Race, Time, and the Petrified Subject in Algeria

Reading Frantz Fanon's Algerian Writings and Kateb Yacine's Nedjma[1]

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Abstract

Two major thinkers of anti-colonialism in Algeria—Kateb Yacine, author of the novel Nedjma (1956), and Frantz Fanon—described the impacts of colonial Violence through figures of petrification that blur the border between human and nonhuman. Their works ground this article's relational reading across anti-Black and anti-Algerian racializations, drawing on Sylvia Wynter's concept of rhythmic reading and scholarship on comparative racialization. Petrification seeks to capture subjective absence: a modality of living as a negated subject who is excluded from the category of the human. This relational frame suggests absence as a plural, disappearing mode of knowledge production under colonialism. Yacine's novel fleshes out alternative modalities of being human that appear, in Fanon's Algerian writings, as flickers en route to revolution, or clinical diagnoses. Fanon's oeuvre and its readers generate a new critique of Yacine's canonical novel. This article develops absence as a new vocabulary, beyond colonial psychiatry and its agentive resistance, for the reading of literature from the settler colony. Building on feminist critiques of Nedjma, it names anti-Blackness in the novel as an instance of the text's participation in the field of Man at the moment it tries to write, through absence, its outside.

"I came into the world imbued with the will to find meaning in things, my spirit filled with the desire to attain to the source of the world, and then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects."
—Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth

"Today's Rachid seemed to him only a thick layer of lichen stifling the other, frail and paradisaic Rachid lost."
—Kateb Yacine, Nedjma

Two major thinkers of race and anti-colonialism in Algeria—Martinican psychiatrist Frantz Fanon and Algerian writer Kateb Yacine (b. Yacine Kateb)—described the subjective impacts of colonial rule through images of petrified yet living men whose bodies trouble the human/nonhuman divide. Their convergence in metaphor opens this article's relational reading of figures of absence across two distinct grammars of racialization: anti-Black and anti-Algerian. Fanon, a Black psychiatrist who practiced in Algeria during the War of Independence, was an influential thinker of both these grammars of racialization. However, the intellectual kinship his writing forged between traditions of emancipatory thought from the Maghreb and Black studies has receded from scholarship in recent decades. In the years Fanon was in Algeria, Yacine published a novel from exile, *Nedjma* (1956), which was quickly accepted as a piercingly poetic representation of the brutal yet sometimes invisible violence wrought by settler colonialism. It has since remained a canonical text of Algerian anti-colonial nationalism and of Maghrebi studies. Despite their shared ties to decolonizing Algeria, the two thinkers were not, to this author's knowledge, in contact or addressing one another's works. My relational reading of them draws

[1] An edited version of this publication first appeared in *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 287 Vol. 44, No.2, 2024 (doi 10.1215/1089201X-11233080) https://read.dukeupress.edu/cssaame/article-abstract/44/2/287/389946/Race-Time-and-the-Petrified-Subject-in?redirectedFrom=fulltext). The current text is based on the author's manuscript.

inspiration from "rhythm as reading praxis," developed by readers of Sylvia Wynter: a task of "tracking continuities, seeking out flows, noticing pauses" between stories and intellectual traditions that were, or are, excluded from the category of the human and are treated, under contemporary organizations of knowledge, as separate.[2]

In what follows, Yacine's *Nedjm*a and Fanon's writings open two vantage points that describe modalities of living under duress and erasure. In each, settler colonialism and racism crush the subject into absence, which propels an experience of self as absence. David Marriott, commenting on Fanon's late oeuvre in Algeria, points to the difficulties of representing subjective forms of absence, describing an "untranslatability," an "unnameable n'est pas" in Blackness:

> In [Fanon's] later case studies, the basic dissymmetry between the me and not-me [i.e., whiteness], explained by disavowal, opens onto a more vertiginous absence between the I and the it, and this absence cannot simply be represented by disalienation, nor is it simply linked to colonial racism: consequently, the object here refers to a deep, often circuitous fall or descent whose lapsus is received by the subject as a mirroring without content, in which the subject is not reflected back to itself as a diminished or distanced whiteness but as a no-thing, or non-being.[3]

Marriott is not alone in using the language of absence, Including Fanon's famous *n'est pas*, to describe Black [why this line spacing?]Subjectivity.[4] Zakiyyah Iman Jackson's study of animalization and anti-Blackness, for example, evokes the subject as "an empty vessel, a nonbeing, a nothing, an ontological zero."[5] These descriptions (and this is not a critique of Jackson, but a characteristic of the topic at hand) suggest a certain arrival in absence, as though the racialized subject, once erased and rendered an object, achieves stasis.

Yet as Fred Moten argues, the passage from subject to object that Fanon invokes remains a movement: "What if the thing sustains itself in that absence or eclipse of meaning," he asks, and what if "the value of that absence" is given "by way of a history of exclusion, serial expulsion, presence's ongoing taking of leave?"[6] It is just such a movement, an ongoing taking of leave under another grammar of racialization, that appears in Yacine's *Nedjm*a. In one of its most famous sections, the novel sketches the racialized subject's passage into an absence that is ongoing and fraught with rage, yet open to states of fugitive pleasure. Absence, as discussed here, is not an arrival point but a sustained state in repetitive motion where presence is repeatedly denied, where the subject is continually reexcluded from the category of Man: "the projected model/ criterion of being of the globally dominant Western- European bourgeoisie" that underlies colonialism and its declared modernity and that continues to underpin contemporary multicultural discourses of "postracial" neoliberalism.[7] This exclusion lies at the

[2] McKittrick, O'Shaughnessy, and Witaszek, "Rhythm," 867. For a recent perspective on relational reading for this context,
see Davis, "Incommensurate Ontologies."
[3] Marriott, *Whither Fanon?,* 64; on lack, 5–6.
[4] Marriott interprets Fanon's concept of wretchedness via absence, arguing that it "designates the way in which the subject is immiserated or affected by its own impossibility or nothingness" (*Whither Fanon?,* 65). Calvin L. Warren places the negation of Blackness at the heart of metaphysics, where "the Negro must assume the form of nothing in a metaphysical world. The world needs this labor" as an objectification of its foundational terror, nothingness. By this logic, and in a gesture similar to calls for the destruction of Man discussed in this article, Warren argues that "Black freedom" would require "a form of world destruction" (Ontological Terror, 6). On Fanon's n'est pas, see Warren, Ontological Terror, 35.
[5] Jackson, *Becoming Human,* 1.
[6] Moten, "The Case of Blackness," 181–82.
[7] Wynter, "On Disenchanting Discourse," 208. On neoliberalism, see Melamed, "The Spirit of Neoliberalism."

heart of racialization: a hierarchization (for Hortense Spillers a "semiosis of procedure") into humans, "not-quite-humans and nonhumans."[8]

By its very formation in/as exclusion, the kind of absence under discussion is difficult to represent. It lies outside racialized presumptions of what a human subject should be: not only white, but integral, agentive, conscious, and productively self-narrating in linear time. In turn, absence eludes dominant categories of knowledge and disciplinary boundaries that reflect this normative white subjecthood, which is why this article moves between literature, theory, and Fanon's psychiatric writings. Reading for absence becomes a mode of "traffic in [what is] unknowable": "the devalued" under grammars of racialization, the self-as-absence.[9]

The difficulty of describing absence appears in the complex theoretical language of Afropessimism, as well as in the proliferation of nonhuman imagery in Fanon's oeuvre and Yacine's novel when writers attempt to capture an experience of being in a body that is human and less-than-human, caught in the motion between presence and absence. For the two thinkers under study, this nonhuman imagery clusters around petrification, the transformation of human flesh into stone and plant life. Moten also ventures into nonhuman metaphor to describe what is at stake: "Some/thing escapes in and through the object's vestibule; the object vibrates against its frame like a resonator, and troubled air gets out."[10] The object, in this commentary on Fanon, is the Black subject, and Moten likens this subject's serial exclusions from being human to the reverberations of sound and air in the claustrophobic space between self-as-being and self-as-object. Something akin to this troubling of air will appear, in *Nedjm*a, as an organic creep of imperceptible movement within nonhuman stasis. Together, Fanon's and Yacine's figures of petrification open a fleeting relation of absence at the threshold of decolonization in Algeria that destabilizes the boundaries of the field of Man from without, and from the vantages of two racializing assemblages.

