

## Fanon in drag: Decoloniality in sociolinguistics?<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

In focus in this paper is the genre of drag, and the uses to which it is put by its proponents in subverting conventional and repressive (Western) models of gender, sexuality and race. We raise the question of to what extent performances of drag, while arguably disrupting gender stereotypes, nevertheless continue to reproduce colonialities of race and sexuality. Framing an analysis of a drag king performance in a sociolinguistics of subjectification inspired by the work of Frantz Fanon, we offer an account that recognizes how, rather than subverting or challenging conventional images of gender, the performance is one part of a complex circulation of textual and corporeal semiotics that enregisters racialized categories of male and female cut to the cloth of coloniality/modernity. On the other hand, the analysis also reveals that there are moments of interruption and slippage in the reproduction of colonial constructs of race, gender and sexuality that may offer more complex and multifarious understandings of what may comprise the exercises of decoloniality. We conclude with a discussion of what a decolonial Fanonian approach to subjectification might offer sociolinguistics.

### Introduction

Increasingly, there are calls – in contexts of the global, geopolitical South especially – for decoloniality, and there is a respectable and growing body of literature in disciplines such as history, sociology, literature, philosophy and linguistics that are taking the ‘decolonial turn’ (Maldonado-Torres 2011). Quijano (2000) introduced the notion of decoloniality to emphasize the need to move away from ‘continuing’ coloniality – what Mignolo (1995) refers to as ‘the darker side of modernity’, distinguishing four axes relevant to the enduring colonial matrix of power:

- economic (appropriating land, and control of the economy);
- political (maintaining authority);
- civic life (where gender and sexuality are controlled with Western heteropatriarchal discursive practices); and
- epistemological (pertaining to subjectivity, identity, control, distortion and erasure of knowledge).

In Maldonado-Torres’ (2011: 2) words,

Coloniality ... refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labor, intersubjective relations and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations. Thus, coloniality survives colonialism.

Decoloniality, then, is a political and epistemic (and spiritual) project to delink from modern colonial designs (Mignolo 2011). It is the

dismantling of relations of power and conceptions of knowledge that foment the reproduction of racial, gender and geo-political hierarchies that came into being or found new and more powerful forms of expression in the modern/colonial world. (Maldonado-Torres 2011: 117)

The decolonial turn has many roots and offshoots: 'heightened perception of the linkages between colonialism, racism and other forms of dehumanization in the twentieth century, the formation of ethnic movements of empowerment and feminisms of colour, and the appearance of queer decolonial theorizing' (Maldonado-Torres 2011: 2). The many manifestations of decoloniality share a perception of coloniality as a continuing concern in the contemporary world. An important dimension of enduring coloniality is the 'knowledge' we have of our embodied, gendered, racialized and sexualized selves, and the praxes/ practices through which these selves can be inserted into the everyday. Concepts of gender and race that evolved out of imperial coloniality remain tightly imbricated in contemporary forms of coloniality/modernity. The 'voices' with which we speak ourselves and the scripts that we follow in these respects remain those of colonial discourse. Conceptualizations of gender that articulate with race are reproduced through specific global sociopolitical forms of political organization, as well as circulated across the globe in Western heteropatriarchal discourses of entertainment and thought. Mohanty (2003: 514) notes how modern-day manifestations of coloniality 'global capitalism and neoliberal policies writes its script especially in the bodies and lives of women and girls from the third world'. In the postapartheid context of South Africa, the intersectionalities of race, gender and economic disparities underlie widespread practices of patriarchy, rape and sexual discrimination.

However, despite the intimacy and carnality of the coloniality nexus of sex, gender and race, Arboleda-Rios (2014) notes that 'the ways in which lesbian, homosexual, bisexual, transgender and/or queer subjects confront interlocking systems of oppression have been consistently disregarded' by the decoloniality collective. Furthermore, the connections between enduring racialization and the production of race and sexuality remain in need of explication. Mbembe (2017: 55) makes the point that 'our critique of modernity will remain incomplete if we fail to grasp that the coming of modernity coincided with the appearance of the principle of race'. He goes on to say that '[i]n order to reproduce itself, the principle of race depends on an assemblage of practices

whose immediate and direct target is the body of the Other and whose scope is life in general' (2017: 56) – including, importantly, sexuality.

In her much-cited, seminal work on decolonial feminism, Lugones (2010) explicates the mutual co-constitution of gender and race in practices of slavery and colonization. And Sally Kitch (2009: 169) notes how 'sexual difference and the gender binary became basic tenets of the ideology of racial hierarchy and white supremacy during processes of nation formation in the West'. Gunkel (2010: 11) explains that, through hypersexualizing the (black) Other, 'colonialism constituted race as a sexualised category, and sexuality a racialized category. However, it was not only heterosexuality that was racially constructed, but also divergent sexualities'.

### **Drag and decoloniality**

One area in which these complex interactions are literally on show and open to reflection is the drag performance. Drag shows are arguably a form of decolonial aesthetic or decolonial aestheSis (Mignolo and Vásquez 2013), a dimension of decoloniality that seeks to replace the coloniality of traditional aesthetics with alternative ways of sensing and perceiving. They are typical instances of performances that seek to parody and disrupt colonialities of gender or sexuality, by showing that they are in no way 'natural' or stable, as we are led to believe. Although much has been written on drag queens, less is known about how drag kings go about the task of disrupting sexuality and gender. A drag king is most often (but not always) a woman who dresses up in costume that is recognizably masculine, and who performs theatrically in that costume (Halberstam 1997, 1998, 2001). Muñoz (1999: 99) remarks on how queer performances allow performers and their audiences (through disidentification) to resist 'the interpellating call of ideology that fixes a subject within the state power apparatus'. Halberstam (1998) argues that the subversive power of the drag performance lies in the fact that drag parades discontinuities between gender and sex or appearance and reality, but doesn't allow these discontinuities to be read as dysfunction (as they would be in ordinary circumstances). Instead, these inconsistencies become a site of gender creativity (cf. Butler 1996), and there is thus a strong claim here to be disrupting normativities of masculinity through holding them up for laughter. However, genres (including performance genres) are sites of social (re) production – of people, persona, place and registers – as much as they invite social change. They are therefore also a potential carrier of global-colonial structurations (global circulation). Shome (2000: 367) has argued that 'cultural products such as texts, ... legitimize and reproduce – the genre allows gender and race to shift location, and to appear anew' thereby reproducing patterns in 'the everyday organization of social and cultural relations [which] function to confer benefits and systemic advantage to whites' (cf. Williams and Stroud 2014). The question then becomes in what ways, and to what extent, do performance genres such as drag king further a decolonial critique of the colonialities of the body; that is, gender, sexuality and race and their embodiment? In what sense can they be seen as articulations of a decolonial aesthetics? Do drag shows break 'silences, disrupt[ing]

dominant narratives and create a transformative consciousness', as Cervantes and Saldarña claim to be the case for hip hop and nueva canción (2015: 84). Do they provide a means to 'delink from coloniality and exercise a "decolonial imaginary"' (Pérez 1999: 5)?

