

Interpellation in the Colonial Context: Louis Althusser's Theory of Interpellation and Frantz Fanon's Account of the Race- Marked Colonial Person

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Abstract: This paper examines the intersection of Louis Althusser's theory of ideology and Frantz Fanon's account of the race-marked colonial person to explore how interpellation functions—and fails—in a racialized world. Althusser's notion of interpellation describes how individuals are transformed into subjects under the ruling ideology through material practices. Yet while Althusser treats this process as universally reproduced under a given economic system and of “absolute guarantee,” Fanon reveals its limits: colonized subjects are not “always-already” interpellated as subjects. Drawing on Fanon's phenomenological descriptions, I argue that under white supremacist ideology, the black person is not constituted as a universal subject but as a race-marked person whose status as a human being is shaped by the colonizer's imposed imaginary. The default category of subject in the colonial order is the white subject, while the colonized person is treated as a “nonbeing.” Reading Fanon alongside Althusser exposes a structural asymmetry: ideology both constitutes subjecthood for some and denies it for others, producing what I term non-interpellation. Fanon's philosophy thus challenges Althusser's assumption of a shared field of subjectivation by showing that, in the colonial context, interpellation's “obviousness” relies on racial exclusion. Ultimately, I contend that confronting the colonial and racial limits of ideology requires rethinking the category of the subject—not as a fixed, reproducible universal, but as a historically contingent product of a material world divided between those who are interpellated as subjects and those who are denied subjecthood.

Introduction

In “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” Louis Althusser claims that “you and I are always already subjects, and as such constantly practice the rituals of ideological recognition, which guarantee for us that we are indeed concrete, individual, distinguishable and

(naturally) irreplaceable subjects.”¹ He takes a materialist approach to explain how ideology ensures the reproduction of the conditions of production—that is, how social institutions and practices secure the continuation of the existing economic system by ‘recruiting’ individuals into subjects that uphold it. However, he does not account for how the ruling ideology can reproduce itself not only through successful interpellation but also through its failures to interpellate certain individuals as subjects.² In this paper, I seek to bridge that gap in Althusser's theory of interpellation by bringing it into dialogue with Frantz Fanon's description of the black man's lived experience³ to claim that the race-marked colonial person is *not* constituted as a subject in the colonial context.

Situating this analysis primarily in the context of Western colonialism and its transnational afterlives across the African diaspora, I contend that the black person is not interpellated as a universal human subject like the (white) person but is instead viewed as a race-marked individual already overdetermined by their skin color. Interpellation under white supremacy is both reproduced and dialectically constituted by the ruling ideology of the colonizer, which denies black people interpellation as distinct, free subjects. Considering that the default category of the subject in the colonial context is the white subject, the colonized person is excluded from a universal form of interpellation. In this sense, Fanon's phenomenological account exposes a limit in Althusser's claim that “we are always-already subjects.”⁴ For those who are not properly interpellated as human subjects, interpellation fails not because the colonized exist outside ideology, but because ideology is structured to perpetuate their exclusion. This paper integrates the work of Althusser and Fanon—philosophers who developed interrelated concepts yet did not theorize them in direct relation—to show that interpellation for the black person is lived particularly (as race-marked), whereas for the white person it is lived universally (as unmarked). By introducing the concept of ‘non-interpellation,’ I claim that the black person can be denied subjecthood, revealing that the category of the subject is historically and racially delimited.

I. Althusser's Theory of Ideology and Interpellation

To clarify the framework I am using, it is important to distinguish Althusser's understanding of ideology from Karl Marx's. The main difference is that, for Althusser, there is no realm outside of ideology; ideology is not an illusory representation of real conditions⁵ or an abstract force external to reality, but a foundation of material existence. For Marx, ideology primarily functions as a set of false ideas imposed by the ruling class to obscure real economic conditions and relations of exploitation—what often gets called “false consciousness.”⁶ In

1 Louis Althusser, *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, trans. Andy Blunden (Monthly Review Press, 1971), 28.

2 I will be using ‘interpellation’ as a synonym for ‘subjectivation’ throughout the paper.

3 Fanon consistently refers to the “black man”. In this paper, I use “black,” “colonized,” or “race-marked person” interchangeably for clarity and inclusivity, while retaining his focus on race-marked colonial subjectivity.

