Islamic past and future, with reference to a particular Islamic practice in the present.”⁵⁹ For Asad, Islam is a discursive tradition in relation to the founding, not foundational, texts the Qur’an and Hadith while addressing practice in the present. And, already, an impossible disjuncture emerges in time as a hesitation comes to the fore in the attempt to translate a tradition’s founding (that is never past) to an unstable present.⁶⁰

Discursive tradition, furthermore, is not a process of securing definitions of meaning, but requires we consider the “behavioral customs and the sensibilities they teach and regulate in the process of disciplining the soul.”⁶¹ But in attempting to inculcate learning, the present further becomes disjointed and discontinuous especially so since, following Alasdair MacIntyre, Asad posits that a tradition is “an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition.”⁶² Attuned to the problem of time and the question of the whole, Asad does not simply include all expressions and determinants within tradition – a hyper-empiricism that seeks to map tradition in time through a mechanical causality. Instead, though marked by disagreement and the impossibility of final meaning or an essence, aspirations toward coherence, extended across time, remain the key to the constitution of the tradition; it is a relation not predicated on inhabiting a tragic present, but the possibility of reaching coherence in what is an interrupted present.

causing its particular, dominant shape” (350). See Pluth, “Freeing Althusser from Spinoza.” Put another way, time is a “theater without an author” (347). See Althusser and Balibar, *Reading Capital*.

⁵⁴Scott, “The Tragic Sensibility of Talal Asad,” 151. For more on agency, see Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*.

⁵⁵Anidjar, “Can The Walls Hear?,” 256.

⁵⁶The literature is vast on the secular and historicity. For example, see Abeysekara, *The Politics of Postsecular Religion*; Mahmood, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age*; Hollywood, *Acute Melancholia and Other Essays*; El Shakry, “Rethinking Arab Intellectual History.”

⁵⁷Iqbal, “Asad and Benjamin,” 79.

⁵⁸For more, see Asad, “Are There Histories of Peoples,” 607.

⁵⁹Asad, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam*, 14.

⁶⁰The distinction between “founding” and “foundational” here is essential as founding can be anti-foundational. I owe this insight to Tanzeen Doha, who highlights this distinction in an unpublished paper.

⁶¹Asad, *Secular Translations*, 94.

⁶²MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 222.

Even though Scott's reading of Fanon in *Refashioning Futures* takes him away from the Asadian reading of tradition, his earlier work in *Formations of Ritual* aligns with Asad's understanding of time. That is, there is a split in Scott's work that might make *Formations of the Ritual* tie in more closely with Fanon's own rethinking of invention than *Refashioning Futures*. In *Formations of Ritual*, Scott is concerned with rethinking theoretical assumptions and problems in anthropology and its relation to its objects of inquiry by focusing on *yakku* (supernatural beings) and *yakotovil* (a ritual healing ceremony) among Sinhala communities in Sri Lanka.⁶³ A central feature of the argument is that the opposition between essentialism and anti-essentialism in relation to tradition is a false one since the opposition between a static tradition and a fluid tradition are attempting to define *a priori* what "tradition" is, making it present.⁶⁴ Instead of mapping tradition through scholarly conquest, Scott is interested in how the "claims about the presence or absence of boundaries are made, fought out, yielded, negotiated."⁶⁵ The anthropologist grasps toward their position *within* a discursive tradition and the restraints of this intervention rather than taking the expressions of experience as self-evident representations of a culture.⁶⁶ The key is to consider what constitutes the terrain of contestation of Buddhism, to follow Scott's example. One would ask: How does Buddhism challenge the very anthropological insights that the scholar tries to produce? In *Formations of Ritual*, then, the postcolonial intellectual's relationship to the object of inquiry is not marked by tragedy or melancholia or recuperation or authentication, rather Scott highlights how the present is already dislocated, an impossibility traversed by multiple projects, without parceling past, present, and future and, importantly, without recourse to tragedy or romance.⁶⁷ It is what Ananda Abeysekera has called, "a contingent conjuncture."⁶⁸