In this paper, we approach these questions with a close analysis of four excerpts from two performances by a troupe of drag kings called Bros B4 Ho's (sic)<sup>2</sup> who promote themselves as 'South Africa's first ever Drag King troupe'.<sup>3</sup> In interviews the motivation behind their performances is presented as clearly political in nature (OUT Africa Magazine 2012) and, on the group's Facebook page, the kings explain that they 'use satire, irony, and parody ... to subvert cultural hegemony and conventions and empower them[selves]'. It's clear that, to them, resisting and disrupting hegemony is a big part of their project. On the basis of our analysis of the drag king troupe, we argue that deconstructions of gendered relationships, or the remapping of sexualities across gender categories, or the erasure of simple gender binaries oftentimes implicate the continued production and circulation of racial and sexual hierarchy. In fact, we make a stronger claim: that the continued circulation of stereotypes of race and sexuality are the very means whereby heteronormativity is deconstructed in these performances. In other words, not performing blackness is a prerequisite for the performativity of masculinity. At the same time, we show that there are moments of genre rupture in the drag king performance that destabilize the simple reproduction of colonialities of race and sexuality.

In making this argument, we take an approach to language and social life inspired by the work of Frantz Fanon, a post-colonial philosopher and writer born in French-colonized Martinique, who shaped the way we think about colonialism and anti-black racism today. His most well-known works were published in the 1950s and 1960s, largely in response to his experiences of racism when studying in France, as well as his involvement in the Algerian National Liberation Front fighting against French colonization. In the very first line in the very first chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks* he notes the 'fundamental importance' of language, considering it 'essential for providing us with one element in understanding the black man's dimension of being-for-others' (2008: 1). In particular, we use a Fanonian perspective on body, violence and language to frame our discussion of performance, genre and subjectification in the next section. Following this, we present the drag troupe together with a brief review of some key literature on drag. This will provide the foundation for a study of two performances in Cape Town. We conclude the paper with a discussion on the implications of drag for decoloniality (informed through a Fanonian stance), and the possible contribution a Fanonian approach can make to sociolinguistics more generally.

## **A Fanonian lens on sociolinguistics**

Although little used by linguists (but cf. Burnett and Milani in press), a Fanonian approach to language opens up some enticing possibilities for thinking about the role of language in the global circulation of enduring racialization and its semiotics. Central concepts in Fanon's thought pertain to the body, violence and language, and, even though Fanon wrote almost 70 years ago, his accounts of the existential formation of race retain a troubling currency in contemporary society.

The central problematic of Fanon's oeuvre is the fact of blackness as a White semiotic construction, one that depends on, and is continually reinforced by, (failed) encounters with whiteness. Blackness is forged on the anvil of structural whiteness in a violence of language, and 'woven out of a thousand details, anecdotes and stories' (Fanon 1967: 111). Race, in Mbembe's (2017) words, is an assemblage, cobbled together in the intersubjective, social world of culture, history, language and economics – a world symbolically and semiotically constituted by humans. It is this world of representation and interaction that determines the forms in which blackness may emerge. Fanon calls the process of fabricating blackness sociogeny, whereby the symbolic and semiotic is made materiality and flesh.

The most famous example of sociogeny is Fanon's telling of how he is interpellated, while walking the streets of Paris, by a young (white) Parisian boy who shouts: 'Look, a negro!' This hailing, which Fanon at first found amusing, alerted him to how his body – his general corporeal schema – had in that moment been overtaken by a racial epidermal schema:

... my body was given back to me sprawled out, distorted, recolored, clad in mourning in that white winter day. The Negro is an animal, the Negro is bad, the Negro is mean, the Negro is ugly. (Fanon 1967: 112)

When Fanon recounts this story, he notes how he is made to appear to himself as an epidermis, a becoming-skin, a historical-racial body schema (seen through a third person consciousness). He contrasts this 'self' as a becoming-skin with a body-schema, or a phenomenological sense of self, that normally emerges out of the everyday 'remnants of feelings and notions of the tactile, vestibular, kinesthetic or visual nature' (1967: 91), 'owned' by the perceiving and acting subject (cf. Merleau-Ponty 1996). The epidermalization, or becoming skin (Fanon's concept of the body), is at the same time an internalization. In fact, as pointed out by Gorgis (2015: 86) "becoming-skin" suspends rather than reinforces the distinction between interiority and exteriority'. Becoming skin is thus 'the process by which the exteriority of the skin internalizes affects' (2015: 86). Fanon coins the term scissiparite (self-division or self cleaving) or fissiparousness (a reproductive process by means of fission) to capture this form of enforced subjectification.

Fanon refers to becoming-skin, as living in the zone of non-being. The Black, reduced to inhabiting a two-dimensional body, has no inner life that is recognized as interactively engaging in his/her own subjectification. There is no recognition in the sociogeny of Blackness that s/he is anything more than surface appearances. One implication of this is that, if the Black has no inner life worth engaging with intersubjectively, then everything that can be 'known' can be sourced from his/her surface. Thus, the Black is a victim of epistemic closure, 'sealed in a world without reciprocity or the intersubjectively social' (Gordon 2015: 48–49), existing only in the zone of non-being.

In order to become fully human, to have a recognized inner life that goes beyond the interiorization of the exteriority of the racial epidermal schema, the Black subject must transcend the boundaries of race. However, there is a repeated 'failure' of the black body to enter the world – to emerge into a world where the standards of humanity are determined by and as whiteness – other than as an object. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, each chapter elaborates on a different aspect of the failure of black attempts to gain recognition of their humanity. With respect to language, Fanon (2008: 3) notes how 'the black man who has lived in France for a certain time returns home radically transformed'; 'speaking pidgin means imprisoning the black man and perpetuating a conflictual situation where the white man infects the black man with extremely toxic foreign bodies' (2008: 19); addressing a black man in pidgin means 'you stay where you are' (2008: 17). According to Fanon (1967: 1), 'to speak is to exist absolutely for the other'. The world and what is human is defined by the white as white.