4 Althusser, *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, 31.

5 By “real conditions,” Marx refers to the concrete material circumstances in which people live and produce through their activity under a given economic system—in this case, capitalism. He describes these as “real individuals, their activity and the material conditions under which they live” (Marx 1939, 3). Althusser uses the term in a similar sense to denote the material conditions structuring social life (i.e. employee-employer, citizen-state relations).

6 Engels first introduces the notion of “false consciousness” when he describes ideology as “a process

contrast, Althusser does not treat ideology as something people can think their way out of or examine from a neutral perspective. When he says that “men represent their real conditions of existence to themselves in an imaginary form,”⁷ he means that we live and act through images and narratives mediated by ideology; we are alienated because we do not recognize how our everyday material practices are shaped by, and in turn reproduce, ideology. Ideology is ‘imaginary’ because it provides a unifying story or set of images that makes a contradictory social reality intelligible and bearable in practice. In Lacanian terms, this corresponds to the imaginary order—the coherent image of self and world through which the subject is capable of navigating their surroundings.⁸ The imaginary belief that hard work leads to success, for example, shapes people’s expectations and behavior even though material realities (i.e., unequal starting points and structural barriers) contradict that idea. Ideology is thus imaginary not because it is fictional or false, but because it provides unified images and norms people internalize and enact, allowing daily life to perpetuate the status quo without confronting its underlying contradictions.

Ideology is also ‘material’ because its imaginary content only becomes effective when it is instantiated in commonplace practices. Attending school Monday to Friday, praying once a day, and clocking in at work are practices that transcend abstract beliefs. They reproduce the images and norms that make social relations intelligible, leading people to act on (ideological) representations because they cannot confront the “real conditions” directly. This makes alienation particularly effective: when subjects do not recognize how their everyday habits and self-relations are shaped by routineized social forms, they take those forms as natural, allowing ideology to reproduce the conditions of production more seamlessly. From a Lacanian angle, the imaginary provides a coherent, unifying set of images that makes such representations actionable. That coherence masks structural contradictions and lets people participate in and be subordinated by relations of domination without collapsing.⁹ The imaginary component of ideology would remain merely abstract and one-sided if it were not for its materiality. It is only through embodied, repeated practices that the ruling ideology is reproduced in everyday life.

Interpellation names the process by which ideology transforms mere individuals into sociocultural subjects. The relationship between subject and ideology is dialectical: ideology needs subjects to continue functioning, yet it produces those very subjects through interpellation, the process by which individuals recognize themselves—and are recognized—within ideology.¹⁰ Althusser argues that human existence fundamentally involves being a subject in-

accomplished by the so-called thinker consciously, to be sure, but with a false consciousness” (Engels 1893, 1).

7 Althusser, *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, 23.

8 Althusser’s account of ideology is psychoanalytically informed. Like Lacan, he sees the imaginary as shaping how subjects experience themselves and their world, giving coherence to social life while masking the structural conditions that produce it. Fanon also engages the concept of the imaginary and extends Lacanian theory to the colonial context (Fanon 1986, 161).

9 An example helps clarify this claim about how the imaginary prevents subjects from collapsing. Someone who has a stable sense of “who they are” in the eyes of others—say, a worker who can imagine themselves as a competent employee—can show up to their job, follow routines, and navigate authority without falling apart. Even if the workplace exploits them, the basic imaginary coherence (“this is who I am; this is how others see me”) keeps their world from disintegrating. Without that unifying self-image, daily interactions—being given instructions, responding to a supervisor, or understanding one’s place in a shared space—can become overwhelming or unintelligible, producing a kind of practical collapse.