Much like a discursive tradition cannot be integrated in the present, refusing originary and final meaning, blackness, too, refuses the demand of History. Here, Scott's earlier work and Fanon coincide in relation to agency and time though on markedly different registers. For example, since a tradition is constituted through contestation in relation to its founding, a tradition can simultaneously constrain while also being creative. A contestation within tradition can be creative since the distinction between creativity and contestation depends, Elizabeth Povinelli writes, "on the framework one brings to bear on time, form, and destination."⁶⁹ If we conceptualize tradition as a constraining cultural form because experiences should be shed from expectation⁷⁰ or that History provides the weight for recognition,⁷¹ then contestation is assumed to be uncreative as well as constricting. But contestations can also be inventive as they try to cohere in new conditions of existence that produce epistemological rupture. But coherence is never given. It is a

⁶³Scott, *Formations of Ritual*, 241.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, xix.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, xviii.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, 115.

⁶⁷In *Conscripts of Modernity*, Scott highlights this dislocation within this present and how new problems arise in relation to the shifts in tradition. He writes "the efficacy of old distinctions and old options wanes, fades, becomes obsolete. The old paths do not necessarily disappear altogether. They may well remain dimly visible along with remnants of the languages that articulated them" (116). See Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity*.

⁶⁸Abeysekera, *Colors of the Robe*.

⁶⁹Povinelli, *Empire of Love*, 143.

⁷⁰borrow experiences and expectations, from Koselleck, *Futures Past*.

⁷¹Povinelli, *Empire of Love*. Also see, Povinelli, *The Cunning of Recognition Indigenous Alterities*.

struggle since “a living tradition is not merely capable of containing conflict and disagreement; the search for what is essential provokes argument.”⁷² That is to say, it might be that the given meaning we assign to tradition was also already marked by untranslatability, not inaccessibility, providing both an escape and a place to remain.⁷³

Fanon and Islam

Admittedly, my attempt to read different traditions together is a stretch, traversing across multiple theoretical registers loosely.⁷⁴ Especially so, since it connects two vastly different concepts together, tradition and blackness, by trying to highlight a similar temporal structure. There are important differences. There is, for one, an easily discernable difference in Marriott’s reading. For Marriott, untimeliness is an invention, which leads to a *tabula rasa*, a radical overturning that cannot be situated within tradition since the decolonial moment is “the collapse and abandonment of all given meanings”;⁷⁵ it cannot be identified with a politics, but is “a language yet to be written.”⁷⁶ It is a messianic moment that is a radical cut,⁷⁷ but has “no historical certainty” and, therefore, no horizon.⁷⁸ It is an “endless self-creation,”⁷⁹ but one that is not concerned with extending “servile representation.”⁸⁰ In this radical disarticulation, the given principles of colonialism are undone and “the existing basis of knowledge teems with errors,” making the colonized giddy with excitement.⁸¹ Invention, as Marriott argues, “puts into question the prevailing dogmas by which the colonized have traditionally experienced themselves, in the name of politics and religion.”⁸² Invention is “a *leap*, a crossing, that can either fail or succeed,” reorienting our attachment to the “perceptual grid” constructed by colonial practices.⁸³

In relation to time, invention is not a repetition of a foundation, which leads to petrification – “a certain numbness and complacency by which the *colonisé* survive the desperation of daily life, and the delirious disbelief in which time is lived over and over again.”⁸⁴ Instead, it is an intervention for an opening, that is, Marriott writes, “neither for the law or the system, nor founded on representation and one that does not serve an ideological function within the state system, nor against it.”⁸⁵ In other words, it is not a horizon or utopianism, which reference ground and prediction.⁸⁶ Instead, the wretched are key; they are “neither foundation nor anti-foundation,”⁸⁷ but an infection in the heart of colonialism, producing crisis in that representation that incarcerates.⁸⁸ Such paradoxes are not, Marriott contends, confusion or historical contradictions, but

⁷²Asad, *Secular Translations*, 95.