Relationality, or Reading Fanon and Yacine Today

The urgency of what Lewis Gordon called, in 1996, the fifth stage of Fanon studies has been galvanized by the Black Lives Matter movement. The core characteristic of new engagements with the Martinican psychiatrist's oeuvre in the US academy has been to work "with and through Fanon" to name the coloniality and white supremacy of the present.[11] In this policial context, no comparative reading of Fanon with his Algerian setting (still less one drawing on the conceptual tools of Black studies) can overlook that some of the leading engagements with Fanon's work in recent years, notably in Afropessimism, have turned away from the internationalism that drew Fanon to Algeria. This body of scholarship reads his work to articulate an incomparable ontology of Black subjectivity, forged in the radical negativity of anti-Blackness.

The resulting caution against comparison turns initially on the question of whether absence, as described above, is an ontological condition or an affective- embodied state. In Black studies today, theories of subjectification, including those engaging Fanon, work predominantly in the register of ontology.[12] In *Nedjm*a and the Algerian context, in contrast, affect, memory, and trauma are core concerns. The trope of absence is prevalent in Algerian literature and theory, and when it addresses the subject, psychoanalytical approaches predominate.[13] A recent example is Karima Lazali's Colonial Trauma, which places "the colonial practice of erasure and disappearance of people, symbolic orders,

[8] Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus,* 24. Weheliye quotes Spillers.
[9] Hong and Ferguson, *Strange Affinitie*s, 16.
[10] Moten, "The Case of Blackness," 182.
[11] Gordon, Sharpley-Whiting, and White, Fanon: *A Critical Reader*, 7.
[12] See, e.g., Warren, *Ontological Terror*, 43–44; Moten, "The Case of Blackness."
[13] Historical erasure is a key theme, notably around the work of Assia Djebar; see, e.g., Jarvis, *Decolonizing Memory*, 19–23. On subjectification, see, e.g., Farès, *Mémoire de l'absent*, and the discussions of Jean Amrouche (a contemporary of Yacine) in Lazali, *Colonial Trauma*, 83–85.

and land" at the heart of contemporary Algerian trauma.[14] The continuing pain, in her reading, is akin to a phantom limb after amputation: "The feeling of absence gives way to an acutely painful presence of what is, for its part, no longer there."[15] Her comments hold true for the *Nedjm*a, where subjective absence affects only one of the text's four narrators. While Rachid forms nonhuman intimacies with the rocks of Constantine, the other three continue to move in the world, whether on worksites, in prisons, or at protests. In *Nedjm*a, absence is a nongeneralized state, not an ontology; and while Yacine's rocky imagery sugg ests permanence, the novel is agnostic on whether Rachid "returns" to presence at other moments in his trajectory.

Related to this point is the relative newness of using racialization to describe settler colonialism in Algeria. Muriam Haleh Davis's recent book Markets of Civilization: Islam and Racial Capitalism in Algeria argues that systematic oppression rendered Indigenous Algerians vulnerable to "extraction, violence, and legal exception" on the grounds of religious identity.[16] Her analysis of colonialism's Homo islamicus as a racialized subject breaks with an enduring tendency in studies of the Maghreb to understand race as biology and phenotype.[17] Yet the purported primacy of the body is part of racialization's ideological violence, as Fanon argued through his concept of sociogeny (see below). Racialization, in contemporary Black and critical ethnic studies, names the processes and "assemblage[s] of forces that must continuously articulate nonwhite subjects as not-quite-human."[18] On these grounds, it is not controversial to think settler colonialism in Algeria as a racializing assemblage, wherein certain "populations" were devalued and "rendered vulnerable to processes of death and devaluation over and against other populations."[19] As contemporary studies of Algeria emphasize the erasures of settler colonialism— where "bodies are irreversibly marked by blank space and the violence of dispossession"— the theoretical tools of Black studies invite scholars to revisit the racialized body with new critical urgency.[20]

Thus, while I adopt the language of racialization, I retain that *Nedjm*a does not propose a theory of Algerian subjectivity equivalent to ontology or Blackness.[21] The rejection of a comparison that imposes equivalence is part, moreover, of dismantling the colonial field of Man. In Strange Affinities, working in Black and women of color feminism, Grace Kyungwon Hong and Roderick Ferguson argue against the Western-centered imaginary of "discreet," internally homogenous, and static groups of national and racial identities that, in turn, promote politically defanged, if not oppressive, celebrations of multicultural commonality across racialized groups.[22] They outline instead a "comparative analytic of difference" across grammars of racialization; this heterotopic method "refuses to render illegible the shifting configurations of power that define such objects in the first place."[23] In the same vein, Alexander G. Weheliye, drawing on Wynter and Spiller, powerfully argues that "the theoretical and methodological protocols of Black studies have always been global in their reach."[24] A tradition of thought with roots in the nineteenth century, it "illuminates the essential role that racializing assemblages play in the construction of modern selfh ood, works toward the abolition of Man, and advocates the radical reconstruction and decolonization of what it means to be human."[25]

Fanon's and Yacine's writings on the absented subject and their rhythmic connections in decolonizing Algeria are not, then, an authorization to extract similitude from anti-Black and anti-Algerian

[14] Lazali, *Colonial Trauma*, 82.
[15] Lazali, *Colonial Trauma*, 82.
[16] Davis, *Markets of Civilization*, 7.
[17] E.g., Hannoum, *Invention of The Maghreb*, 14–15.
[18] Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 19.
[19] Hong and Ferguson, *Strange Affinities*, 2.
[20] Lazali, *Colonial Trauma*, 82.
[21] The negation of blackness leads Marriott to argue that "[it] requires a different language than ontology," one he seeks in Fanon's *n'est pas* ("Blackness: N'est Pas?," 47; see also 34).
[22] Hong and Ferguson, *Strange Affinities*, 8.
[23] Hong and Ferguson, *Strange Affinities*, 9.
[24] Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 4.
[25] Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 4.

grammars of racialization. Their gazes upon modalities of living that emerged in exclusion from the colonial ideal of the human remain distinct. But it is when they are drawn into relation, not similitude, that the disappearing ground of subjective absence emerges, in plurality and difference, as a mode "of knowledge construction liminal to the Western order of modernity."[26] This liminal space is what Wynter dubs the demonic ground from which the abolition of Man becomes imaginable. Decolonizing Algeria was a site where multiple perspectives on this genocidal center were written, signaling what Wynter calls "different kinds and ways of being human that are relational to one another and are, collectively, across geographies and racial identifications, bios-mythois [biological storytelling]."[27]

Situating Fanon and Yacine

The opening epigraphs of this article condense a key timeline in each author's narrative of a self: the autobiographical "I" in Fanon's case, and the fictional character Rachid in Yacine's. Each subject senses a prior moment of presence and plentitude but lives in a present defined by absence and proximity to the nonhuman: the object, for Fanon, and lichen, for Rachid.[28] Before turning to these figures, I introduce the authors, whose works span literature, theory, and psychiatry, as well as two historical moments of catastrophic violence in Algeria. These moments are the Sétif massacre in 1945, around which *Nedjm*a circles, and the apocalyptic heights of the war, the context for Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* (1961).

