

Death-bound subjectivity: Fanon's zone of nonbeing and the Lacanian death drive

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ABSTRACT

Is there a distinctive form of political agency that emerges from the conditions of 'death-bound subjectivity'? Fanon's idea of the zone of nonbeing suggests that this is indeed the case. Yet there is an omission in the secondary literature on Fanon in this respect. While a renowned Fanon scholar like Lewis Gordon usefully explores how the zone can be understood as domain of ontological erasure, he typically fails to elaborate on the revolutionary potential of the concept. The nature of the psychical processes underlying this passage to revolutionary agency remains unclear. Of such agency we might ask: what is the animating factor that underlies, that drives the passionate attachment to such death-bound causes? Lacan's reconceptualization of the death drive *as ethical cause* – which, to be sure, represents a dramatic departure from the original Freudian conceptualization of a 'death instinct' – is presented here as a useful auxiliary concept to Fanon's zone of nonbeing. With speculative reference to the ethical dimension of the Lacanian death drive as a mode of surplus life which both underlies an unceasing fidelity to a cause and delivers the subject to a zone between life and death, we are able to offer an account of the agency of radical negativity that the zone of nonbeing engenders.

Keywords: Agency; Death drive; Fanon; Lacan; Zone of nonbeing

Introduction: "You have been dead..."

I would like to begin – as befits the psychoanalytic perspective I adopt here - by noting an apparent inconsistency of speech. In an interview, Steve Biko, the man who more than anyone embodied the voice and promise of the Black Consciousness challenge to white supremacy in apartheid South Africa, offered a series of comments on the methods of torture he suspected that he - or his comrades - were likely to undergo as part of the struggle against white supremacy. The security police, he said,

go on and on with a towel around your neck saying 'Speak' – and you say nothing - ... and the bloody brutes are not trained well enough to realize when enough is enough.

So, by the time they release the towel you have been dead for a couple of minutes (Biko, cited in Wilson, 2011, p. 65).

Biko was in fact to die in a not dissimilar manner, in a Pretoria police cell on the 12th of September 1977 as the result of injuries incurred during a brutal police interrogation (Woods, 1978). His above choice of words, the conjunction of a seemingly present condition (“they release the towel”, “you have”) with a description offered in the past tense (“been dead”), is not just curious, but telling. It connotes an unusual proximity between life and death, an overlapping state in which the circumstances of death are omnipresent in life. It is interesting also inasmuch as it invokes what for Lacan is the distinctive temporality of subjective transformation – made possible by psychoanalysis, or, perhaps more pertinently, by an unwavering political commitment – that of the *future anterior*: the time of what ‘I will have been’.

Biko had reflected on the possibility of his own death as part of the struggle, observing: “You are either alive or you are dead, and when you are dead, you don’t care anyway. And your method of death can itself be a politicizing thing” (Biko, 1978, p. 152). A similar turn of phrase is apparent in his assessment of the township youth:

The dramatic thing about the[ir] bravery...is that they have...discovered, or accepted...that the bond between life and death is absolute...your method death can be a politicising thing; so you die in the riots. For a hell of a lot of them, in fact, there’s really nothing to lose.... So if you can overcome personal fear for death...then you’re on your way (1978, p. 152).

We have then the entwined themes of death *in* life – of a life that in some ways is pre-naturally close to death — and of death itself as of value, paradoxically, for *future* life. What type of political subjectivity, indeed, what *mode of agency* is being invoked here? The above reflections provide us with a conceptual challenge. How are we to understand the death-bound subjectivity (to cite Abdul JanMohamed’s (2005) memorable phrase) exhibited above? How, furthermore, are we to grasp the political agency of such a type of subjectivity particularly so in today’s Neo-Liberal era where the question of violence cannot be raised within the ambit of what is considered legitimate political activity? This, after all, is a period – to follow Zahi Zalloua (2020) - in which the political is routinely reduced, if not to identity politics or the agendas of civil rights, then to the party politics of democratic and/or parliamentary structures. Let us turn to Frantz Fanon for the beginnings of an answer.

“Descent into real hell”

In the first few pages of *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon (1952/2008) offers a series of striking remarks that frame his broader analysis of the colonial situation. He applies an interrogative psychoanalytic logic, asking: “What does the black man want?” (p. xii). His response, stark as it is disheartening, is to proclaim that the black man, at least within the racist colonial context “is not a man” (p. xii), an answer he qualifies in the following way:

Man is not merely a possibility of recapture or of negation. If it is true that consciousness is a process of transcendence, we have to see too that this transcendence is haunted by the problems of love and understanding. Man is a yes... The black is a black man; that is, as a result of a series of aberrations of affect, he is rooted at the core of a universe from which he must be extricated.... I propose nothing short of the liberation of the black man from himself (Fanon, 1952/1967, p. 8).

This extract provides the immediate context for an extraordinary passage which, in its foregrounding of a radical form of political agency, drives my concerns in this paper:

There is a zone of nonbeing, an extraordinarily sterile and arid region, an utterly naked declivity where an authentic upheaval can be born. In most cases, the black man lacks the advantage of being able to accomplish this descent into a real hell (Fanon, 1952/1967, p. 8).

This at first seems a rather puzzling description, not least because of the contradictory elements that Fanon has juxtaposed. The zone of nonbeing is “extraordinarily sterile”, and yet there is nonetheless a prospect that an “authentic upheaval can be born” (1952/1967, p. 8). Moreover, although a “descent into hell” is involved, this is also an “advantage”, something that not all of an oppressed class are “able to accomplish” (p. 8). This assertion seemingly begs a question. Surely, given the unrelenting racism of the colonial context, the dehumanizing zone of nonbeing would be everywhere for the person of color. Why is it then that “[i]n most cases the black man lacks the advantage” (p. 8) of access to it?

