

“The giving birth of a world”: Fanon, Husserl, and the imagination

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Abstract

This article examines the role of the imagination in Fanon's and Husserl's work in order to rethink Fanon's relationship with Husserlian phenomenology. I begin with an investigation of the oft-overlooked ways in which the imagination appears in *Wretched of the Earth*. Here, I argue that Fanon puts a great deal of stock in the imagination, ultimately calling upon this faculty in order to presage the novel ways of being, thinking, and acting, which are a recurrent signature of his vision of decolonization. In the latter half of the article, I then offer an account of the decisive methodological significance of the imagination within Husserl's work. Revisiting the methodological infrastructure of phenomenology with Fanonian concerns in mind casts Husserl's project in a surprising new light, bringing to the fore the revolutionary potential of both the epoché and the method of eidetic variation. For at the core of Husserlian methodology lies a resolve to exceed the limits of our present empirical reality—a *leitmotiv* of Fanon's own thinking. I ultimately show that Fanon's work can thus be imagined as a reactivation, indeed a revolution, inaugurated at the heart of phenomenology and its most basic methodological commitments.

It is about catching a glimpse of madness: the possibility of a world that does not remain as it is.

—Nadia Yala Kisukidi, “Sleeping Standing Up: Notes on Lucid Dreams” (2021)

What does it mean to refuse to “accept the present as definitive” (Fanon, 1967a, p. 226)? To push relentlessly toward the “opening up of new, unlimited horizons” (Fanon, 2004, p. 173)? To “change the order of the world,” indeed, to “birth” a new world (Fanon, 2004, p. 2; 1967b, p. 181)? These questions constitute the driving force of Fanon's revolutionary project, a project that conceives decolonization not merely as a changing of the guard, but as nothing less than the demand to “make a new start, develop a new way of thinking, and endeavor to create a new man” (Fanon, 2004, p. 239).

Fanon's insistence on the new is simultaneously one of the more invigorating and challenging aspects of his writing. Of the various candidates that Fanon raises as possible resources for this thoroughgoing reconstitution of the world—rehabilitated indigenous traditions, creative appropriations of European thought, the cleansing force of violence in a counter-Manichean revolt—each is ultimately shelved as a compromise that ensnares the future in the closed circuit of the past. One of the decisive questions thus raised by Fanon's work is how one might, from within and while remaining aware of historical constraints, effect an opening to the genuinely new. My argument in this article is that a critical resource for this Fanonian labor is the imagination: it is, in part, through the imagination that one might become capable of, as Fanon puts it in *Toward the African Revolution*, the “giving birth of a world” (1967b, p. 181).

Throughout *The Wretched of the Earth* and associated writings of the period, Fanon attributes to the imagination and its products a central importance in the decolonization process. He understands this revolutionary potential from a number of different perspectives: the imagination (i) informs his critique of colonialism; (ii) explains how anticolonial revolt becomes conceivable as an actual possibility; and, finally, (iii) enables the creation of alternative ways of being, thinking, and acting, which effect a radical break with the past and the present. It is on this third level—the constitutive function of the imagination in a specifically *inventive* mode—that I see the Fanon of *Wretched of the Earth* as invoking the imagination to answer the infamous question he sets for himself in the conclusion to *Black Skin, White Masks*: how to effect the “real leap [that] consists in introducing invention into existence” (1967a, p. 229).

The perhaps somewhat more provocative argument made in this article is that it is by focusing on the role of the imagination in Fanon's work that we can shed new light on his relationship with, and creative rethinking of, Husserlian phenomenology.¹ Husserl, like Fanon, is driven above all by a concern to exceed the present—a concern, to put it in more Husserlian language, to suspend any hardened commitment to what is actual and push phenomenological investigation forward into the “spacious realms of possibility” (Husserl, 1950a, p. 162/2017, p. 200). And, like Fanon, Husserl invokes the imagination to the end of breaking out of our unquestioning fealty to the real world; among the tools of phenomenology, the imagination has a decisive systematic importance for Husserl. As I will argue, this is especially clear when it comes to the eidetic ambitions of Husserlian phenomenology: it is through the imagination that phenomenology is to soar beyond what has been empirically realized as actual and thus attain essential insight.

Revisiting Husserl's work through the lens of Fanon allows me to make two interventions. First, it opens up a timely reconsideration of what remains appealing in the methodological infrastructure of Husserlian phenomenology. When we attend to Husserl's methodological commitments from the perspective of Fanon's vision of decolonization as the explosion of our present space of conceivability, we see the fruitfulness of a set of methods that would allow us to engage unforeseen possibilities and, ultimately, to reconfigure the world. I thus issue a call for a renewed appreciation of the critical potential of Husserlian methodology.² The article

¹Inevitably, the choice to focus on Fanon's work on the imagination within the context of the phenomenological strain in his thinking risks obscuring other genealogies, which are no doubt relevant to a complete of Fanon's understanding of the imagination—most immediately, psychoanalysis and the surrealist dimensions of the Négritude movement. The account given here is not offered to the exclusion of these other approaches, but rather in the spirit of the idea that to gain a comprehensive understanding of any major philosopher, it will be a piecemeal, collective effort.

²Against a number of critical phenomenological accounts that have rejected Husserl's phenomenology as a meaningful resource for *critique*, “even though it is acknowledged as a historical starting point of or contribution to an approach that has moved beyond it” (Rodemeyer, 2022), I am adding my voice to the chorus of Husserl scholars who have urged an acknowledgement of the ways in which phenomenology, even in its Husserlian formulation, has always already been critical. This article seeks to enrich this debate by showing how the critical dimensions of Husserl's phenomenology are thrown into sharp relief when we revisit it through the lens of decolonial developments in phenomenology (especially, in this context, those made by Fanon). For examples of phenomenologists who have sought to reaffirm the critical orientation of “even” Husserlian phenomenology, see the essays in Aldea et al. (2022) and Laferté-Coutu (2021).

builds toward this insight by reading Husserl *through* Fanon—a decolonial reading strategy which I motivate and detail in some of my other work (De Schryver, 2023).³

Second, in so reading Fanon and Husserl together around the question of the imagination, I hope to contribute to ongoing conversations about the nature and extent of Fanon's belonging within the phenomenological tradition. In a series of significant interventions, Fanon has been construed as a leading figure in an Africana existentialist phenomenological tradition (Gordon, 1995); as an “unsophisticated” phenomenologist who nonetheless offers important specifications to the notion of “lived experience” in light of racialization (Macey, 1999); as a thinker who, alongside Sartre, urges phenomenology in a Marxist direction by developing a radical form of universal humanism (Vogt, 2012); as the inventor of a new phenomenological method of affectivity (Al-Saji, 2020); as pressing Jaspers's phenomenology of historicity into the service of decolonial ends (Bernasconi, 2020); and as a founding figure for a critical phenomenology that productively transforms Merleau-Ponty's notion of the corporeal schema (Karrera, 2020). Whereas most commentators have, up to this point, focused on the phenomenological pulse of *Black Skin, White Masks*, my suggestion that we consider the imagination in *Wretched of the Earth* as a creative retooling of the phenomenological method is intended to push investigations of Fanon's relationship with phenomenology beyond his early work.⁴ And whereas most accounts of Fanon's relationship with phenomenology have put him into dialogue with other thinkers working in Husserl's wake, I argue that it is with the founder of phenomenology (and indeed with the founding conception of phenomenology as an eidetic enterprise) that we can shed new light on Fanon as a phenomenologist.⁵ Finally, whereas most commentators have, for good reason, avoided the question of *method* when it comes to Fanon, my claim is that it is precisely concerning the methods of phenomenology that we can see the most productive encounter between Husserl and Fanon.⁶

The rethinking of Fanon's relationship with phenomenology in this key takes its inspiration from Lewis Gordon's (2000) broadened understanding of the phenomenological tradition. As Michael Monahan (2023, p. 143) has described this orientation, “the claim is not that [certain] non-European figures ‘fit’ neatly into the prescribed definitions of . . . ‘phenomenology,’” but rather that “their work evokes, directly or indirectly, key problems and dilemmas that can be understood as existential in the broad sense.” I ultimately argue that Fanon's belonging within the phenomenological tradition should be thought of along these lines: not a straightforward inheritance, but a critical uptake that breathes new and unexpected life into the methodological dimensions of phenomenology as formulated by Husserl.

