



This is a repository copy of *Fanon, the recovery of African history, and the Nekyia*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:

<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/194052/>

Version: Published Version

---

**Article:**

Romdenh-Romluc, K. (2022) *Fanon, the recovery of African history, and the Nekyia*. *European Journal of Philosophy*, 30 (4). ISSN 0966-8373

<https://doi.org/10.1111/ejop.12835>

---

**Reuse**

This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs (CC BY-NC-ND) licence. This licence only allows you to download this work and share it with others as long as you credit the authors, but you can't change the article in any way or use it commercially. More information and the full terms of the licence here: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/>

**Takedown**

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing [eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk) including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



[eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk)  
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>

# Fanon, the recovery of African history, and the *Nekyia*

Komarine Romdenh-Romluc 

Department of Philosophy, University of Sheffield, UK

## Correspondence

Komarine Romdenh-Romluc, Department of Philosophy, 45 Victoria Street, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, S3 7QB, UK.  
Email: [k.romdenh-romluc@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:k.romdenh-romluc@sheffield.ac.uk)

Black history is the study of the human past that focuses on people with black skin: the things those people have done, the past societies of Africa, world events from the perspective of Black people, and so on. Nowadays, the recovery of Black history is increasingly seen as important in the United Kingdom and elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> People campaign for its inclusion in school curricula; there are documentaries exploring past African civilisations, and university research programmes devoted to it. The recovery of African history was also deemed important by the Négritude Movement (a Black consciousness movement developed in Paris), which was a central part of the intellectual context for Fanon's work. It is perhaps, therefore, surprising to find that Fanon is highly critical in *Black Skin, White Masks* (Fanon, 2008), of négritude writers' attempts to recover African history. In this paper, I will argue that his critique can only be fully understood if we read his text as adopting an important idea from Césaire (1995) that, following Jung (2009), can be called a *nekylia*. As such, Fanon's text is a form of therapy.

I will begin by briefly explaining what the Négritude Movement is, and why writers associated with it were concerned with African history, before presenting Fanon's explicit objections to their arguments. After this, I will offer a further reason from Fanon's text for recovering African history that is not defeated by his objections. The final part of the paper will present Fanon's *nekylia* and show how reading *Black Skin, White Masks* as therapy helps explain why Fanon dismisses attempts to recover African history in the text.

## 1 | THE NÉGRITUDE MOVEMENT AND THE RECOVERY OF AFRICAN HISTORY

The Négritude Movement was an anticolonial movement that emerged in Paris during the 1930s. One of its central themes was Black identity. The term 'négritude'—coined by Aimé Césaire, one of the movement's founders—means 'blackness' or perhaps 'black personhood'. The other two thinkers usually recognised as founding the movement are Léon Gontran Damas, and Léopold Sédar Senghor. All three were from countries under French colonial rule. No movement is created out of nothing. Césaire, Damas, and Senghor were influenced by the Harlem and Haitian

---

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/) License, which permits use and distribution in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, the use is non-commercial and no modifications or adaptations are made.

© 2022 The Author. *European Journal of Philosophy* published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

Renaissances, through which Rabaka (2015) traces the roots of the Négritude Movement to the thought of W. E. B. DuBois. The three men encountered these ideas at a ‘salon’ hosted in Paris by three sisters from Martinique: Jane, Paulette, and Andrée Nardal. Sharpley-Whiting (2000) observes that women’s contributions to the Négritude Movement are usually overlooked, and Jane Nardal had already published an article in 1928 that set out many of the themes that later came to characterise it (Nardal, 2002).

Different thinkers put forward different ideas under the banner of the Négritude Movement, but a central aim all négritude writers share is to develop a new black identity as an alternative to colonial conceptions of blackness. Colonial thought takes White people to be superior, civilised, rational, intelligent, and fully human. Black people are claimed to be inferior, primitive, uncivilised, less intelligent, less rational, and not fully human (the latter is sometimes couched as less evolved). Whiteness also has a special normative status—it is conceived as the standard state for humans. Black people are thus, according to colonial thought, not just different but also defective. At the time, people from the French Caribbean commonly thought of themselves as French rather than Black, taking colonial ideas to apply to Black people in Africa. This self-conception crumbled when they travelled to France and discovered that White people thought of them as Black, not French (Fanon, 2008). Against this, the négritude writers posited a common Africanized identity for all Black people, turning to the—at the time—largely unknown history of Africa as inspiration.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, their emphasis on recovering African history was a challenge to the longstanding claim that Africa *has no history*.<sup>3</sup> For example, Hegel writes,

‘Africa [...] is no historical part of the World; it has no movement or development to exhibit [...] What we properly understand by Africa, is the Unhistorical, Underdeveloped spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature’ (Hegel, 1991, p. 99).