For the purposes of this paper, Fanon's complex understanding of how (female) gender (and the exclusion or denial of femininities) mediates the (sexual) construction of black male disempowerment is of particular relevance. Firstly, the gaze or power of interpellation that reduces the black body to an exteriority or 'lack' is in psychoanalytic thought a prerogative of the (white) male. The black male who is denied this gaze, becoming instead its 'object', is thus refused a fundamental 'privilege' of masculinity. The disempowerment is accentuated even more if the gaze that constructs the black body is feminine (thus also reversing gender roles): in an episode recounted by Fanon (1967: 94), a woman exclaims 'Look how handsome that Negro is' and the powerful retort, 'Fuck you, madame' testifies to the added dismemberment felt by the black male from being objectified in a female gaze (cf. Bergner 1995).

Secondly, Fanon discusses the gendered differences between black men and women in how they desire and attempt to inhabit whiteness. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, he strongly critiques Mayotte Capécia's (1948: 202) comment in her autobiography *Je suis Martiniquaise*, 'I should have liked to be married but to a white man', condemning her reproduction of racist ideology. Bergner (1995: 86) remarks on how 'black women's attempts to inhabit a whiteness that Fanon consistently defines in masculine terms becomes mimicry, a feminine masquerade both of race and gender'. In this comment,

black femininity is de-subjectivized. Thus, gender and sexuality figure prominently in Fanon's thought in the construction of the black male.

Fanon's concern with appearance as subjectification (how what can appear in what guise and when, under what conditions), the notion of sociogeny as the site where collective racial narratives become individualized, embodied subjectivities, the metatheory of failure as the generative process in the construction of black identities, together with the role of sexuality and gender in the construction of the black male, provides an interesting perspective from which to study drag. Performance more generally is a site for highly coordinated and public displays of cultural reproduction (and contestation; Bauman 2001), where the communicative act is also put on display for an audience, and is thus objectified and able to be intensely scrutinized with regard to multiple features of its semiotics (cf. also Coupland 2007). Because of this, performance is a potentially productive site of resistance to and reindexicalization of cultural stereotypes of sexual and racialized identities. However, performances acquire this potential through tapping into (globally) circulating discourses and characterological figures and genres that audiences can identify, align with or distance themselves from. It is also this dimension that opens up performances to reproducing the familiar and the status quo. Performances are '... encounters in which individuals establish forms of footing and alignment with voices indexed by speech, and thus with social types of persons, real or imagined ...' (Agha 2005: 38).

A Fanonian approach to the sociolinguistics of performance suggests a specific angle of interrogation into the drag genre and its instantiations in the performance, one that explores the drag show as a potential site for the construction of alienating stereotypes of blackness (and sexuality). We feel that this is a particularly important perspective to ask of a drag performance with decolonial ambitions in contemporary postapartheid South Africa.

Drag shows are an instance of a particular genre that is a complex cluster of speaker types, audience types, technologies, settings and purposes, 'a constellation of systemically related, co-occurrent formal features and structures that serves as a conventionalized orienting framework for the production and reception of discourse' (Bauman 2001: 79). It is a relational event, creating indexical connections across performances (Bauman and Briggs 1990) with 'other times, other places and persons' (1992: 147–148), thereby linking to 'structural whiteness'. When an utterance is interpreted through its intertextual relationships with prior texts, including prior situational contexts and their constituents (settings, participant roles, scenarios), it transcends the locally produced event (Bauman 2001). Of particular interest here is the role of genres in reproducing or subverting social power. Bauman and Briggs (1990) speak of an intertextual gap occurring in the linking of particular utterances to generic models. These gaps can either be minimized (as in 'rendering the discourse interpretable through the use of generic precedents' (Bauman and Briggs 1992: 49) or maximizing the gaps. With respect to the latter they note that:

Maximizing and highlighting these intertextual gaps underlies strategies for building authority through claims of individual creativity and innovation ... [resulting in] resistance to the hegemonic structures associated with established genres ... (1992: 149)

We explore the minimizing and maximizing of intertextual gaps in relation to the production and subversion of Blackness in the drag king show below.

### **Drag kings in Cape Town: performing a genre**

In November 2011, after attending a performance by drag king Johnny Deep at a drag bar in Cape Town called 'Bubbles Bar', Catherine Saint Jude Pretorius decided to create her own drag king persona, rapper Saint Dude. Following a handful of successful performances at the open stage nights at Bubbles, and realizing that other women may also benefit from the catharsis she experienced while performing, Pretorius put out an invitation on the Facebook group 'Cape Town Lesbians' for a gathering to discuss the possible formation of a drag king troupe. Bros B4 Ho's was formed, now comprising four white performers and two women of colour. At the time of the study, the troupe was made up of six personas regularly performed by the group: troupe leader Saint Dude and Umlilo John – the only two kings of colour – both of whom are hip hop characters; FreDDie, a Freddie Mercury impersonator; King Cory Lingus and Cole Steel Johnson, white kings who performed mostly rock and pop music; and Frankie H, a white king who dipped into both hip hop and pop music (Figure 1). The group performs predominantly in traditionally white spaces in Cape Town. Pretorius believed that a troupe could provide a safe, supportive space for a woman to experiment with gender-bending performances (Lea 2013). Frankie H, who at the time described himself as a 'pre-op trans guy', said that the troupe was a space in which he could safely dress and behave as a man, and have his masculinity 'celebrated'. He went as far as admitting that the affirmation he received while performing with the troupe allowed him to finally make the decision to transition (Frankie H 2012). Another king, Umlilo John, said that being in Bros B4 Ho's allowed him to be butch without being ostracized, and that he viewed the troupe as a second family: it was as though he had gained new brothers and sisters at the same time (Lea 2013). This cathartic effect that participation in the troupe has on its members, and the options of safely performing other genders has been noted by other authors. Shapiro (2007: 251) notes how participating in a drag performance may 'transform the gender identity and politics of the drag performer' functioning as 'a form of consciousness raising and a site of identity transformation for performers' (2007: 251).





Figure 1: The original members of *Bros B4 Ho's*. From left to right: Cole Steel Johnson, Frankie H, Umlilo John, Saint Dude, King Cory Lingus and FreDDie (Source: <https://www.facebook.com/brosb4hosCT/photos/a.140776156058213.28571.140769169392245/144839178985244/?type=3&theater>) [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

As noted earlier, one prime motivation for Pretorius to start the group in the first place was a firm political belief expressed on their Facebook page that '[i]n order to debunk the hegemonic power that too often goes unaddressed and unchallenged, we must adopt the empowered personae so that we can expose it'.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, Pretorius explained that doing drag allowed her to bring the complexities of her (and others') gender presentation to people's attention, and to fight for 'gender presentation without persecution' (Lea 2013) as part of her gender activism. Shapiro (2007: 267) adds the caveat, though, that a prerequisite for tapping into the disruptive power of drag is that it is done 'in a group with an oppositional collective identity, feminist political commitment and collective organizational practices'.

