



# Time's entanglements: Beauvoir and Fanon on reductive temporalities

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## Abstract

Simone de Beauvoir and Frantz Fanon both argue that oppression fundamentally constrains the subject's relationship to and embodied experience of time, yet their accounts of temporality are rarely brought together. This paper will explore what we might learn about the operation of different types of reductive temporality if we read Beauvoir and Fanon alongside each other, focusing primarily on the early works that arguably lay out the central concerns of their respective temporal frameworks. At first glance, it seems that these two models of temporality have radically different emphases. While Beauvoir suggests that reductive temporalities work to sever the future from the past and present, Fanon locates this destructive operation in the heightening of their entanglement. However, I will contend that there are deep affinities between these accounts: For both Beauvoir and Fanon, freedom is bound up with futurity, with its lack therefore cashed out in terms of stagnation, repetition, and the entrapment within a hollow moment that prevents authentic projection. Both resist teleological perspectives; problematize the endeavor to describe the structures of lived temporality in neutral terms; and show that temporality is crucial to the pursuit of a political phenomenology. These resonances, however, should only serve to recast rather than dissolve the tension between their approaches; ultimately, we need to acknowledge the distinctiveness of their differing concerns and aims.

**Keywords** Beauvoir · Fanon · Temporality · Phenomenology · Vergès

"Where to begin?" is a political question."<sup>1</sup>

Simone de Beauvoir and Frantz Fanon both argue that oppression fundamentally constrains the subject's relationship to and embodied experience of time, yet their accounts of temporality are rarely brought together.<sup>2</sup> This paper will explore what we might learn about the operation of different types of reductive temporality if

<sup>1</sup> Vergès (2005, pp. 41, 32)

<sup>2</sup> This is not to deny that Beauvoir and Fanon have been read together in other respects; important recent examples include Adkins (2013) and Webber (2018).

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we read Beauvoir and Fanon alongside each other, focusing primarily on the early works that arguably lay out the central concerns of their respective temporal frameworks. In doing so, I take my cue from Françoise Vergès, who—in a paper that contrasts Fanon’s approach of temporality to her own model of what she calls “Creole time”—makes the point that the question ‘where to begin?’ “establishes a time and space of politics.”<sup>3</sup> She goes on to suggest that we must therefore carefully examine what kind of temporality a liberatory analysis seeks to inaugurate:

Will the time include the reinterpreted past and the imagined future, or will it choose to begin now, grounded in the present which rejects any reference to the past and projects itself into an imagined future, or will it wish to be imagined as an ongoing present, in which neither the past nor the future have a role?<sup>4</sup>

At first glance, it appears that we can locate both Beauvoir’s as well as Fanon’s approaches to temporality within these options—and that the “temporal architectures” of oppression and resistance move in different, even opposing, directions within their respective accounts.<sup>5</sup>

Beauvoir seems to best fit the first of Vergès’ categorizations. Like the models of time that influenced her own—Bergson, Husserl, Heidegger—her work emphasizes the intertwining of past, present and future, one that any liberatory moment of beginning must encompass.<sup>6</sup> She tells us that, “cut off from the past and future, the present no longer has any substance; it’s nothing, just a pure, empty now.”<sup>7</sup> While we must surpass our past, we cannot simply “leave it behind”; recognizing ourselves in it is required in order for us to genuinely exercise our capacity for choice.<sup>8</sup> Even though we are futural entities, always stretching outwards, we must not sacrifice past or present for the future, or view the latter merely as “the transitory existence which is made in order to be abolished.”<sup>9</sup>

Fanon, meanwhile, seems to resonate more with the second of Vergès’ classifications—and indeed, this is the target of her critique in the paper. In an account permeated by what John Drabinski calls “the eschewing of history” and “the abjection of memory,” Fanon tells us that “the past can in no way guide me in the present moment.”<sup>10</sup> He is “his own foundation,” which requires “going beyond the historical

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> I am borrowing this illuminating term from Bernasconi (2020), derived from Fanon’s statement in *Black Skin, White Masks* about the temporal “structure” or architecture of the text.

<sup>6</sup> For an analysis of these influences on Beauvoir’s own model of time, see Al-Saji (2017), Tidd (2001) and Secomb (2006).

<sup>7</sup> Beauvoir (1999, p. 266).

<sup>8</sup> Beauvoir (2018, p. 27).

<sup>9</sup> Beauvoir (2018, p. 126).

<sup>10</sup> Drabinski (2012, pp. 124, 125) Fanon (2008a, p. 175). This paper will draw on both the Markmann and Philcox translations of *Black Skin, White Masks*; references to the former will be denoted by Fanon (2008a), as here, while the latter is listed as Fanon (2008b).

and instrumental given [in order to] initiate [his] cycle of freedom.”<sup>11</sup> The striving for a revolutionary future here involves the recognition that the past has been weaponized by the oppressor, and the concomitant abnegation of both this deadening weight and—where this distortion has made it “untenable”—of the present itself: <sup>12</sup> “The future must be a construction supported by man in the present. This future edifice is linked to the present insofar as I consider the present something to be overtaken.”<sup>13</sup>

Overall, then, it seems that these two models of temporality have radically different emphases. While Beauvoir suggests that reductive temporalities work to sever the future from the past and present, Fanon locates this destructive operation in the heightening of their entanglement. However, reading them together also reveals affinities that broaden our understanding of reductive temporalities. For both Beauvoir and Fanon, for example, freedom is bound up with futurity, with its lack therefore cashed out in terms of stagnation, repetition, and the entrapment within a hollow moment that prevents authentic projection.<sup>14</sup> Both resist teleological perspectives; problematize the endeavor to describe the structures of lived temporality in neutral terms; and show that temporality is crucial to the pursuit of a political phenomenology. These resonances, however, should only serve to recast rather than dissolve the tension between their approaches; ultimately, we need to acknowledge the distinctiveness of their differing concerns and aims.