This article will take its time to arrive at this claim: I do not begin with Fanon as a phenomenologist; rather, this is where I wind up. The first three sections of this article offer a reading of Fanon's work on the imagination “on its own terms,” as it were. With these Fanonian concerns in view, sections four and five then go on to examine the role of the imagination in Husserlian phenomenology and ultimately to discuss the connections between the Fanonian and Husserlian projects.

³I am here in agreement with Alia Al-Saji's (2021) recent claim that “it might be time to read phenomenology *through* Fanon, rather than centering analysis on Fanon's assumed debt to Merleau-Ponty's body schema or his lack of familiarity with Husserl.” This methodological orientation also takes its cue from the creolizing readings associated with the Caribbean Philosophical Association; see, for example, Gordon (2014) and Monahan (2017).

⁴Exceptions include Gordon (1995) and Vogt (2012).

⁵Exceptions include Gordon (1995) and Al-Saji (2020).

⁶Fanon's famous pronouncement in *Black Skin, White Masks* that when it comes to method he shall be “derelict” (1967a, p. 12) largely accounts for this abstention.

1 | “WALLOWING IN THE MOST EXTRAORDINARY PHANTASMS”: FANON'S CRITIQUE OF THE IMAGINATION

A central stumbling block for any attempt to direct attention to Fanon's positive invocation of the imagination is his extensive analysis in the first chapter of *Wretched of the Earth* of the manner in which those subjected to colonial occupation escape reality by means of fantasy. These passages, which famously involve some of Fanon's more rebarbative comments regarding the misguided uses of indigenous tradition, likewise seem to commit him to a functional and ultimately disparaging view of the imagination. For Fanon here proposes to understand the extensive imaginative worlds of colonized subjects—imaginative worlds populated by mythological remnants of precolonial culture—as no more than an unproductive defense mechanism. Lumping together “zombie ancestors, two-headed horses, corpses woken from the dead and djinns” as part of what he calls the “magical super-structure of indigenous society,” Fanon disparagingly describes those who indulge in the imagination as “wallowing in the most extra-ordinary phantasms” (2004, p. 18).

Fanon explains: “Zombies, believe me, are more terrifying than colonists. . . . The magical, supernatural powers prove to be surprisingly ego boosting. The colonist's powers are infinitely shrunk. There is no real reason to fight them because what really matters is that the mythical structures contain far more terrifying adversaries” (p. 19). From this perspective, the imagination operates as an understandable form of escapism from the reality of colonial occupation. As such—and here we can see why the imagination understood in this way attracts Fanon's ire—the “imaginative realm” operates as a palliative, distracting from the urgent necessity of anticolonial combat. And although Fanon does not use the language of “pathology” here, a psychiatric diagnosis of the colonial subject's flight from reality is not far from the scene: Fanon's many analyses of the “mental disorders” produced by colonial occupation often zero in on the patient's refusal of reality through dreams, hallucination, and mirage.⁷

Based on this analysis, Fanon suggests that it is the fight for liberation at the national level that promises, at the individual level, to liberate colonized subjects from “years of unreality” (p. 20). He writes: “In the liberation struggle, this people who were once relegated to the realm of the imagination, victims of unspeakable terrors, but content to lose themselves in hallucinatory dreams, are thrown into disarray, re-form, and amid blood and tears give birth to *very real and urgent issues*” (p. 19). The resulting picture of the imagination is a rather inauspicious one: through its diversionary effect, it has a supportive function within the colonial order. There is no practical push for freedom, because, as Fanon explains, “during colonization, the colonized subject frees himself night after night between nine in the evening and six in the morning” (p. 15). It follows that decolonization will involve emancipation from the world of fantasy.

This dismissal of the imagination in the early pages of “On Violence,” arguably the most famous essay in *Wretched of the Earth*, likely accounts for the dearth of extensive scholarly considerations of Fanon's use of the imagination.⁸ And yet, the imagination recurs throughout *Wretched of the Earth* in quite a different guise. Specifically, Fanon invokes the imagination and its products (i) as something colonialism is intent on restricting; (ii) as that which immediately presages the destruction of the colonial order; and (iii) as that which launches a new history of the human. I now turn my attention to an exegetical consideration of these more positive invocations of the imagination before offering some brief and

⁷See, for instance, Fanon's essay “Colonial Wars and Mental Disorders” (2004, pp. 181–233) and the psychiatric writings in *Alienation and Freedom* (2019). For considerations of Fanon's relationship to psychiatry and psychoanalysis, see Marriott (2018) and Vêrges (1996).

⁸Two exceptions are Hiddleston (2015) and Sekyi-Otu (2011).

admittedly tentative remarks as to how this might hang together with the critique of the imagination considered here.

2 | “DREAMS OF LIBERTY”: IMAGINATION AND ANTICOLONIAL COMBAT

The first level at which we can glean a more appreciative understanding of the imagination on Fanon's part lies within his broader criticism of colonialism. Specifically, Fanon suggests that the machinery of colonialism operates, if not centrally then nonetheless significantly, to restrict the imagination. As he writes, “the work of the colonist is to make even dreams of liberty impossible for the colonized” (p. 50). This plays out, in the first instance, in a very concrete manner. Colonialism is intent on bringing cultural production to a virtual halt, and it knows “full well” what it is doing, writes Fanon, when it begins “systematically arresting storytellers” (p. 174). More fundamentally, the colonized subject's concern with meeting basic subsistence needs blocks the possibility of imagining alternatives: “in a context of oppression, living does not mean integrating oneself into the coherent, constructive development of a world. To live simply means not to die” (p. 232). As Alia Al-Saji has instructively commented on this aspect of Fanon's writing, “material embodied conditions and foreclosed possibilities, eating and thinking, are held together in the affect of hunger. . . . Fanon is making the point that colonization wants to block imagination and invention, and uses all material and affective means to do so” (2020, p. 210). Colonialism thus drowns out the imaginative capacity of those subject to colonial oppression through concrete tactics: the prohibition of artistic activity and the effectively compulsory focus on subsistence needs.

But Fanon's comment that “the work of the colonist is to make even dreams of liberty impossible for the colonized” (2004, p. 50) can also be read in a somewhat less concrete vein. For, as Ato Sekyi-Otu (2011) has argued, underlying the spatial imagery of compartmentalization, apartheid, immobility, and petrification that pervade Fanon's descriptions of the colonial situation is an insight regarding the way that the imagination is, like the racialized subject under colonialism, “penned in” (Fanon, 2004, p. 14). Fanon's condemnation of colonial occupation takes as its target not only its abject violence and its manifest politics of segregation, but its subtle operation on the order of consciousness. In the “tightly knit web of colonialism” in which everyday life is literally condemned to immobility, the imaginative faculty is likewise frozen (p. 17). Colonialism has rendered the world it occupies inert, not merely as a matter of restricted movement between its two zones—those of the settler and the colonized—but more profoundly as a matter of the very possibility of creative thought. The fact that colonialism's restriction of the imagination features in Fanon's indictment of colonial occupation is an initial clue that Fanon is not as dismissive of the imagination as the early comments in “On Violence” would indicate. This is what I am describing as the first level of Fanon's positive account of the imagination. But it is with the manner in which the imagination manages to free itself, however briefly, from the imposed immobility of colonized life—a second level at which the imagination makes a more positive appearance—that the centrality of the imagination to Fanon's vision of decolonization comes more clearly into view.