Escudero-Alias (2011: 257) remarks on 'relevant queer tools: camp humor, slapstick', as strategies of 'disidentification' (Munoz 1999: 39), that is, survival strategies for resisting hegemonies. The techniques and practices whereby the Bros B4 Ho's enact and articulate their subversion of sexual and gender hierarchies are those of satire, irony, parody, performed mostly through musical acts, lip syncing or singing songs. In general, the decision to sing songs originally performed by male artists is an effective way of using the resources of interdiscursivity to perform masculinity. Through allusion to previous performances, the audience is invited to associate the meaning-making of the original act with the current performance, and the masculinity of the original singer with that of the drag king. This is, thus, a chronotopical event which gets its local meaning from similar performances in similar spaces across historical time. Furthermore, there is a strong drag queen culture in Cape Town, and nearly all the drag queen performances in this city have included queens doing music performances as well-known female singers like Beyoncé and Lady Gaga. It is not surprising, then, that the kings chose to follow the example of the queens around them in designing their act, again testifying to the role of linkages with similar contemporary discourses (Table 1).

The strategies used and the aspects of coloniality that the groups target for subversion depend on the make-up of their performers, a point that a number of authors have captured in the notion of intersectionality. Moreman and McIntosh (2010), for example, mention that white drag uses camp to ‘exaggerate drag performance’, whereas Latinas ‘focus more on mannerisms and mimicry of the personality portrayed’ (Hobson 2013: 38). Hobson (2013: 39) notes how ‘when performing in public space, racial and class markers inevitably influence audience and performer interactions’.

One aspect of this was their attempt to shift the conventional racial and sexual parameters of the drag show away from the predominantly white, LGTB spaces in which drag is usually performed in Cape Town to more racially open, predominantly heterosexual spaces. However, as these spaces are located in what were designated white areas before 1994, the three venues used by this group (Bubbles Bar, Obz Theatre Cafe and Alexander Bar theatre) are situated quite a distance from where the majority of non-white Capetonians are currently living in the former coloured and black townships of the city. It is therefore unsurprising that the audience at both events was predominantly white and middle class.

For the purposes of this study, we limit our focus to data collected from the only two sit-down performances held by the troupe Bros B4 Ho’s – the first at Obz Theatre Cafe in Observatory in June 2012 and the second in December 2012 at Alexander Bar’s theatre in town. At these events, the first author actively participated as an audience member, but also took field notes on costumes, songs performed, movements and dance, and the reactions of the crowd. After each event, any available footage of the show was downloaded off the group’s YouTube channel for closer examination. Preliminary analysis of the data was supplemented by conducting one face-to-face semi-structured interview with the founder of the troupe, Catherine Saint Jude Pretorius. This interview was meant to gain clarity on and further explore a few of the issues that had come up in the data.

**Table 1:** Songs performed in the two *Bros B4 Ho's* performances – the first at Obz Theatre Cafe in Observatory in June 2012 and the second in December 2012 at Alexander Bar's theatre in town

Song title	Artist	Drag king performer
<b>Performance 1</b>		
<i>We Will Rock You</i> (Remix)	Queen	Group performance
<i>Don't Stop Believing</i>	Journey	King Cory Lingus
<i>Baby Got Back</i>	Sir Mix-A-Lot	Frankie H
<i>In The End</i>	Linkin Park	King Cory Lingus and FreDDie
<i>Beez in the Trap</i>	Nicki Minaj ft 2 Chains	Umlilo John
<i>All the Girls of the World</i>	Original song	Saint Dude
<i>Lazy Song</i>	Bruno Mars	Cole Steel Johnson
Queen medley	Queen	FreDDie
<i>Walk This Way</i>	Aerosmith	Cole Steel Johnson and Frankie H
<i>Rainbow</i>	Original song	Group performance
<i>I Wanna Sex You Up</i>	Color Me Badd	Group performance
<b>Performance 2</b>		
<i>More than Words</i>	Original song	Group performance
<i>Revolution</i>	Original song	Catherine (Saint Dude)
<i>Try</i>	Pink	Jax (Cory Lingus)
<i>Look What You've Done</i>	Drake	Sinaed (Umlilo)
<i>Perfect</i>	Simple Plan	Marchané (FreDDie)
<i>This is All of Me</i>	Original song	Frankie (Frankie H)
<i>Do It Like A Dude</i>	Jessie J English	King Cory Lingus
<i>The Great Pretender</i>	Queen	FreDDie
<i>The Umlilo in Me</i>	Original song	Umlilo John
<i>I'm a Man</i>	Original song	Frankie H
<i>Hot in Herre</i>	Nelly	Saint Dude
<i>Sexy Back</i>	Justin Timberlake	Group performance

## Kinging in Cape Town

The performances put on in the two events under discussion could be divided into three types. Firstly, the troupe performed group acts, with all six drag kings on stage in matching costumes, their songs accompanied by choreographed dances. An example would be their rendition of Color Me Badd's hit song *I Wanna Sex You Up*. Secondly, they performed individually, choosing their drag personae based on musical genres and then putting their drag selves on display by performing the masculinities they associated with those singers of those genres. Individual performances were introduced by another member of the group, usually through some witty dialogue or a funny or endearing anecdote – a buying-in to the current global genre of the drag king performance. Lastly, the performers would step out of their personae to render biographical performances that they identified with personally. In these cases, they would either choose a song which they felt fit their biography, or would perform a song they'd written themselves.

In the next section, we look at one general troupe performance and two performances where drag members choose their own personae for display. We focus only on the lyrics and the stage props used by the performers, and choose here not to discuss the nature of the locales where the shows took place, nor go into detail on the role of the audience. We motivate our choice of foci for this paper with reference to our (Fanonian) interest in the personae that the troupe wish to offer in their attempt at decoloniality, and less in the audience uptake or co-construction of these personae.

## **Racializing skin through gender**

Fanon's conception of the subjectivation of Blackness finds resonance in a conceptual framework of sociolinguistics (semiotic anthropology) dealing with enregisterment, indexicality, interdiscursivity, voice, stance and alignment and the contribution that these tools make to understanding the circulation and fixedness of the stereotype of the black as object. Bros B4 Ho's use a palette of semiotic devices to stylize (Bakhtin 1981; Rampton 1995) and build indexical relationships (Silverstein 2003) with a variety of male voices, and to stage and highlight a conventional masculinity. The audiences align themselves with these characterological masculinities, which are also reproduced, circulated and subjected to metalinguistic commentary on the group's blogs, interviews and Facebook page. Throughout, we suggest, the Black subject is racialized as an exteriority of skin.