## 1 Beauvoir on the “future-myth”

Much of the scholarship on Beauvoir and temporality focuses on *The Second Sex* and, naturally, *Coming of Age*, but I want to turn to earlier texts that already map out the key concerns of her model of time in clear, bold terms.<sup>15</sup> The best example of this can arguably be found in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, where we find an extended discussion of “the present and the future.”<sup>16</sup> Here, Beauvoir draws out two different—and, as we will see, ultimately competing—ways of relating to the future. On the one hand, there is “my future”—this is “the definite direction of a particular transcendence,” a “movement which, prolonging my existence of today, will fulfill my present projects and surpass them towards new ends.”<sup>17</sup> This is the future

<sup>11</sup> Fanon (2008b, p. 159).

<sup>12</sup> Quote from Drabinski (2012, p. 139). The point about the weaponization of the past draws on the analysis of Al-Saji’s analyses (2019, 2021) of the colonised, racialized past.

<sup>13</sup> Fanon (2008b, p. 15).

<sup>14</sup> It is worth noting here that my emphasis on futurity in both accounts, but especially in Fanon, is not uncontroversial. I take this to be a particularly interesting and clear point of tension between Beauvoir and Fanon. However, it is certainly possible to be read both in a different temporal light—for example, with an emphasis on how each cashes out and centres the role of the past. Thank you to reviewers for highlighting this point.

<sup>15</sup> Important exceptions to this focus on Beauvoir’s later work that inform my analysis in this paper include Tidd (2001), Secomb (2006), Miller (2012) and Mussett (2020).

<sup>16</sup> This is a reference to the fourth part of Section III. Beauvoir (2018, p. 124).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124–25.

of the individual who acknowledges and inhabits, rather than flees, the ambiguity that, according to Beauvoir, characterizes the human condition: We are conscious, free, projecting, reflective, yet also one fragile body among many, subject to circumstances beyond our control; in Nietzsche's words, both "creature and creator."<sup>18</sup> To live towards "my future," we must grapple with the fundamental precarity of our lives and projects without seeking refuge in fantasies of cosmic certainty ("everything happens for a reason," "it will all work out in the end") but also without surrendering to fatalistic escapism ("nothing I do will change the outcome anyway"). We must, Beauvoir suggests, embrace agency *and* the likelihood of failure, indeed recognizing the latter as both consequence and enabling condition of the former—for a being that cannot fail, whose will is instantly and perfectly realized, would be neither truly free nor capable of generating an ethics.<sup>19</sup> Crucially, this future is one that is integrated into the flow of time, characterized by the interwovenness of the axes of time. It "is so closely bound up with the present that it composes with it a singular temporal form [...] the future which Heidegger considered as a reality which is given at the present moment."<sup>20</sup> "My future" is open to possibility as such without devolving into pure abstraction, and is capable of acknowledging failure as a real risk without viewing it as either inevitable or in need of redemption, precisely because it is grounded in the concreteness of past and present. It is a field of possibilities open to a concretely situated individual tied to a concrete now and the history that permeates it—an individual who has undertaken particular actions and sought particular ends, whose striving shapes and is shaped by specific, dynamically intersecting constraints, capabilities and vulnerabilities.

On the other hand, there is a future that is not integrated into the totality of lived time, but instead represents both an apocalypse and a culmination—a "future-myth" that brings "Glory, happiness or justice" to the victors.<sup>21</sup> This is the future of grand narratives of progress, where "the end justifies the means"; sacrifices are demanded, offered, justified, because however many sacrifice themselves, "the quantity that will profit from their sacrifice will be infinitely greater."<sup>22</sup> Beauvoir traces out the operations of this eschatological future in both religious and secular manifestations. Whether final salvation is located in the kingdom of god or of rational ends, it generates troubling temporal contradictions: The future is both the abstract, inevitable and infinitely deferred product of cosmic processes; and also an imminent and immanent goal whose realization is so precarious that it absorbs every action, makes every sacrifice urgent.

Particularly interesting for my purposes here is that this reductive, oppressive vision of the future functions by separating the flow of lived time that characterizes the authentic individual future. The grandiose, heroic future does not integrate or

<sup>18</sup> Nietzsche (2002, p. 117).

<sup>19</sup> See Beauvoir's account of failure in (2018, pp. 26–35).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 138, 125.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 126. Tidd emphasises the importance of this passage to Beauvoir's account of temporality—see (2001, p. 118).

weave together—it is “cataclysmic,” a rupture that never fully arrives but also never ends, and renders the present merely “an instrument, a means, it is only by its efficacy with regard to the coming of the future that the present is validly realized.”<sup>23</sup> This resonates with the definition of oppression that Beauvoir provides earlier in the book, where “transcendence is condemned to fall uselessly back upon itself because it is cut off from its goals.”<sup>24</sup> Here, others prevent the subject from participating in the “constructive movement” of lived temporality, forcing it to “consume my transcendence in vain” and reducing its “life [to] a pure repetition of mechanical gestures.”<sup>25</sup>

This disjointed temporality does not only occur in extreme situations of deprivation or conflict—it is insidious, and far more common than we might expect. We can find vivid descriptions of what this looks like in *America Day by Day*, Beauvoir’s diary of a trip to the United States taken in 1947 (the year that *Ethics* was published).<sup>26</sup> There, Beauvoir discusses at length the stultifying “abstraction” that she believes characterizes life in America.<sup>27</sup> She writes that

even the time they’re living in is abstract. They respect the past, but as an embalmed monument; the idea of a living past integrated with the present is alien to them. They want to know only a present that’s cut off from the flow of time, and the future they project is one that can be mechanically deduced from it, not one whose slow ripening or abrupt explosion implies unpredictable risks. [...] Their time is the “physicist’s time,” a pure exteriority that mirrors the exteriority of space.<sup>28</sup>

Here, we meet what is arguably a third version of the future that is as pernicious as the heroic one, namely, a future defined by novelty. Americans, Beauvoir complains, “feverishly demand something more, and again, something more, never able to quell their restlessness.”<sup>29</sup> This type of striving towards the future deadens both past and present—history becomes a “cemetery” rapidly filled with the corpses of newly outdated “men, works and ideas who die as soon as they are born,” meaning that “the present is merely an honorary past.”<sup>30</sup> The type of severance at work here comes into view more easily if we recall the key influences on Beauvoir’s philosophy of time—Bergson, Husserl, Heidegger. While there are of course significant differences between their respective accounts, these figures share the concern that we miss something crucial about the lived experience of time if we ignore the

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 126.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 87.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., pp. 88–89.