Fanon famously describes the colonial world as a “petrified zone, not a ripple on the surface, the palm trees sway against the clouds, the waves of the sea lap against the shore, the raw materials come and go, legitimating the colonist's presence” (p. 14). Crucially, however, when it comes to consciousness—“on the inside,” as Fanon will put it—colonialism achieves only a *pseudo-petrification* (p. 17). That is, the attempt to freeze the imaginative capacity of colonized subjects is not entirely successful, and this in two ways. First, as we have already seen, dreams and fantasies continue as a defense mechanism against an intolerable reality. As we have also seen, Fanon was largely unsympathetic to this type of recoil to the dream world, regarding it

as effectively collusion with the colonial order. There is another way, however, in which the imagination continues to operate under colonialism. The passage invoked above concludes as follows: “[a] petrified zone, not a ripple on the surface, the palm trees sway against the clouds, the waves of the sea lap against the shore, the raw materials come and go, legitimating the colonist’s presence, *while more dead than alive the colonized subject crouches forever in the same old dream*” (p. 14).⁹

What is this “same old dream” that inserts a ripple into the petrified zone of colonized being? As Fanon elaborates, these are dreams of “muscular action,” of “aggressive vitality” (p. 15). Their object? A *substitution*, a reversal in the power structure of colonialism: “the colonized always dreams of taking the place of the colonizer . . . the colonized man is a persecuted man who is forever dreaming of becoming the persecutor” (p. 16). This brings us squarely to the second level at which we can see Fanon’s more positive use of the imagination. The dream that the colonized subject is “forever dreaming,” the dream that introduces tremors into the coagulated zone of colonization, is the dream of the destruction of the colonial world through, in Fanon’s unforgettable opening salvo to *Wretched of the Earth*, the “substitution of one ‘species’ of mankind by another” (p. 1). The relatively simple claim here is that this violent, substitutive moment of the decolonization process must become *imaginable* before it can become *practicable*.¹⁰

Importantly—and this is a point I will return to below—this imaginative bringing into view of the reversal of the colonial order depends, according to Fanon, upon certain fortuitous empirical circumstances. Fanon mentions the increasing instability of the international world order as well as the coming to prominence of certain nationalist politicians as key factors that allow the imagination to exceed, however briefly, the colonial order (p. 29). As a result, “to blow the colonial world to smithereens is henceforth a clear image within the grasp and imagination of every colonized subject” (p. 6).

Here we see a peculiar link between the imagination and the violent, muscular mobilization that runs like a thread through Fanon’s descriptions of anticolonial combat.¹¹ The imagination is marshaled as a crucial spark for the revolutionary act that is to put a decisive end to colonial occupation: the colonized subject first “*dreams of action, of aggressive vitality*” (p. 15) before the “decisive confrontation” (p. 3) can become actual. Operative at this second level at which the imagination operates is a refusal, certainly—a refusal of a world that is unjust, inhumane, and unacceptable. But there is also something more productive at work here: an envisioning of an alternative and, with this act of envisioning, a suggestion that things may not have to remain as they are. In other words, a sense of possibility is opened up.

Getting precise about the *kind* of possibility at work here will help us to appreciate why it is necessary, for Fanon, to invoke the imagination on a further level still. To see this, it will be instructive to briefly turn to another anticolonial phenomenologist, Trần Đức Thảo. For Thảo, anticolonial combat appears on the horizon in the first instance as an *effective* possibility, as that which, as he writes, “almost has the value of reality, that which would be real without a

⁹Emphasis added.

¹⁰It is important to note that, while I am interested in the relationship between the imagination and violence, my aim here is not to contribute to an Arendtian reading of Fanon—rightly discredited by Vogt (2012, pp. 9–10)—whereby Fanon’s dreams extend no further than a glorification of the violent act. My ultimate interest, as will become clear in the passages to follow, is to track how Fanon has a far more expansive vision of what the imagination can accomplish.

¹¹The link Fanon posits between the imagination and mobility is likely a mark of Gaston Bachelard’s influence. Fanon owned a well-marked copy of Bachelard’s *Air and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination and Movement*, in which Bachelard affirms that the “imagination is primarily a kind of spiritual mobility of the greatest, liveliest, most exhilarating kind” (1988, p. 2). Notably, Bachelard offers in this text multifaceted analyses of dreams of motion with special attention to flight—these are the kinds of dreams attributed, by Fanon, to the colonial subject. As Fanon writes, “the dreams of the colonial subject are muscular dreams, dreams of action, of aggressive vitality. I dream I am jumping, swimming, running and climbing. I dream I burst out laughing. I am leaping across a river and chased by a pack of cars that never catches up with me” (2004, p. 15).

certain obstacle that one takes as responsible for its failure” (1946, p. 881).¹² Under certain empirical circumstances, anticolonial revolt understood as the reversal of the colonial order lights up as realizable, as *effectively* possible.

This is evidently Fanon's understanding of how the imagination functions at the second level: it projects, from within specific material conditions, an alternative configuration of the existing structure. And, importantly, it projects this alternative configuration as a *substitution* of one people for another, that is, an *inversion* of the power relations that govern colonial society. Recall that the “old dream” first accessible within the colonial context is, quite simply, the “persecuted becoming the persecutor” (Fanon, 2004, p. 16). The imagination here reaches for what is imaginable from within the constricting circumstances in which it operates, and the *effective* possibility, to borrow once again Thào's expression, is to break free of domination through a violent seizure of the colonizer's place. But as Tyler Gasteiger—whose interpretation of Thào I am indebted to here—notes of this sense of possibility, “it flattens out the horizon of the future into a repetition of the past” (2021, p. 162). That is to say, qua inversion, decolonization in its substitutive phase leaves undisturbed the broader framework of the colonial world: as Fanon himself writes, it “obeys the same rules and the same logic” as colonialism (2004, p. 150). It thus hardly rises to the ambitious task that Fanon sets for “true decolonization”: the envisioning of a language, of a rhythm, of a generation of human beings, in short, of a world, which is emphatically *new*. To give birth to such a world will likewise be the task of the imagination, but of a form of the imagination that is no longer *repetitive* but *inventive*. This is the third level at which the imagination is invoked in *Wretched of the Earth*—through Fanon's analysis of the literary imagination, we see how the imagination might be productive of genuinely new possibilities.

3 | “INTRODUCING INVENTION INTO EXISTENCE”: FANON AND THE LITERARY IMAGINATION

The imagination as inventive—as going beyond repetition and allowing for the development of alternative modes of coexistence—makes its most prominent appearance in the fourth chapter of *Wretched of the Earth*, “On National Culture.” Here, Fanon broaches the topic of the imagination by way of a broader discussion of artistic (especially literary) activity in North and West Africa during the time of his writing. The context of Fanon's remarks regarding the imagination at this third level is important; in “On National Culture,” he undertakes to describe the emergence of a dynamic cultural sphere at a very precise space and time within the process of decolonization. Fanon has therefore not simply abandoned his erstwhile insights regarding the obstructing nature of colonialism with respect to the imagination and creativity more broadly. The point is, rather, that there is a phase within the liberation struggle in which the chokehold of colonialism is somewhat loosened; as a result, the space for the imagination in a more creative capacity is likewise opened up. We are thus reminded once again of a certain materialism undergirding Fanon's pronouncements regarding the order of consciousness. As William Paris has recently argued, for Fanon “every subjective consciousness has as its conditions of possibility prior historical structures and projects” (Paris, 2020, p. 79)—and imaginative consciousness is no exception.

The aperture to more inventive forms of the imagination is shown to be contingent, in “On National Culture,” upon anticolonial combat having already begun. But as I argued in the section above, anticolonial combat is itself incited by the imagination: liberation must become conceivable as an effective possibility before it can become practicable. In a round-about way, then, the imagination at the second level—namely, the imagination tied to

¹²Cited in and translated by Gasteiger (2021).

effective possibility—is needed to bring about the conditions of more inventive forms of the imagination. Thus, Fanon will write that “one cannot expect African culture to advance unless one contributes realistically to the creation of the conditions necessary for this culture, i.e., the liberation of the continent” (2004, p. 170). Regarding the link between the imagination and anticolonial combat discussed in Section 2, we might now add that there is an even more complex interplay than is immediately apparent: the imagination first makes violent struggle conceivable; but it is violent struggle that clears up the affective space for more daring forms of the imagination to get off the ground.¹³ It is to these latter forms of the imagination that I now turn.