For Hegel, having a history does not mean just existing through time. History is the rational development and progression of a group of people towards a social structure that establishes their freedom. Animals do not have a history. Of course, there is such a thing as *natural* history—a longstanding discipline that studies the natural world and the development of organisms. But this is different from the rationally connected succession of events that constitutes history in the human sense. Hegel holds that African people have no history because they are completely unaware of freedom (and in this sense are less evolved than Europeans). Their societies are thus static and do not develop and progress in a rational manner towards structures that realise freedom. African people thus live in a natural state, akin to animal existence.<sup>4</sup>

Hegel was far from unique in holding such a view, and similar ideas persisted, in at least certain quarters, into the 20th century.<sup>5</sup> In the 1960s, the BBC broadcast a lecture series in which Professor Hugh Trevor-Roper from the University of Oxford notoriously stated that precolonial Black Africa had no history.<sup>6</sup> Like Hegel, Trevor-Roper’s claim was based on the idea that history ‘is essentially a form of movement and purposive movement too [...]’ so a static society—like those supposedly existing on the African continent—that does not change and develop is not historical. Moreover, Trevor-Roper contends that ‘we study [history] in order to discover how we came to where we are’ (Trevor-Roper, 1965, p. 9). So history only concerns those societies that have contributed to the progress of the world more broadly. Since Trevor-Roper assumes past Africans have not contributed, it follows that studying Africa’s past would merely be ‘to amuse ourselves with the unrewarding gyrations of barbarous tribes in picturesque but irrelevant corners of the globe’ (Trevor-Roper, 1965, p. 9).<sup>7</sup>

## 2 | FANON'S OBJECTIONS

Chapter 8 of *Black Skin, White Masks* focuses largely on the question of recovering African history. Fanon makes three objections in this chapter.

First, there are two broad lines of response available to the view that Africa has no history. One can contest the claim that African societies are static, primitive, and have had no influence on the world’s development. Or, one may dispute the conception of history as only concerned with the rational development and progress of societies towards

some end point, and the associated claim that having a history is the mark of being fully human. (These responses are not mutually exclusive.) The Négritude Movement's recovery of African history is an instance of the first response. Négritude writers countered the view of a primitive unchanging Africa by showing there have been past African civilizations, which played a central role in world events. Fanon argues that we should prefer the second line of response. The first debates colonialism on its own terms; as such, it accepts certain colonial ideas—that civilisation is the mark of being fully human; that Black and White people belong to fundamentally different races. But those ideas should be rejected. Fanon compares the situation with being invited to respond to a student article in Lyon that 'made jazz music literally an irruption of cannibalism in the modern world' (Fanon, 2008, p. 176).<sup>8</sup> Rather than try to argue that jazz music is *not* a form of cannibalism, Fanon tells us that 'he rejected the premises on which the request was based' and we should do the same here (Fanon, 2008, p. 176).

There is no good reason to think that only people who live in civilizations are fully human. 'The discovery of the existence of a Negro civilization in the fifteenth century confers no patent of humanity on me' (Fanon, 2008, p. 175). Moreover, the racial binary is not a fact of nature. Black-skinned and White-skinned people are not fundamentally different from each other; instead, race exists only to the extent that it has been socially constructed. 'The Negro is not. Any more than the white man' (Fanon, 2008, p. 180). 'My black skin is not the wrapping of specific values' (Fanon, 2008, p. 177). Since there is no real and important difference between people with black skin, and those with white skin, outside of the differences created by cultural ideas and social institutions, the existence of African history makes no difference to the sort of being that Fanon is. It is true that as someone whose ancestors came from Africa in the past few hundred years, there is a sense in which African history belongs to Fanon. But as a human being, the whole of human history belongs to Fanon too. 'I am a man, and in this sense the Peloponnesian War is as much mine as the invention of the compass' (Fanon, 2008, p. 175).

Fanon's second objection is that the Négritude Movement's ultimate goal is liberation from colonialism, which essentially includes ending the exploitation of the most downtrodden. But the recovery of African history will not help bring this about. Fanon remarks that whilst past African civilisations are of 'the greatest interest [...] I can absolutely not see how this fact would change anything in the lives of the eight-year-old children who labor in the cane fields of Martinique or Guadeloupe' (Fanon, 2008, p. 180). There are two ways that the mistreatment of colonised workers could end: the colonisers might have a change of heart and stop exploiting them, or the colonised might fight for their own liberation (both could happen). Fanon argues that the recovery of African history will play no role in either route to liberation.

One might suppose it *will* make a difference to the colonisers' treatment of the colonised. A common theme in colonial thinking is that the colonised are in some way less human, and this (partly) justifies poor treatment of them. Thus, for example, Aboriginal Australians were denied their right to land on the grounds that they lead a merely animal existence and so property rights do not apply to them (Banner, 2005). To show that there were civilisations on the African continent is to establish that Africans fulfil one of colonialism's criteria for being fully human. By colonial logic, this (partially) removes the supposed justification for their mistreatment. But Fanon remarks, 'I do not carry innocence to the point of believing that appeals to reason or respect for human dignity can alter reality' (Fanon, 2008, p. 174). Colonial ideas about colonised people are not grasped on a merely intellectual level. They also affect the way people both *perceive* and *feel* about others. These perceptual and affective phenomena are not easily dislodged simply through reasoning. Perhaps more importantly, conceptions of the colonised as inferior might help to grease the wheels of colonialism, but they are not what keep them turning. Colonialism is ultimately motivated by the accrual of wealth, and power (usually in the service of the acquisition of wealth), and the pursuit of these things will not be stemmed by alternative conceptions of the colonised. Indeed, the various ideas that apparently justify colonialism often look like rationalisations. This is an empirical claim, but there are many examples throughout history that bear this out—for example, the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 was presented to the public as aiming to liberate Afghan women from the Taliban. It is widely acknowledged that this was not the real motivation (Berry, 2003).