<sup>26</sup> I am here indebted to the way that Mussett (2020) reads *Ethics of Ambiguity* and *American Day by Day* side-by-side in order to draw out their implications for Beauvoir’s account of time.

<sup>27</sup> For a detailed analysis of this temporal abstraction, see Mussett (2020, pp. 5–7).

<sup>28</sup> Beauvoir (1999, p. 385). Mussett analyses parts of this passage in (2020, pp. 6–7).

<sup>29</sup> Beauvoir (1999, p. 386); see also Mussett (2020, pp. 6–7).

<sup>30</sup> Beauvoir (1999, p. 385) and Mussett (2020, pp. 6–7), who also discusses these parts of Beauvoir’s diary.

interpenetration of past, present and future.<sup>31</sup> This is often discussed with reference to the present: If we conceive of presence as a singular, pure “now” that can be counted and accumulated, and then make this the paradigm of time to the detriment of past and future, we not only find ourselves with a reductive, flattened model that is incapable of capturing not only the richness of experiential temporality, but also the very thing this edifice is built upon. The more we look for the “now,” trying to localize and define it, the more evanescent it reveals itself to be. Beauvoir’s account reminds us that we can also do this to the future, especially if we conceptualize in terms of pure novelty, “pure exteriority.” To borrow William James’ famous descriptor, it is not only the “now” that can become “specious” if we look at time askew.<sup>32</sup> The “mechanically deduced” future she here ascribes to twentieth century industrial America is a future that is not one, foreclosing genuine openness to possibility by reducing the latter to another new thing to add to a pile. It is a frozen future that loses the “slow ripening or abrupt explosion” that might characterize a fruitful relationship to past and present.

How can we resist these reductive temporal imaginaries of the heroic and the abstract futures? Beauvoir suggests that the key is how we take up the relation between past, present and future; in focusing on “my future” rather than the “future-myth” or the desolate quest for innovation, I must take up my past and project towards my future in a manner that lets neither obscure the present or become a dead weight, in a way that embraces rather than occludes the fundamental ambiguity that characterizes human existence.<sup>33</sup> Earlier in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Beauvoir draws out this difference:

If I leave behind an act which I have accomplished, it becomes a thing by falling into the past. It is no longer anything but a stupid and opaque fact. In order to prevent this metamorphosis, I must ceaselessly return to it and justify it in the unity of the project in which I am engaged. Setting up the movement of my transcendence requires that I never let it uselessly fall back upon itself, that I prolong it indefinitely. Thus I cannot genuinely desire an end today without desiring it through my whole existence, insofar as it is the future of this present moment and insofar as it is the surpassed past of days to come.<sup>34</sup>

The authentic interweaving of past, present and future is vital, is the source and aim of liberation from the oppressive temporalization mentioned earlier. This applies to history, too:

It is obvious that this finiteness [which we must acknowledge and protect] is not that of the pure instant [...] the limits cannot be marked out a priori; there

<sup>31</sup> Compare the accounts of temporality in Bergson (2001), Heidegger (2006) and Husserl (1991).

<sup>32</sup> See James (1981).

<sup>33</sup> See also Tidd (2001), Secomb (2006) and Miller (2012) for analyses of authentic futurity in Beauvoir. Tidd in particular takes a similar approach to the present paper, although she argues that, for Beauvoir, the individual is ultimately incapable of bringing together the ruptured aspects of their temporality, and must make use of narrative techniques (and the readers of narratives) in order to do so.

<sup>34</sup> Beauvoir (2018, p. 27). Mussett also uses parts of this quote to set out the authentic alternative to the abstraction of time in (2020, 6).

are projects which define the future of a day or of an hour; and there are others which are inserted into structures capable of being developed through one, two, or several centuries, and thereby they have a concrete hold on one or two or several centuries.<sup>35</sup>

That is, resisting the “future-myth” does not mean that we should restrict ourselves only to our time in the most immediate sense. While finite, we are nonetheless the kinds of entities who can understand our projects on larger timescales.

## 2 Fanon on the “future edifice”

Turning now to Fanon’s early work, we find that *Black Skin, White Masks* explicitly highlights both the importance of time to its concerns and method, as well as the future-weighted orientation of its temporal framework, right at the start.<sup>36</sup> The introduction offers the following statement, which is worth quoting in full:

The structure of the present work is grounded in temporality. Every human problem cries out to be considered on the basis of time, the ideal being that the present always serves to build the future. And this future is not that of the cosmos, but very much the future of my century, my country, and my existence. In no way is it up to me to prepare for the world coming after me. I am resolutely a man of my time. And that is my reason for living. The future must be a construction supported by man in the present. This future edifice is linked to the present insofar as I consider the present something to be overtaken.<sup>37</sup>

This is a rich yet largely self-explanatory passage, and I do not want to obfuscate its clarity by saying too much about it. I do want to briefly highlight two claims that are particularly important for understanding the nuances of Fanon’s account here.