The outstanding feature of this part of the show is the strong heteronormative and patriarchal parameters that frame the deconstruction of gender roles. The kings used a variety of indexical props to perform masculinity, both linguistic and broadly semiotic. A detailed unpacking of the strategies employed by the performers showed the most common strategy for performing masculinity to be the modification of the body's appearance. The performers donned what is generally considered men's clothing, in some cases chosen for a baggy quality to hide curves and make the wearer look more angular. Other body sculpting techniques were also employed, like binding,<sup>4</sup> packing,<sup>5</sup> and the use of makeup to add the appearance of facial hair and to change the shape of cheeks and jaws so as to make them appear chiselled and more defined. Certain bodily movements and choreography – such as crotch-grabbing and hip-thrusting – were used strategically to perform a type of masculinity that was aggressively sexual.

Furthermore, the song drag king Frankie H chose expresses quite explicitly a man's sexual desire for a woman's body. Drag king Frankie H's rendition of Sir Mix-A-Lot's *Baby Got Back* at the show in Obz Cafe is a case in point.

is a means for Frankie to perform a particular type of stereotypical and hegemonic masculinity characterized by misogyny and sexism, where women are objectified as a highly sexualized single body. Frankie's exaggerated and comic performance of Sir Mix-A-Lot's hit song parodies the male gaze and the objectification of the original song and music video. We see this in the following well-known lyrics:

**Extract 1 (Sir Mix-A-Lot, 1992)**

I like big butts and I cannot lie  
You other brothers can't deny  
That when a girl walks in with an itty bitty waist  
And a round thing in your face  
You get sprung

In this context, the word 'sprung' refers to having an erection, reinforced by the way the singer grabs his crotch at this point in the music video. Frankie signals the importance of heterosexuality to his masculinity by modifying some of the song's lyrics to emphasize this point. In the original, Sir Mix-A-Lot praises black women's bodies with the line 'Even white boys got to shout', implying that black women (with the 'right' body shape, of course) are so desirable that even white men have to admit to being attracted to them – the assumption being that it is the norm for white men to desire white women rather than black women. In Frankie's version, the line is 'even gay boys got to shout', meaning that women with big behinds are so desirable that men who aren't usually expected to desire women's bodies would do so. In marking the 'other men' as 'gay', Frankie positions himself as a straight man, thereby underscoring a point made by Hobson (2013) that heterosexual identities are (per)formed at the cost of other identities.

The transposition of the wording of the song is not an insignificant detail. The original text of the song sung by a black singer carries a level of Fanonian significance that is completely lost in the change of wording. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon makes a strong case for the racial dimension of sought white recognition in relations between Black and White. The Black woman of his example desires to be loved by her White lover (all the better if he should be racist) in order to be recognized in his eyes, and thus to perceive herself through whiteness, as non-black (or just a 'little bit coloured'). Fanon's discussion of this example not only deconstructs the psychoanalytic primacy accorded to sexuality and gender in the formation of the Self in favour of race; it also shows that heteronormativity is superficial. Once again, we note that subjectivation of blackness (how it is allowed to appear in itself and through whiteness) is formed through collective racial narratives.

With his analysis, Fanon dismantles the ground-zero importance of heteronormativity and the power of the phallus as a structuring parameter in human relationships in favour of the primacy of the racial dimension.

Frankie's rendition elides this dimension completely, introducing an ambiguity and invisibilizing blackness in the process in favour of a masculine representation of femaleness.

The portrayal of typical masculine representations of femaleness is also clearly apparent in the scenography of the performance. Frankie performs the song with two very feminine back-up dancers, whose appearances carefully draw on elements closely linked with dominant narratives of femininity. They are dressed in short, tight black dresses that show off their legs and their curvy figures. The 'sexy little black dress', of course, is associated with chronotopical indexicalities of a classic and timeless femininity – this skimpy piece of clothing is what some magazines insist all women should own. The women also have long, loose hair and wear makeup, which they have used to

highlight their lips and eyes, unlike Frankie, whose makeup adds the appearance of facial hair to his face. A hyperfeminine woman or drag queen joining a drag king performance is a strategy of masculine supplementarity (cf. Halberstam 2001: 428), and serves to both supplement the king's masculinity and destabilize it by highlighting anything he lacks. The back-up dancers also contribute to an interdiscursive link between this performance and the hip hop music videos screened frequently on music channels like MTV. Throughout the song, Frankie exaggerates his attraction to the women, touching their bodies and grinding against them as he dances, and performing both a stereotypical masculinity and femininity; through this explicit articulation of heterosexual desire through movement, gesture, song, and clothing, the drag king performs his masculinity.

This is further emphasized by Frankie's costume. In this act, he wears a sleeveless black vest with the words 'GIRLS GIRLS GIRLS GIRLS' printed on it, and in smaller print, the words 'Girls I do adore'. Each letter 'i' in the larger print is a silhouette of a thin, curvy woman posing in a suggestive way (Figure 2). The shirt acts as a prop that spells out his sexual preference.

In the conventional sense of drag, the drag kings are successful in overturning commonsense understandings of the relationship between sex and gender. Firstly, their performances make the 'performance' aspect of gender visible. By demonstrating that successful performances of masculinity can be produced by people who are not men, it denaturalizes masculinity, bringing attention to all the props and strategies that are needed to perform it successfully (Butler 1990; Milani 2014).

In addition to this, the audience's knowledge of the female performer behind each persona allows for the reinterpretation of the depictions of heterosexuality during the performances, which now take on homoerotic overtones, because while it is a performance of a man desiring women, to the viewers it is also a demonstration of a woman desiring other women. The titillation of the display of same-sex desire is confirmed by the audience reactions observed at these points during fieldwork. Without fail, each time the kings performed sexual attraction – towards each other, towards supporting women performers or women in the audience – the crowd erupted with hollers, wolf whistles and laughter.



Figure 2: Frankie's shirt  
(Source: <https://www.facebook.com/brosb4hosCT/photos/a.170395233096305.40071.140769169392245/170405949761900/?type=3&theater>) [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

This is a recontextualization of cultural texts of masculinity (Bauman and Briggs 1990) just as much as it is an attempted dismantling. In this respect, among others, the drag show has all the attributes of the carnivalesque, where the gross depiction of power is momentarily inverted in the performance, but nevertheless understood by all participants, as solidly present and as robustly powerful the very moment the carnival concludes. However, what is hidden behind the White mask of the heteronormative performance is the Black skin – the reproduction of the invisibility of the racial-epidermal body schema.