We could ask: what is the mode of subjectivity or psychical condition that characterizes this “descent into real hell”? How might we further develop – or augment – this view of political agency? Through what other theoretical resources might this zone of nonbeing be conceptualized? This paper is an attempt to throw a distinct perspective on the form of death-bound subjectivity invoked above. It is, in addition, an attempt to grasp the revolutionary type of agency seemingly exemplified in Fanon’s notion of the zone of nonbeing. I argue that Lacan’s reconceptualization of the death drive *as ethical cause* – which, to be sure, represents a significant departure from the original Freudian conceptualization of a ‘death instinct’ (Hook, 2016) – is a useful auxiliary concept to Fanon’s zone of nonbeing. With speculative reference to the ethical dimension of the Lacanian death drive as a mode of surplus life which both underlies an unceasing fidelity to a cause and that delivers the subject to a zone between life and death, we are, I think, able to offer an account of the agency of radical negativity that the zone of nonbeing engenders. Indeed, it is perhaps only with reference to this conceptual supplement that we are able to properly grasp the revolutionary potential idea of the zone of nonbeing.

Fanonian articulations

Given the sheer number of texts commenting on Fanon’s notion of the zone of nonbeing, it is simply not feasible to summarize this literature here. That being said, I will highlight several of the most instructive descriptions of Fanon’s concept in what follows. Let me begin by offering three general comments on this literature. Firstly, the concept of the zone of nonbeing is applied

in a great variety of ways and is done so in widely differing historical, political and disciplinary contexts (Ciccariello-Maher, 2014; Sithole, 2016; Suárez-Krabbe, 2012; Ziarek, 2001, 2004). Secondly, the concept is often utilized in a general, loosely descriptive or figural (Bennet & Nichols, 1971; Thame, 2011) as opposed to a properly analytical or – more rarely yet – a philosophically-rigorous manner.¹ Thirdly, there are considerable tensions within the field - particularly in reference to Afro-pessimist articulations of the concept (Sexton, 2011; Wilderson, 2010) - regards the implications of Fanon's idea and how it should best be philosophically developed and politically deployed (Ahmed, 2018; Gordon, 2018; Olaloku-Teriba, 2018; Roberts, 2015).²

Bearing the above considerations in mind, I have opted to begin our investigation of the concept by citing Maziki Thame (2011) who offers a valuable description of the zone that is representative of much of the current literature on Fanon:

the colonized inhabits a 'zone of nonbeing'...[and is] constructed as an inferior being...[t]he native is racialized, their humanity and personhood are always in question...The stigmatization of the Black poor may be seen through...[this] 'zone of nonbeing', which emerges out of a postcolonial context that attaches values of nothingness to their lives and existence... In its hellish and liminal character, the zone of nonbeing is an actual state of affairs - the brutish nature of the lives of the Black poor and also, a way of seeing them - as inferior, meaningless, virtually absent or as the *wretched*. In the zone of nonbeing, the Black poor are then, dispensable, for the state, for elites and for the poor themselves... In a real way, the poor are not truly seen, they are in the 'zone of nonbeing', they are invisible (Thame, 2011, p. 77).

Thame (2011) effectively delivers Fanon's concept into the *postcolonial* era, usefully stressing the actual and material (as opposed to figurative or metaphorical) status of the zone of nonbeing. Importantly also he adds, in his reference to the state of wretchedness, an implicit link to Fanon's (1961/1990) later political conceptualizations in *The Wretched of the Earth*. This alerts us to the fact that the zone of nonbeing is not a concept that can be limited to *Black Skin White Masks*. Consider, for example, the following observation Fanon makes in *A Dying Colonialism* (without, admittedly, using the phrase 'zone of nonbeing'):

The disinherited in all parts of the world, perceive life not as flowering or a development of an essential productiveness, but as a permanent struggle against an omnipresent death. This ever-menacing death is experienced as endemic famine, unemployment, a high death rate, an inferiority complex and the absence of any hope for the future. All this gnawing at the existence of the colonized tends to make of life something resembling an incomplete death (1965, p. 128).

While the phenomenological-existential dimension is less overtly apparent here than in the description Fanon provides in *Black Skin White Masks*, Fanon has, I think, the same condition of colonial/racist dehumanization in mind, particularly so given his reference to a state of "incomplete death". This will be useful to bear in mind as we continue.

Below otherness/Ontological erasure

One exception to the descriptive as opposed to more philosophically/analytically grounded applications of Fanon's notion of the zone of nonbeing is to be found in the work of Lewis Gordon. Gordon has arguably revisited the concept more frequently than anyone else at the forefront Fanon scholarship. Given the wide-ranging number of treatments of Fanon's concept as noted above, Gordon seems to offer us the best prospect of a systematic line of exposition even though, as I will argue, there are facets of his account which are themselves open to critique.

In a helpful account toward the beginning of *What Fanon Said*, Gordon stresses that the zone of nonbeing must necessarily be understood within the context of antiblack racism:

The dehumanizing bridge between individual and structure posed by antiblack racism marks the black, who is in the end, "anonymous" in a perverse way, which enables "the black" to collapse into "blacks". It is perverse because whereas "blacks" is not a proper name, antiblack racism makes it function as such, as a name of familiarity that closes off the need for further knowledge...This naming affords a strange intimacy in which blacks are always *too* close, which stimulates anxiety for disappearance or absence. So black find themselves, Fanon announces at the outset, not structurally regarded as human beings. They are problematic beings, locked into... "a zone of nonbeing" (2015, p. 22).

The zone of nonbeing thus conceptualized: 1) anonymizes and de-individuates blacks, 2) forecloses the need for any further knowledge about them, and 3) produces an anxious need to exclude them from the realm of human inter-subjectivity. We are able then to appreciate the acuity of Nelson Maldonado-Torres's (2007) succinct description of the zone as the domain of 'sub-ontological difference'. That being said, Gordon's above description aptly pinpoints the conditions of colonial or anti-black racism without highlighting any mode of prospective agency.

Elsewhere, Gordon (2008) situates Fanon's speculations as part of a broader critique of Hegel's notion of recognition. He again emphasizes the factor of antiblack racism, which

structures blacks outside of the dialectics of recognition and the ethical struggle of self and other... The result is a struggle to *enter* ethico-political relations, ironically to establish the self both as 'self' and 'other'. The not-self-and-not-other is characterized by Fanon as "the zone of nonbeing" in his early work, and in his final one [*The Wretched of the Earth*], it simply means to be the damned of the earth (p. 86).

This confirms the above suggestion that the zone of nonbeing reoccurs – albeit under different names - in different periods of Fanon's work; it can be seen as the basis of Fanon's thinking of the broader political category of the wretched/damned of the earth (see also Gibson, 2015).