Firstly, the future towards which the present stretches here is not a distant, ever-receding conclusion to some grand cosmic narrative.<sup>38</sup> It is not an unreachable “better world,” an object of distant hopes that has little bearing on the current individual beyond demanding their sacrifice for it. While it must be “unforeseeable,” a violent rupture, this future is nonetheless concretely that of an individual within their time—it is “the future of my century, my country, and my existence,” and “not that of the cosmos.”<sup>39</sup> It is a future that is constructed, not prophesied. The imperative for this construction lies in its immediacy, not its distance—“in no way is it up to me to prepare for the world coming after me.”<sup>40</sup> The shock of the revolutionary moment lies in making the future present.

<sup>35</sup> Beauvoir (2018, pp. 137–38).

<sup>36</sup> See Bernasconi’s analysis of the importance of this statement in (2020).

<sup>37</sup> Fanon (2008b, pp. 14–15).

<sup>38</sup> For analyses of this aspect of Fanon’s approach to time, see especially Sekyi-Otu (1996), Bhabha (1996) and Marriott (2018).

<sup>39</sup> Fanon (2008b, pp. 14–15).

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

Secondly, the quoted passage does not mention the past. Some readers of Fanon take this to be indicative of his approach to temporality more generally. Vergès, for example, argues that “[t]he past has no role in [Fanon’s] conceptualization of time. [...] the productive relation is between the present and the future.”<sup>41</sup> while Drabinski emphasizes Fanon’s “eschewing of history” and positioning of the past as “abject.”<sup>42</sup> Indeed, Fanon often analyses the dynamics of racialization and colonization in terms that highlight how dangerous and insidious the past is when it is in the hands of the colonizer, who entraps the racialized subject within suffocating nets of historical distortions that interfere with the project of self-definition by misdirecting and pre-empting it: “...the other, the white man, [...] had woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories.”<sup>43</sup> He finds himself stuck, “fixed,” within and through the caricatures, stereotypes and tropes imposed by the colonizer’s vision of the past:

I was responsible at the same time for my body, for my race, for my ancestors. I subjected myself to an objective examination, I discovered my blackness, my ethnic characteristics; and I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, slave-ships, and above all else, above all: “Sho’ good eatin’.”<sup>44</sup>

Moreover, Fanon suggests that attempts to turn to the past in order to validate or legitimize revolutionary endeavors can be both futile and dangerous, threatening to weigh down the present and cut it off from projection: “The discovery that a black civilization existed in the fifteenth century does not earn me a certificate of humanity.”<sup>45</sup>

That the past is not a part of what Vergès calls “the productive relation [...] between the present and future,” however, does not mean that it can be forgotten or ignored.<sup>46</sup> In contrast to what some of his critics—even Vergès—seem to suggest, Fanon does not want to pretend the past does not exist. The “abjection,” rejection, is a conscious and questioning one that ultimately also serves to disentangle, not only the individual from the past, but also different senses of the latter from each other.<sup>47</sup> As Al-Saji and Ngo have argued, Fanon shows that the history of colonization is also the colonization of history, whereby the colonizer’s narrative distorts and supplants the histories of the colonized:

<sup>41</sup> Vergès (2005, pp. 38–39).

<sup>42</sup> Drabinski (2012, p. 124) and (2012, p. 11).

<sup>43</sup> Fanon (2008a, p. 84). Fanon’s interlinked claims that racialisation ossifies the past in a way that weighs down the racialized subject and endangers liberation are often discussed in the scholarship dealing with Fanon’s account of temporality. Beyond Vergès (2005), significant examples (ones that inform my reading here) can be found in Al-Saji (2019, 2021), Ngo (2021), Sekyi-Otu (1996), Drabinski (2012, 2013), Gordon (2015), Mariott (2018, p. 73–123ff), Opperman (2019), and Bernasconi (2020).

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 84–85.

<sup>45</sup> Fanon (2008b, p. 155).

<sup>46</sup> Vergès (2005, pp. 38–39).

<sup>47</sup> See Al-Saji (2021), Drabinski (2013), Ngo (2021) and Sekyi-Otu (1996). The point about different senses of the past, first brought to my attention by a reviewer, comes from the work of Al-Saji and Ngo.



The black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man. [...] His metaphysics, or, less pretentiously, his customs and the sources on which they were based, were wiped out because they were in conflict with a civilization that he did not know and that imposed itself on him.<sup>48</sup>

The burden of this past is heavier, more effectively paralyzing, precisely because it is so paradoxical, a network of violations and associations that the racialized subject is asked to simultaneously embrace (as an enabling condition of what the colonizer calls “civilization”) and ignore (through the injunction to “get over it”).<sup>49</sup> This, Al-Saji argues, in turn undercuts the individual’s capacity for futural projection:

Hence, Fanon perceives a field of possibility structured according to the past and exhausted possibles of an absent other. As past, these possibilities lose their contingency and virtuality; they become factual and necessary, the routes to their realization fixed. More precisely, the field of possibility loses its playfulness and imaginary variability. [...] The structure of possibility allows repetition but neither invention, variation, nor leeway; it is a closed map.<sup>50</sup>

Fanon frames resistance against the dangers of the past in explicitly existentialist terms:

Sartre has shown that the past, along the lines of an inauthentic mode, catches on and “takes” *en masse*, and, once solidly structured, then gives form to the individual. It is the past transmuted into a thing of value. *But I can also revise my past, prize it, or condemn it, depending on what I choose.*<sup>51</sup>

The remainder of the work makes it clear which of these options is necessary for resistance. Fanon writes that he has to “rework the world’s past from the very beginning”—it cannot provide the grounds or legitimation for a revolutionary act.<sup>52</sup> “Disalienation will be for those Whites and Blacks who have refused to let themselves be locked in the substantialized ‘tower of the past,’” those who “refuse to see their reality as definitive.”<sup>53</sup> For the dis-alienated subject, “the density of History determines none of my acts. I am my own foundation. And it is by going beyond the historical and instrumental given that I initiate my cycle of freedom.”<sup>54</sup>

A key aspect of Fanon’s wariness of the past, of historicization, is a concomitant rejection of teleology—including, and especially, the attempt to impose grand narratives of inevitability and progress, of the unity of past and future glories, upon revolutionary perspectives and actions.<sup>55</sup> Famously, Fanon argues in the conclusion

<sup>48</sup> Fanon (2008a, p. 83). See Al-Saji’s analysis of this passage in (2021, pp. 181–83)

<sup>49</sup> See Al-Saji (2021) and Ngo (2021); the quoted injunction is discussed the latter.