Fanon arrived in Algeria in 1953, the year before the War of Independence began. He worked in a psychiatric hospital in Blida, south of the capital, treating Algerian and settler patients. The hospital was overcrowded, with "dehumanizing" conditions for patients, and rife with colonial hierarchy and racism. [29] Fanon joined the National Liberation Front and wrote prolifically on Algeria's strugg le for independence. As Brian Edwards notes, Fanon remains a canonical voice of the Algerian revolution in anglophone contexts, yet this representational status elides his shifting "reputation in Algeria and the greater Maghreb" since his death in 1961, as well as the translational role the Martinican psychiatrist played in connecting the Algerian strugg le to global revolution.[30] As noted above, Fanon's oeuvre is undergoing a profound rereading in Black studies. Moreover, his work remains a staple for theories of decolonization in Maghrebi studies, notably in scholarship on Algerian colonial memory and on the Moroccan avant-gardist, Marxist- Leninist journal *Souffles-Anfas* (1966–1971).[31] This journal announced its critical dialogue with the legacy of Fanon in 1966, and it continues to animate literary and cultural studies of the Maghreb.[32] Yet despite Fanon's ongoing prominence, he is rarely if ever read with his Algerian contemporaries.

Yacine drafted *Nedjma* in the late 1940s and published it in 1956.[33] At the age of sixteen, he participated in the Sétif protests of May 8, 1945, in which the French army and settlers massacred an estimated six thousand Algerians.[34] Yacine was arrested, and the shock caused his mother to descend into mental illness, from which she never recovered. Sétif is the event that propels *Nedjm*a and that Yacine defined as formative in his writing:

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[26] Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 21.
[27] McKittrick, O'Shaughnessy, and Witaszek, "Rhythm," 867.
[28] The question of whether such early moments constitute lived memories or glimpses of always-already-lost absoluity return to the differential of racialization as amputation or ontology, respectively; see Marriott's reasoning against psychoanalysis in "Blackness," 35–36.
[29] Robcis, *Disalienation*, 62–63.
[30] Edwards, "Fanon's *al-Jaza'ir*," 100.
[31] On Algeria, see Jarvis, *Decolonizing Memory*. On *Souffles-Anfas* and Fanon, see Villa-Ignacio, "Decolonising Violence," and Harrison, *Transcolonial Maghreb*, 18–20.
[32] One recent rereading is Tolan-Szklinik, *Maghreb Noir*; on Fanon and *Souffles-Anfas*, see 45–48.
[33] For the author's biography, see Mortimer, "Kateb Yacine," 275.
[34] This figure remains an estimate; Horne, *A Savage War*, 27. For a detailed discussion, see Benot and Maspero, *Massacres coloniaux*, chap. 1.

> Before 1945, I'd had no awareness of what was going on in the country. I was a schoolkid, I lived in poetry and books. I didn't understand anything going on around me. Then, I remember there was a demonstration in the streets, and simply because some of my classmates were joining the demonstration, I wanted to be with them… I didn't understand the meaning of the demonstration at all ... When I got out of prison, I had a vision of the people. These people I'd never noticed before when I passed them every day, in the streets, when I saw them in prison and we spoke together, when we had the same tortures, the same shocks, I really started to know them ... It was at that moment that I gathered my first poetic reserve ... Looking back, [my time in prison was] the most beautiful moments of my life. I discovered the two things that are most dear to me: poetry and revolution. [35]

*Nedjm*a was the fruit of Yacine's feeling that he saw his fellow Algerians for the first time and realized their common ties in protest and violence. Although a markedly different prose stylist from Fanon, Yacine's comments here echo a core theme of *Wretched*: the historical agent called the Algerian people taking shape in anticolonial revolt. The two texts under study bookend two historical events of violence in Algeria's decolonization: the massacre that revealed the racialized disposability of Algerian bodies on a mass scale, and the war, the revolutionary transformation that *Wretched* narrates.

A key distinction, recalling the comparative analytic of difference, is that while *Nedjm*a formally insists on the plurality and internal differentiation of the Algerian population, albeit limited to male subjects, Fanon's revolutionary tract tends to elide the interiority of individuals. These inner lives appear instead in his clinical case studies, discussed below. The plurivocality of *Nedjm*a is secured by its four narrators— Rachid, Mustapha, Lakhdar, and Mourad—who pursue an elusive woman named *Nedjm*a. Their stories evoke a new class forged in colonized Algeria: precarious, impoverished, and primarily male laborers uprooted from land and community, many of whom would emigrate in the 1940s to France.[36] Yacine's engagement with this class position was a personal one. After his release from prison, he became an itinerant laborer in France, working in construction and on docks and farms alongside other Algerians during the years he composed *Nedjm*a. Another of *Nedjm*a's narrators, Mustapha, is imprisoned during the Sétif protests. He loses his mother to madness, evoking the author's biography. The nonelite Algerian subject who preoccupied Yacine in *Nedjm*a was the focus of his postindependence career, in which he turned away from the novel to produce popular theater in dialectal Arabic.

Immediately, *Nedjm*a won Yacine enormous acclaim. Scholars have pored over the novel's multivocal, spiral structure, which repeats events from multiple perspectives to undo the nationalist novel as linear progression. [37] Another critical focus is the decoding of *Nedjm*a, a married woman born of a French Jewish mother and an Algerian man whose identity is uncertain. She is widely accepted as a symbol of the Algerian nation in its "betweenness" after a century and a half of colonization, "because of her multifaceted, contradictory, and shifting identity which encompasses past and future, tribal and national society," French privilege and Algerian revolution. [38] Critics tend to parse *Nedjm*a's lack of interiority— she is an object rather than an agent in the text—as "good" nationalism. [39] By this logic, the men's many perspectives on *Nedjm*a, an undecidable symbol, perform the undecidably plural content of Algerian nationalism.

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[35] Yacine cited in Arnaud, *Recherches sur la littérature*, 506.

[36] The reader meets the narrators in a stone yard near the northeastern city of Bône (now 'Annaba), which the French developed as a port city for the transportation of iron ore. The city's "minarets of steel" were, notes Seth Graebner, "emblematic for Kateb" ("Kateb Yacine," 146–47). On the pauperization of rural classes around Constantine beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century (due to colonial settlement, famine, drought, and illness), and the marked rise in urbanization following World War 1, see Pagand, *La medina de Constantine,* 213–24. Davis demonstrates the entanglement of capitalism in Algeria with colonial racialization: "Understandings of the religious- racial difference of Muslims not only justified unequal access to material resources . . . they also service to conceptualize and organize the political economy of the settler colony" (*Markets,* 21).

[37] See, e.g., Gontard, *Nedjma de Kateb Yacine*; Mortimer, "Kateb Yacine."

[38] Woodhull, "Rereading Nedjma," 50

[39] Critically reviewed in Tremaine, "The Absence of Itinerary," 16–22. On Nedjma's lack of interiority, see Hiddleston, "That Obscure Subject of Desire," 134.

From the 1980s to the early 2000s, this argument in literary studies had a certain political edge in light of the National Liberation Front (FLN) state's Arab- Islamic nationalism and its claim to embody a unified, homogenous Algerian people— an appropriation historian Benjamin Stora dubbed the "faceless" revolution. [40] Scholars read *Nedjma*'s gestures to Algeria's Amazight, Arab, and Jewish history against the postcolonial state's Arabnationalism, which Fanon had already roundly critiqued in *Wretched*. *Nedjma*'s pluralism offered a symbolic corrective to the expulsion of Algeria's Jews in 1963 and rhetorical validation of the strugg le for recognition of Amazight cultural identities and languages. Yacine's poetic style also harmonized with Maghrebi studies' core
reading methods that, derived from poststructuralism, celebrate plurality, undecidability, and hybridity.