⁷³*Ibid.*, 55–98.

⁷⁴For an incisive reading of Islam and Fanon Studies, see Davis, “Incommensurate Ontologies? Anti-Black Racism.”

⁷⁵Marriott, *Whither Fanon?*, 28.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, 228.

⁷⁷*Ibid.*, 36.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*, 278.

⁷⁹*Ibid.*, 241.

⁸⁰*Ibid.*, 280.

⁸¹*Ibid.*, 244.

⁸²*Ibid.*, 244.

⁸³*Ibid.*, 241.

⁸⁴*Ibid.*, 242.

⁸⁵*Ibid.*, 305.

⁸⁶*Ibid.*, 281.

⁸⁷*Ibid.*, 227.

⁸⁸*Ibid.*, 310–11.

rather “productive ambiguities that facilitate the disposition, function and promotion of certain aporetic effects.”⁸⁹ We find, Marriott continues, a type of “‘stricture’ (or endless deferral and complication)” rather than any clean cut, temporal break, or escape.⁹⁰ To leap is “to escape and yet remain,” to continue to relate to the historical and yet never abandon the possibility of an open-ended traveling.⁹¹

Recall here that Asad writes “founding,” not “foundation,” in relation to the Qur’an and hadith. Tradition is never settled; it never provides a foundation, since it is also groundless though not an absolute groundlessness.⁹² It has a founding, not a foundation. Tradition becomes foundational, however, with the advent of colonial rule, which creates a new encyclopedic form that views from a non-perspectival ground, seeing whole and striving to petrify the tradition into a religion. Hence Marriott’s reminder that the dogmatic division between “religion” and “politics” is no longer sustainable in the invention. Colonial rule, to repeat, demands a synchronous tradition that can be mapped temporally much like it maps a synchronous world and its postcolonial cartography.⁹³ And, yet, even in this classification, separation, and hardening of religion, practices remain authorized through contestations as the aspiration to a collective coherence is central, rather than individual or non-perspectival creation. Working through the contours of a tradition, then, can be an attempt to escape petrification, the division between religion and politics, even while remaining within that tradition.

Reading these multiple conjunctures and disjunctures between Marriott and Scott in relation to time can provide us a productive way to think about Fanon, Islam, and the colonized. Indeed, though my reading of tradition and Fanon has sought to interrogate the cleavage between Scott and Marriott, the placement of the Islamic tradition in Fanon’s work remains muddled. This is an especially important question because if *The Wretched of the Earth* is central to Fanon’s psycho-political project, as Marriott asserts, then Islam is indeed fundamental even if it remains an elephant in the text.⁹⁴ However, though the wretched, clinic, and Algerian War are all key features to Fanon’s thought, Islam is presumed unessential, even though encounters with Arab Muslims do cause him to revise François Tosquelle’s institutional therapy and the War itself radically amends Fanon’s understandings.⁹⁵

We get a glimpse of Fanon’s relation to the Islamic tradition through Marriott’s theorization of Fanon and the veil – one in which Fanon “downplays the religious significance, preferring to see it as a sign of national cultural resistance or as the doubly displaced sign of a wish to conquer and possess.”⁹⁶ In removing the Islamic, the veil becomes an odd practice indeed. Since the veil is enigmatic and a struggle for sovereignty, Algerian women are no longer inertly passive or mobilized through paternal projections by the *colon* or the *colonisé*. Instead, the relationship of Algerian women to “her own mystery” is “between two imperatives to action; to unveil, or sacrifice herself to the revolution, is not the same as unveiling herself to the gaze of

⁸⁹Ibid., 311.

⁹⁰Ibid., 281.

⁹¹Ibid., 313.

⁹²Scott, “The Tragic Sensibility of Talal Asad,” 144.