Gordon remains alive to the inherent ambiguity of Fanon's concept. He notes that the zone of nonbeing can, in effect, be read in two ways:

It could be limbo, which would place blacks below whites but above creatures whose lots are a lot worse; or it could simply mean the point of total absence, the place most

far from the light that, in a theistic system, radiates reality, which would be hell (2005, p. 22-23).

Whichever these interpretations we adopt, we can now appreciate that the zone of nonbeing as tantamount to a condition of ontological erasure. How these two readings (zone of nonbeing as limbo or hell) might be united is a question we will come to in due course. For the time being, we should highlight one immediate advantage of Gordon's account: it disrupts everyday notions of racism – such, perhaps, as those popularized in post-structural and discourse analytic accounts following in the wake of Edward Said's (1979) *Orientalism* – which focus predominantly on the discursive construction of *otherness*. Theoretical articulations which attempt to understand the condition of the colonized subject on the basis of Self-Other relations necessarily fail, says Gordon (2015), for the reason that

[t]hey presuppose the subtle symmetry of "Otherness." Since racism is a denial to an Other attributes of the self and even those of another self – in other words, even of being an *Other* – the resulting schema is one of location *below*, in the zone of nonbeing. Thus, white-black relations are such that blacks, in their effort to rise out of the zone of nonbeing, struggle to achieve Otherness (to get into Self-Other relations); it is a struggle to be in a position, in effect, *for the ethical to emerge*, for ethics and morality, proper are relationships between human beings...living in a human world (2015, p. 69).

With this in mind we better understand Fanon's pronouncement in *Black Skin White Masks* (the black man lacks "ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man" (1967, p. 110). Black subjects are, as Ciccariello-Maher (2010) puts it, *below otherness*, they are seen but are not *seen*, they *exist* but *are* not (human):

[n]ot only does this 'below-Otherness' render politics...impossible, but the same applies for ethics... .. the absence of a Self-Other dialectic in racist situations means the eradication of ethical relations. Where ethics is derailed, all is permitted... blacks are denied access to ontology (Ciccariello-Maher, 2010, p. 3).

Hence, if equality is to be contemplated, racialized subjects "must first seize access to ontology, storming the fortified heaven of being itself" (Ciccariello-Maher, 2010, p. 3).

Gordon's exposition brings with it an important methodological implication. As we have seen, the racialized schema of the zone of nonbeing exists *below* the level of the Hegelian master-slave dialectic. It thus "demands an approach that addresses contradictions that are not of a dialectical kind" (Gordon, 2008, pp. 86-87). Political strategies that insist on human recognition, while of obvious ethical importance, are, within the conditions of colonial racism, not in and of themselves adequate. So, although "[t]he call for Black *Consciousness*...demands addressing a "lived reality," a meaning-constituting point of view" (Gordon, 2008, p. 87), this itself is not enough, politically or ethically, inasmuch as in the colonial domain the black is not even that of an Other, "is not a point of view" (Gordon, 2008, 87). What else then, we might ask, is needed to attain the rudimentary conditions whereby viable forms of inter-subjectivity might be possible?

In one of his most developed elaborations of the concept Gordon returns to the theme of hell:

[D]amnation means that the black (or better, the blackened) lives the irrelevance of innocence. Without the possibility of innocence, the blackened lives the disaster of appearance where there is no room to appear nonviolently. Acceptable being is nonexistence, nonappearance, or submergence...the absence of a Self-Other dialectic in racist situations means the eradication of ethical relations... The absence of ethical relations means living with what Abdul JanMohamed has called "death-bound subjectivity". It means living with the possibility of one's arbitrary death as a legitimate feature of the system. It also means witnessing concrete instances of arbitrary death and social practices that demonstrate that one group of people's lives are less valuable than others' to the point of their not being considered to be really people at all. (Gordon, 2007, p. 11)

Powerful as this passage is, it also brings into focus a critical perspective on Gordon's conceptualizations: they seem routinely to veer away from foregrounding any meaningful sense of political agency. Gordon seems never to foreground the *transformative* dimension intimated by Fanon (for whom, to recall, the zone is a site "where an authentic upheaval can be born", 1952/1967, p. 8). What, we might ask, has become of the revolutionary potential of the concept? How is such a death-bound subjectivity also, potentially, agentic? How might the zone of nonbeing enable disalienation?

There are no doubt good reasons for this apparent omission in Gordon's work, conspicuous as it is. One prospective reason might be said to come to the fore in the comments of Dawn Rae Davis (2002) who, in a feminist engagement with the zone of nonbeing, stresses that for Fanon

nonbeing is not a zone of transcendence, but rather a direct falling-into of the alienation created by the system of domination...an immersion into both a realm of lovelessness and an experience of epistemic deprivation in which what can be known even of the most subjective state of (consciousness) is denied (2002, p. 148).

For Davis, to think of the zone of nonbeing as a mode of transcendence is to succumb to humanistic platitudes that have underestimated the epistemic and psychical scale of colonial/anti-black violence. As she elaborates: "[W]hatever grand empathies are proposed by humanist understanding and love ultimately fail in view of their intimate relation to the epistemic violence of colonization" (2002, p. 147). One crucial use of the concept of the zone of nonbeing as a critical instrument comes here to the fore: that of showing up the unholy alliance between humanism and colonialism – or, as afro-pessimists would no doubt insist, between humanism and anti-blackness - enabling us thereby to bypass the lure of the humanistic discourse of transcendence.

Hence perhaps Gordon's apparent preference for reading the zone of nonbeing as *hell* (rather than merely as limbo), for, as one might bluntly put it: there is no transcending hell. All this being said, the ruse of humanism being soundly rejected, Davis nevertheless advances that

“The extremity of the Black man’s negation, located at the lowest point of ontological ground...seems to breathe alongside anti-colonial revolutionary possibility” (2002, p.147). This prospect of revolutionary agency is also taken up by Paget Henry (2006) who asserts that it is through the zone of nonbeing that “new images of self, new projects for bringing one’s self into ego-being can be undertaken....[via] its self-creating powers” (p. 14). Henry notes also that

This push for rebirth is strong, defiant, almost compulsive. Through this agency Fanon’s awakening subject takes the broken pieces of his/her selfhood and refashions them into a new project of being in the world...In short, phenomenologically speaking, the zone of nonbeing is a valuable resource for the subject who is working his/her way out [of] negritude (2006, p. 14).