Amid praise for the novel, Winifred Woodhull challenged the general blind eye turned to its patriarchal tendencies. The title character, *Nedjma*, is alone in a cast of men. She is the offspring of a rape, who is in turn kidnapped, raped, and exoticized—allwhile remaining a nearly silent symbol of the nation. Highlighting a key scene in which Rachid returns to the tribal heartland (discussed below), Woodhull argues that the novel's "reactionary dimension" around its female protagonist participated in a pervasive and "dangerous [nationalist] ideology" that sacrificed Algerian women to real confinement and violence in the name of the nation.[41]

The present article shares the feminism of Woodhull's critique but argues it does not go far enough. An isolated gaze on woman in the novel has enabled an alarming silence on anti-Blackness in *Nedjma*. Through relational reading with Fanon and his interpreters, I explore methods for comparative and Maghrebi literary studies that respond to the politics of the present. This article was written after the popular rise and state repression of the Hirak movement, in which Algerians embraced plural, multilingual identities in protest and demanded not only a new state but radically new configurations of politics and memory, beyond the anti-colonial war and the politicians who extracted their legitimacy from it. It was also written in a moment when Black Algerians were critiquing their racialized invisibility in society and politics. [42]

"Liminal spaces," recalls Weheliye, are "simultaneously ensconced in and outside the world of Man."[43] In its moments of insideness, *Nedjma* instrumentalizes gendered and racialized bodies, reinscribing the exclusion of blackness from the human at the precise moment of an Algerian man's passage into subjective absence. Therefore, *Nedjma* must be read relationally with Black studies to articulate a new critique of this canonical text in Maghrebi studies. I highlight *Nedjma*'s movement toward "alternative conceptions of being" in Rachid, an absent subject who cannot be recuperated within the liberal humanist tradition, but I also show how this articulation perpetuates gendered and racialized limits to the human.[44]

On the other side of the relation, Yacine's novel makes the imaginative contribution of fleshing out alternative modalities of being human that appear, from the vantage of Fanon's Algerian writings, as flickers en route to revolution, or as clinical diagnoses. A formally inventive novel, *Nedjma* sets figures of petrification into temporal duration, populating the nothingness of absence with enduring experience. Perhaps unexpectedly, this dimension of *Nedjma* leads my concluding section back to debates over agency in Black and critical ethnic studies, with the Algerian novel making visible an absented subject of settler colonialism whose uncanny, invisibilized presence shadows the triumphant revolutionary of *Wretched*.

[40] Stora, *La gangrène et l'oubli*, 8.
[41] Woodhull, "Rereading *Nedjma*," 52.
[42] King, "Invisibility and Negrophobia"; Khiat, "Les noirs en Algérie."
[43] Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 25.
[44] Jackson, *Becoming Human,* 3.

Petrification in Nedjma

Rachid is a thirty-year-old itinerant laborer who abandons himself to smoking hash on a balcony in Constantine. He used to be politically and culturally active, a student organizer, an imprisoned army deserter.[45] Now, along with "criminals, the unemployed, the homeless, the *sans-papiers*, the half-mad," he smokes day and night, absenting himself from his self and the world:[46]

> Rachid no longer left the *fondouk*, the balcony; the stretch of mosaic, of wrought iron; he didn't leave the savage collectivity, the Divan, the intimate revery of the horde anymore: ten or twenty men of allages— silent dreamers who scarcely knew each other—scattered along the balcony, deeply intoxicated, at the cliff top ... He would not leave Constantine again; he would probably die on the balcony, in a cloud of forbidden weed.[47]

Rachid abandons nationalist politics to while away his days and nights in pleasurable oblivion. His young body is distended, immobile, sentient. It desiccates as his gaze grows vacant. The sensuous pleasures of silent dreaming recede as Rachid's body transforms into a skeleton:

> The more he grew used to the *fondouk*, the more his language rarified, just as his dark gaze grew misty and vague, and his ribs stood out under his old soldier's shirt, as if his body, drier and drier, had to reveal [*mettre en relief*] the skeleton, only the skeleton of the powerful man he could have been in other circumstances.[48]

The French *en relief* suggests a body rendered into topography, anticipating Yacine's rapprochement between the men on the balcony, the rocks of the riverbed, and the ancient ruins of Constantine. The skeleton—" the lithic within the corporeal"— stands out, pointing, in Yacine's masculinist account, not to the subject's origin or inner permanence, but to its arrested trajectory: a power that was not realized.[49]

Memory of what could have been invades the balcony scenes, ensuring that Rachid's absence is held in resonating motion with his distant childhood and the lives, now crushed, it pointed to. This dimension of *Nedjma* echoes Fanon's description of entering existence with the desire to create meaning, only to discover he has been rendered an object. Rachid's present- day daze is interwoven with descriptions of him as a bright, watchful child, peering out of a grating in the early 1920s:

> The child always [*toujours*] perched at his light shaft, always [*toujours*] curious about the brilliance followed by the shadow's bite, the fear of remaining a prisoner in the world when other universes were raining night and day upon Rachid, whether he was asleep in the poplar-wood cradle with the little windows to breathe through, or whether he was taking his first steps in the rain.[50]

The recurrence of "always/still" (*toujours*) emphasizes that, in adult absence, the child and his sense of plenitude are somehow still here. Rachid on the balcony is somehow (also) perched in semidarkness, wondering at the motion of light and shadow, even as his present self is desiccating and immobilized. As though confirming or alleviating the child's fear of incarceration, the narrative repeatedly asserts that Rachid has no will left to leave the *fondouk*.

In keeping with *Nedjma*'s aesthetics of ruin, the *fondouk* is an abandoned shell in the anti-colonial present, reflecting the decline of traditional economic networks in and around Constantine since the late

[45] Gontard, *Nedjma de Kateb* Yacine, 37.
[46] Yacine, *Nedjma*, 1956, 184.
[47] Yacine, *Nedjma*, 1956, 224; 1956, 181. Where I cite or adjust Richard Howard's translation (1961), I provide French and English pagination. Where no date is provided, I refer exclusively to Howard's translation.
[48] Yacine, *Nedjma*, 1961, 226; 1956, 182.
[49] Cohen, *Stone*, 2.
[50] Yacine, *Nedjma*, 1961, 221–2; 1956, 179.

nineteenth century.[51] In its "luminous haze," the reader finds "the city's heart . . . an arachnean retreat" teetering "above the abyss": the city stands on a massive rock, with sharp drops down to the Rhummel River. Yacine's nonhuman imagery weaves the spiderlike men into this iconic landscape, imagining them as "figures gathered from the river's deathbed."[52] Their rockiness quickly converts to a metaphor that makes them "tombstones" thrown up by the river.[53] The image underscores the skeletal appearance of Rachid and his companions, now part of Constantine's lithic geography, stone figures of death. In an almost imperceptible movement within petrification, the Rhummel's water is imagined as "a blood transfusion for an old man whose bones are already dried out," fusing Rachid's desiccated skeleton to the landscape.[54]

Clinical Rigidity

On its surface, Rachid's immobility seems to mirror Fanon's wartime observations of the colonized Algerian subject as rigid and ossified. "This particular form of pathology," notes Fanon, had "already caught our attention before the revolution began."[55] In *Wretched*, Fanon writes the colonized as a figure whose muscles are permanently tensed, forced to "acquire the serenity of stone," an object in the world.[56] Reflecting on clinical sessions he performed during the war, Fanon observed among his Algerian patients "systemic contraction, muscular stiffness . . . a characteristic rigidity ... The patient does not seem to be able to demobilize his nerves. He is constantly tense, on hold, between life and death. As one of them told us: 'You see, I'm as stiff as a corpse.'"[57] "Death in Fanon's writing," notes Stephanie Clare, "is a quality of stagnation and the inorganic, unlike the propulsion for future-oriented activity that is life ... Living beings come to bear the qualities of both life and death."[58] For this reason, Fanon characterized the colonized Maghrebi as locked in "a bodily strugg le with death, a death on this side of death, a death in life."[59] This death in life, a form of absence in which the inorganic looms and the future evaporates, resonates with Rachid on the balcony, which the novel describes as "half-necropolis, half-prison."[60]

In rediagnosing rigidity among Algerians as a tension between life and death, Fanon subverted colonial racializations of the "native" as lazy, irrational, childlike. Colonial doctors used the rigid Algerian body to diagnose a "congenital stigma of the 'native,' an original feature of his nervous system." [61] In other words, petrified bodies belonged in colonialism's grammar of racialization. Fanon famously inverted the interpretation, arguing that the colonized body "quite simply [reveals] evidence in the colonized's muscles of their rigidity, their reticence and refusal in the face of the colonial authorities."[62] He moves seamlessly from embodiment to political defiance: rigid muscles allegorize rigid resistance.