⁹³Sloterdijk, “Synchronous World.” Also see Heidegger, “The Age of World Picture.”

⁹⁴Slisli, “Islam: The Elephant.”

⁹⁵Marriott, *Whither Fanon?*, 76.

⁹⁶Ibid., 102.

the colonizer.”⁹⁷ For Marriott, the key is the production of the *new* in relation to the veil (and language), a relation that transforms. Unveiling, Marriot contends” is “the new (even utopian) beginning of a new kind of fidelity, a new sign freed from any cultural servitude; in short, she acquires the disturbing authority of a *tabula rasa*.”⁹⁸ We get “a new corporeal-political category: a new dimension of the body is invented and new corporeal pattern assumed,” flowing outside itself.⁹⁹ Such an unveiled body, Marriott continues, “has escaped the forms of piety that used to enclose it, and where the senses subordinate to ethnology can no longer be felt” that is, “impelled across the checkpoints of culture and tradition.”¹⁰⁰ And, again, it is “at the level of this unveiled body,” Marriott concludes,

that a real revolution in fidelity takes place and can be fully understood: its reality is that of a woman who has overcome all anxiety and hesitation, in whose splendor all rivalry and resentment is transformed and in whose movement there is neither that of sacrificial fetish nor imitate role, nor inert presence whose magical character lies hidden.¹⁰¹

But how does Fanon downplay the religious significance? Is tradition the checkpoint today in a world where walls grow even higher? The goal in asking such questions is not to restore Islam to its proper political place and collapse two categories (Muslim and black) together, but to ask about the afterlife of such distinctions.¹⁰² And an examination of Islam might reorient the very questions that are asked about Fanon.¹⁰³ For one, we can ask, how does the “colonized,” the “wretched,” emerge as a political entity while Islam remains in the background as mere religious identity? Why does Islam recede? It is a Christian division, a mark of colonial rule in which political enemy and religious enemy were divided in order to dissipate the religious.¹⁰⁴ In Algeria in the 1830s and 1840s, this was precisely Alexis de Tocqueville’s aim. For him, it was imperative, Gil Anidjar explains, to downplay the religious hostility that opposes the Muslims to the French, the latter being clearly perceived, and perceiving themselves, as Christians.”¹⁰⁵ The road to the War, Anidjar continues, is “negotiated first by determining the battlefield as political and, subsequently (or simultaneously), by restricting, then denying, its religious dimension.”¹⁰⁶ It is a strategic division to manage enemies, walls built between religion, politics, and commerce to divide and entrap. In Fanon’s work, it appears as “wretched,” remains the singularly divided entity that has the capacity to leap providing it is detached from Islam, which is the “religion.”¹⁰⁷ As *religion*, Islam awaits its own

⁹⁷Ibid., 103.

⁹⁸Ibid., 103.

⁹⁹Ibid., 104.

¹⁰⁰Ibid., 104.

¹⁰¹Ibid., 105.

¹⁰²The goal, in other words, is not to locate a prior fluid identity against a present rigid one. As Parisa Vaziri writes, “the self-evidence of fluid rather than rigid racial distinction contains and reproduces its own significance while leaving unstated why such an opposition is the appropriate frame by which to understand differences designated as racial in the first place” (251). See Vaziri, “On ‘Saidiya’: Indian Ocean World Slavery.”

¹⁰³Doha, “Review of Fifty Years of the Battle of Algiers.” Also see Davis, “The US Academy and the Provincialization.”

¹⁰⁴Anidjar, “Can The Walls Hear?,” 263.

¹⁰⁵Ibid., 261.

¹⁰⁶Ibid., 262.