As noted, Fanon discusses the inventive or productive imagination with reference to some of its specific creative products: artistic and especially literary innovations in the broader decolonization struggle. After dismissing the literary phases that consisted in imitating metropolitan literary products as well as Négritude literature—both of which Fanon regards as essentially repetitive—Fanon turns his attention to what he variously calls “combat literature, revolutionary literature, national literature” (p. 159). This third phase of literary production is, according to Fanon, expressive of the ways that the imagination can carve out a path to an unforeseen future. The significance granted to combat literature within the broader anticolonial struggle is striking; Fanon situates songs, folk tales, and other forms of literary production at the very forefront of the decolonization process. And although this discussion is, as noted, indexed to a particular context (Fanon does not stray far from artistic production in Algeria and Guinea), it seems clear that Fanon understood this analysis to contain generalizable lessons. This is consistent with Fanon's claims in *Toward the African Revolution* that in the worldwide struggle for liberation, certain areas will sometimes take the place of exemplar or “guide territory” (1967b, p. 145). As Jane Hidleston puts this point:

Fanon's vision of national culture can be read less as a description of literary practice in either Algeria or Africa than as a conception of what literature might be able to achieve when conceived in tandem with a process of liberation. . . . [“On National Culture”] is original in the power it gives to the imagination. . . . It is through the imagination that colonized peoples might be able to demand and presage a new way of living. (2015, pp. 50–51)¹⁴

That is, when the imagination operates in the creative or inventive mode paradigmatically on display in literary production, it involves visions of another kind of society, another humanity, another *world*. As Fanon writes, “combat literature . . . opens up new, unlimited horizons” (2004, p. 173).

How, precisely? As I see it, Fanon gives us two reasons to think that the literary imagination is able to precipitate the genuinely new. First, Fanon suggests that the literary imagination, in virtue of its modal function, enables a critical perspective on the actual world. By keying us into other modes of being, thinking, and acting, it shows us that the world as it currently exists is one among other possible worlds. In this way, it enables a fresh look at our own reality, certain features of which will appear no longer as ironclad necessities, but as contingent. The revolutionary import of making such distinctions is underlined by Fanon in the essay “Racism and Culture,” in which he famously asserts that “racism is not a constant of the human spirit” (1967b). As Gordon has rendered this insight of Fanon's, the key idea here is that yes, “we find ourselves in the epoch of a racist world,” but, crucially,

¹³My thanks to Alisha Sharma for encouraging me to clarify how I conceive the interplay between the imagination and violence in Fanon.

¹⁴For an alternative and more critical view of Fanon's literary analyses in *Wretched of the Earth* see Miller (1990, p. 48).

“other worlds have existed and could exist in the future” (Gordon, 1995, p. 34). The analysis in “On National Culture” brings to the fore the role of the imagination in arriving at such a conclusion: by allowing us to see our own reality as simply one expression of a range of possibilities, the literary imagination helps to sharpen our critical sensibility as to those features of the world that parade as transcendental structures but are in fact subject to change.

It is important to note that, with this critical function, we have already surpassed the form of possibility operative in the imagination at the second level. For the claim is not that a future beyond racism is an *effective* possibility easily realized; since racial thinking presents itself as a necessity, its overcoming is not a simple matter of realizing a possibility immediately available within the horizon of our actual world.¹⁵ The inventive imagination instead sets its sights beyond the actual world *and* the effective possibilities contained within it. Since these effective possibilities will inevitably be constrained by whatever this particular expression of reality takes for granted as necessary, a more radical form of possibility is required. This is how I read Fanon's statement that the “urgent task” when it comes to revolution is “to rediscover what is important beneath what is *contingent*” (1967b, p. 18).

But the role granted the literary imagination goes further than enabling this sort of critical perspective on the actual world. For, second—and in some ways more significantly—in creatively positing alternatives to the existing world, the literary imagination is enlisted in the service of the reparative work of envisioning *new worlds* no longer relativized to, nor constrained by, empirical circumstances. In its “exceptionally *inventive*” (2004, p. 179) ability, it conjures up novel possibilities. At stake here is not just the tweaking here and there of the existing world (for instance, in the substitution of one “species of men” by another accomplished by the initial stage of the decolonizing process) and not just the opening up of *effective* possibilities immediately suggested by a given empirical reality. It is not so much against the imagination as operative on this second level but *beyond* it that Fanon invokes the imagination as capable of prefiguring the genuinely new. Fanon thus speaks in a quasi-messianic register of the “giving birth of a world” (1967b, p. 181): this world structured by a “new rhythm” and a “new language” for a “new humanity” (2004, p. 2). The imagination appears here, again, in an *inventive* or constitutive mode: as a faculty which is not merely receptive and reproductive, but also—and essentially—creative and productive. It is therefore no coincidence that Fanon grants the storyteller who gives “free reign to his imagination” the ability to first reveal the enigmatic “existence of a new type of man” to the public (p. 174).

To be sure, Fanon does not conceive the literary imagination as simply “pure,” or entirely free from empirical circumstances. His commitment to a certain form of historicism is operative here as elsewhere: the ways in which humanity is inevitably bound to historical situations without being captive to them. Indeed, as I argued above, specific material conditions are required for the literary imagination to even get off the ground. From this perspective, the “new world” broached by the literary imagination is not entirely cut loose from the existing world. It would thus be more appropriate to say with Felwine Sarr that, for Fanon, “the world of tomorrow is in gestation within the world of today” (Sarr, 2020, p. 99). There is, in other words, no productive imaginative act which is not, even to some small degree, related to the actual world.

Nonetheless, the thrust of Fanon's comments on the imagination throughout *Wretched of the Earth* leave little doubt that there are greater and lesser degrees of liberation from the “real” that the imagination can—under the right circumstances—accomplish. And,

¹⁵I therefore see Fanon as ultimately attuning us to a far more radical sense of possibility than the phenomenologist with whom he is most often put into dialogue, namely, Maurice Merleau-Ponty. The form of possibility of interest to Merleau-Ponty takes the form of an “I can” within a given space; in other words, Merleau-Ponty is above all invested in what he at one point calls “*Möglichkeit an Wirklichkeit*: possibility in actuality” (2002, p. 36).

perhaps somewhat surprisingly, Fanon strongly suggests that it is in the purer forms of the imagination that we can see its most profound revolutionary potential. As an inventive faculty that allows the human being to project new ideas, new values, and new ways of being in the world from within a situated context, it is the imagination that supplies the Fanon of *Wretched of the Earth* with the elusive possibility of “the real leap: introducing invention into existence” (1967a, p. 229). Far from being an obsolete text whose pronouncements have failed to outlive their particular historical epoch, the *Wretched of the Earth* thus emerges as an exercise in creative utopia pertinent to any critical enterprise intent on fashioning new modes of existence.

Before considering how all of this might contribute to a reading of Fanon's *phenomenological* sympathies, I want very briefly to return to a question left in abeyance: How are we to reconcile the pivotal role *Wretched of the Earth* ultimately assigns the imagination with the resolutely critical analysis of it offered in the early pages of this same text? Recall that Fanon had given a pathological characterization of the imagination's turn to “myth,” understanding it as a defense mechanism and a flight from the real, which distracts from the necessity of anticolonial combat. My tentative suggestion is that the more positive account of the imagination that we have just considered provides us with the resources for an immanent critique of Fanon's pejorative descriptions of the colonized subject as determined to, as he puts it, “wallow in the most extraordinary phantasms” (2004, p. 20).¹⁶ For Fanon ultimately encourages precisely the flight from reality first witnessed in the mad dreams of colonized subjects; we are thus led by Fanon to see that even the “pathological” uses of the imagination might bear an incipient decolonial potential. In this way, the initially rigid distinction between the realm of the imagination and the realm of decolonial action—as well as the distinction between the “mad dreams” of zombies and two-headed horses and the presumably “sane” dreams of liberty—are destabilized. It would thus be more pertinent to uncover, as does Paul Ricœur (1991), how the function of the imagination as inventive and revolutionary is tied up with its “dysfunction” as escapist. As Ricœur writes, in a passage strikingly reminiscent of Fanon's own language:

The “nowhere” [of utopian thinking] can *or not* be directed to the “here and now.” But who knows whether this or that erratic mode of existence is not a prophecy of the humanity to come? *Who even knows whether or not a certain degree of individual pathology is not the condition for social change*, to the extent that this pathology brings out the sclerosis of dying institutions? To state this in a more paradoxical fashion: *Who knows whether the illness is not at the same time a part of the therapy?* (Ricœur, 1991, p. 187)¹⁷

Read along these lines, Fanon's earlier suggestion that decolonization would involve the end not just of colonial occupation but equally of madness is no longer tenable. We can instead see with David Marriott that “liberation from colonialism should not be confused with freedom from madness” (2018, p. 48). The resolute orientation beyond reality undergirding Fanon's most extensive work on the imagination in “On National Culture” thus casts the earlier analysis in a quite

¹⁶For an alternative view see Cherki (2006, p. 204). Cherki here offers a contrast between illusion (the object of Fanon's criticism) and the utopian thinking characteristic of Fanon's positive work on the imagination: “Is it not also the intellectual's function to fan the dream of that which is possible, of the creative utopia that is not the same thing as illusion, if we understand the latter to mean a complex of suggestions to which one clings in order to avoid self-awareness. . . . Illusion can provide a temporary structure, in time and space, for all and sundry in their encounter with the world, with the other of this world. The creative utopia, the dreamy utopia in whose service Fanon had tirelessly labored to the delight, enthusiasm, or annoyance of those who knew him belongs alongside it.”

¹⁷Emphasis added.

different light, showing that madness, far from being a feeble palliative, might very well be an effective part of the therapy.

The difficulty in maintaining with any rigor the distinction between pathological and healthy uses of the imagination directs us to an important reminder regarding the utopian elements of Fanon's thinking. The premium Fanon puts on possibility is not meant to encourage a stance confident of progress, as though history were driven by a secret assurance of redemption. As Paris points out, Fanon is not one to authorize optimism, “if optimism is understood as the calculation that things will get better” (2020, p. 95). The temporal form underlying Fanon's thinking is, on the contrary, averse to all teleology. This is the case not only because of Fanon's warnings that one cannot know in advance the outcome of the political fight, but more radically because one cannot be assured that one's imaginative visions are immune to a certain degree of pathology. The possibilities to which Fanon attunes his readers, far from being programmatic or certified by epistemological justification, are precisely unforeseen, unanticipatable, and take for their grounding the abyss opened by decolonial practice. Since there are no guarantees attending the labor of forging a new world, what Fanon offers is less an idealism than a tenacious hope.¹⁸

4 | “BREAKING WITH THIS IMPRISONMENT OF MAN AS SUCH”: THE METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK OF HUSSERLIAN PHENOMENOLOGY

So far, I have offered an argument as to how, despite Fanon's by and large dismissive assessment of the imagination early on in *Wretched of the Earth*, this text nonetheless contains a much more subtle and appreciative understanding of the imagination and its revolutionary potential. One of my claims has been that it is the imagination which the Fanon of *Wretched of the Earth* calls upon in order to “exceed the present” (1967a, p. 13), as he puts it in the introduction to *Black Skin, White Masks*. What all of this has to do with Husserl, and indeed with the phenomenological project more broadly, may at this point be entirely unclear. Taking my hermeneutic bearing from the foregoing interpretation of Fanon, I now turn to the role of the imagination or phantasy in Husserlian phenomenology in order to spell this out.¹⁹

The imagination appears within Husserlian phenomenology in a number of ways, most prominently: (i) as a topic of phenomenological investigation and (ii) as an instrument of the phenomenological method.²⁰ As a topic of phenomenology, Husserl offers a theory of the imagination that has won its fair share of critics for rehearsing the tired distinction between original and image and reaffirming the priority of perception.²¹ His phenomenological inves-

¹⁸To this extent, Fanon belongs to that decolonial literature which Nadia Yala Kisukidi (2017) understands under the moniker *Laetitia Africana*, the diverse theoretical attempts to joyfully “produce decolonized versions of the world.” She continues: “*Laetitia* is here intended to signify the move away from a melancholy fixation and toward a creative activity whose affective charge is joyful. Not in the racist sense by which an absurd and naïve smile is attributed to black peoples, but in the sense that joy inevitably accompanies, as Bergson says, every act of creation when a vital interest is at play” (Kisukidi, 2017, p. 66).

¹⁹In what follows, I use the terms “imagination” and “phantasy” interchangeably. It is nonetheless worth noting that Husserl tends to prefer “*Phantasie*” to “*Vorstellung*” (since *Vorstellung* suggests that phantasy is a positing act whereas it is in fact nonpositional [Husserl, 1980, p. 582/2005, p. 699]) and uses the language of “*Einbildung*” sparingly (since this stacks the deck in favor of an imagistic conception of phantasy that Husserl ultimately rejects [Husserl, 1980, pp. 16, 87–88/2005, pp. 18, 94]). Given that my interest here concerns the methodological role of phantasy rather than Husserl's efforts to uncover its phenomenological essence and hence distinctiveness vis-à-vis positional acts and imagistic consciousness—and given that my overarching aim is to bring out the continuity with Fanon—I switch between the two terms. For lucid accounts of Husserl's phenomenological investigations into the precise nature of phantasy see Jansen (2010) and Carreño Cobos (2013).

²⁰This distinction, standard in the literature, interestingly does not exhaust the scope of Husserl's thinking on the imagination. Although Husserl's early account of the imagination is explicitly offered against the Kantian notion of the transcendental imagination, the imagination eventually comes to play a decisive role in Husserl's theory of genetic constitution. On this see Jansen (2010), Steinbock (2001), Natanson (1998), and Crowell (2005).

²¹See, for example, Sallis (1992), Kearney (1998), and more recently Aldea (2020).

tigation of the imagination proceeds by way of elucidating its proximity to, but essential derivation from, perception; like perception, the imagination is understood as an intuitive intentional act, but one that apprehends its object in the mode of inactuality and nonpresence (Husserl, 1980, p. 16/2005, p. 18). Relative to perception, the imagination is thus understood as an incomplete mode of meaning fulfillment. Following this exegetical thread, we end up with a Husserlian position that—much like Fanon's early dismissal of the imagination as no more than a form of escapism—does not seem to attribute all that much importance to the imagination.

As in Fanon, however, this is not the end of the story. For when it comes to the imagination as part of the methodological infrastructure of phenomenology, Husserl leaves little doubt as to the fact that “*free phantasies assume a privileged position over against perceptions*” (1950a, p. 162/2017, p. 199).²² Indeed, the imagination has a singular methodological significance for Husserl. This is proclaimed forcefully in *Ideas* with the following statement: “Hence, if anyone loves a paradox, he can really say, and say with strict truth if he will allow for the ambiguity, that *the element which makes up the life of phenomenology as of all eidetical science is ‘fiction’*” (1950a, p. 163/2017, p. 201).²³ What does Husserl mean by this self-avowedly “paradoxical” claim?

The pivotal function that Husserl assigns to the imagination can best be appreciated by attending to the requirements Husserl lays out for transcendental phenomenology. I therefore devote this section to a brief reconstruction of Husserl's description of the aims and methods of transcendental phenomenology before turning, in Section 5, to an elucidation of the systematic place of the imagination within phenomenology in order to shed light on Husserl's enigmatic claim regarding the fictional nature of phenomenological science. Attending to the methodological requirements of transcendental phenomenology will already provide some clues as to what I take to be the proto-Fanonian vector in Husserl's work. Much of what follows is nevertheless preparatory to establishing the connection between Fanon and Husserl on the question of the imagination.