Likewise intent on highlighting the revolutionary potential within Fanon’s concept, Neil Roberts (2015) argues that “[a]s loathsome as life inside this zone of enslavement might be, it is a zone of hope and natality” (p. 118). In examining the zone of nonbeing, says Roberts, Fanon determines that

however counterintuitive or nauseating, the zone prepares [the human] to act, can induce man to be *actional*, and is a region ripe for an authentic upheaval. Whether through *négritude*, Marxism...or another system beyond Fanon’s considerations in *Black Skin*, the axiom is clear: the zone of nonbeing harbors the prospect for revolution among the unfree (p. 119).

Perhaps one reason why the facet of revolutionary agency is not more focal in Gordon’s account has to do with his reticent to in any way imply that Fanon is indebted to Sartre’s philosophy. While I certainly agree that we need to dismiss the idea that Fanon’s work stands in the shadow of Sartre’s philosophy – Fanon’s importance today as decolonial theorist seemingly makes this point abundantly apparent – I do think that more detailed reference to Sartre proves helpful in respect of grasping the implications of the zone of nonbeing. With this in mind, let us turn to Nicholas Webber (2012) who illuminates the Sartrean underpinnings of Fanon’s conceptualization:

Black Skin’s adapted existentialism results...in a terrifying descent into *nonbeing*, yet it is only from this declivitous zone, Fanon argues, that the casting off of such accumulated myths and stereotypes (or what we might like to call “disalienation”) can begin... The antinomy that is Fanonian existentialism then, contains the absolute negation of existence as its source of germination: nothingness and infinity are its soil and water, self-determination its sun....Conflictingly, then, the zone of nonbeing is both volatile and nurturing, leaving the dissolved ego locked into a perpetual tug-of-war between poles of existence - between emergent selfhood and racist objectification.... Fanon discovers that the cultural machinery in place dissolves anything other than nonbeing: history, reason, creativity, and *négritude* all prove...to be ill-equipped at exploding the mythic framework both within and without the [colonized] subject....Fanon determines,

in typically Sartrean phraseology, to introduce “invention into existence” (Webber, 2013, p. 7).

Webber reminds us that for Sartre, nothingness is the defining characteristic of the *being-for-itself* of human existence as opposed to the being-in-itself of material objects. For the existential philosopher so renowned for the maxim ‘existence precedes essence’ it is necessarily the case that human being has no determined essence or fixity, hence:

To question being requires a prerequisite of nothingness as its origin and foundation, since it is only through the possibility of negation that such questions can be posed in the first place. Within this framework, Fanon’s “nothingness,” his zone of nonbeing, is transformed from disempowerment and objectification into an empowering ability to inject invention into existence (Webber, 2013, p. 8).

With this we have the basis of a potentially compelling existentialist account of the revolutionary potential of the zone of nonbeing. And yet, questions remain. I, for one, am left with doubts as to whether the ethics of an existential or phenomenological humanism can adequately accommodate what Fanon is reaching for with the concept of the zone of nonbeing. This is particularly the case given Davis’s (2002) above use of the concept precisely to critique the idea that humanism – and, by extrapolation, existential and phenomenological variants of humanism – might provide an adequate critical platform for the conceptualization of antiblackness. The same holds for an Afro-pessimist perspective which would insist that humanism as such is premised on the extrusion of blackness (Wilderson, 2020). We would be remiss here if we were not to turn to David Marriott (2011) who offers the definitive critique of humanistic phenomenological and existentialist readings of Fanon. Fanon, he says, persistently locates “blackness as a necessary contamination of traditional political thinking and ontology” (p. 36). The implication of this is that “racism interrupts the movement towards the human, and paradoxically makes ontology irrelevant for understanding black existence” (p. 36). As such ethics and politics, in so far as they are grounded on humanism – particularly for Marriott of the Marxist-phenomenological tradition - “cannot simply be invoked...as a model for thinking black existence” (p. 36).³

Three particular questions emerge in respect of Webber’s (2013) Sartrean conceptualization. Bearing in mind the Steve Biko example noted above, we might ask: is the dimension of actual death, and, indeed, of a death-bound subjectivity, as central as it arguably needs to be in the foregoing philosophical appeals to nothingness and negation? Secondly, how are we to think “the possibility of negation” in properly *psychical* terms rather than allowing them to remain couched in the more abstract ontological formulations of Sartre’s existentialism? In other words, the nature of the psychical processes underlying this passage to revolutionary agency remain unclear and sorely in need of further exploration. Thirdly, in reference to the form of political agency that is being posited: what is the animating factor that underlies and that *drives* the passionate attachment to such life-threatening causes? One psychoanalytic answer to these questions is: the drive, or, more precisely, the ethical dimension of the death drive.⁴

Death drive as fidelity to a cause

Odd as it may seem to cite Achille Mbembe in the context of a discussion of Lacanian theory, it proves helpful here to briefly to consider his comments in the chapter of *Necropolitics* (2019) entitled 'Fanon's pharmacy'. Mbembe's aim in the chapter, he tells us, it so appeal to

Fanon, whose considerations on destruction and violence, on the one hand, and on the therapeutic process and desire for unlimited life, on the other, form the basis of his theory of radical decolonization. Indeed, Fanon's work envisages radical decolonization from the angle of movement and a violent labor. This labor aims at the principle of life; it aims to enable the creation of the new. But does all violence create something new? (2019, p. 118).

Questions emerge here, not unlike those posed by Fanon's own description of the zone of nonbeing. If we are to locate Fanon on the side of "unlimited life" how should this be reconciled with the "violent labor required for the project of decolonization" (Mbembe, 2019, p. 118)? This violent labor aims moreover "to enable the creation of the new" even though "the new" here is – to be sure - a type of violence. How are we to understand the violence of which Mbembe and Fanon speak, a violence which is both creative and on the side of "unlimited life"? With this challenge in mind, we can turn now directly to the Lacanian reconceptualization of the death drive.