### **Performing personae through choice of song**

Another example of how the performance constructs Blackness in the zone of non-being and as an artefact and prop in a heteronormative production of Whiteness is when one of the drag kings, Umlilo, stands out by choosing to perform masculinity with a song originally sung by a woman hip hop artist, Nicki Minaj. Minaj is a controversial figure who often makes people feel uncomfortable because her performances of femininity are designed to make audiences question their ideas on how black women in music videos should behave. She unapologetically plays with her sexuality on her own terms, appearing in erotic situations with women, flipping the male gaze, taking pleasure in black women's bodies that deliberately resist white ideals of beauty, or performing a hyperfeminine 'fake' Barbie persona as an over-the-top conforming to such ideals. The Nicki Minaj song chosen by Umlilo, *Beez in the Trap*, is about selling drugs and pimping (the phrase translates to 'I always have what you need') and is characteristic of the stereotypical 'pimp-hoe-gangsta' culture that has become emblematic of hip hop culture since the nineties and is constantly being displayed in rap music videos. The rap register is usually linked with a particular social stereotype of black masculinity, and so by performing the hip hop hustler as a woman, she disrupts the masculine link while retaining and recycling the stereotype indexically associated with the register of rap.

In the interview, the first author asked Pretorius explicitly about this choice of song, and she answered the following:

Extract 2<sup>6</sup>

Yeah, *Beez in the Trap*. Umm (.) Because also— because Nicki Minaj is an interesting character that's why. It's because Nicki Minaj plays with her masculine identity. So what Umlilo did was take the masculinity out of what Nicki Minaj was saying (.) and flip it and s— have it from a male perspective. Um so ya it's pretty much based on like the way Nicki Minaj plays with gender because then what happens is (.) you can divorce what— like divorce her lyrics from her gender identity and apply it to like— the like the masculine and then she's doing it through like (.) a feminine um (.) voice like her voice is feminine and then having that you can s— I mean if you listen to the words she talks about like 'bitches' and all of that (.) Ya it's interesting also because (.) just as a side note we always used to discuss how Nicki Minaj um (..) some people call her a feminist, but it's interesting that she exploits women in the same way that (.) male hip hop performers do. So it's interesting that like a woman needs to do that too to be like deemed powerful. Ya, so we were kinda like exploring that whole (.) idea like (.)

Here, Pretorius seems to be saying that in some cases, it's possible to 'source' masculinity or emulate a masculine performance from a non-male-bodied person (like Minaj), and this confirms her belief that gender can be divorced from biological sex. The drag king persona here follows Nicki Minaj's lead by embodying masculinity in the female body and articulating masculinity through the feminine voice. At the same time, she is playing on the controversy surrounding Minaj who treats other women as though they were her 'bitches', and 'exploits women in the same way that male hip hop performers do', thus delivering a critique of masculinity as a denigrating power that is not localized to the male body only. By bringing in this aspect of power as non-specific to gendered bodies, the performance can thus be read as a critique of the lip synching heteronormativity on which the success of the drag king performance rests.

Interestingly, however, the critique of the testosterone male and the disembodiment of pernicious masculinity is figuratively embodied and carried through a representation and enactment of the black body and the black male. Minaj uses the rap register to make visible a transgressive feminine masculinity, but in so doing there is again a stereotyping of the social persona of the black rapper. This cultural appropriation, in which masculinities of colour are used as props, has many problematic dimensions. Bucholtz (1999) has examined one set of problematics of this strategy in her work on the speech of a young white man called Brand One who, through his use of AAVE resources, 'borrows' an honorary black status and its accompanying ideological form of masculinity, where AAVE indexes black masculinity, which is seen as a more successful form of masculinity because it is stereotypically linked to physical power and violence. Brand One's borrowing reproduces and preserves both this racist narrative which projects essentialized qualities onto racialized groups and evaluates members in how they measure up to these qualities and the racial hierarchy that enables white cultural appropriation of African American culture through language crossing (cf. Bucholtz and Lopez's 2011 discussion of 'linguistic minstrelsy').



E.P. Johnson (2003) also discusses instances when people who identify as white appropriate black signifiers. He argues that the sources are often black performers whose blackness is implicated in the construction of racist stereotypes – something we see happening in drag king Frankie H’s performance of Sir Mix-A-Lot’s famous hit song analysed below. He points out that such appropriation is always fraught with discourses of otherness. ‘For their part’, he says,

whites construct linguistic representations of blacks that are grounded in racist stereotypes to maintain the status quo only to then reappropriate these stereotypes to affect a fetishistic ‘escape’ into the Other to transcend the rigidity of their own whiteness, as well as to feed the capitalist gains of commodified blackness. (Johnson 2003: 5)

In his interview in the documentary, Frankie reveals that, unlike other performers, he didn’t know immediately what persona he would choose. After doing research and watching videos of other drag performances, he was surprised to find that he was most attracted to ‘old-school’ rap and hip hop performances, and that these eventually shaped his persona, which he characterizes as a ‘whiteboy gangsta wannabe’ (Lea 2013). His performance of Sir Mix-A-Lot’s *Baby got Back* is exactly the kind of fetishizing and unreflective appropriation of over-the-counter stereotypes of blackness that Johnson talks about here.

The construction of blackness as physically aberrant in ways that echo Fanon’s characterization of ‘my body thrown back at me through a third person consciousness’ (2008: 93) in all its grotesque, exaggerated physicality is a feature of the performance that comes across frequently. We find this in Frankie’s performance of Sir Mix-A-Lot’s song. In the original song, the (black) rapper makes a show of his preference for black women’s bodies over those of white women. As problematic as the song is, it is partly a comment on the way white women’s bodies are held as the standard of beauty at the expense of black women’s bodies. However, Frankie – a white performer – not only appropriates the original performance of black masculinity, but also replaces the black back-up dancers with white women. Importantly, the explicit parody of ‘the white girl’ and her racism in the famous introduction to the song – in which a white woman expresses comical disgust at a black woman’s body – is omitted:

*Extract 3 (Sir Mix-A-Lot, 1992)*

Oh, my, god. Becky, look at her butt.  
It is so big. [scoff]  
She looks like one of those rap guys’ girlfriends.  
But, you know, who understands those rap guys? [scoff]  
They only talk to her, because, she looks like a total prostitute, ‘kay?  
I mean, her butt, is just so big.  
I can’t believe it’s just so round, it’s like, out there, I mean— gross. Look!  
She’s just so... black!