<sup>50</sup> Al-Saji (2021, p. 184).

<sup>51</sup> Fanon (2008b, p. 157).

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 156.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 160.

<sup>55</sup> Fanon’s critical relation to teleological narratives has been widely discussed in the literature; here, I am drawing on accounts put forward in Sekyi-Otu (1996), Bhabha (1996) and Marriott (2018).

to *Black Skin, White Masks* that the “Vietnamese who die in front of a firing squad don’t expect their sacrifice to revive a forgotten past. They accept death for the sake of the present and the future.”<sup>56</sup> We can see why Fanon thinks that teleological histories are particularly pernicious in his response to Sartre’s infamous essay *Black Orpheus*. There, Sartre argues that the *Négritude* movement is “a ‘crossing to’ and not an ‘arrival at,’ a means and not an end”—merely one stage in a dialectical historical progression: “in each era, circumstances of history elect a nation, a race, a class to take up the torch,” and Négritude simply represents another group taking their turn.<sup>57</sup> Fanon writes that, in reading the essay, he “felt that they had robbed me of my last chance.”<sup>58</sup> Why? Because this perspective re-enacts and reinforces the colonization of temporality set out above. On the one hand, it recasts the *Négritude* movement’s attempt to recover and enliven its participants’ historicity as simply another chapter in a narrative that is not their own. Perversely, it reinscribes the very attempt to retake the past from the colonizer within another white man’s vision of history. In doing this, “the time of colonized reaction and resistance has been flattened, disjointed, caricatured.”<sup>59</sup> On the other hand, Sartre’s reading radically undermines the agency, spontaneity and futurity of the individual. Through this, “they proved to me that my reasoning was nothing but a phase in the dialectic”; even a purported ally “had found nothing better to do than to demonstrate the relativity of their action.”<sup>60</sup> Sartre “should have opposed the unforeseeable to historical destiny”; instead, Fanon tells us, he tried not only to find “the source of the spring but in a certain way to drain the spring dry”—where one necessarily leads to the other.<sup>61</sup> The effect of this—and of similar approaches—is to trap the individual in stagnation, in immanence:

The dialectic that introduces necessity as a support for my freedom expels me from myself. It shatters my impulsive position. Still regarding consciousness, black consciousness is immanent in itself. I am not a potentiality of something; I am fully what I am.<sup>62</sup>

### 3 Resonances

I now want to see what happens when we read these two accounts of time side by side. At first, it may seem that they make many fundamentally incompatible claims. While both associate freedom with futurity, projection and self-creation, the way they conceptualize this future and its relationship to the rest of time appears to be

<sup>56</sup> Fanon (2008b, p. 157).

<sup>57</sup> Sartre (1988, pp. 327, 333). Fanon discusses these quotations in (2008b, pp. 95–96).

<sup>58</sup> Fanon (2008b, p. 95). This response to *Black Orpheus* is analysed in detail in Webber (2018) and Bernasconi (2019, 2020).

<sup>59</sup> Al-Saji (2021, p. 182).

<sup>60</sup> Fanon (2008b, p. 95).

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96).

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

fundamentally at odds. For Beauvoir, the present must not become a tool that is evaluated in terms of its usefulness for building a desired future; for Fanon, this is what a revolutionary present must be, something that serves and heralds the future and can be surpassed in the striving towards that end. For Beauvoir, it is the heroic “future-myth”<sup>63</sup> that is cataclysmic; for Fanon, the cataclysm is that which shatters those grand narratives of the colonizer. For Beauvoir, we can maintain an authentic relation to our own finitude even as we strive towards projects that take multiple centuries, whereas Fanon proclaims he is “resolutely a man of [his] time.”<sup>64</sup> However, I want to draw out a set of affinities between these accounts that reveal deeper resonances. As mentioned at the start, I do not want to propose that Beauvoir and Fanon are both ultimately saying the same thing about time—I do not think that we can or should try to reduce their temporalities to each other. The resonances I want to highlight here are meant to shed further light on the productive tensions that remain between them.

The first key resonance that I want to highlight here is that, for both Beauvoir and Fanon, reductive temporalities not only imprison but constitute the subject within a present that is both stagnant and repetitive. Indeed, going back to Vergès' taxonomy of different approaches to time, it seems that the first and the second—whatever else they have against each other—are united in resisting the third. While I will not say much about these texts here, it is worth noting that subsequent major works of each author—*The Second Sex* and *The Wretched of the Earth*—both go on to characterize this constrictive presence in terms of drudgery, the embodied performance of roles that are expected of the group in question in manual or reproductive labor.<sup>65</sup> In both accounts, repetition reinforces itself and becomes sedimented, such that the limits of a subject's time become (to bastardize Wittgenstein) the limits of their world. There is also in both the sense that the oppressed subject is recruited into perpetuating an ongoing, inescapable cycle that produces more people who will suffer the same fate—in the reproduction of labor, of racialization, of complexes, of domesticity, or in literal reproduction, the repetition of the lifecycle.<sup>66</sup>

Both Beauvoir and Fanon also cash out this oppressive present in terms of a stagnant living death. We find this in Beauvoir's *Coming of Age*. Here, the elderly are constrained to a paradoxical situation that is future-less even as it is reduced to an

<sup>63</sup> Beauvoir (2018, p. 138).