Our first task in attempting to understand how the Lacanian theorization of the death drive pertains to the domain of the political is to underscore how radically it diverges from Freud's notion of a "death instinct". The Lacanian notion of the death drive, says Slavoj Žižek, in a helpful commentary

has nothing whatsoever to do with the craving for self-annihilation, for the return to the inorganic absence of any life-tension; it is, on the contrary, the very opposite of dying... The paradox of the Freudian 'death drive' is therefore that it is Freud's name for its very opposite, for the way immortality appears within psychoanalysis... for an 'undead' urge which persists beyond the (biological) cycle of life and death... The ultimate lesson of psychoanalysis is that human life is never 'just life': humans are not simply alive, they arepassionately attached to a surplus which sticks out and derails the ordinary run of things (Žižek, 2006, p. 61).

In a comparative reading of the death drive in the work of both Lacan and Deleuze, Alenka Zupancic similarly observes:

[T]he death drive...is certainly not the primacy of some obscure will or tendency to aggression, destruction, death...it is a complex notion that one needs to think if one wants to posit *affirmation*... For Deleuze, the death drive is a prerogative of true [ontological] affirmation. What they [Lacan and Deleuze] both suggest is that the death drive cannot be thought in terms of the simple opposition between life and death,

because it is precisely what belies this opposition and (re)configures it in the first place (2017, pp. 111-112)

We are a world away here from pseudo-biological Freudian assertions concerning “an instinct...inherent in organic life to restore to an earlier state of things”, from the death drive understood as “the expression of the inertia inherent in organic life” (Freud, 1920, p. 36). To the contrary, many of the qualifying terms used in the above descriptions – death drive as underlying passionate attachments, as the basis for an ontological form of affirmation – are completely at odds with standard accounts of the Freudian ‘death instinct’ understood as a wish to dissolve or annihilate one’s self (Rycroft, 1973).

There is, so it would seem, more of *life* than death in the above descriptions, even if the life in question is of an extraordinary (‘undead’, ‘immortal’) sort. We find this paradox writ large in Lacan’s qualification that “It is not...a perversion of instinct but rather a desperate affirmation of life that is the purest form of the death instinct” (2006, p. 263). How then are we to account for the fact that the Lacanian death drive is more about a type of surplus life than death? The crucial move here lies with insisting that the Lacanian reconceptualization of the death drive is not – paradoxically enough – primarily about (physical, biological) death. It is most fundamentally about *drive*, and more precisely yet, those drives that animate and underlie our most ardent commitments, and that we pursue beyond the logic of the build-up and release of tensions (in other words, beyond Freud’s pleasure principle). The accent here is decidedly more on overcoming, insistence and continuance – indeed on *repetition* (which, incidentally, accounts for Deleuze’s (1994) philosophical interest in the death drive) – rather than on the limits of mortality or on impulse to final inertia. Hence the qualification offered by Sophie Dawkins: (2015) “death drive is obsession with continuation, not death itself...it is continuation that is important in conceptualizing the death drive...not the cessation of life”.

And yet, do we not hit a stumbling-block here? If the Lacanian theory of the death drive is not primarily - or literally - about the physicality of death, then how can it be of assistance to us, given that it is the agency of death-bound subjectivity that we are concerned with here? A crucial qualification is thus required. While the Lacanian death drive is not primarily about actual bodily death, it retains an important relationship to the prospect of physical demise. As suggested above, there are certain drive impulses that the subject pursues beyond the thresholds of pain, despite the multiple social and subjective costs that might be incurred by doing so. It is in this way that, for Lacan, every instance of the drive is, potentially, an instantiation of the death drive: the drive taken in its unmoderated form disregards any injunction to live within the natural limits of self-preservation. Unexpectedly perhaps, we have here a first intimation of what it might mean to speak of the ethical status of the drive. What we witness in the death drive – that is, in any drive pursued to the end, despite the costs incurred to the subject’s livelihood or wellbeing - is a willingness to make any sacrifice necessary. When such a drive impulse becomes attached to a political objective, then we are in the ethical domain of death drive as cause.

What though is it that fuels this process, what motivates drive activities and keeps them going despite that they so often prove detrimental, costly, even at times life-threatening, to the subject? This returns us to a theme broached above, namely the idea of death drive as a type of *life in excess of life*, a mode of ‘undead’ libidinal animation. Mari Ruti (2012) offers a series of synonyms that helpfully support this characterization: the ‘undeadness’ of the drive she says

must be understood as a type of surplus vitality, an excessive energy, a form of bodily agitation. Simply put: drive – and death drive as drive in its undiluted form – exceed the adaptive or self-preservative requirements of the organism as a biological entity. Importantly, inasmuch as the death drive can be described as an excess of life “a pressure, a compulsion which persists beyond death” (Žižek, 2006, p. 182) then it necessarily entails *jouissance*, that is, the painful libidinal gratifications we incur when persisting in an activity beyond the parameters of pleasure or self-preservation. To be a human subject, within this theoretical framework, is to be the host of a self-overcoming tendency – *jouissance* – which we pursue beyond the boundary-lines of moderation, existing social norms and our own best life-sustaining interests.

It is worth noting here that any affective stimulation once raised beyond a certain threshold can lead to *jouissance*. *Jouissance* is not as such limited only to negative or detrimental affect; any passionate attachment is accompanied by precisely such an order of excess. I stress this point so as to highlight that death drive, despite its *jouissance*-fueled momentum, is not necessarily psychopathological or merely self-serving. This might strike one as contradictory. Surely any motivation that disregards the considerations of self-preservation and pushes the subject beyond the pleasure principle – indeed, into the realm of suffering – is, by its nature, psychopathological? Two answers are possible here. We might concede, on the one hand, that yes, if the psychopathological is defined in terms of what violates the health of the *individual* subject, then *jouissance*-fueled acts of the drive are always, by definition pathological. And yet, if the subject’s commitment is to something greater than his or her own well-being – a social, political, moral cause – then the ethical nature of the commitment can be said to outweigh its contingent “psychopathological” costs.

