**Author Information**

Name: Em Walsh

Affiliation: McGill University, Montreal.

Position: PhD student

Email: emily.walsh@mail.mcgill.ca

Bio: Old-timer at UOB. Primary interests include researching philosophy of psychiatry, philosophy of mind, feminist philosophy, and ethics. Keen baker and dog walker. Will dance with glee if accepted but will enjoy the conference regardless because the keynotes are EPIC.

**How Racialization is Felt on the Skin:**

*Frantz Fanon and the Epidermalization of ‘Inferiority’*

We typically conceive of racism as working in a certain way. This way, simply put, is as follows: an agent, X, holds racist beliefs about a member of a different race to his own, Y. X then uses this to justify acts of prejudice and discrimination against Y. Such discrimination exists widely in society as we know it today. Nevertheless, Frantz Fanon in his work *Black Skin, White Masks* gives us reason to believe that racism works in a much more insidious way than traditionally conceived (Fanon 2008). According to Fanon, racism isn’t simply an act committed by an agent who holds a certain set of racist beliefs. Instead, it is a process called ‘racialization’ (Fanon 2008). Racialization is a process which we all contribute to, which affects how each of us acts, speaks and thinks of one another, and which is built into the very fabric of the communities we find ourselves in.

In this paper, I explore how this process of racialization affects how we see the bodies of those around us and how it changes how we feel about our own bodies. Fanon claims that one consequence of racialization is that it affects not only how agents perceive themselves and others but also that it physically changes racialized subjects by a process of ‘epidermalization’ (Fanon 2008: 18). When Fanon refers to this phenomenon, he is referring to the idea that racialization can become genuinely felt on the skin of racialized subjects. He explains why this is by use of metaphor. According to Fanon, racialization creates knots in the ego of racialized subjects (Fanon 2008: 62) which is caused by a constant feeling of inferiority and by the psychology of colonialism (Fanon 2008: 16). These knots then come to affect how the racialized subject feels and moves in their own skin. Fanon explains that one such way it does this is by causing the agent to develop a ‘white mask’ in order to survive. This mask then becomes glued to their skin (Fanon 2008: 60) and even if the agent wishes to remove the mask, he cannot. In turn, this can cause racialized subjects to shut down completely, become highly sensitive to the world around them or become noticeably ‘prickly’ to others around them.

I will argue that Fanon’s account effectively explains why certain agents are perceived as being ‘sensitive’ by members of their own community and that this perceived ‘sensitivity’ is caused by structures which we all contribute to and therefore all have a responsibility to attend to. My talk calls for an end to diminishing the experiences of racialized subjects and uses Fanon to call attention to how socio-political structures can not only affect the environment around us but can change our very being in ways that actively harm us.

**Keywords:** Racialization, embodiment, epidermalization.

References:

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