Absence and Time in *Nedjma*

The influence of Fanon's thought on petrification can be found in readings of Rachid that parse his oblivion as resistance to psychiatric racialization, with the men forming a defiant tableau of Algerian individuals subject to "colonial psychiatry as a disciplinary force."[63] Yet "resistance and agency

[51] Pagand, *La medina de Constantine*, 212–13.
[52] Yacine, *Nedjma*, 229.
[53] Yacine, *Nedjma*, 229.
[54] Yacine, *Nedjma*, 229.
[55] Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 217.
[56] Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 18.
[57] Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 218-19.
[58] Clare, "Geopower," 65.
[59] Fanon, *Toward the African Revolution*, 13.
[60] Yacine, *Nedjma*, 225.
[61] Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 217.
[62] Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 217.
[63] Keller, *Colonial Madness*, 179, 184.

assume full, self-present and coherent subjects working against something or someone."[64] To assign these characteristics to the absented Rachid is a stretch at best. The rush to find resistance has "a tendency to blind us . . . to the manifold occurrences of freedom in zones of indistinction," notes Weheliye, recalling that the disenchantment of Man requires attending to modalities of knowing and living that are illegible in that colonial frame.[65] Literature can play a key, if not untroubled, role in this work of relativizing the human.[66] The freedom of Rachid's scenes is not the familiar one of a nationalist revolutionary, but a sensuous descent into drug use, which authorizes the mythic narrative at the novel's core. Yacine's shading of a child over Rachid's living skeleton disrupts the racialized grammar of the Algerian, not by inverting it but by appropriating the infantilization of Algerians into an exploration of absenting over time. The question is less what the rigid body *means* than which invisibilized modalities of living it *bears*: an enduring, material filament of memory, pleasure, and rage within what looks like a living corpse.

Like Fanon's image of seeking the world's source, Rachid's childhood is marked by figures of lush fullness, liquidity, and universal origins: "the gorgeous past, the break of dawn [*le point du jour*], the first childhood where he lay prostrate, repeating the words and gestures of the human race with a fluidity that left him inwardly intact, like a seed about to germinate under other skies."[67] Rachid's subsequent exclusion from the human race is briefly resumed, even euphemized: "The animal in him was reduced to the daily degradations, catnaps, and oblivion ... He emerged incognito and severe ... The world would grow no larger."[68] Little is said in this moment of settler- colonial violence, which explodes across the rest of the novel.[69] Instead the narrative floods Rachid's physical stasis with searing accounts of what it might mean to experience oneself, perpetually and in repetition, as absence.

Rachid recalls his "keen awareness of old like a scar; today's Rachid seemed to him only a thick layer of lichen stifling the other, frail and paradisaic Rachid lost in the prime of life."[70] In a dense monologue, Rachid likens himself to "a piece of broken pottery, an insignificant fragment from an age-old architecture" and "a lizard driven out of his burrow."[71] He names himself nonhuman, nonsignifying, displaced, but these are not vectors of "limit-breaching intimacy" or "crosstaxonomic relation[s]."[72] The inhuman in Rachid materializes the felt paths of his racialization, registered as the continual rupture, or slipping away, of his original presence and integrity of self. The theme is reinforced by his description of "dream[ing] day and night under [Bône's] harbor palms, experiencing my fragile life like an unsuspected break in the stem toward the root."[73] The lizard recalls child-Rachid's flight through alleys, while the plant imagery of a broken stem hearkens to a childhood memory of the *fondouk*, when he had listened to its music drifting down from above, "the weight and speed of inner tears whose flow Rachid, like an attentive plant, felt furtively." [74] An adult, Rachid is no longer a sensitive plant life but the stem's breakage: an empty space where unimpeded flows once moved. The broken stem limns an emptiness marked by the structures it once or might have achieved. It also repeats the name of the mythic ancestral tribe Keblout, which means broken cord.

The passage into absence is neither complete nor in the past. Racialized human and nonhuman coexist, as do past and present. These bindings confirm that in *Nedjma*'s present, the effaced child-Rachid is here, still innocently awaiting the blow of settler colonialism's exclusions that have already crushed

[64] Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 2.
[65] Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 2. My language draws on Wynter, "On Disenchanting Discourse."
[66] Wynter in McKittrick, *Sylvia Wynter*, 30.
[67] Yacine, *Nedjma*, 1961, 223; 1956, 180.
[68] Yacine, *Nedjma*, 1961, 223; 1956, 180.
[69] E.g., the novel begins with drunk settlers beating an Algerian maid; see also Sétif in the final section of the novel, which strips Yacine's poetic language down to bulletlike sentences and bare words, evoking chaos and horror. Yacine, *Nedjma*, 1961, 305–7.
[70] Yacine, *Nedjma*, 1961, 222; 1956, 179.
[71] Yacine, *Nedjma*, 234–35.
[72] Cohen, *Stone*, 2, 5.
[73] Yacine, *Nedjma*, 235.
[74] Yacine, *Nedjma*, 1961, 225; 1956, 181.

his adult self, mute and incapable of bending his tongue to express "the ideas he understood with rage, as if the world's irrevocable forms now weighed on his head like horns."[75] With breathtaking violence, Rachid—laborer, addict, ordinary bearer of mute rage—assumes mythic meaning: a racialized Atlas bearing the colonial world on his head.

Upon closer scrutiny, the "thick layer of lichen" blanketing child-Rachid in the present is nothing other than adult-Rachid, human/nonhuman hybrid.[76] Lichen is a symbiotic entity, formed of "hundreds, thousands, or perhaps tens of thousands of other species within [its] thallus, including other kinds of fungi and myriad bacteria."[77] Its perpetual growth is imperceptible to the human eye. "Ancient worlds" unto themselves, lichen inhabit and signify geologic time scales.[78] These in turn push "the limits of historical understanding"— and the scale of the novel.[79] Their nonhuman presence mirrors the vast time scale invoked when Rachid transforms into a colonized Atlas. Moreover, lichen lends poetic and imaginative substance to what Fanon might have meant by the presence of death within colonized life: a viscerally felt, agonizingly slow, and perhaps imperceptible motion of annihilation that the subject nevertheless lives.

The story of absence, much like the plot of a novel, is typically understood as a sequence of events advancing through linear time: presence, erasure, absence, aftermath. *Nedjma* breaks this order; the violence of absenting (racialized colonialism) and what has been absented refuse to remain in the past. The "what" of the previous phrase must stay undefined because, by the very fact of erasure, the subject does not know what should be retrieved, nor does he have access to a stable location from which to contemplate the disaster. Rachid is not haunted, a configuration that would retain him as a stable, bounded subject. Rather, Yacine's broken stems, spreading lichen, and bony topographies invade the very ground of the subject.

On the balcony, the future recedes as a horizon of action. The imagery to describe Rachid proliferates, accumulative and disjunctive, as the narrative approaches the terror of experiencing the self as nothingness:

> It seemed to him that the surplus of years would be absorbed one day, merging into the emptiness [*le vide*], damming up his swollen past, as if he were aware of drawing a circle without leaving the point of departure that he situated vaguely between the moment he left his cradle and his roamings around the Rock, so that the circle was only a grudging promenade that almost ruined him, from which he groped his way back, not just himself, the adolescent returning to the cradle, no, his ghost condemned to this pitiful gait of the blind [*démarche d'aveugle*].[80]

What holds the individual together is not a stable core of personality, but a movement through time (between childhood presence and adult absence) that can be experienced as integral. The circle imagery is evocative, suggesting Rachid's stuckness between past and present while recalling the child's fascination with the rotations of light, the sign of time's passage. The drawing of a circle with a compass adopts the cold objectivity of geometry to cast Rachid's motion through space and time as nothingness, a mapping of myriad events that register as nonevent. The circle is one way to consider that subjective absence is both process (ongoing, extensive in duration) and achieved event. The dot left by a pencil that never departs its point of origin recalls that the French used for Rachid's childhood as original dawn is "*le point du jour*." Yet this nothingness cannot be extricated from what threatens to overwhelm it: the swelling waters of a past self, surging on other trajectories that, *Nedjma* speculates, could have been Rachid's.