The meaning of the original song sung and performed by Black artists is arguably a celebration of blackness. However, this element of the original performance is completely lost in Frankie's appropriated rendition. The omission of the introductory parody of 'the white girl', and loss of the important locus of enunciation of this song in the black body of Sir Mix-A-Lot is lost in transition, a form of 'glossing' that ultimately has the effect that white supremacy and hegemony reasserts itself. In the example of the kings, the 'gloss of white enunciation' opens up a whole new set of interdiscursive chains – not just the visibility of the black body and its indexicalities and meanings through the white gaze, but also how that white gaze itself, as the very modality through which the black body can be interpellated, has ocular histories in colonial oppression. Making oneself visible through appropriating the 'visibility' and audibility of Black music and characters reinforces one of the traditional/conventional (framing) parameters of Blackness, namely to be interpellated through the White gaze. In fact, the text of the song linking big buttocks to excessive sexuality and prostitution is eerily reminiscent of the texts circulating in conjunction with the display of the naked body of Saartjie Baartman, the 'Hottentot Venus' of the human zoos of the 19th century (Mendez 2015). Her 'darker skin', 'horribly flattened nose', 'voluptuousness', 'protruding buttocks' and 'overdeveloped clitoris and labia' were seen as 'markers of primitive physiology and sexuality' (Mendez 2015: 48; Gilman 1985; cf. also Mbembe 2017).

### **Mind the gap**

So far, we have emphasized how the drag kings accomplish gender subversion through the invisibilization, stereotyping and reproduction of race. In these respects, rather than destabilizing the colonial nexus of sex, gender and race, the performances can arguably be seen as stabilizing and reproducing it. The genre as performed so far seems to offer no escape from the colonial stereotype of the Black subject. However, genres do allow for renewal and change. There are instances in the performance when intertextual gaps open up, and create spaces for the performers to step away from racially stereotyping reproductions and perform race and gender/sexuality differently. One such gap occurs when Umlilo moves away from the drag king convention of singing songs sung by male artists and chooses to sing a song by Nicki Minaj, a female rapper, as discussed above.

There are two features of the performance that we can identify as stepping outside of the circulation of stereotypes. In the first instance, the voice of the performers are engaged by the lyrics they perform as 'themselves', singing songs that reflected their own personal 'Journey through Gender' (the title of the show); some chose to sing existing American songs, but others performed their own lyrics. The song entitled Revolution by Pretorius, in particular, makes some political points as she talks about her struggles with her cultural and gender identity. In the middle of the song, she sings the following:

#### Extract 4

I don't want to be a boy and I don't want to be a girl  
No room for grey area in this black and white world  
I don't want to be coloured, white or black  
But I was forced to choose  
Reality gave me a smack  
I'm a black female lesbian  
My political motives  
I became militant too, words were my explosives  
...  
I'm the wrong kind of boy, his name is Saint Dude.  
I have a slave name but I'm still Afrocentric  
I love these dreads, please don't call them eccentric

The text of this song is one of few occasions when the drag kings step out of the cut-and-dry representation of masculinity and femininity, and complicate the idea of gender, at the same time as they complicate racial categorizations of white, black and coloured, as well as sexuality. This kind of biographical piece or metacommentary is not typical of the genre of drag king performances. Here, Pretorius links her current ambivalence with the history of the slave trade. The song is a powerful interruption of the classical drag narrative of gender binaries, and introduces a voice weary of the stereotype and alert to the linkages of sexualities, races and genders. As with Besnier's (2002) study of the transgendered fakaleitā of Tonga, what is transgressive about her performance has less to do with subverting the gender binary and more to do with highlighting aspects of the local of importance for identity work. In the Tongan case, the pageant allows an underprivileged and marginalized sector of Tongan society to play with locality (in this case performing 'Tongan-ness') as well as to have access to global symbolic capital in ways that they don't usually have off-stage (Besnier 2002: 559). In a similar manner, the Filipino gay men in New York City in the late 1980s to mid-1990s that Manalansan (2003) writes about resist adopting American gay culture outright, and rather create their own identities influenced by practices from home, as well as contesting mainstream Western ideas about gayness and adapting them to suit themselves. Manalansan positions his study as a resistance to generalizing discourses of globalization that erase local differences within minority groups, particularly with regard to LGBT issues. In referencing the local web of imposed sexual and racial entanglements in which she is caught, Pretorius momentarily steps outside the conventional genre of the drag performance.

What we see exhibited/performed here is an intertextual gap that maximizes distance from the genre. To all intents and purposes, Pretorius' initiative appears to be well received by the audience, who clap and otherwise express appreciation. However, a similar attempt by another performer to maximize the gap while performing the lyric *The Umlilo in Me* during the autobiographical portion of the 'Journey through Gender' event is not as successful, and in fact 'misfires'. Gordon (2015) discusses 'failure' as a pervasive structuring trope of Fanon's thinking when drawing attention to the similarities in design of *Black Skin, White Masks* to the tales in Dante's *inferno*. As the black attempts in various ways to gain access to humanity (through whiteness), repeated failures compound the descent into the hell of the zone of non-being.

The failure or ‘misfire’ occurs when the performer who plays Umlilo forgets the lyrics to her own rap. Such a lapse in memory is, of course, not expected in a theatrical performance, and reminds the audience of the artifice of the event. At first, the audience was clearly supportive – the show must go on – but the longer the artist struggled with recalling the text, the more ‘awkward’ the audience became, and the more they were shifted out of the complicity of the particular co-construction of the event. The result that unfolded was a slippage, where the ‘gaze’ of the audience was pruned away from the co-constructed imaginary being depicted on the scene to the ‘reality’ of the immediate present and the wonky workings of the pulleys and cogs, including the complicity of the audience in the delivery.<sup>7</sup> Rather than maximizing the gap, the performer tore a split across the whole fabric of the genre, leaving the audience unhappy with the professionalism of the performers.

Fanon’s metatheory of failure offers some enticing avenues for interpretation here. What we appear to be witnessing is the failure, the misfiring of the performer’s attempt to put the interiority of the autobiographical self into the exteriority of the performed public persona visible on the drag stage. Fanon speaks of the ‘shame’ and psychic distress experienced by the Black subject in not being able to enter into the world of whiteness. Affect takes many psychic forms, including silence – or, in this case, the forgetting of lines. It is suggestive of the racialized nature of the genre that the performer is unable to align her autobiography within its format. We suggest that it is precisely in the conditions for such ruptures – or the forces that constrain them – that we might look for decoloniality.