Fanon then argues that the recovery of African history will not motivate the colonised to fight for their own liberation either. He offers two examples to illustrate this claim. First, he states that the few working-class people he

knew in Paris ‘never took it on themselves to pose the problem of the discovery of a Negro past’ (Fanon, 2008, p. 175). Second, he points to the First Indochina War/Anti-French Resistance War, which was fought mostly in Vietnam along with parts of the surrounding region, including the French protectorates of Laos and Cambodia, and which was ongoing when he wrote *Black Skin, White Masks*. Fanon notes widely reported stories of the ferocity of the Viet-Minh in battle, and the ‘serenity with which young Vietnamese of sixteen or seventeen faced firing squads’ (Fanon, 2008, p. 177). He states that their motivation for fighting is not a dream of past cultural glory, but the present violence and brutality they experience at the hands of the colonisers.

The preceding argument turns on claims about what *in fact* happens to motivate people. Fanon’s third objection is ontological. He draws on a Sartrean notion of freedom to argue that history cannot determine human action. On this view, each person always finds herself in the midst of a situation, occupying a particular geographical and social place, at a particular time. The facts of an agent’s situation—her ‘facticity’—present her with a range of options, that is, possibilities for action. Sartre argues that nothing compels the agent to choose one option over another—she is completely free to choose any of them. Of course, the possibilities for action with which the agent is confronted may be dire. But this does not, for Sartre, change the fact that nothing determines that she will choose one rather than another. History—both someone’s personal past, and that of her ancestors, or humankind more generally—is part of a person’s situation; it is part of what constitutes her facticity (Sartre, 2003). History therefore presents the agent with certain options, but it does not determine her actions. Of course, someone could live as though what they do is controlled by what has gone before. The enormity of our freedom can be hard to accept, so we try to evade it by convincing ourselves we have no choice in some matter. But Fanon points out that for Sartre, this is ‘an unauthentic position’ (Fanon, 2008, p. 177). In reality, nothing—including history—compels anyone to take one option rather than another.

‘I am not a prisoner of history. I should not seek there for the meaning of my destiny [...] I am endlessly creating myself’ (Fanon, 2008, p. 179).

‘The body of history does not determine a single one of my actions’ (Fanon, 2008, p. 180).

### 3 | BLACK HISTORY AND REPRESENTATION

Let us accept Fanon’s three objections for the sake of argument here. Still, they are not sufficient to explain his rejection of attempts to recover African history in *Black Skin, White Masks*. Fanon’s appeal to a Sartrean notion of freedom indicates that he interprets one strand of *négritude* philosophy as holding that African history is important to black identity because what has happened in the past *determines* what a person does in the present. But other parts of Fanon’s text suggest a different connection between history and identity, which does not look vulnerable to his three objections.

Fanon argues that colonialism is not just a system of exploitation, it is one that is essentially premised on ideas of race. We saw earlier that colonial thought takes White people to be superior, civilised, rational, intelligent, and so on, whilst Black people are inferior, uncivilised, less intelligent, less rational, less intelligent, etc. These racial categories reinforce the structuring of society into a group who exploit, and the group who are exploited. In other words, colonialism is partly defined by an ideology, that is, a set of ideas that represent people’s places in the colonial world. One of Fanon’s tasks in the text is to identify and analyse how these ideas are spread. For example, Fanon talks about the impact of children’s magazines, pointing out that ‘[t]he Tarzan stories, the sagas of twelve-year-old explorers, the adventures of Mickey Mouse [...] In the magazines, the Wolf, the Devil, the Evil Spirit, the Bad Man, the Savage are always symbolized by Negroes or Indians’ (Fanon, 2008, pp. 112–113).

Examples such as this indicate that Fanon is concerned with what Hill Collins (1991, 1998) labels ‘controlling images’. Every culture possesses a store of shared meanings—ideas we have about ourselves and each other, stories

we tell, ways of describing the world, and so forth. We use these to construct our self-identities—whom one takes oneself to be, and the kinds of things one feels able to do and aspire to. We also use cultural meanings to understand our experiences, convey them to others, and interpret things that happen. They also help structure the various social institutions that govern our lives. Fricker (2008) calls these meanings a culture's 'hermeneutical resources'. Cultures are made up of different social groups, which often stand in uneven relations of power. In such cases, the cultural meanings that have the most 'currency'—those that are most widely accepted, and embedded in institutions such as the law—often function to maintain these power relations. Controlling images are those that help to sustain oppression. For example,

'the welfare queen constitutes a highly materialistic, domineering, and manless working-class Black woman. Relying on the public dole, Black welfare queens are content to take the hard-earned money of tax-paying Americans and remain married to the state[...] [This image was used to help] mask the effects of cuts in government spending on social welfare programs that fed children, housed working families, assisted cities in maintaining roads, bridges, and basic infrastructure, and supported other basic public services. Media images increasingly identified and blamed Black women for the deterioration of US interests. Thus, poor Black women simultaneously became symbols of what was deemed wrong with America and targets of social policies designed to shrink the government sector' (Hill Collins, 1991, p. 80).