This leads us to consider the relation between the death drive and agency. We have already seen how undiluted instances of the drive push the subject beyond the parameters of the merely natural, beyond the imperatives of instinctual, self-preserving, adaptive existence. In this sense, the death drive is precisely the vehicle that delivers us from a natural existence; it is the “radical antagonism”, to cite Žižek (1989), through which we “cut the umbilical cord with nature” (pp. 4-5). Much the same holds of the symbolic dimensions of one’s existence, that is, for the accepted roles, identities, obligations and laws that anchor a subject in the social order, that define a given subject position. As powerful and difficult to overcome as these various forms of symbolic anchoring might be, they too – as we will soon see – prove less than inviolable when it comes to drive in its most forceful instantiations. There is good reason for Žižek’s (1999) claim that the death drive is the psychoanalytic name for “the innermost radical possibility of a human being” (p. 190). Death drive is, as such, the agency of radical negativity.

Given the obvious distance that we have struck from Freud’s biologism (and from more literal readings of the death drive) one might ask: what Freudian aspects remain within the Lacanian reconceptualization? This takes us to a further key feature of the Lacanian theory of the death drive that we need to highlight here: the factor of repetition. While Žižek’s above reference to the immortality of the death drive might seem unnecessarily dramatic, it does provide an effective way of invoking this factor of repetition, underscoring, as it does the *ceaseless insistence* of the drive. Within psychoanalytic theory, the drive is the exemplar of continuation without end. Why is this the case? Well, unlike the subject who is motivated primarily by objects of desire, drive finds its motivation not in an object but in the prolongation of its own activity. The enjoyment of the drive is that of being caught in a repetitive, self-

propelling loop; the subject's enjoyment is found – paradoxically enough – in their satisfaction being forever delayed, in the object never being fully attained. The drive is thus both objectless and unending; it obeys the imperative of infinite continuation.

The implications of this are worth playing out. Unlike the subject who labors under the illusions that an object will complete them, that attaining it will thereby finalize a given political mandate or task, the drive-compelled subject finds enjoyment precisely in continuing, in trying again and again despite failing ever to fully attain its object. Bertold Brecht's oft-cited refrain "Try again. Fail again. Fail Better" hence serves perfectly as the mantra for the drive. A further aspect of the ethical dimension of drive comes now into view. Rather than being reduced to a type of object-fixation, the drive retains an unending fidelity to a repeated *activity* and does so – as importantly - beyond any aspiration of acknowledgement or reward. Not only does the compulsion of the drive occur beyond the remit of such goals, it occurs – as is perhaps by now obvious - despite typically incurring severe subjective, social and symbolic losses. As already stated, in its unmoderated form, the drive disregards given social norms alongside all benchmarks of what might appear rational, reasonable or permissible within a given situation. Such drive activities are not, strictly speaking, *corruptible*, at least inasmuch as they are not contingent on external ("pathological") motivations, objectives or forms recognition. Moreover, given that drive activities remain forever unsatisfied (at least in the sense of ever reaching their object) and unending, they cannot be lured into a sense of finalization or completion.⁵

So, while the drive's relentless repetitions certainly can set the subject on a course that leads to their own detriment and even destruction, it can also be understood as a form of commitment, a passionate attachment relative to which everything else – acceptable social identifications, the injunctions of everyday symbolic norms, the imperative of Freud's pleasure principle – are of secondary importance. With this foregoing discussion in mind, we can now understand the initially puzzling proclamation that "*the status of the drive itself is inherently ethical*" (Žižek, 2002, p. 273). How though can we connect this theoretical account of the death drive as mode of surplus life and agency of radical negativity to a more concrete instantiation of death-bound subjectivity?

In the zone between life and death

In Lacan's (1992) view, the epitomizing instance of death drive as radical commitment is to be found in the figure of Antigone. The 21st chapter of his *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* is entitled 'Antigone between two deaths' and it includes a section entitled 'The death drive illustrated'. Lacan discusses the situation that Antigone finds herself in after insisting – against the wishes of King Creon – on burying her brother, despite that she has been explicitly prohibited by the laws of the state, from doing so:

Her punishment will consist in her being shut up or suspended in the zone between life and death. Although she is not yet dead, she is eliminated from the world of the living... from Antigone's point of view life can only be approached, can only be lived or thought about, from the place of that limit where her life is already lost, where she is already on the other side.... And it is from the same place that the image of Antigone appears before us as something that makes the Chorus lose its head...makes the just appear unjust, and

makes the Chorus transgress all limits, including casting aside any respect it might have for the edicts of the city (Lacan, 1992, pp. 280-281).

There is, certainly for Lacan, something powerfully transformative about becoming the subject of death drive, as is the case for Antigone. She has undergone the ultimate test of desire. Her desire is not the alienated desire of the Other; it cannot be compromised or moderated in any way (“No mediation is possible here” notes Lacan (1992, p. 283)). By virtue of the fact that her desire has been utterly purified, emptied of contingent (“pathological”) contents or concerns, given that it has been subjected to one single activity which she is prepared to sacrifice everything for, we can say that she has crossed over from the parameters of desire to those of the (death) drive. It is in this sense that Antigone is a paradigmatically ethical figure for Lacan.

It is also in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* that Lacan insists that the death drive represents “the will to create from zero, to begin again” (1992, p. 212). Žižek (1989) likewise stresses that the death drive “opens the way for the creation of new forms of life *ex nihilo*” (p. 134). As he puts it elsewhere – a point worth reiterating given how counter-intuitive it seems that the death drive engenders creativity – “in order for (symbolic) creation to take place, the death drive...has to accomplish its work of...emptying the place and thus making it ready for creation” (Žižek, 2004, p. 167). One begins to realize now how these at first glance implausible comments might hold. It helps here to clarify Lacan’s above reference to a zone – which resonates so suggestively with Fanon’s zone of nonbeing – that exists between the realms of life and death. The life and death referred to here are more ambiguous than they may at first appear: both include literal and symbolic aspects. The imprisoned Antigone, for example, is, while literally alive, symbolically dead (“eliminated from the world of the living”), and in two distinct senses. She has, firstly, been ejected from the social order, and is, as such, effectively living a life of social death. Having been condemned to execution, she has, secondly, passed the point of no return, has effectively become a dead woman walking. She exists, that is to say, in a psychological state completely overshadowed by her rapidly encroaching death (“she is already on the other side”). And yet it is from within this condition of symbolic death (“where...life is already lost”) that a new – and radically transformative – order of life becomes possible.