¹⁰⁷Fanon’s interlocutors made a similar critique. As Davis explains, “Mohamed El-Mili, who worked with Fanon and Malek at El Moudjahid and was close to Islamic modernist circles, was adamant that Fanon’s secular humanism was much closer to the French Left than to the ideologies of some of his Algerian comrades. In 1971, writing in Arabic, El-Mili chided Fanon for his belief that decolonization could represent a clean break with the past. He speculated that ‘if Fanon had been a Muslim or permeated by Arabic, or Islamic culture, then his position on the past would have

withering in the unquestioned movement of secularized eschatological time as the theological meaning of the veil is wrenched away. Yet to restrict the religious dimension of the Algerian War or, more precisely, to reinscribe it within or outside a religious dimension, might be to limit the possibilities of the leap itself, giving it a political horizon against a religious one even though the leap undoes such horizons.

Rather than follow these colonial demarcations between religion and politics, focusing on tradition might allow us not to turn to the divisions sanctioned by colonial rule nor the recuperation of History, but an inheritance – one that is irreducible to “cultural integration”¹⁰⁸ especially since inheritance is not a given, but a task.¹⁰⁹ It would mean we do not ask “so what?” to the past from the point of a tragic present, but neither should we respond in like to the theological. It might require, in other words, we escape even though we remain in these divisions. If we return here to *Formations of Ritual*, rather than *Refashioning Futures*, one aspect of the task of inheritance would be to ask how the divisions between Islam and political life were “made, fought out, yielded, negotiated” and therefore remaining attuned to the specificity of colonialism in its secular and, indeed, Christian form.¹¹⁰ In this attunement, we could turn to how piety itself can be interruptive as well oriented toward the abyssal since it is not simply a matter of cultural belief, a Christian division, but rather an ethical habituation of the body that refuses to be synchronized into the world. It is an interruption of sovereignty, rather than an enclosure premised on individual capacity. The Islamic tradition, then, following Stefania Pandolfo, could require we trace “invention at a time of political and cultural crisis, and on the ruins of symbolic forms, exploring the possibility of transmission for a tradition uprooted from its system of reference.”¹¹¹ And this invention would be one that carves out “a path towards an encounter with the divine, as a possibility open at the very site of agony.”¹¹²

Conclusion

To escape and yet remain would be, to borrow from Pandolfo once more, “to engage the vertigo of existence.”¹¹³ This is precisely what makes Fanon an important psychopolitical thinker, calling us into “the historical life of the symptom” while refusing to be read into a redemptive linear time or a tragic present historicism as Marriott magnificently explores. It is, indeed, psychoanalysis that provides Fanon these insights; it gave him, Marriott explains, “a name and technique for thinking invention.”¹¹⁴ Since psychoanalysis is not a historical narrative, it is “sufficiently open to hearing gaps and absences in meaning,” rendering them into narrative form, but not quite.¹¹⁵ Returning to David Scott’s earlier work, however, turned our attention to resonances with Talal Asad’s formation of tradition, which, is an antihistoricism and a different site for disarticulation –

been different.’ A similar critique came from the well-known Algerian sociologist Abdelkader Djeghloul, who defended a dissertation on Fanon in France the same year.” See Davis, “The US Academy and the Provincialization of Fanon.”

¹⁰⁸Marriott, *Whither Fanon?*, xvii.

¹⁰⁹Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 54.

¹¹⁰See Anidjar, “Secularism.”

¹¹¹Pandolfo, *Knot of the Soul*, 9.

¹¹²*Ibid.*, 9.

¹¹³*Ibid.*, 243.

¹¹⁴Marriott, *Whither Fanon?*, 298.

¹¹⁵*Ibid.*, 298.

disarticulation, recall, is not the sole provenance of the clinic.¹¹⁶ The turn to tradition might also shift our questions toward Fanon and the world that we inhabit as well – the divisions within his own work, the world, as well as toward the other forms that engage, encircle, the abyss that cannot be sutured into the world.¹¹⁷

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¹¹⁶For example, as El Shakry writes, “Sufism, like psychoanalysis, was itself an ethical encounter with the Other mediated by the domain of the unconscious” (59). See El Shakry, *The Arabic Freud*.

¹¹⁷El Shakry, “History and the Lesser Death.”

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