<sup>64</sup> Fanon (2008b, p. 14). Of course, one key factor shaping these differences between Beauvoir and Fanon is that Beauvoir herself is a beneficiary of colonisation; her time is the coloniser's time. I think that there are important elements to Beauvoir's account that transcend her own limitations here. However, it is important to note that her work excludes and occludes racialized subjectivity, which may make one wonder whether her model of temporality is at risk of replicating the colonisation of time discussed earlier. See Al-Saji (2017), Gines (now Belle) (2014) and Hill-Collins (2017). Thank you to a reviewer for highlighting this concern.

<sup>65</sup> For analyses of this temporal structure in Beauvoir, see especially Deutscher (2006), Miller (2012) and Burke (2018). For examples of discussions of repetition in Fanon, see Drabinski's analysis of *Wretched of the Earth* (2013) and Sekyi-Oto, who notably also situates this aspect of Fanon's work in relation to the temporal structures of labour under capitalism (1996, pp. 73–79).

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

aspect of what has not happened yet: their decline and demise.<sup>67</sup> They are viewed and treated as if they do not have their own future, yet also as if what they will one day become is all that is significant about them. They are condemned to a timeless waiting, to a past and present that are cut off from the future and from projection. This degrades death itself as well—not only does it normalize the violation that death should represent, reducing it to something that is expected and mundane, it also flattens out the gravity of our interpersonal vulnerability as mortal, temporal, embodied creatures.

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, meanwhile, Fanon speaks of the deadening—what Lewis R. Gordon calls the “zombification”<sup>68</sup>—that accompanies entanglement in the locus of past and present:

...bourgeois society is any society that becomes ossified in a predetermined mould, stifling any development, progress, or discovery. For me bourgeois society is a closed society where it's not good to be alive, where the air is rotten and ideas and people are putrefying. And I believe that a man who takes a stand against this living death is in a way a revolutionary.<sup>69</sup>

This motif reappears in “Medicine and Colonialism,” published seven years later as part of the *Dying Colonialism* collection. Here, the constant cycles of implicit and overt violence render “life something of an incomplete death.”<sup>70</sup> The colonized subject becomes trapped within a stillness that is perversely characterized by unrelenting existential terror.

The colonized person [...] perceives life not as a 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.<sup>71</sup>

This foreclosure of the future threatens to drain death of its revolutionary potential. For both, then, stagnation within the immanent present threatens not only to tame and condition the subject through its finitude, but to tame that finitude itself.

A second key resonance is that both accounts fervently reject teleological conceptions of history. Recall Beauvoir's account of the “future-myth,” which threatens to absorb and instrumentalize the living present of the individuality in service of a grand historical narrative. Fanon's response to Sartre's *Black Orpheus* shows us in more radical, concrete terms what it truly means for a narrative of progress to undermine the agency and futurity of the individual.

<sup>67</sup> Beauvoir (1972, pp. 361–447ff).

<sup>68</sup> Gordon (2015, p. 91).

<sup>69</sup> Fanon (2008b, p. 155). As a reviewer has noted, this raises the question about the relationship between bourgeois and colonial time. As I read Fanon, these are not equivalent but nonetheless closely associated with each other, as the latter ultimately gives rise to and defines the former; this allows his analysis of one to shed light upon the other.

<sup>70</sup> Fanon (1994, p. 128).

<sup>71</sup> Ibid. Opperman analyses the temporality of this passage in detail in (2019, pp. 69–70).

Beauvoir and Fanon both associate this teleology with dialectics, with Hegel and with Marx. On the former, Beauvoir writes:

If one denies with Hegel the concrete thickness of the here and now in favor of universal space-time, if one denies the separate consciousness in favor of Mind, one misses with Hegel the truth of the world.<sup>72</sup>

There is, Beauvoir argues, not so much a political or tactical, but rather a moral difference between "a doctrine of pure dialectical necessity and a doctrine which leaves room for contingency"—it is only under the latter that each action "will be lived in its finiteness."<sup>73</sup> For Fanon, meanwhile, it was all the worse that Sartre remarked that many participants in the *Négritude* movement were "militant Marxists"; the narrative of historical materialism becomes another way of subsuming and ultimately dehumanizing the subject.<sup>74</sup> Imposing a narrative of dialectical necessity once again entangles the colonized within the colonizer's historical categorizations.<sup>75</sup> It suppresses the radical unforeseeableness of the revolutionary future; it not only undermines the agency of the colonized, racialized subject, but drains its specificity—now, anyone could have taken that torch and played that part in the unfolding of history. Crucially, Fanon links this to the resistance against the idea that a revolutionary moment can or must be justified or legitimized by a historical consciousness. He remarks "The discovery that a black civilization existed in the fifteenth century does not earn me a certificate of humanity."<sup>76</sup> Dis-alienation, the recognition of humanity, does not depend upon or wait for some kind of justification through a historical narrative—one that is, after all, framed in terms of the colonizer's historical categorizations.

These two resonances let us see that, ultimately, both accounts argue in different ways against messianic temporalities. Beauvoir cautions against sacrificing the present, not just for any future, but a distant glorious end that will somehow make "everything right" and retrospectively justify every act committed in striving for it—she argues against deferring our responsibility for our choices and projects, our confrontation with our ambiguity, to an ever-receding, necessarily unattainable future at the end of history. Similar, for Fanon, the revolutionary future is "not that of the cosmos"<sup>77</sup>—it is a radical rupture, but one that is relevant to and directly affects the individual, his existence, his country, his relations of solidarity. This future must be both unforeseeable and resolutely non-eschatological; it cannot displace the call to act upon either a glorious past or a future that can never happen. The radical act is the opening up of a revolutionary future in the present—this, as *Wretched of the Earth* tells us, is what shatters the complacency of the colonizer: Not the mere

<sup>72</sup> Beauvoir (2018, p. 131).