Distinguishing phenomenology from psychology in the introductory pages of *Ideas*, Husserl writes that whereas psychology is a science of empirical facts, transcendental phenomenology is to be an eidetic science: “a science which aims exclusively at establishing knowledge of essences and *absolutely no ‘facts’*” (1950a, p. 6/2017, p. 44).²⁴ Second and relatedly, whereas psychology deals with realities in that the phenomena it handles have “real existence,” “the phenomena of transcendental phenomenology will be characterized as non-real (irreal)” (1950a, p. 6/2017, p. 44). These requirements stem from Husserl's ambition that phenomenology lay hold of the essential being of transcendental consciousness and its intentional contents with apodicticity, the highest grade of certainty attainable.²⁵

In order for phenomenology to be an *eidetic* science, phenomenological inquiry must not be circumscribed to the narrow domain of whatever actual subjects may experientially encounter—that is, phenomenological inquiry must go beyond the facts. Were it to remain at the level of facts, phenomenology would spit out mere generalities and not essences. And in order for phenomenology to attain *apodicticity*, phenomenological inquiry must be divested of any and all presuppositions, down to the naïve belief that the world and what populates it

²²Translation modified; emphasis in original.

²³Emphasis in original.

²⁴Emphasis in original.

²⁵Husserl's two-pronged emphasis on (i) essence over “facts” and (ii) apodicticity over lower grades of certainty marks the distinctiveness of classical phenomenology from later developments, such as that found in Merleau-Ponty. Although hesitant to make his critique explicit, Merleau-Ponty suggests that Husserl's fatal error is his commitment to eidetic inquiry over factual investigation. For Merleau-Ponty, the remedy is sinking into factual existence and, relatedly, dispensing with the Husserlian “presumption to absolute knowledge” (1964, p. 109). For a consideration of Merleau-Ponty's departure from Husserl on this score, see De Schryver (2022).

really exist—that is, phenomenological inquiry must leave behind what Husserl at one point calls the “Ur-doxa” (1950a, p. 259/2017, p. 300). Were the founding belief in reality undisturbed, the results of phenomenology would be marred by the bias manifest in the human being’s propensity to attribute an existential index to the world and its beings.

Taken together, these two requirements serve to propel the phenomenologist into the new realm of phenomenology: “an infinite realm of being of a new kind, as the sphere of a new kind of experience: transcendental experience” (Husserl, 1950b, p. 66/1995, pp. 27, 66). The realm of phenomenology is emphatically not the domain of actual experience populated by entities presumed real, but the domain of the as-if: as Husserl writes, phenomenology is concerned with “the spacious realms of possibility” (1950a, p. 162/2017, p. 200). This shift of domain is first of all to be accomplished, as is well-known, by the inaugural gesture of phenomenological practice—the epoché and its attempt to suspend the phenomenologist’s unquestioning fealty to the actually existing world by putting it between brackets. Husserl was at pains to emphasize both the difficulty and the transformative nature of this move, the new standpoint being “absolutely alien from everything to which we have been accustomed” (Husserl, 1968b, p. 348/1997, p. 252).²⁶ By leading the phenomenologist away from their surrounding world and to its constitutive grounds, the epoché demands that all customary ways of thinking be left behind, thereby liberating the intellectual horizon. In Eugen Fink’s (1970) portentous terms, by “exposing the world as a problem,” this negative moment of the reduction allows the phenomenologist to surpass the taken-for-granted belief in the existence of the world and the “unity of acceptances” thereby implicated (p. 113). The epoché is therefore imbued with the potential for nothing less than “breaking with this imprisonment of man as such” (p. 113).

It is here that we can begin to glimpse a profound affinity with Fanon’s project: the Fanonian demand to exceed the present, to refuse to regard the current empirical reality as definitive, is revealed to be rich with phenomenological implications. For this very same ambition lies at the center of Husserl’s project. Fanon’s determination to break free of the limiting reality of the colonial world, his aversion to the idea that the past should unilaterally determine the future, might thus be understood as pressing the epoché into the service of anticolonial critique and ultimately revolt.

This affinity comes into greater clarity when we consider Husserl’s descriptions of the shift to the phenomenological standpoint as a modal undertaking. Within the realm disclosed by the epoché, Husserl notes that “the ‘real world,’ as it is called, the correlate of our factual experience, then presents itself as a *special case of various possible and non-possible worlds*” (1950a, p. 111/2017, p. 148).²⁷ That the real world be relativized in this sense is of a piece with the “liberation from fact” demanded by the transition to the phenomenological field (1968a, p. 71/1977, p. 52); the phenomenologist must shed any special allegiance to the actual. As Andreaa Smaranda Aldea (2020) has powerfully argued, the phenomenological impetus toward modalization—in this context, the demand that the real world be treated as one of a series of possible worlds—has the effect of loosening our habituated commitment to the particular instantiation of reality we inhabit. A key facet of transcendental phenomenology’s critical dimension is thus captured by what Aldea, borrowing Merleau-Ponty’s expression, describes as “loosening the threads of the fabric of our reality” (p. 304).

This ability to take a critical distance vis-à-vis reality is precisely the critical function that Fanon attributes to the inventive imagination as it operates in combat literature. Recall that, for Fanon, it is through its positioning of this world as one among possible alternatives that combat literature furnishes anticolonial revolt with a rush of energy. The imaginative projection of other possible worlds—and the associated relativization of our actual

²⁶ See also Husserl (1950a, p. 5/2017, p. 43).

²⁷ Emphasis in original.

circumstances—is, as Ricœur has argued, “the very instrument of the critique of the real” (1991, p. 171). Ricœur goes on to write: “The Husserlian transcendental reduction is the most complete illustration of this” (p. 171). It bears remarking that this is the same Ricœur whose translator's introduction to the French edition of Husserl's *Ideas I* Fanon read closely.²⁸

The notion that it is with the epoché that we can begin to appreciate a sensibility common to Fanon and Husserl may be surprising. For is one of the principal lessons of Fanon's intervention into phenomenology not precisely a doubling down on Merleau-Ponty's (2012) claims regarding the limits of the phenomenological reduction? Indeed, as Al-Saji has argued, Fanon's insights regarding the totalizing nature of colonialism means that it cannot be simply “bracketed to reveal a core of sense, as if racism were an afterthought” (2020, p. 211). Far from being a superficial layer of merely existential significance, colonization naturalizes itself and appears in the guise of a transcendental condition, as part of the constituting core which “already structures the phenomenological field of sense” (p. 211). I think this is entirely right. Fanon at no point suggests that colonization is simply a supplement that may with any ease be bracketed away. Equally undeniable is the fact that, to whatever extent colonialism emerges as a theme within Husserl's own work, it is treated precisely as one of so many lifeworld contingencies that the phenomenologist has the “complete freedom to transform in thought and phantasy” (Husserl, 1939, p. 223/1970, p. 375).

A full inquiry into the possibility of and prospects for a Fanonian reduction lies outside the scope of this article: my suggestion here is intended, again, as a step in a broader argument concerning Fanon and Husserl's shared investment in the imagination. Nevertheless, these considerations raised by Al-Saji—considerations to which I am sympathetic—urge some greater precision regarding my claim that Fanon's work is carried out in the spirit of the epoché. I will make two brief comments. The first thing to emphasize is that the Husserlian reduction does not simply take as its target surface layers of experience but is decidedly radical in its ambition to weed out deeply rooted epistemic commitments (its interest in the “Ur-doxa” is a case in point). In this way, classical phenomenology already encourages a critical perspective vis-à-vis taken-for-granted beliefs and habits. To the extent that this critical perspective might be angled at aspects of experiential life implicated by coloniality, we can already see that Husserl's project is not inconsistent with Fanon's.

This point alone is insufficient, however, to fully motivate the idea that Fanon's critique of colonization makes any use of the epoché. For the upshot of the above argument is precisely that colonization is not simply some particularly sticky taken-for-granted belief but secretes itself as a quasi-transcendental structure. That is, even if colonization informs many of the everyday matters properly subject to the epoché, colonialism is not itself reducible. What Fanon shows us is that the “residuum” which remains after the reduction includes colonialism qua structuring condition of our present world. If our interest lies with surpassing our present reality, indeed with birthing a new world, then the epoché cannot, from this perspective, get us very far.