It follows that one route to combatting oppression involves replacing controlling images with better alternatives. Fricker (2008) offers the example of 'sexual harassment'. Before this notion was developed, certain forms of pernicious workplace behaviour that disadvantaged women were simply thought of as harmless flirting, which allowed it to continue unchecked. The replacement of the 'harmless flirting' idea with the notion of 'sexual harassment', which was eventually incorporated into legislation, made it easier for women to combat this form of behaviour in the workplace.

One important source of a culture's shared meanings is history. Our grasp of the past is only ever partial. We do not know—either individually or collectively—everything that has happened. What we do know is always known and/or interpreted from a particular perspective. Since the history books are usually written by the powerful, our grasp of the past often embodies their perspective. Unsurprisingly, history is sometimes the source of controlling images. One good example is the recent Windrush scandal. The 'Windrush generation' were people who emigrated to Britain from its Caribbean colonies, encouraged to come by the British government as sorely needed labour after World War II. However, as former colonial subjects, these people's status as British citizens was, and continues to be, ambiguous. Despite being ruled by Britain, people living in the British colonies did not enjoy the same rights as British citizens living in the United Kingdom, and were subject to a complex system of different forms of citizenship, further complicated when those colonies achieved independence.<sup>9</sup> Legislation passed in 1971 meant that only those Windrush migrants who had arrived prior to 1973 would automatically be given indefinite leave to remain in the United Kingdom. In 2010, the British government destroyed a large archive of landing cards, which recorded the date of Windrush arrivals to the United Kingdom. The government was reportedly warned by immigration caseworkers that this information was not stored anywhere else, but the archive was destroyed regardless (Gentleman, 2018). Many people who had lived and worked in the United Kingdom for decades were suddenly unable to prove that they had the right to be there. They lost their jobs, their homes, and access to healthcare. Some were deported to countries they had left as little children. Others were stranded for years outside the United Kingdom after going on holiday and being refused re-entry (Gentleman, 2020).<sup>10</sup> Campaign groups<sup>11</sup> argue that this scandal was partly facilitated by a lack of knowledge about the history of Britain's colonies and associated migration to the United Kingdom, amongst the general population. Widespread ignorance made it easier for the whole mess to be thought of by many members of the general public as a series of unfortunate bureaucratic errors coupled with the failure of individual victims to keep their paperwork in order, rather than the latest move in a long series of actions

gradually curtailing the citizenship of people from Britain's former colonies. The amorphous idea of 'red tape' can be thought of as a controlling image that acted as a sort of smokescreen obscuring the responsibility of individuals holding British state power who actively destroyed the lives of many elderly British-Caribbean people and their families.<sup>12</sup>

Since a skewed perspective on the past can give rise to controlling images, recovering the history of the less powerful can serve to combat them, providing people with a set of hermeneutical resources with positive effects. This leaves us with a puzzle: given Fanon's concern with the controlling images generated by colonial thought, why does he seemingly not recognise that the recovery of African history could help counteract them?

#### 4 | THE NEKYIA, AND THE 'PSYCHE OF ASCENT'

The answer, I think, lies with the fact that Fanon's three objections do not capture all his reasons for dismissing attempts to recover African history in *Black Skin, White Masks*. There is an important line of thought missing from our account so far: Fanon's adoption of a central idea from Césaire's négritude philosophy, which—for reasons I will explain shortly—I will call the Césairean *nekyia*.

Fanon holds that colonialism produces unhealthy psychic phenomena in the minds of the colonised. Liberation partially involves restoration of good mental health. This is one of the goals of *Black Skin, White Masks*. 'I believe that the fact of the juxtaposition of the white and black races has created a massive psychoexistential complex. I hope by analyzing it to destroy it' (Fanon, 2008, p. 5). Fanon reads Césaire's epic poem, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal/ Notebook of a Return to My Native Land* (1995), which he quotes extensively in *Black Skin, White Masks*, as offering a particular method for doing this. The poem does not merely describe the method; it carries it out. The method in question is that of the waking dream<sup>13</sup>—a psychotherapeutic technique for accessing the unconscious. The patient allows mental images to arise, which are taken to be a guide to unconscious psychic phenomena. Different versions of the waking dream method have been developed by different therapists.<sup>14</sup>

Jung uses the idea of the *nekyia* as a metaphor for an inner journey into the unconscious to face aspects of oneself, including what is painful or uncomfortable, which one must accept in order to develop. *Nekyia* is a classical Greek term referring to communication with the dead, usually to obtain information from them. A second term—*katabasis*—refers to a journey to the Underworld of Hades. Jung used the term *nekyia* to encompass both. His reference to Greek myths of journeying to the Underworld indicates not only the hidden nature of the unconscious, but also that the inner voyage is difficult and dangerous. It carries the risk of madness since what one finds may overcome the rational conscious mind. Césaire's epic considered as a therapeutic exercise clearly fits the Jungian idea of *nekyia*.<sup>15</sup> In Césaire's poem, the journey inwards is to search for what it means to be Black in a colonial world. For the therapy to have its intended effect, he must confront and accept all that this means—all the psychic residue associated with blackness contained in the hidden recesses of the mind, particularly that which is most awful—in order to move forward and develop his négritude (his Black identity). For Césaire, this is not some fixed essence, but a continually rewritten way of existing in the world as a person with black skin, which is inseparable from working towards liberation.