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[75] Yacine, *Nedjma*, 1961, 224; 1956, 181.
[76] Yacine, *Nedjma*, 1961, 223.
[77] Pringle, "Establishing New Worlds," 157.
[78] Pringle, "Establishing New Worlds," 157.
[79] Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History," 221; on the novel as form, see Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*.
[80] Yacine, *Nedjma*, 1961, 222–23; 1956, 180.

The novel thus sketches the contours of absence in one life, temporalities that are lived and unseen, attesting to art's role in accounting for racialized annihilations.[81] It is an accounting that dwells in absence's *durée*, marking its resonance rather than naming what was erased or what is left.[82] The very uncanniness of the imagery authors use to represent it raises questions of how to read literature from the colony, where "historical violence threatens psychic life itself": as a mirror of the real, a cry of madness, pure poiesis, or something else entirely?[83]

Interpreting Figures of Racialized Absence

> French colonialism has settled itself into the very center of the Algerian individual and has undertaken a sustained work of cleanup, of expulsion of self, of rationally pursued mutilation.
> —Frantz Fanon*, L'an V de la Révolution Algérienne*[84]

Fanon's Algerian years infused his writing with concern for the invaded, absented subject, whose body is "occupied" even to the level of breathing.[85] Wretched is widely seen as a narration of the triumphant revolutionary's anti-colonial violence, yet the text's reflections on clinical practice, notably with torture survivors, linger with a subject hollowed out from within. Marriott locates the origin of Fanon's post-1958 move to theorizations of racialized absence in his treatment of Algerian victims of torture during the war: "The n'est pas that torture reveals leads Fanon to an important shift in his notions of sovereignty and resistance," and away from a notion of the body as "an allegory or fictive persona" that was "swathed in real fantasies or illusions."[86] In case studies, Fanon describes torture as "a coherent system that leaves nothing intact," an exemplary site of rationally pursued mutilation to body and selfhood.[87] His clinical studies track the collapse of reference points for right and wrong, truth and falsehood; survivors of indiscriminate torture were left with "an indifference to any moral argument."[88] After the use of truth serum, reports Fanon, "there is a basic indistinction between true and false. Everything is both truth and false."[89] Fanon generalizes this rupture beyond torture survivors to encompass the mental effects of the war, which reveals in its fullest sense the "sociogeny of the colonial encounter."[90]

Fanon articulated his concept of sociogeny in *Black Skins, White Masks* (1952) before his arrival in Algeria. It names the ways symbolic or social registers collapse Black individuals into the category "Blacks," confining them—in ways projected as naturalized and innate rather than historically produced and sustained—to "a zone of nonbeing."[91] Wynter's subsequent theorization of the sociogenic principle underlies the concept of Man in the present article; she developed Fanon's insights to trace Europe's invention of the human, a normative white, bourgeois figure, as a "supracultural universal" for purportedly "purely biological form" through the abjection of Black and Indigenous bodies.[92]

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[81] For Gérard Wajcman, art's role is not to fill in what has been erased but to make absence *itself* the object of representation. Wajcman, *L'objet du siècle*, 36.
[82] "As soon as the question 'What is lost?' is posed, it invariably slips into the question 'What remains?'" Eng and Kazanijian, *Loss*, 2.
[83] Marriott, *Whither Fanon?,* 174
[84] Cited in Moten, *Universal Machine*, 187.
[85] Cited in Moten, *Universal Machine*, 187.
[86] Marriott, *Whither Fanon?,* 64.
[87] Fanon, *Wretched*, 199.
[88] Fanon, *Wretched*, 210.
[89] Fanon, *Wretched*, 212.
[90] Marriott, *Whither Fanon?,* 172.
[91] Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, xii.
[92] Wynter, "Towards the Sociogenic Principle," 42–43. See also Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus,* 26–27.

By theorizing the sociogeny of colonialism in Algeria through war and torture, Fanon captures the colonial system's symbolic and social (re)productions of the Algerian "native" as a naturalized target of systematic mutilation and destruction. Symbolic representations of the Algerian subject exist, in this light, on a continuum with apocalyptic violence and torture's annihilation of worlds. The reorganization of symbolic representation in the colony, in turn, was an integral part of revolution, understood not as a precharted path but as a radical, destructive unknown, a "tabula rasa" in which the old symbolic order, as well as "metaphysical distinctions between ethics and politics, say, or sovereignty and subjectivity, [are] erased."[93] In turn, the potency of figurative transformation, shuttling between body and political revolution, stems from Fanon's concept of lived experience.

For Fanon, centering the body as sensorium undermined its "denied presence" in colonial thought as a legacy of Western civilization.[94] In phenomenology, "one's own body is no longer simply another object in the world, held beneath the gaze of a detached mind... It is *our point of view on the world*."[95] In turn, lived experience is not "the objectively given or an event" but "the process in which objects acquire their status as such for-consciousness. It is also in this sense that it is reality."[96] Racializing representations— including allegories and metaphors centered on the body and its features— shape this reality. "I arrive slowly in the world," wrote Fanon in 1952:

> Sudden emergences are no longer my habit. I crawl along. The white gaze, the only valid one, is already dissecting me. I am *fixed* ... I slip into corners, my long antenna encountering the various axioms on the surface of things: the Negro's clothes smell of Negro; the Negro has white teeth; the Negro has big feet; the Negro has a broad chest. I slip into corners. I keep silent; all I want is to be anonymous, to be forgotten.[97]

"The living, signifying body, source of all 'orientation' or 'perspective,' of alldirection constitutive of an exteriority" is stripped of inner life and flattened to pure appearance.[98] This is apparent in Fanon's description of his alienated body parts, observed from without ("the Negro has…"), and his experience of self as antennae probing the axiomatic surface of things. The racialized body is read from its appearance.

This hegemony of surfaces might offer some insight on the convergence, in Fanon's Algerian writings, on petrification as a feature of both colonial world and colonized body. The colonial world, he writes, is "a world compartmentalized, Manichean and petrified, a world of statues: the statue of the general who led the conquest, the statue of the engineer who built the bridge. A world cocksure of itself, crushing with its stoniness the backbones of those scarred by the whip."[99] In describing the way Algerians were forced to take on the serenity of stones, Fanon emphasized the outward appearances of petrification, just as the statues he named as icons of colonial rule were concerned with public forms and surfaces of power and submission.

Yet under racialization, where metaphor invades and evacuates the self, figuration takes on new dimensions. The corpseness Fanon's Algerian patient invokes is an ordinary metaphor in the sense that it expresses a stiffness he feels. Yet his body is "like" a corpse in another register: the lived experience of colonial racialization that renders him nonlife, nonhuman. Yacine's depiction of Rachid's transformation from seed to lithic figure also depicts this process. In critical rhythm, each writer shows the exclusions of racialization that shape the becoming- reality of the subject. In a draft of *Nedjma*, Yacine

[93] Marriott, *Whither Fanon?,* 10.
[94] Gordon, *What Fanon Said*, 8.
[95] Cited in Khalfa, *Poetics of the Antilles*, 188.
[96] Judy, "Fanon's Black Body of Experience," 53.
[97] Fanon cited in Khalfa, *Poetics of the Antilles,* 198.
[98] Khalfa, *Poetics of the Antilles*, 193.
[99] Fanon*, Wretched of the Earth,* 15.

refers to a "pseudo-Rachid…the opposite of a man, less than an animal, an insignificant beast of the tomb, a mosquito buzzing under arachnid power."[100]