The foregoing does not, however, exhaust the critical scope of the epoché. Indeed, the above qualification that colonialism is a structuring condition of our *present* world is significant. And this brings me to my second point. As I explored in Section 3, Fanon is unambiguous that colonialism is not to be understood as an ahistorical, invariant, and universal constituting condition. It is instead a constituting condition that has itself, at some point in time, been constituted; it is not accompanied by any necessity, for the world has been and could be otherwise (hence: *quasi*-transcendental). This is precisely the sort of insight the epoché seeks to deliver. Insofar as the phenomenological standpoint encourages an orientation away from the actual and an insistent push into the conditioning depths of experience, it has the potential to be revelatory of, as Aldea writes of Husserl's work, “naturalized contingencies parading as necessities” (2020, p. 317).

²⁸See Jean Khalifa, “Frantz Fanon's Library,” in Fanon (2019, p. 738).

To be sure, Husserl himself foresaw no such application of the epoché. Yes, the epoché is decidedly critical in orientation, but decolonial intentions are far from Husserl's own project. My view is that this does not so much discourage a reappropriation of this method so much as alert us to the need to carry it beyond the purposes conceived by Husserl himself. Seen from the perspective of Fanon's own philosophical resolve to surpass the limits of our empirical circumstances, the epoché might thus be thought of as part of a broader decolonial toolset, which allows us not only to render questionable deeply sedimented habits, but more radically to put false necessities in their place.

5 | “THE ELEMENT WHICH MAKES UP THE LIFE OF PHENOMENOLOGY. . . IS FICTION”: THE METHODOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE IMAGINATION FOR HUSSERLIAN PHENOMENOLOGY

With its analysis of the broader methodological framework of Husserlian phenomenology through a Fanonian lens, the preceding section has sought to offer an initial argument as to how Husserl's methods are amenable to Fanon's decolonial project. Specifically, the negative moment of the reduction or the epoché reveals a shared philosophical sensibility animating both Fanon and Husserl: a determination to break free of the constraints, epistemic or otherwise, of our given empirical situation. But it is within still a further aspect of Husserlian phenomenology that, I want to argue, we can locate the most productive point of contact between Fanon and Husserl. And with this we are returned squarely to the question regarding the systematic importance of the imagination within Husserl's work. Recall that, from the perspective of phenomenological method, Husserl famously argues that the imagination takes precedence over perception. This lies behind his claim that “the element which makes up the life of phenomenology . . . is fiction” (1950a, p. 163/2017, p. 201). The segue into the broader methodological framework of transcendental phenomenology undertaken above will now allow us to elucidate this claim.

The first thing to note is that for Husserl, the imagination involves a neutrality-modification with respect to reality: what appears to the phenomenologist in the mode of phantasy appears unencumbered by the existential index (1980, p. 504/2005, p. 605). Recall that the object of a phantasied act is neither present nor presumed to be actually existent. While this means phantasy plays second fiddle to perception when it comes to intention fulfillment (since phantasied acts are indirect and require a re-presentation or *Vergegenwärtigung*), these same features work in phantasy's favor when it comes to the method. By apprehending its object in the mode of the as-if, phantasy accomplishes something of an automatic suspension of the “Ur-doxa” plaguing phenomenological inquiry. Operating in the mode of phantasy, the phenomenologist abstains from any assertions concerning existence, thereby doubling down on the presuppositionless stance first accomplished by the epoché. It is for this reason that, as noted above, the imagination assumes a decisive priority over perception when it comes to the phenomenological method.

But there is a further reason still that Husserl designates the imagination—and fiction in particular—as nothing less than the “element which makes up the life of phenomenology” (1950a, p. 163/2017, p. 201). The imagination receives this particular accolade on account of the special role it has to play in phenomenology qua eidetic science. In contrast with the natural scientist who takes experience as their basis—and who would be ill-advised to deploy the imagination in their studies—the phenomenologist joins other eidetic scientists (Husserl's standard example being the geometer) in their entitlement to make “rich use of phantasy” (1950a, pp. 21, 163/2017, pp. 62, 200).²⁹ Essential knowledge is achieved, according to

²⁹ Translation modified.

Husserl, by way of the method of eidetic variation—which Husserl also refers to as imaginative variation or free phantasy. Eidetic variation typically involves taking some phenomenon—be that a lived experience, for example, perception, or some object of experience, for example, the bench in the lecture hall—and imaginatively generating a series of possible variants. By varying features of the original, this process of producing variants then allows the phenomenologist to, as Husserl explains, put forward the question of “what holds up amid such free variations of an original—let us say, of a thing—as the *invariant*, the necessary, universal form, the essential form, without which something of that kind would be altogether inconceivable” (1968a, p. 72/1977, p. 54).³⁰ This invariant, which Husserl will call the “*eidos*,” is “given to immediate intuitiveness” in the sense that the phenomenologist sees it for themselves (1968a, p. 73/1977, p. 54). That is, one begins with some phenomenon and imaginatively varies its characteristics in order to isolate those that are necessary; grasping the *eidos* would not be possible without that use of the imagination.

In this way, the imagination is critical to phenomenology's ambition to attain essential knowledge, for eidetic variation is nothing less than the procedure by which pure essences are intuited. Husserl is unambiguous about the significance of this aspect of the method to the functioning of transcendental phenomenology as a whole: “the fundamental performance upon which everything else depends is the shaping of any experienced or phantasied objectivity into a variant” (1968a, p. 76/1977, p. 57).³¹ But as Husserl's invocation of a “phantasied objectivity” in this quote suggests, the imagination's role in producing variants does not yet exhaust its methodological significance. It is not only that the imagination produces variants, but the variants produced may in certain instances be variants of *something imagined*. Indeed, for Husserl, it is preferable that the “original,” which inaugurates the series of variants, not be drawn from experience, since beginning with an *experienced* objectivity and generating variants on this basis carries the risk of stamping the *eidos* with the mark of the actual. The consequences are significant: failing to carefully exclude actuality risks delimiting the relevance of phenomenological investigation to the factual world. The eidetic ambitions of phenomenology would, as a consequence, be frustrated. For phenomenology is not interested in what Husserl at one point calls “universalities in relation to empirical extensions,” that is, essences dependent upon the available empirical facts (1968a, p. 79/1977, p. 59). It is after a higher grade of universality: a *pure eidos* which holds across all possible worlds. So, when it comes to, for example, intuiting the *pure* essence of “color,” Husserl writes that it is not “a question of something common to this and that factual color and possibly of optional colors which might ever confront us in this space here or even on earth” (1968a, p. 86/1977, p. 64). Eidetic variation can only claim to deliver “the purely ideal ‘color,’ which is common to all colors which are at all conceivable *without the presupposition of any factual actuality*” (1968a, p. 86/1977, p. 64).

In order to achieve this latter goal, the phenomenologist must ensure that the factuality of the original is left “out of play as irrelevant” (1968b, p. 322/1997, p. 231). One promising way to accomplish this is to have one's eidetic variation takeoff from examples drawn not from actual experience, but from fiction. Hence the reference to the “original” being a “phantasied objectivity.” By setting off from a world of pure phantasy—the realm of fiction—the phenomenologist ensures that the *eidos* arrived at will likewise be purified of any reference to actuality. As Husserl elaborates in the lectures on *Phenomenological Psychology*:

The *eidos* is only then actually pure whenever every restriction to actuality is in fact most carefully excluded. *If we vary freely but secretly stipulate that the variants*

³⁰ Emphasis added.

³¹ Translation modified.

must be optional tones in the world, tones heard or able to be heard by human beings on earth, then we have indeed something essentially universal or an eidos, but one related to our factually actual world and restricted to this all-inclusive fact. This restriction, or secret stipulation, must be suspended if we are to attain a higher grade of universality no longer stamped by actuality; and with this gesture, we move into a “pure phantasy-world.”

(1968a, p. 74/1977, p. 55)

Husserl here conjures an important contrast between two kinds of phantasy, a contrast he spells out in greater detail in *Phantasy, Image-Consciousness and Memory*. In the first instance we have phantasies that remain in some way bound to the real world, drawing on actual experience for their basis. For example, we might, Husserl writes, take “this yellow house given in actual experience” and imagine it as blue, letting everything else remain constant (1980, p. 533/2005, p. 640). The imagined blue thus appears as an “added” and “superimposed” element that contradicts “the actually experienced property of yellow” (1980, p. 534/2005, p. 640).