Like others who travel to the Underworld, Césaire is confronted with the dead. The poem is shot through with images of disease and decay, and Césaire encounters those who suffered a brutal death under slavery and colonialism. For example,

'So much blood in my memory! In my memory are lagoons. They are covered in death's heads'  
(Césaire, 1995, p. 101).

'My memory is circled with blood. My memory has its belt of corpses' (Césaire 1995, p. 103).

'From the hold I hear shackled curses rising, the gasps of the dying, the sound of one thrown overboard, the baying of a woman giving birth... the scraping of fingernails groping for throats... the sneer of the whip... the crawling of vermin among tired bodies...' (Césaire, 1995, p. 107).

There are also the ghosts of those who resisted—people who escaped slavery and set up small maroon enclaves, and Toussaint Louverture who led the enslaved revolt in Haiti.

Césaire talks of madness in *Cahier*, which resonates with Jung's warning of the dangers the *nekyia* poses. But Césaire's madness has a triple significance. What overcomes the rational mind is the weight of inherited trauma: he is driven mad by the grief and horror at the atrocities he encounters. It is also the divine madness of the poet whose mind is overtaken by the Muse. And as both of these things, it re-imagines the colonial idea of the colonised as irrational (and thus mad).<sup>16</sup>

'Because we hate you, you and your reason, we invoke dementia.  
praecox flamboyant madness tenacious cannibalism.

Treasure, let us count:  
the madness that remembers.  
the madness that screams.  
the madness that sees.  
the madness that is unleashed' (Césaire, 1995, p. 93).

On his journey, Césaire finds images of Africa. But these are phantasmagoric and ambivalent, rather than noble.

'I have looked and looked at trees and so I have become a tree and this long tree's feet have dug great venom sacs and tall cities of bone in the ground.  
I have thought and thought of the Congo and so, I have become a Congo rustling with forests and rivers' (Césaire, 1995, p. 95).

'I have worn parrot feather and musk-cat skins.  
I have tried the patience of missionaries' (Césaire, 1995, p. 95).

Césaire also confronts things that are hard to acknowledge. He finds colonial images of Black people as deficient. For example,

'(niggers-they are-all-alike, I tell you every-vice-every-conceivable-vice, I'm telling-you-the-smell-of-niggers, it-helps-the-cane-grow.  
remember-the-old-saying:  
beat-a-nigger, feed-a-nigger)' (Césaire, 1995, p. 103).

There are his own failings in his engagement with the colonial world as a Black man 'I must tell how far I carried cowardice' (Césaire, 1995, p. 107). Césaire recounts being seated on a tram near a Black man who is a pitiful sight, ground down by poverty. After describing the man in unflattering terms, Césaire tells of women laughing at him. Césaire distances himself from the man and sides with the women.

'Overall it was the picture of a hideous nigger, a grumpy nigger, a gloomy nigger, a slumped nigger, his hands together prayer-like upon a knotty stick. A nigger shrouded in an old threadbare jacket. A nigger who was comical and ugly, and behind me women were looking at him and giggling.



He was COMICAL AND UGLY.  
 COMICAL AND UGLY, for sure.  
 I exhibited a wide smile of connivance...’ (Césaire, 1995, p. 109).

Finally—and crucially for our discussion here—Césaire encounters his own ancestors. If the *nekyia* is to succeed in bringing about self-transformation, then one must be brutally honest with oneself. Césaire states that the ancestors of Martinique, his forbears, were not proud people from great African civilisations—‘we have never been amazons of the King of Dahomey, nor princes of Ghana with eight hundred camels [...]’ but a resigned, beaten down, racial underclass ‘we have always been quite pathetic dishwashers, shoeshiners with no ambition’ (Césaire, 1995, p. 105).

Césaire’s coming face-to-face with these painful facts is in the service of self-transformation.

‘I accept, I accept all this [...].  
 And suddenly, strength and life charge me like a bull’ (Césaire, 1995, p. 125).

‘Negridom with its smell of fried onions rediscovers the sour taste of freedom in its spilt blood.

Negridom is standing’ (Césaire, 1995, p. 131).

Thus his epic embodies the idea, also found in Jung’s conception of the *nekyia*, that for the inner journey to result in progress, one must hit rock bottom. Self-transformation requires acceptance of what is contained in the unconscious, no matter how difficult. It is, therefore, clear that clinging to comforting images of stately African glory would hinder completion of the *nekyia*, as this would be a way for Césaire to avoid facing that which is most difficult.

I have so far shown how Césaire’s epic can be helpfully read as an example of what Jung calls a *nekyia*. However, there is more to Fanon’s understanding of Césaire’s poem as therapy than this. Fanon writes,

‘Do you understand? Césaire has *come down*. He is ready to see what is happening at the depths, and now he can go up [...] But he does not leave the black man down there. He lifts him to his own shoulders and raises him to the clouds [...] What he has chosen is, to use the expression of Gaston Bachelard, a psyche of ascent’ (Fanon, 2008, p. 151).

Fanon is pointing out that Césaire’s poem ends by invoking what Bachelard, in his psychology of imagination, calls ‘ascensional images’ (Bachelard, 1988). As the name suggests, these are images associated with ascent. For example,

‘rise, Dove.  
 rise.  
 rise.  
 rise’ (Césaire, 1995, p. 135).