Antigone’s perspective from the place of death – so reminiscent of Biko’s remark about “already being dead” and the associated forms of bravery of the township youth – yields a very different standpoint on life, indeed, on a form of *symbolic* life that exceeds death. This symbolic life that exceeds death in the case of the figure who gives up their life for a Cause has at least two aspects. There is, firstly, the symbolic immortality granted to such a subject if their sacrifice is witnessed, recognized, remembered, made part of history, commemorated, and afforded thus a properly historical status. And then there is, secondly, the prospect of how the existing symbolic order might itself be altered by virtue of such a sacrifice and the newness it brings into the world. So, we have, to underscore the point, the symbolic life that comes from repeatedly marking a death, firstly, and the life of a newness – a birth, a nascence - emerging by virtue of the fact that the symbolic order has been shifted.

We should attend to the psychological ramifications which result from becoming the subject of the death drive. What Lacan is arguing in respect of Antigone is that any lingering unconscious investments that she may have had in the symbolic order are now relinquished, expunged, now that she has become the subject of the death drive. This is what he is referring

to when he says that it is from the death-bound vantage-point of Antigone that any respect for the “edicts of the city” - that is, for the laws and norms of the symbolic domain – are cast aside, and cast aside – importantly - for both Antigone and the witnessing Chorus. We should not skip too quickly over this idea, namely that it is via the death drive that all unconscious commitments to the status quo of the existing symbolic order can be overcome. Reiterating this point enables us to link back to Fanon (1952/1967), who, to recall – and this is crucial - describes the de-alienating prospects of the zone of nonbeing directly after posing the question “What does the black man want?” (p. 8), a question which, as he avers, brings with it the prospective unconscious answer “to be white” (p. 9). In other words, one way of eradicating such alienating desires, is to enter the zone of nonbeing, which, via Lacan, we can conceptualize also as the zone between life and death, a zone which opens up the prospect of the agency of the death drive. Importantly, what we are discussing here should not be limited to merely individual or psychological effects. To be the subject of the death drive not only enables one to disinvest one’s self of such lingering unconscious effects of power, it also means that one is able to throw the very underpinnings of the symbolic into question for a broader political community (such a prospective effect calls to mind Biko’s prescient reflection: “your...death can itself be a politicizing thing” (1978, p. 152)).

Having suggested earlier that the death drive need not be understood in terms of (literal) death and/or destruction, we can now highlight one prospective form in which the death drive *does* aim to achieve both such ends. As we have seen, the death drive brings about the prospective demise of alienated desires, just as it can be said to suspend the hold of the symbolic upon the subject. With reference to Antigone, we can see how by persisting beyond both the limits of the pleasure principle and her own symbolic death, she effectively ceases to be what she was, what the symbolic order had determined her as. She had, until her radical commitment to burying her brother at all costs, a pre-established position in the symbolic order, a given societal role, a viable subject-position. By entering the zone between life and death (or, as Lacan (1992) sometimes puts it, “the zone between two deaths” (p. 270), referring thus to the distinction between symbolic and physical death) Antigone turns her back on the symbolic, on the trans-subjective network of collective beliefs, laws and customs that had functioned both to bond society and mediate the stuff of her own everyday subjective experience. Antigone thus eschews the values and laws of the symbolic order; it no longer plays a regulating role in moderating what she wants. The death drive thus entails the prospect of a form of radical agency that is not over-determined by the ideological symbolic world.

As Dawkins (2015) points out however, such a subject of the death drive “does not completely escape the symbolic order, he or she recreates it to satisfy an undying urge to continue: dead but alive; living yet dead”. This provides us with the opportunity to clarify how the Lacan notion of the death drive both complicates categorical distinctions between life and death and shows up the ambiguity inherent within each of these concepts. Antigone can be said to be “living yet dead” in the sense of being voraciously, *libidinally* alive, invigorated with surplus vitality (*jouissance*), even though she is symbolically dead (having been ejected from society, consigned to wretchedness, rendered ‘ungrievable’). And yet, Antigone is also “dead but alive”. Her unrelenting drive to bury her brother has meant that she has entered the trajectory of death, has assumed a death-bound subjectivity, even while her commitment to such an ethical cause holds out the potentiality of future life by virtue of the historical effects that they set in play.

Death-bound positionality is itself here a precondition for the emergence of that which is genuinely new, for a different order of life, for – as Deleuze (1994) would have it – a properly ontological form of affirmation. It is via an appreciation of this unceasing aspiration to overturn a given symbolic world and bring about something new that the death drive’s revolutionary potential comes most clearly into view. We have then, with the idea of the death drive as a mode of surplus life that imbues the subject with the agency of radical negativity, an apt response to Mbembe’s (2019) paradoxical comments on the relationship between creativity and violence Fanon. Mbembe, to recall, refers to a type of “violent labor” (2019, p. 118). Fanon’s decolonizing project premised on a “desire for unlimited life” and aiming “at the principle of life...[at] the creation of the new” (p. 118), requires, for Mbembe, just such a violent labor. We are now in a position to assert that the Lacanian name for this violent labor of decolonization is nothing other than...the death drive.

Conclusion

For Fanon, writing in 1952, there is “a zone of nonbeing, [a] sterile and arid region, an utterly naked declivity where an authentic upheaval can be born” (1952/1967, p. 8). For Lacan, delivering his seventh seminar in 1960, there is a “zone between life and death” from which one is “eliminated from the world of the living” and from where one “might transgress all limits...casting aside....the edicts of the city” (1992, pp. 280-281). This is a suggestive juxtaposition, one which indicates that there is a degree of overlap in what these two theorists, each in his own way, was attempting to theorize.

As it turns out, there is an interesting - if somewhat attenuated - historical connection between these two different conceptualizations. On the 10th of May 1960, Laurence Bataille, the oldest daughter of Lacan’s second wife Sylvia Bataille, was arrested and sent to the Prison de la Roquette for six weeks. She was imprisoned because of her activities in support of the FLN (*Front de liberation nationale*, i.e. Algerian Freedom Fighters), the same revolutionary cause that Fanon had dedicated himself to. Lacan was in the process of delivering *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (the seminar from which the above lines are drawn), and he brought Laurence a transcript of the work in progress when he visited her in prison. This was an apt choice, as Lacan’s biographer Elisabeth Roudinesco (1997) remarks, given that – as we have seen - the text was in large part a commentary on Antigone’s rebellion against Creon. Lacan in fact took to referring to Laurence as ‘his little Antigone’. In August of 1960, he wrote to D.W. Winnicott about Laurence’s imprisonment, noting that “She’s given us a lot anxiety (we’re proud of it), having got herself arrested because of her political connections” (Lacan cited in Roudinesco, 1997, p. 187).