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 133. For a detailed analysis of Fanon on Hegel, meanwhile, see Sekyi-Otu (1996).

<sup>74</sup> Sartre, quoted in Fanon (2008b, p. 95).

<sup>75</sup> This section draws on the analyses of Fanon's reading of *Black Orpheus* in Webber (2018) and Bernasconi (2019, 2020).

<sup>76</sup> Fanon (2008b, p. 155).

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

potential of the colonized envisioning a different future, but rather the shocking actuality of the colonized being prepared to bring it about, to make the future present.<sup>78</sup> For both Beauvoir and Fanon, then, the authentic future must be anti-cosmological.

Having said this, we cannot ignore that for Beauvoir, a liberating temporality reaffirms the connections between past, present and future, while for Fanon, revolutionary time frees the subject from these. For Beauvoir, these connections are life-saving anchors. Separating the temporal axes undermines the subject's ability to take up and reinterpret their past continually even as they surpass it; reductive temporal imaginaries—whether the heroic future myth or the abstract quest for novelty—operate through severance. For Fanon, these connections are snares and shackles. The problem lies in entanglement—the subject becomes wrapped up in the impingement of the past upon the present and the future, and the threat of determinism – the past is dangerous, it is contaminated and contaminating.

All of this links up in interesting ways with general themes in the social theory of time about different directions of reductive temporality.<sup>79</sup> The latter is often seen as either a quantitative and qualitative flattening of time that reduces it to fungible, countable units of labor time; or as a teleological narrative that sacrifices individual present in favor of securing a glorious past and/or future.<sup>80</sup> Resisting the type of reductive temporality that focuses on fungibility and efficiency means holding on to the connections between temporal axes, emphasizing that the present cannot be reduced to an interchangeable, isolable now, that time should not be stripped of specificity and significance. On the other hand, resisting the type of reductive temporality that focuses on grand narratives means that disentangling the individual from a broader temporal narrative is key to enabling/restoring agency; the emphasis here instead needs to be on freedom from the past, the indeterminacy of the future, and the future as a radical eruption. These types of reductive temporalities, and their accompanying forms of resistance, cannot be reduced to or replaced by each other; they are linked, but the nature of their connection is itself going to be subject to change.

Having said that, Vergès herself proposes a model of temporality that can be read as countering, or at least addressing, both forms of reductive temporality. As a counter to both Fanon's temporality of the revolutionary future as well as the reductive temporal imaginaries that it resists, Vergès puts forward Creole time, which

mocks a European time of ineluctable progress: it has integrated the notion of slowness in human social and political enterprise. It is not a time for revolutionary politics—quick seizure of power—but a time for surviving and creating a space.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>78</sup> See Drabinski's reading of *Wretched of the Earth* in (2013).

<sup>79</sup> Here I am referring to analyses such as Thompson (1967), Adam (1990), Osborne (1995), Koselleck (2004), Tomba (2013) and Martineau (2015).

<sup>80</sup> Sekyi-Otu applies this schema to Fanon, comparing the latter's account of temporality to Marxist and Foucauldian accounts of time. See (1996, pp. 73–79).

<sup>81</sup> Vergès (2005, p. 43).

This is the lived temporality of those inhabiting “the territories of French Creole societies – Martinique, Guadeloupe, Réunion – which were born out of slavery, colonization and forced migrations.”<sup>82</sup> It is shaped by trans-historical feedback loops, interactions between different waves of new arrivals, the communities from which they were forcibly separated, and their descendants. It is also inaugurated by “a violent rupture,” but this rupture is the arrival and continued presence of the colonizer, and therefore “one that has not been chosen.”<sup>83</sup> It encompasses “different temporalities” – “capture, being sold, crossing the sea, arrival, adjustment, meeting others”—as well as the continued adjustment through interactions between new and old temporal norms.<sup>84</sup> This makes it “both rupture and unification”; the overlapping of different lived temporalities mean that it is “not linear time.” It is characterized by “repetition, mimicry and invention” and—crucially—therefore “sits between rupture and linear time.”<sup>85</sup> It mixes speed and slowness, and, by focusing on “the ephemeral nature of one’s life [...] allows space in the time of one’s life for conceiving emancipation not only as rupture but as ongoing practice.”<sup>86</sup>

However, the very power of this response lies in part in its specificity, in the lived temporalities that it draws upon and to which it speaks. It is therefore not a solution that we can simply appropriate and to redraw in generalizable terms—instead, we need to take on board the way it calls upon us to resist that impulse. Trying to find a singular non-reductive temporality is itself a reductive move, one that we can address by emphasizing multiplicity and the non-reducibility of lived temporalities.

#### 4 Conclusion: temporality and political phenomenology

This last point about the specificity of temporal frameworks highlights an important set of implications for attempts to grapple with time in a phenomenological way, however one may define this. Firstly, Beauvoir and Fanon’s respective accounts problematize – both in their content and through their irreducibility—endeavors to define the temporal structures of human experience in neutral, universal terms. The claim here is not that there are no generalizable temporal structures, or that we should not look for or talk about widely shared ways of relating to or experiencing time. Rather, the point is that the topic of time in particular – ironically – makes it easy to linger within or look for a very general level. If we think of temporality as Bergson, Husserl and Heidegger do, for example, then the specifics of various ways of relating to time become details to be filled in later, otherwise, by someone else. However, Beauvoir and Fanon show us that our relationship to time is shaped in fundamental ways by socio-political circumstances, by power, by systemic factors. We are temporal entities, but we live time differently, and we should not try to elide

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., p. 44.

or gloss over those differences in the quest for some universal template of temporality. To analyze this in ways that are not only conceptually adequate but can serve to motivate, enhance or interrogate strategies of resistance against reductive temporalities and the power structures they benefit, we need a sense of what Wendy Brown calls “untimeliness”: We need “...to contest settled accounts of what time it is, what the times are, and what political tempo and temporality we should hew to in political life [...] to grasp the times by thinking against the times.”<sup>87</sup>

We might think that phenomenology’s emphasis on embodied temporality and its insistence upon the interweaving of past, present and future in every moment of experience can serve to inoculate us against making the same kind of error that we diagnose in reductive temporal imaginaries (that is, the flattening of time so that it becomes interchangeable, generalizable, predictable, or the assimilation of specificities into a sweeping narrative). However, accepting the interpenetration—the “equiprimordiality,” in Heideggerian terms—of past, present and future might also make us more susceptible to what Linnell Secomb calls a “nostalgia that fails to perceive the restrictions that past-times inflict on the times to come.”<sup>88</sup> That is, we might take the influence of past upon present, and past-present upon future, for granted in a way that closes off possibilities of critique and resistance.