This makes it clear that Fanon understands Césaire’s poem as employing the waking dream technique developed by Robert Desoille,<sup>17</sup> which Bachelard (1988) discusses as part of his own psychology of imagination. In Bachelard’s philosophy, there are universal metaphors employed by the imagination. Rather than images per se, these fundamental metaphors are dynamic; they are imagined movements through space. Primary amongst these is movement on the vertical axis: ascent and descent. Imagined ascent brings positive feelings of joy, calm, and so on, whilst imagined descent is associated with unpleasant feelings such as dread and gloom. Desoille’s *rêve éveillé dirigé* (directed waking dream) method is similar to the Jungian *nekyia* in that the patient uses her imagination to go on an inner journey into the unconscious.<sup>18</sup> She relaxes and allows images to surface, which function as metaphors for aspects of psychological life. Desoille holds that by imaginatively altering the images, the patient can transform the psychic phenomena

they represent. Crucially, Desoille makes use of imagined movement in space and its association with affect as part of his therapy. The patient is always directed to imagine ascent as part of the therapeutic session so that the positive feelings associated with it can help ensure the patient does not become gloomy as a result of facing any difficult things that surface. In addition, Bachelard understands the imagined ascent that is an integral part of Desoille's method to be a way of giving the patient a renewed sense of the freedom that Bachelard takes to define human existence. This is because imagined ascent always brings with it, in addition to feelings of serenity, calm, and so on, a feeling of freedom.

In summary, Fanon understands Césaire's poem as offering a therapeutic method for healing the colonised person's stunted sense of self. He takes Césaire to propose a certain kind of waking dream therapy: an ascensional *nekyia*. One must descend to the depths of the unconscious to confront all the worst colonial residues of race, and make peace with what one finds there. Through acceptance, the colonised person's self-identity is transformed. She can then rise up in an imagined ascent that brings positive feelings with it, and provides her with a new appreciation of her freedom. From this point, she is ready to work for liberation from colonialism.

Fanon takes up the idea of an ascensional *nekyia* in *Black Skin, White Masks*. Like Césaire, he does not just recommend the method, he employs it in the text, journeying to the Underworld alongside the reader. Fanon indicates what is to come at the outset, 'In most cases, the black man lacks the advantage of being able to accomplish this descent into a real hell' (Fanon 2008, p. 2). Gordon (2005) suggests that the text seeks to accomplish such a descent through a hell that is modelled on Dante's inferno, constituted by the different self-conceptions offered to Black people by colonial ideology. The feeling of Césairean descent comes through particularly forcefully in certain portions of the text. Chapter 5 is largely written in poetic form, recalling the *négritude* poets Fanon is discussing. On his journey, he encounters images of past African greatness, which initially filled him with hope.

'I rummaged frenetically through all the antiquity of the black man. What I found there took my breath away [...] Ségou, Djenné, cities of more than a hundred thousand people; accounts of learned blacks (doctors of theology who went to Mecca to interpret the Koran) [...] The white man was wrong, I was not a primitive, not even a half-man, I belonged to a race that had already been working in gold and silver two thousand years ago' (Fanon, 2008, p. 99).

But he dismisses these and continues his journey through colonial ideas about race. We feel Fanon's anguish,

'Every hand was a losing hand for me' (p. 101).

'I took up my *négritude*, and with tears in my eyes I put its machinery together again' (p. 106).

'The crippled veteran of the Pacific war says to my brother 'Resign yourself to your colour the way I got used to my stump; we're both victims'.

'Nevertheless, with all my strength I refuse to accept that amputation [...]' (Fanon, 2008, pp. 107–108).

The chapter ends with Fanon trying to ascend, but he is unable, 'I wanted to rise, but the disembowelled silence fell back upon me, its wings paralyzed [...] I began to weep' (Fanon, 2008, p. 108).

Fanon cannot yet rise because he has not reached rock bottom. His descent continues in the next chapter. Like Césaire, Fanon encounters the dead wronged by slavery and colonialism: 'I need to lose myself in my *négritude*, to see the fires, the segregations, the repressions, the rapes, the discriminations, the boycotts' (Fanon, 2008, p. 144). He also emphasises the need to face the worst of what colonialism has lodged in the unconscious, 'We need to put our fingers on every sore that mottles the black uniform' (Fanon, 2008, p. 144). Fanon does this by giving an analysis

of the ‘archetype’ of blackness. Rather than something innate, he understands this as ‘the sum of prejudices, myths, collective attitudes of a given group’ (Fanon, 2008, p. 145). It is an idea that colonialism has lodged in the unconscious of both coloniser and colonised. The full details of Fanon’s account will have to wait for another day. But he shows how the racial binary has been transposed onto another set of binaries. Earlier, I noted that for Bachelard and Desoille, movement along the vertical axis is a fundamental metaphor for us. Bachelard (1988) notes that it is extricably bound up with our conception of morality so that ascent is associated with moral goodness and descent with depravity. The vertical axis is also associated with colour—ascend with the sky and light (azure, yellow, white), and descent with darkness.

‘Blackness, darkness, shadow, shades, night, the labyrinths of the earth, abysmal depths, blacken someone’s reputation; and, on the other side, the bright look of innocence, the white dove of peace, magical, heavenly light’ (Fanon, 2008, p. 146).