## **Discussion**

The drag performance we have analysed has all the trappings of a Western genre, complete with scenography and the audience design and uptake characteristically associated with the genre. The drag kings insert themselves into a highly knotted web of interdiscursive links, flagging explicit alignments and footings with characterologically gendered figures through their choice of lyrics. The drag kings of Bros B4 Ho’s portray very similar masculinities and perform genres of music popular to drag king performances on a global level. Attached meanings of gender and race are carried over, along with the reliance on Western pop culture and music. There is also an overlay of white privilege, and the performance of black masculinities by white bodies is troubling from a decolonial perspective. The interdiscursive links reach across space and time, and across microevents of interaction (around particular songs) and globally circulating registers of the institution of the drag genre. We have also noted the role of ‘white gaze’ in structuring the representation and enactment of racialized bodies.

A number of authors have given consideration to whether or not drag consolidates or subverts hegemonic gender normativities (Dolan 1985; Lorber 1999), with authors such as Tewksbury (1994) finding they do, and others finding that drag poses

challenges to these normativities (e.g. Rupp and Taylor 2003). Hobson (2013: 37) finds that ‘female drag performances do the work of oppression and social justice simultaneously’, ‘as sites filled with class and racial tension amongst other things, perpetuating misogyny and whiteness’ (2013: 37); claiming that ‘drag teeters a jagged line between our normative ideological assumptions of gender, sexuality, race and class and the performances that resist those norms’ (2013: 36). Shapiro (2007), likewise, found that the possibilities for reimagining identities were limited by race and ethnicity, and limited to imaginaries of gender and the enactment of a variety of masculinities rather than offering alternative forms of whiteness.

Not surprisingly, then, we have found in our analysis that the act both contests and colludes with problematic, normative scripts of masculinity simultaneously, thereby contributing to the further enregisterment (Agha 2005) of styles associated with the characterological figures of masculinity. However, perhaps even more importantly, we have found a greater collusion with problematic normative scripts in the perpetuation of stereotypical racializations. In fact, we would hazard the claim that the ambiguity of shifting, interlocking and variable mappings and erasures of sexualities and genders – the contest and collusion of stereotypes of masculinity – are undergirded by the reproduction of racial hierarchies.

Many voices alert us to the complexities of doing anti-hegemony and decoloniality through a focus on gender binaries alone. Mendez reminds us that decolonial feminism cannot be ‘reduced to descriptive biology or even to the social relation between “Men” and “Women” because to reduce it in this fashion means to obscure the bodies and histories of the enslaved and the critical role they played in giving gender new meaning’ (Mendez 2015: 46). Lugones, likewise, notes how ignoring the racial foundation of these concepts perpetuates colonial constructs:

It is important to see that a framework may well be fundamentally critical of the ‘categorical’ essentialist logic of modernity and be critical of the dichotomy between woman and man, and even of the dimorphism between male and female without seeing coloniality or the colonial difference. Such a framework would not have and may exclude the very possibility of resistance to the modern colonial gender system . . . (2010: 749)

Mendez (2015) also reminds us that gender as a shorthand for the dehumanization of the colonial other is reproduced continually through global economic circuits and in postcolonial structures. We have suggested here that one of the technologies of such global, postcolonial reproductions is the global genre of drag performance. However, the level at which this circuit of reproduction is most insidious is that of race rather than sexuality or gender. In fact, the question is whether the reproduction of Blackness as stereotype is not an integral part of the White de-construction of gender.

Where then might decoloniality reside? We would suggest that it is found less in the drag framing of the show itself, and more in the juxtapositions, slippages, and interruptions that accompany and speckle its delivery. It is tangibly present in the misreadings, intertextual gaps and diversion of the white gaze, purposely or through accident and chance circumstance that reveals scripts on the sidelines and peripheries of the drag king act as a normative genre. It is the moments when personal witness and individual voice rather than the persona of the drag king appears in the lyrics of Pretorius, skilfully but crisply juxtaposing the arbitrariness and imposition of both racial and gendered categories, revealing through the parallelism the historical link between these constructs. And it is the white gaze (co)constructing white visibility through the appropriation of staged blackness, turned back onto itself in the misreading/misrendition of the personal lyric, that leads to the collapse of the imaginary (recall Patsy Smith at the Nobel festival in Stockholm, 2016). We would argue that it is in the misappropriations, slivers of alternative happenings in the performance, unintended cracks in reproduction of coloniality/modernity, that moments of change are occurring and gathering momentum amidst reproductions of the everyday 'conventional'. This is where we might begin to search for a Fanonian decolonial humanism.

Finally, what are the implications, if any, for a decolonial sociolinguistics? A Fanonian approach to sociolinguistics offers an approach to accounting for subjectivization as the nexus between how we see, understand, comprehend and imagine race as individuals and groups (Mbembe 2017). It offers a metatheory of failure as a pervasive trope of subject formation (of Blackness in the world) that must pose a challenge to how we usually conceptualize language in identity. A Fanonian approach also emphasizes the intersectionality and unbearable coloniality of race, gender and sexuality and the need for their Southern disentanglement. Above all, the thinking of Fanon alerts us to the ethical problematic of our everyday complicities in the semiotic production of zones of non-being. The zone of non-being bears more than a superficial resemblance to the concept of 'bare life', and this zone is growing by the day. Clearly, the reduction of the human to a materiality is a complex co-constructed semiotic construction of difference under conditions of denial and lack of intersubjectivity. These are complex processes of elision, invisibilization and diversion in the circulation of the semiotic stuff that make up our identities. The question is whether we have even begun to touch upon these issues analytically in sociolinguistics – the resolution of which is a prerequisite to more ethical engagements with others.

## Notes

1. The authors would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers and Dr Quentin Williams for valuable comments on earlier versions of this manuscript. We would also like to thank the editors for their patient perseverance as we worked on this paper.
2. The spelling of the name appears to employ what is called the ‘greengrocer’s apostrophe’, when an apostrophe is incorrectly used to make a word ending with a vowel into a plural (Beal, 2010).
3. [https://www.facebook.com/brosb4hosCT/info?tab=page\\_info](https://www.facebook.com/brosb4hosCT/info?tab=page_info) (last accessed 9 December 2014).
4. ‘Binding’ involves wrapping bandages tightly across the breasts to flatten them and give the appearance of a flat, muscular chest.
5. ‘Packing’ refers to stuffing the crotch of one’s pants to give the appearance of bulk in that area, hinting at the presence of male genitalia.
6. Transcription conventions:

word-	false start
[	onset of overlapping speech
=	latching
so::	lengthening
(.)	short pause
(..)	longer pause
(...)	very long pause
[laughter]	extralinguistic feature
7. There is an interesting parallelism with the prize giving ceremony at the 2016 Nobel Prize literature awards, when Patty Smith, singing a song by Bob Dylan, lost her words. The song itself was an unusual item to be awarded a literature prize, and Patty Smith’s ‘lost for words’ in performing the song radically shifted the perception of the event for all those present – as well as for thousands of viewers and commentators.

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