All this is to say, then, that, on the one hand, Beauvoir and Fanon remind us that time is political, and that a phenomenology of temporality will be, too, whether it wants to be or not. As Oksala, writing on the methodology of critical phenomenology, emphasizes: “When phenomenology is made to respond to the experiences of oppression and marginalization, its foundational ideas and methodological commitments must necessarily become unstable.”<sup>89</sup> In order to take hold of its critical and self-critical promise, phenomenology must recognize that we do not live time neutrally—our temporality is intimately bound up with the power structures that we inhabit, navigate, perpetuate.<sup>90</sup>

On the other, reading Beauvoir and Fanon alongside and against each other highlights that a political phenomenology is well-served by taking temporality into account, even—or especially—when this does not seem like an obviously necessary step. Temporality has a way of permeating any conception of what a political or critical phenomenology might look like. Consider, for example, the framework set out by Bedorf and Herrmann in the 2019 collection *Political Phenomenology*, which

<sup>87</sup> Brown (2005, p. 4).

<sup>88</sup> Secomb (2006, p. 349).

<sup>89</sup> Oksala (2022, p. 10). Approaching temporality this way may even resolve a concern that Oksala’s account faces. She argues that critical phenomenology must embrace the first phase of Husserl’s method—taking up a critical distance towards the natural attitude – without proceeding to the second, which seeks out universal structures of consciousness. This appears to leave us without the tools that Husserl used to trace out the structures of time consciousness. However, if we can only ever see, let alone understand, universal structures in particular manifestations; if abstraction to a more general level becomes more a tool than a goal (and one that is ultimately used to take us back to specificity, to let us appreciate concreteness and its resistance to universalising analyses); then holding back from the second step is not so much a surrender as it is an embrace of more methodological possibilities, less of a paralysing crisis and more of an energising one.

<sup>90</sup> We see this, of course, in the work of critical phenomenologists like Al-Saji and Ngo.



outlines three different types of political phenomenology: Firstly, there is “eidetic analysis,” which “analyses a set of basic experiences that are constitutive for acting in public”; the examples are Husserl’s discussions of conflict, love and subordination.<sup>91</sup> Secondly, there is the “phenomenology of political ontology,” which shifts to focusing on the existential analysis of “being-in-the-world as a whole” and the grounds of normativity; the example given is Arendt.<sup>92</sup> Finally, there is genetic analysis, which makes it possible to understand the space of experience itself as a result of political struggles”; the example is Laclau’s discourse analysis.<sup>93</sup> Bedorf and Herrmann acknowledge that these read like three steps in a progression, but insist that “all three refer to each other.”<sup>94</sup>

While I do think that Beauvoir and Fanon give us interesting models of bringing together the second and third types here, I do not want to focus on this; the point is precisely not to subsume either of them within yet another taxonomy. Instead, I want to close by suggesting that reading them together helps us to understand how temporality fits into and indeed conditions this framework – and, specifically, how it is essential to the move towards what Bedorf and Herrmann call genetic analysis. After all, temporality not only structures the basic experiences studied by eidetic analyses, but itself constitutes such a basic experience, especially when it is an experience that brings home to the subject how much their contingency and futurity are being constrained, channeled, reduced by systemic factors. The relationship between being-in-the-world and normativity is worked out through and in relation to both historicity and finitude, even as the norms that we enact and that we are subject to affect how we see ourselves in relation to time. Lived time, Beauvoir and Fanon show us, is normative, in both constricting and liberating ways, and resistance to injustice on existential grounds will be anchored in particular understandings of what it means for us to be futural.

Bedorf and Herrmann state that, in genetic analyses, the “absolute generality of essential characteristics is thus replaced by a historically situated and relative generality of differences.”<sup>95</sup> In order for this, however, to have “an effect on phenomenology itself,” that perspective must also be turned inwards; it must have an understanding of itself as historical, too. And, to quote Vergès once more, “any conception of history implies a conceptualization of time.”<sup>96</sup> As the very name suggests, *genetic* analysis is itself a temporal concept. It is an historical engagement with the nature of historicity; an exploration of the “generality of differences” that is worked out in and through time as much as the objects of its investigation are. Beauvoir and Fanon remind us to do this in a way that does not look for a singular conception of

<sup>91</sup> Bedorf and Herrmann (2019., p.3).

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 11–12.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>96</sup> Vergès (2005, p. 35).

historicity or temporality. “Where to begin?” must indeed always be a political question—and it does not, cannot, have only one type of answer.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> I would like to emphasise that I am not suggesting Beauvoir and Fanon fit into or should be categorised according to Bedorf and Herrmann’s taxonomy, nor that the latter provides us with a way of mapping the two conceptions of reductive temporality explored in this paper onto each other (which neither can nor should be attempted). Rather, I think they illuminate and challenge it in interesting ways. Critical phenomenologists, of course, may ask whether we even need such a taxonomy in the first place. Oksala’s recent work on the methodology of critical phenomenology (2022) suggests that there are interesting shared concerns between these two inquiries, but the implications of those intersections are beyond the scope of this paper. Thank you to a reviewer for raising these issues.

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