Colonialism takes skin colour—a wide array of pink, beige, grey, caramel, and brown hues—and fits it to the two categories of Black and White. The latter binary is easily transposed onto the former two described above, so that black skin becomes associated with darkness and descent, and therefore, evil. ‘In Europe, the black man is the symbol of Evil’ (Fanon, 2008, p. 145). Other binaries also come into play once the initial identification has been made—animal versus human, sexual versus intellectual, emotional versus rational, and so on. The result is a conception of black-skinned people as beastlike, hypersexualised, aggressive, and depraved. ‘In Europe, the Negro has one function: that of symbolizing the lower emotions, the baser inclinations, the dark side of the soul’ (Fanon, 2008, p. 147). Fanon then draws on various sources, including psychiatric case studies and historical data, to show how this archetype plays out in psychological life.

In laying bare these uncomfortable truths, Fanon accomplishes the same thing as Césaire: he journeys to the depths of the Underworld and unearths colonial ideas of race that are most difficult for the Black person to face. By making these ideas explicit, they can be acknowledged. Through acceptance, they begin to lose their power. By hitting rock bottom, the transformation of the self can begin.

## 5 | CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have considered Fanon’s critique of the Négritude Movement’s attempt to recover African history. I have argued that the explicit objections that Fanon makes in chapter 8 of *Black Skin, White Masks* are not his only reasons for dismissing the recovery of African history in the text. Instead, Fanon takes up Césaire’s suggestion that the psychic wounds inflicted by colonialism can be healed with an ascensional *nekylia*. The colonised person must undertake an inner journey to face the worst ideas of race that colonialism has lodged in the unconscious. Moreover, Fanon does not just write about the method; like Césaire, he employs it in the text. Clinging to noble ideas of past African glory hinders completion of the *nekylia*. Thus Fanon sets them aside in *Black Skin, White Masks*. Only in facing that which is most painful, will the colonised person be able to transform his self-identity and rise, ready to progress towards liberation.<sup>19</sup>

### ORCID

Komarine Romdenh-Romluc  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4257-6377>

### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> This is not to deny that there is much room for improvement on this score.

<sup>2</sup> Different négritude writers emphasised African history in different ways at different times. See Rabaka (2015) for a detailed analysis of the comparisons and contrasts between them.

- <sup>3</sup> “History” here refers to the past rather than to knowledge of it.
- <sup>4</sup> See Stone (2020) for a detailed exposition of Hegel's view and an explanation of how it implies colonialism.
- <sup>5</sup> See Brizuela-Garcia (2018) for an overview of this way of thinking.
- <sup>6</sup> These lectures were later published as Trevor-Roper (1965), and the relevant comments can be found pp. 9–11. He repeated this claim in Trevor-Roper (1969).
- <sup>7</sup> There is not enough space here to mention the many writers who have responded to Trevor-Roper's remarks. To give just a few examples, see Achebe (2016), which is the published version of an address he gave in 1975 at the University of Massachusetts, Fuglestad (1992), and Msindo (2019).
- <sup>8</sup> The exact details of the argument put forward in this student article have been, to the best of my knowledge, lost to the passage of time.
- <sup>9</sup> See, for example, Dummett (1981).
- <sup>10</sup> Amelia Gentleman has reported extensively on the Windrush scandal for *The Guardian* newspaper. Anyone wishing to find out more can search her articles in *The Guardian's* online archives.
- <sup>11</sup> See, for example, Runnymede (2018).
- <sup>12</sup> At the time of writing, none of the people responsible for the Windrush scandal has been prosecuted or held accountable. Amber Rudd resigned as Home Secretary in 2018 in some sort of admission of guilt, but was appointed as Work and Pensions Secretary just 6 months later.
- <sup>13</sup> Fanon sometimes used this method with his patients—see, for example, his discussion of the Saint-Ylie case (Fanon, 2008, pp. 158–162).
- <sup>14</sup> See Watkins (1974) for an overview.
- <sup>15</sup> Snyder also hints at this reading of Césaire, describing the poetic journey as a “Jungian descent” (Snyder, 1970, p. 212). It is not clear that Césaire's epic was literally based on Jung's ideas. For one thing, the best source for Jung's discussion of the *neklyia* is – is as far as I know *The Red Book* (Jung, 2009), which he did not publish in his lifetime, well after Césaire wrote *Cahier*. Cassar (2020) notes that despite having worked on his ideas about the active imagination throughout his life, Jung only shared them with his closest colleagues. Césaire was certainly aware of some aspects of Jung's work, and discusses ideas drawn from it—e.g., Césaire discusses the Jungian collective unconscious in *Poésie et Connaissance* (Césaire, 1945). But Ripert (2017, p. 90) argues that Césaire most likely knew Jung's work through the secondary literature. In any case, the idea of a journey to the Underworld as a metaphor for personal crisis is a common poetic theme.
- <sup>16</sup> See also Gibson's (2003) discussion of the significance of madness in Césaire's poem.
- <sup>17</sup> Desoille discusses the technique in various places throughout his work. Desoille (1966) provides a nice overview.
- <sup>18</sup> See Cassar (2020) for a detailed comparison between the two thinkers. Desoille sometimes makes use of Jungian ideas. But he came across Jung's work after developing his *rêve éveillé dirigé* method.
- <sup>19</sup> I would like to thank an audience at the University of Southampton philosophy research seminar for helpful discussion of an earlier draft of this paper. I would also like to thank my colleague Joshua Forstenzer for discussing this work with me over numerous cups of coffee. I am also grateful to the Leverhulme Trust for supporting the period of research leave in which this paper was written.