When we phantasy in this way, there is a peculiar conflict attendant on phantasied experiences. Husserl discusses this conflict in terms of “protests,” “demands,” or “prescriptions” made by the real world (1980, pp. 42, 47, 254, 534/2005, pp. 45, 51, 309, 640). These remain effective so long as a link with actual experience remains in play. Thus, if I imagine a costume parade on the street around the corner from my home, “the remembered street makes demands. The demands that it makes are related to possible natural objects or likely natural objects, and accordingly a human being with six heads is excluded” (1980, p. 254/2005, p. 309). Put otherwise—and recalling the Fanonian analysis above—phantasy is here relegated to *effective* possibility, to possibilities that would be actual save for a certain impediment: the house could be blue were it not yellow; the costume parade could take place were it not the inappropriate day. In both instances, moreover, we have possibilities that are clearly related to our worldly experience: blue is a factual color that is encountered in the world, costume parades are the types of events that are actually held on streets like the one near my home. There is thus a significant sense in which the sense of possibility operative in this first kind of phantasy is constrained by empirical circumstance and allows, as Husserl writes, only a “small sphere of freedom” (1980, p. 535/2005, p. 641). As Husserl explains it, when we phantasy in this manner we are “follow[ing] experience’s own train of sense,” hence the exclusion of the six-headed human (1968a, p. 70/1977, p. 52). And, significantly from the perspective of Fanon’s interests in breaking with the past, if we remain with this kind of phantasy “we can do nothing but project the indeterminate future world in the universal style of the past” (1968a, p. 70/1977, p. 52).

The second type of phantasy—and the one that consistently commands Husserl’s interest—is a pure phantasy world completely disconnected from any reference to the actual world. This is possible, wagers Husserl, if we take phantasy rather than perception as the basis for further phantasy. In such a scenario, rather than simply imagining the house, which is as a matter of fact yellow as blue and leaving everything else undisturbed, “I imagine all the world as blue. . . . I abandon the realm of reality; I live entirely in the intuition of the blue world and submit to it” (1980, p. 534/2005, p. 641). Whatever I take from the real world is decoupled from the existential index—the presumption of reality—and receives instead the “characteristic of what is phantasied, of the as-if” (1980, p. 534/2005, p. 641). In this way, I phantasy unshackled from the limiting effects of *actual* possibility—rather, I phantasy freely, “at my pleasure” and no longer under the jurisdiction of what actual experience deems conceivable (1980, pp. 535–536/2005, pp. 642–643). Having ceased to index my phantasies to reality as it is actually experienced, the conflict attendant on less pure varieties of phantasy likewise ceases, and the real world no longer raises its voice in protest. It is this purer form of phantasy that Husserl enlists to vouchsafe the a *prioricity* of phenomenological insight.

Whether it is in fact possible to enter a pure phantasy world—and, assuming it is, whether such a thing would ultimately be desirable—is a question I discuss at some length elsewhere (De Schryver, 2022). In this context, it is worth noting that Husserl himself admits that the thought of a world completely purified of any reference to the actual is a hard sell: “It is doubtful,” he writes, “whether there is such a thing as a completely pure phantasy, hence a phantasy outside all connection with acts of actual experience” (1980, p. 509/2005, p. 610). Was Hume right, then, to think that “all ‘ideas’ . . . ultimately ‘derive’ from impressions” (1980, p. 510/2005, p. 611)? The answer from Husserl is clear: “I cannot reconcile myself to this view” (1980, p. 510/2005, p. 611). Although I will not here delve deeper into why Husserl thinks a pure phantasy world remains secure as a possibility in thought, I hope at least to have motivated why the imagination—and the purer forms of it—assume such a central importance for his project. To the skeptic who will ask of pure phantasy, “What use is that”? Husserl retorts: “very useful indeed, if pursued correctly. For [this] is the way in which all intuitive essential necessities and essential laws and every genuine intuitive a priori are won” (1968a, p. 72/1977, p. 53). It is thus, above all, phenomenology’s aspiration to become an eidetic science that renders the imagination indispensable: foregoing pure phantasy entails foregoing the essential knowledge that phenomenology hopes to deliver. And, given the significance of phenomenology’s eidetic strain, it would not be much of a stretch to conclude with Felix Kaufmann, an early student of Husserl’s, that in consequence “phenomenology must be imaginative . . . or it loses its identity as a philosophical movement” (1946, p. 379).³²

Now, what does this aspiration to pure eidetic knowledge—which Julia Jansen has recently called the “most Husserlian aspect of phenomenology” (2022, p. 47)—have to do with Fanon? Obviously, Fanon at no point proposes a methodological procedure that involves varying examples, be they real life or fictional. Nor does Fanon have any interest in arriving at an “*eidós*” purified of any reference to the real world. Indeed, the rallying call of Husserlian phenomenology—to the things themselves—is markedly absent in Fanon’s work. Moreover, Fanon significantly does not partake of the Husserlian fantasy (if you will allow me the formulation) of a pure phantasy world, entirely disconnected from reality. And finally, Fanon makes no secret of the revolutionary aims driving his project—aims that find little of correspondence in the Husserlian project (indeed, Husserl’s claims that phenomenology is unmotivated seem to exclude this in principle).

And yet, when we isolate the methodological demand at the core of Husserl’s eidetic project, the proposal that it is here that we can see Fanon’s creative entente with Husserl will appear less preposterous. For this methodological demand consists in a determination to not allow reality to set a limit on our imaginative wonderings—to not allow what our contingent circumstances have deemed an *effective* possibility to restrict our sense of the full scope of what is possible. Seen this way, phenomenology holds resources not simply to *critique* the real, but also, with its method of imaginative variation, to *surpass* it. To accomplish this liberation from the real, Husserl joins Fanon in assigning an absolutely central role to the imagination in its creative or inventive dimension. And, like Fanon, Husserl sees this inventive dimension above all in the work of literary fiction. Looking at this aspect of Husserl’s work with Fanonian glasses on foregrounds the unsuspected revolutionary, indeed decolonial, potential of this “most Husserlian” part of the methodological infrastructure of phenomenology. It thus allows us to see with Esteban Marín Ávila “why and how a form of thought such as transcendental phenomenology, which claims to be European, can nevertheless provide invaluable conceptual resources to think about matters of concern beyond Europe” (2022, p. 419).

The full scope of a reading of Husserl through Fanon is, of course, not thereby exhausted. Beyond lighting up what remains relevant within transcendental phenomenology from the

³² Cited by Kearney (1998, p. 35).

perspective of a thought committed to decoloniality, bringing Fanon and Husserl together in this way will inevitably provoke a critical perspective on those aspects of Husserlian phenomenology that remain imbricated with the European colonial project.³³ And a more comprehensive investigation into the role of the imagination in each of their corpuses would also need to take into account decisive points of contrast between these two thinkers. Two further lines of inquiry immediately suggested by the foregoing analysis include: (i) the possibility and role of an intersubjective imagining and (ii) the legitimate uses of the past in the work of inventive imagination.³⁴ I hope this allusion to possible directions of future research serves to indicate the fruitfulness of revisiting Husserlian phenomenology—and the priority granted the imagination within it—from the perspective of Fanon's decolonial thought.

But what does the reading performed in this article contribute to our understanding of *Fanon* and his relation to phenomenology—after all the central question of this special issue? Against David Macey's (1999) verdict, I think there is sufficient evidence to suggest that Fanon had more than a superficial understanding of Husserlian phenomenology. Ultimately, though, I am less interested in establishing that Fanon takes up phenomenology “like a possession” by staying close to its master texts (Bernasconi, 2000, p. 6). What I have been after is different—it is to show that Fanon's work *can be imagined* as a reactivation, indeed a revolution, inaugurated at the heart of phenomenology and its most basic methodological commitments.³⁵

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³³On this, see Al-Saji (2020) and De Schryver (2022).

³⁴On the question of the relationship between the inventive imagination and the past from a Fanonian perspective see Ferrari (forthcoming).

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