The centrality of figuration to anti-Black and anti-Algerian racism thus necessitates methodological caution against the uncritical use of metaphors— including petrified bodies— in relational reading. Any account of literature must remain sensitive to the reorganization of relations between the real and the imaginary when, as Fanon wrote, "the whole of the personality is disrupted" under conditions of systemic racial, geophysical, and political violence.[101] Images of absence point to experiential dimensions of colonial negation that so damage psychic life as to trouble the very ground of representation. The novel is not, then, a mirror of the real ("what really happened") or historical- ethnographic source. Fanon's and Yacine's two vantages on absence in Algeria, rather, constitute theoretical- clinical and poetic interventions, respectively, that work toward the radical reordering of symbolic life. In *Nedjma*'s depiction of Rachid, this entailed suspending colonialism's symbolic order around the stoned, immobile Algerian body to write its meanings anew, on the grounds of the nonhuman human. In the same vein, in the closing of *Wretched* the "anti-colonial struggle—the common assertion of the dispossessed— is the field in which what is relegated to the status of mental disorder"— in this case, subjective absence—"turns out to be interarticulate with the program of 'total disorder' for which Fanon calls."[102] This total disorder includes the representational field, wherein imaginations of "this other breathing, that is preoccupied with change," writes Moten, come into view.[103]

As Rachid shifts into absence, his language rarefies, becoming more tenuous in its relations to his experience and publicly comprehensible meaning. Yacine emphasizes this tension by keeping Rachid as a narrator while introducing the character of a scribe who visits him and listens, unimpressed, to his ravings. To the writer, Rachid appears "the opposite of a man, less than an animal."[104] With a wink, the novel notes the petrified subject's speech does not translate into public writing— including literature— that remains in the field of Man. The lithic subject is thus threatened with interpretive erasure in *Nedjma*, recalling that the transition to stoniness renders the Indigenous body more legible under colonial racialization. Immobile, Rachid lies before the reader's eye like one of the colonial photographs Ariella Azoulay calls for reading beyond their surfaces.[105]

Yet *Nedjma* makes other possibilities visible, much like Azoulay's call to excavate potential histories and read images of the colonial past for what the camera shutter erases. To this end, Yacine's narrative makes it impossible for the reader to know who decides (or experiences) that the nonhuman quality of Rachid's language stems from his disintegration into absence: is it the scribe, Rachid himself, or both? Fanon's lived experience is helpful on this point, emphasizing the dual positioning of the racialized subject who experiences himself perpetually from within *and* under the gaze of the Other. The resulting obliteration of an integral, narrating self appears when *Nedjma* notes that Rachid's words "dissolve far from the initial thoughts of which he is now merely the collapsed receptacle."[106]

Stylistically, Yacine realizes this effect through a poetic tautness that suspends the presence of multiple and even contradictory accounts together. This technique does not produce the ludic skepticism of postmodernism but rather an impression of dwelling in overcharged spaces of myth. The style is most often noted in relation to the text's circling of the same events told by multiple narrators. Reliant on the long form of prose, this style is easiest to detect in moments where Yacine's narrative thematizes suspension, as in the following passage:

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[100] Cited in Arnaud, *Recherches sur la littérature maghrébine*, tome II, 402.
[101] Cited in Marriott, *Whither Fanon,* 24.
[102] Moten, *Universal Machine*, 186.
[103] Moten, *Universal Machine*, 188. This possibility appears, he continues, "where the relation between observing and being observed is connected to the discernment, transformation, and encoding of values."
[104] Cited in Arnaud, *Recherches*, tome II, 402.
[105] Azoulay, *Potential History*, 8.
[106] Yacine, *Nedjma*, 1961, 242

> Since childhood, [Rachid] had been able to catch only fragments, increasingly slight, disparate, intense: flashes of paradise ravaged by the deflagration of the hours, a string [*chapelet*] of delayed-action bombs that the sky held suspended over the always clandestine joy, reduced to taking refuge in the subsoil of the most frail being.[107]

The passage deftly holds in tension images of violent explosion (the ravaging of paradise, deflagration of time, and delayed-action bombs) with their suspension (the bombs above, strung into relation with one another like prayer beads) over the earth and over the human subject's joy. Neither cancels the other; they suggest, rather, pleasure suffused with an anticipation of devastation— a layered, temporally complex experience that adult Rachid retrieves and constructs in intensified bursts of perception.

Fanon acknowledges unresolvable uncertainties around literary representation in the colony because racialization had already pierced the colonized's voice with "a kind of rupture that is both primal and irreparable."[108] It was therefore impossible to ascertain whether speech acts were "revolutionary- artistic events or signs of madness."[109] His insight may add helpful nuance to tendencies to read *Nedjma* as a historical- clinical source. Keller reads Yacine's madwomen as figures of "resistance," and Stefania Pandolfo advocates reading allof *Nedjma* as delirious poesis on the threshold of madness.[110] For her, Yacine expresses Algeria's "soul choking": "a crippling of the ethical faculty, a disablement of the soul fostered in existential and political trauma, in the confrontation with evil, and in the illness of melancholy as it leads to suicide."[111]

While I am sympathetic to scholarly efforts to capture the political valences of *Nedjma*'s complexity, I have reservations about their generalizing impulse.[112] Moreover, the broad strokes of resistance have a domesticating function, suggesting that, facing the vertiginous absence within (or that is) Rachid, the scholar can return to stable terrain by describing the epistemology or policies of colonial psychiatry. Yet these historical forms, anchored squarely in the field of Man, do not approach an explanation or description of Rachid's absence. It is not productive to note that Rachid is not mad: the very projection of madness introduces the foreign body of colonialism's medical-epistemological apparatus, which the scholar imaginatively defies by converting the subject's "symptoms" to resistance. This move reiterates Fanon's diagnosis of the rigid body. Yet the apparatus *and* defiance of it are marginalized in *Nedjma*, which relativizes the human by giving full, uncanny voice to Rachid's absence. Yet the resulting vantage on the human from outside, as the next section shows, sequentially and imaginatively follows the novel's immersion in the field of Man's racialization of Black and female bodies.

Inside the Field of Man

So far I have traced rhythmic convergences between Fanon's oeuvre and a novel that delves into the implications suggested by the psychiatrist's comments on representation, lived experience, and revolution. A further impulse for relational reading stems from the fact that Yacine's text moves liminally in and out of the field of Man. At some points, it participates in an intersectional undercommon of the colonized and racialized; at others, it reinscribes colonialism's negations of Blackness and instrumentalizations of silenced, violated female bodies. A relational approach underscores the novel's full participation in the field of Man in the very moment it tries to write its outside: Rachid's transformation into nonhuman absence under settler colonialism.

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[107] Yacine, *Nedjma*, 1961, 221; 1956, 179.
[108] Marriott, *Whither Fanon?,* 111.
[109] Marriott, *Whither Fanon?,* 111.
[110] Keller, *Colonial Madness,* 179; 184.
[111] Pandolfo, *Knot of the Soul*, 43, 8.
[112] For example, Pandolfo's readings, while sensitive, collapse early 2000s Morocco into colonized Algeria and into Syrian refugees' Mediterranean crossings of 2015–2016.

Rachid's passage to absence is trigg ered by his failed attempt to return to the tribal heartland. The critical scene takes place in the Nadhor, land of the Keblout. The tribe is sketched as metonym for the Algerian nation; with a founding father of uncertain origins, the tribe resisted French rule by retreating into the landscape. Finally, "the Nadhor was put to fire and sword, military judges were appointed; a little later, the six chief males of the tribe had their heads cut off, allon the same day, one after the other."[113] The tribe is allbut erased in an orgy of colonial violence. Its children scatter and take new names, and the four narrators are mirrored in the four divisions into which the colonial authorities fragment "the Sons of Keblout."[114] It is to seek their lost origins that Rachid and Si Mokhtar, an old man who may be Nedjma's father, kidnap her and seclude her in the Nadhor.