## REFERENCES

- Achebe, C. (2016). An image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *heart of darkness*. *The Massachusetts Review*, 57(1), 14–27.
- Bachelard, G. (1988). *Air and dreams: An essay on the imagination of movement*. Translated by Edith and Frederick Farrell. Dallas: Dallas Institute of Humanities & Culture.
- Banner, S. (2005). Why terra nullius? Anthropology and property law in early Australia. *Law and History Review*, 23(1), 95–131.
- Berry, K. (2003). The symbolic use of afghan women in the war on terror. *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations*, 27(2), 137–160.
- Brizuela-Garcia, E. (2018). Africa in the world: History and historiography. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.013.296>
- Cassar, L. (2020). *Jung's technique of active imagination and Desoille's directed waking dream method*. London: Routledge.
- Césaire, A. (1945). Poésie et connaissance. *Tropiques*, 12, 157–170.
- Césaire, A. (1995). *Cahier d'un retour au pays Natal/notebook of a return to my native land*. Translated by M. Rosello and A. Pritchard. Northumberland: Bloodaxe Books.

- Hill Collins, P. (1991). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. New York: Routledge.
- Hill Collins, P. (1998). *Fighting words: Black women and the search for justice*. Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press.
- Desoille, R. (1966). *The directed daydream: A series of three lectures given at the Sorbonne in January 1965 under the auspices of the psychology Students' Club*. Translated by Frank Haronian. New York: Psychosynthesis Research Foundation.
- Dummett, F. (1981). The new British nationality act. *British Journal of Law and Society*, 8(2), 233–241.
- Fanon, F. (2008). *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by C. L. Markmann. London: Pluto Press.
- Fricker, M. (2008). *Epistemic Injustice*. New York: OUP.
- Fuglestad, F. (1992). The Trevor-Roper trap or the imperialism of history, an Essay. *History in Africa*, 19, 309–326.
- Gentleman, A. (2018) 'Home Office destroyed Windrush landing cards says ex-staffer', *The Guardian* 17 April. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/apr/17/home-office-destroyed-windrush-landing-cards-says-ex-staffer> (Accessed: 11 Feb 2022).
- Gentleman, A. (2020) "'Lambs to the slaughter": 50 lives ruined by the Windrush scandal', *The Guardian* 19 March. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/mar/19/lambs-to-the-slaughter-50-lives-ruined-by-the-windrush-scandal> (Accessed: 11 Feb 2022).
- Gibson, N. (2003). *Fanon and the postcolonial imagination*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Gordon, L. (2005). Through the zone of nonbeing: a reading of Black Skin, White Masks in celebration of Fanon's eightieth birthday. *The CLR James Journal*, 11(1), 1–43.
- Hegel, G. W. F. (1991). *The Philosophy of History*. Translated by J. Sibree. New York: Prometheus.
- Hill Collins, Patricia (1991) *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York: Routledge.
- Jung, C. (2009). *The Red Book*. Translated by S. Shamdasani, J. Peck, and M. Kyburz. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Msindo, Enocent (2019) 'Writing history beyond Trevor-Roper: the experience of African history, with special reference to Zimbabwe. Keynote Address, the Zimbabwe Historical Association, 17–19 July. Retrieved from <https://nomadit.co.uk/conference/africaknows/paper/57591> (Accessed 11 Jan 2022).
- Nardal, J. (2002). Black internationalism. In T. D. Sharpley-Whiting (Ed.), *Negritude Women* (pp. 105–107). Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Rabaka, R. (2015). *The negritude movement: W. E. B. Dubois, Leon Damas, Aime Cesaire, Leopold Senghor, Frantz Fanon and the evolution of an insurgent idea*. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books.
- Ripert, Y. (2017) Rethinking Négritude: Aimé Césaire & Léopold Sédar Senghor and the imagination of a global Post-coloniality. PhD thesis. Columbia University. <https://doi.org/10.7916/D8571QC0> (Accessed 11 Feb 2022).
- Runnymede (2018) Windrush lessons learned review submission. Retrieved from <https://www.runnymedetrust.org/uploads/policyResponses/Windrush%20Lessons%20Learned%20Runnymede.pdf> (Accessed 11 Feb 2022).
- Sartre, J. P. (2003). *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*. London: Routledge.
- Sharpley-Whiting, T. (2000). Femme négritude Jane Nardal, *La Depeche Africaine*, and the Francophone New Negro. *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society*, 2(4), 8–18.
- Snyder, E. (1970). A reading of Aimé Césaire's "Return to my native land". *L'Esprit Créateur*, 10(3), 197–212.
- Stone, A. (2020). Hegel and colonialism. *Hegel Bulletin*, 41(2), 242–270.
- Trevor-Roper, H. (1965). *The rise of Christian Europe*. London: Harcourt, Brace & World.
- Trevor-Roper, H. (1969). The past and present: History and sociology. *Past and Present*, 42, 3–17.
- Watkins, M. (1974). Waking dreams in European psychotherapy. *Spring*, 1974, 33–57.

**How to cite this article:** Romdenh-Romluc, K. (2022). Fanon, the recovery of African history, and the Nekyia. *European Journal of Philosophy*, 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejop.12835>