Fascinating as this connection between Lacan’s and Fanon’s respective worlds might be, we should, perhaps obviously, exercise caution in extrapolating any further. Without putting too fine a point on it, Laurence’s political predicament – as admirable as it was - was not Fanon’s; hers was not a “descent into real hell”; her life was not defined by the dehumanizing objectifications of racism or by the struggle against anti-blackness. The same holds for Lacan, of whom it can be said that ultimately he had little, if anything, profound to say about race.⁶ As such, despite the prospect of identifying prospective theoretical conjunctions and points of intersection (Hook, 2020), it is prudent to keep the intellectual trajectories and research projects of these two men separate. Fanon was overwhelmingly concerned with racism, with the struggle

against colonialism and with the potential of type of revolutionary agency that might emerge from the zone of nonbeing. Lacan, by contrast, was preoccupied with formulating a distinctively psychoanalytic form of ethics, with exploring the transition from being a subject of alienated unconscious desires to one who does not give way on (or “give ground relative to” to cite Lacan (1992, p. 319)) a radical commitment, becoming thus - at least in my own reading - a subject of the drive.⁷ As separate as the two above intellectual projects might appear, we could nonetheless ask a question at this point. Sure the task of transcending alienated unconscious desires (which, at least within Lacanian theory, are object-directed, necessarily associated with questions of symbolic recognition and the desires of the Other) a necessary part of revolutionary political agency?⁸

All this being said, Lacan’s reconceptualized notion of the death drive is, I think, best approached as an auxiliary concept – a kind of psychoanalytic supplement – to Fanon’s idea of the zone of nonbeing. There are benefits to be had from doing so. Attending to the ethical dimension of the Lacanian death drive enables us to provide answers to questions that the secondary literature on Fanon – inclusive of phenomenological and existentialist conceptualizations – seem not to have adequately addressed. What, for example, is the animating factor that underlies, that *drives*, the passionate attachment to life-threatening causes? What, moreover, are the underlying psychical processes which might, once taken in conjunction with a “descent into real hell” (Fanon, 1952/1967, p. 8), result in revolutionary forms of political agency? Thinking the death drive in the qualified terms outlined above allows us to respond to these queries. It is by attending to the ethical dimension of the death drive as a mode of surplus life, as that which persists beyond the limits of what is pleasurable, moderate or life-sustaining, as that which underlies an unceasing fidelity to a cause, and as that which delivers the subject to *the transformative potentials* of living between life and death; it is in this way that we are able to offer a compelling account of the radical negativity – and thereby radical *agency* - that the zone of nonbeing potentially engenders.

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¹ This, I hasten to add, is not necessarily meant as a critical remark. The political value of many of Fanon's most innovative concepts – such as his idea of epidermalization to cite but one salient example - is that they open up and encourage radical perspectives, allowing new types of criticality to come into being.

² One key conflict here is that between generally phenomenological-existential readings of Fanon's notion of the zone of nonbeing (such as those propounded by Bernasconi (2018), Gordon (2015) and Webber (2011)) and extrapolations of the same concept developed by Afro-pessimists such as Sadiya Hartman (1997), Jared Sexton (2011, 2015) and Frank Wilderson (2010, 2020). The latter theorists equate blackness with social death, insisting that the historical institution of slavery has set the paradigm - epistemically, socially, politically - for how blackness and indeed, black subjects, are to be understood, valued and treated (that is, outside the category of the human). Anti-blackness is not, moreover, a temporary historical aberration for afro-pessimist theorists; it is epistemically, libidinally, socially, constitutive of the category of the human as we know it. In arguing that blackness and the history of slavery cannot be separated and, advancing - as Hartman (1997), Sexton (2016) and Wilderson (2020) do - that black life is effectively *lived as social death*, Afro-pessimists run the risk – at least in the eyes of Gordon (2018) and Zalloua (2020) – of ontologizing racism and – we might add – of ontologizing the very notion of the zone of nonbeing. For two excellent recent articles detailing the terms of the above debate see Ahmed (2018) and Olaloku-Teriba (2018). An additional critique of the Afro-pessimist position – instructive given the argument I will go on to make in this paper – comes from Neil Roberts (2016) who argues that we should “reject the mistaken [Afro-pessimist] conflation of the idea of social death with Fanon's radical notion of the zone of nonbeing” because it is precisely “existence within...[the] hellishness [of the zone of nonbeing which]... creates the conditions for a salient, genuine upheaval”.

³ More specifically, in reference to Sartre, and as part of an extended critique of the phenomenological-existential orientation of Lewis Gordon, Marriott (2011) observes that “Fanon identifies in the subject a void-like nothingness-of-being which is....linked to the problem of self-deception in Sartre” (p. 46). This link allows Fanon “to develop thoughts on how the black subject is always belated and dispersed...*irrealized* and yet forever haunted by its non-appearance and who can only acquire a certain density of being by taking on the tragic neurotic role (of an imaginary whiteness) – which is also why phenomenology can never be grounded in the experience of this subject for its truth is literally void” (p. 46).

⁴ I am not the first to investigate how the Lacanian death drive might inform a conceptualization of the agency of politically marginal figures. Lee Edelman's (2004) *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, while adopting a very different approach to my own, is the foremost example of such an initiative.

⁵ It is for this reason that we find in Lacan's (1981) *Seminar XI (The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis)* the idea that the end of an analysis corresponds to a transition from being a subject of desire to a subject of the drive.

⁶ I am indebted to David Marriott for this formulation.

⁷ This, obviously, is my own interpretation of Lacan's concerns in his seventh seminar, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*. It is an interpretation which may well be faulted for retrospectively overlaying Lacan's subsequent theorizations in his eleventh seminar, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, upon this earlier work. For more exhaustive accounts of *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, see De Kessel (2009), Neill (2011) and Zupancic (2012).

⁸ Marriott (2011) makes a similar point, albeit in a different context, when he maintains that for Fanon "the language of neurosis...[is] never simply secondary to 'the language of political experience' (p. 39)