In one of *Nedjma*'s most infamous scenes, the abducted woman bathes under a fig tree while two men gaze at her separately: Rachid and an unnamed Black man, guardian of the Keblout. Rachid says, "I thought I saw a black man [*un nègre]* hidden under another figtree (he was staring at *Nedjma* frolicking in the cauldron) and it was too late to yield to jealousy, too soon to begin strugg ling with the black man who might claim to be not a rival nor even an aesthete capable of appreciating the scene."[115] Throughout, the Black man is a cipher for tribal origin; he is neither French colonizer nor Algerian proletarian, in contradistinction to the four narrators, who occupy hybrid positions between French and Algerian identities.[116] To this end, *Nedjma* rehearses racializations of Black men as sexually potent ("I knew that the black man would be roused by such a sight") and bestial (he sleeps like "an old animal").[117] Blackness figures a primal threat to the woman's "shining innocence."[118] It is the negated origin of/within Algeria: "condemned, unconscious, prohibited—and yet performed"—Blackness, "the depositary of culture" is "nihilated."[119]

In doing so, *Nedjma* participates in long-standing appropriations of Black flesh as plasticity: "coerced formlessness as a mode of domination" that includes but exceeds the anti-Black "animalization [and] objectification" rampant in this scene.[120] This point relies on grasping the transmogrifications of and between female and Black flesh under Rachid's gaze. The Black man blocks Rachid's access to Nedjma, who figures the national origin (i.e., political self) and precolonial past he desires. Yet the Black guardian of the tribe also instantiates those lost origins. Rachid's erotic terror that the Black man will penetrate Nedjma in his place, exiling him forever, is only one part of this scene's plasticity, where even the bathwater is imagined to fuse with Nedjma's flesh. Anti-Blackness thus secures *Nedjma*'s erotically and politically charged fantasy of what the non-Black, male Algerian subject cannot attain: a fusion of the matter of female and Black flesh, tribe and nation, and human and nonhuman. This fantasy is what, at the level of plot, propels Rachid into absence. A national past is foreclosed: the racialized field of Man is what assures the novel's gesture to impending revolution and, curiously, its writing of an outside to that field.

As noted, Woodhull's 1992 critique denounced the antifeminism of this scene. Rachid's fantasy to rape or confine Nedjma restores the freedom he associates with his "lizard childhood": a proximity between the child's body and the nonhuman world for which the dream of Nedjma now substitutes.[121] Yet *Nedjma*'s anti-Blackness has been met with a resounding silence in scholarship. Fanon interjects, seeking emancipation from reification in the gaze of the Other:

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[113] Yacine, *Nedjma*, 167.
[114] Yacine, *Nedjma*, 169.
[115] Yacine, *Nedjma*, 1961, 180; 1956, 147.
[116] See, e.g., Yacine, *Nedjma*, 193: "His contempt for us," reasons Rachid, was due to the Black man remaining loyal to the tribe, while "we were among those whose fathers had sold their share of the land and contributed to the ruin of the ancestral fabric."
[117] Yacine, *Nedjma*, 181, 185.
[118] Yacine, *Nedjma*, 1961, 181; 1956, 148.
[119] Marriott, "Blackness," 49.
[120] Jackson, *Becoming Human*, 71.
[121] Yacine, *Nedjma*, 182.

> But just as I get to the other slope I stumble, and the Other fixes me with his gaze, his gestures and attitude, the same way you fix a preparation with a dye. I lose my temper, demand an explanation ... Nothing doing. I explode. Here are the fragments put together by another me.[122]

It is worth distinguishing what these observations mean for the novel as anti-colonial text and for literary scholarship that engages it. Following David Scott's work, anti-colonial nationalisms constiture problem spaces distinct from the present and its theoretical priorities; the work of critique is not to condemn, but to reconstruct the questions that novels like *Nedjma* answered. Future relational critiques of *Nedjma* might thus contribute to as-yet unwritten histories of Blackness, anti-colonialism, and racialization in Algeria by tracing the question that the novel answered, so vehemently, with anti-Black plasticity.

In scholarship, this scene and its (non)treatment in a canonical text of Maghrebi studies make clear the limitations of approaches that reify what Hong and Ferguson called ideal types—the Algerian woman, the Arab revolutionary— to the ongoing exclusion of other racialized subjects. A generous reading of the silence on anti-Blackness in *Nedjma* might speculate that scholars in Europe and North America were loath to criticize Algerian anti-colonialism, still less a poetic expression of it that acknowledged Jewish and Amazight histories under erasure by the postcolonial state. Yet as Wynters argued, disciplinary borders and conventional knowledge structures also participate in the field of Man, raising the call for relational approaches that shatter ideologies of ideal types and puncture certainties around the human and its normative forms—even, perhaps especially, when they appear in a discipline's literary canon.

Conclusion

As I have shown, a relational reading across Fanon and Yacine, and across anti-Black and anti-Algerian racializations, should not collapse these complex assemblages into similitude or equivalence. By revisiting the intellectual proximities forged in decolonizing Algeria, relational work opens up new imaginative and critical ground by bringing multiple perspectives on absence to bear on the field of Man. In this way, differing accounts of a disappearing ground—the experience of the self as nothingness, the nonhuman resonating against the frame of the human—suggest absence as a plural modality of living under colonial racialization. Yet the hegemonic center of colonial representation and power, Man, from which the absent are excluded does not stay safely put in the middle of the vantages explored here. As my reading of anti-Blackness in *Nedjma* has argued, the novel shifts in and out of the field of Man, plunging into racialization at the very threshold of writing an outside to the colonial gaze.

Relational reading for absence does not, then, guarantee the familiar plotlines of anti-colonial triumph. It may be recalled that Rachid's stasis on the balcony is also an embrace of pleasure. It is his chosen surrender to sensuous intoxication, not his madness or his resistance, that immobilizes Rachid's body and leads to his desiccation. This state of pleasurable absence that pulls the subject towards the nonhuman must confound any effort to finally fix Rachid's meaning. If *Nedjma* points onward to revolution, the narrative retains Rachid as petrified prisoner, echoing a possibility raised in Fanon's clinical writings during the Algerian war: that perhaps no amount of emancipation could recuperate the absented subject, "destroyed and hypnotized by the extreme literal violence."[123]

The stakes of reading for subjective absence are not, then, to recuperate racialized bodies into triumphant, resistant subjects. This is why I have argued against rescuing Rachid from his nonhuman intimacies with stones, lichen, and rivers. It is the very uncanniness of absence, its defamiliarizing imagery and affects, that anchors the critical work of relativizing the field of Man—not reifying it. Any critical engagement with the human/nonhuman exclusions that racializations erect should not, Jackson astutely notes, privilege "the normative subject of liberal humanism [which] is predicated on the

[122] Cited in Marriott, "Blackness," 36–37.
[123] Marriott, *Whither Fanon*, 23.

abjection" of Black and Indigenous bodies.[124] The absented subject forms, for Marriott "a vanishing point *within* meaning," cautioning against the production of political ontologies.[125]

Finally, the evocative heuristic of trauma, while prevalent today in studies of Algeria, in some ways falls short of the devastation described by Fanon and Yacine. Trauma studies posit a subject trapped in the compulsive repetition of a foundational wounding, a motion that initially resembles Moten's resonance. But trauma studies cannot capture the perpetual reinjuring of colonial racialization and transformation of the subject into a vertiginous abyss that remains a self; nor does it ground these injuries in the global and ongoing project of colonial humanism. A relational perspective on absence—one that builds on the rich psychoanalytical tradition of emancipatory literature and thought in the Maghreb—thus promises to connect the corpus on settler colonialism in Algeria to wider critical debates on racialization and humanism today.

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Acknowledgements

The research reported in this article was supported by Starting Grant SYRASP (851393) of the European Research Council. The author thanks Nancy Reynolds, Alexander Dubé, and the participants of the Mellon Sawyer symposium for their feedback on drafts of the article.

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[124] Jackson, *Becoming Human*, 18–19.
[125] Marriott, "Blackness," 50.

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