10 Althusser, *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, 28.

terpellated under the ruling ideology since “ideology interpellates individuals as subjects.”¹¹ Interpellation, or hailing, happens whenever an individual is addressed by another. The simple act of hailing (i.e. “Hey, you there”) is an ideological operation which distinguishes just from inanimate objects and turns undifferentiated individuals into subjects part of the social order.¹²

Althusser distinguishes between two types of institutions that recruit subjects into ideology in society: the Repressive State Apparatus (police, army, courts) and the more discrete Ideological State Apparatuses (school, family, church, media, political parties, cultural institutions). Unlike RSAs, which function primarily “by violence,” the ISAs operate “massively and predominantly by ideology.”¹³ Althusser points to how the school in particular emerges as the dominant ISA under capitalism, replacing the church in its role of reproducing the relations of production. Children, he notes, are “obliged to attend the school, which takes children from every class at infant-school age and then keeps them there for years.”¹⁴ In the process, they are not only taught skills but also the rules of good behavior and the values necessary to reproduce the social order. This material dimension of ideology becomes evident in everyday rituals and institutions: a mother calling her child “son” within the family ISA, a teacher marking attendance in the school ISA, attending a birthday or religious ceremony through the cultural or religious ISAs, queuing at a store within the economic ISA, or greeting someone with a smile or handshake as part of the civic ISA. Althusser views these as ideological acts through which subjects are formed and the capitalist order can be reproduced. The plurality of ISAs attenuates and extends subject recruitment without relying solely on state violence. Institutions are built on bourgeois norms and interests, which are propagated through either ideology (ISAs) or, if necessary, coercion (RSAs). If, for instance, an individual refuses to turn around when hailed by a police officer, only then does the RSA intervene to ensure compliance. In this sense, Althusser extends Marx’s view that capitalist ideology reproduces itself not only through the state’s economic base but across the self-evident spheres of everyday life.

Because it is not a temporal, two-step process, interpellation is not sequential; the existence of ideology and hailing are almost like two sides of the same coin. Althusser’s claim that “individuals are always-already subjects”¹⁵ suggests that we are born into an ideological structure that interpellates us before we can recognize ourselves. Interpellation occurs through material, everyday, ideological rituals present even before birth,¹⁶ manifesting in the name, gender, household, and school one is assigned. Its dialectical character also makes it efficient, for ideology would not function if subjects did not treat social forms, names, or expectations as ‘natural.’ Although interpellation may seem obvious, it is an operation simultaneously reproduced and enabled by ruling ideology and its specific category of the subject.

II. The Universal and the Embodied Particular in the Colonizer’s Imaginary

But what happens when an individual is treated not as a subject, but as an object? Fanon shows how the ‘obviousness’ of interpellation diminishes for the colonized subject

11 Althusser, *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, 28.

12 Althusser, *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, 30.

13 Althusser, *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, 16.

14 Althusser, *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, 18.

15 Althusser, *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, 30.

16 Althusser, *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, 31.

living under the colonizer’s ruling ideology. He criticizes the presupposition of a symmetrical subject-subject relation by illustrating how the black person is not interpellated as a subject in the colonial context. The example where Fanon hears a kid telling his mom, “Look, a Negro!”¹⁷ on the train illustrates a radically different experience from Althusser’s direct, general address, “Hey, you there.” The kid does not address the black man directly, but indirectly, through his mom. The addressive subject-subject relation occurs only between two colonists; the race-marked individual is constitutively excluded from reciprocal face-to-face interpellation despite clear presence. Fanon finds himself treated like a toy on a shelf or a museum exhibit—as an “object in the midst of other objects.”¹⁸ The fact that the most basic act of hailing that Althusser describes is not lived as a universal human experience for the black person in this scenario reinforces the dialectical relationship between ideology and interpellation in a white supremacist world. Instead of being interpellated as a subject, the colonized person is treated as a race-marked quasi-object, having interpellation refused because it is structured by the imposed story of the colonizer’s ideology.

This “story” goes back to what both Althusser and Fanon understand through the Lacanian imaginary. Since the imaginary refers to how people form a sense of self by identifying with external images, in a colonial context, this means the colonized are forced to live within the colonizer’s imagination. They must comply with how the world is made intelligible to the colonizer. The ruling ideology—the settlers’ ideology—identifies and assimilates white individuals as constituting the category of the subject while perceiving the colonized, race-marked person as “the unidentifiable, the unassimilable”¹⁹ *other*. The colonized see themselves through distorted images created by the colonizer, internalizing self-images imposed on them. For the black person, interpellation and ideology are not lived spontaneously or subtly as they are for the white/colonizer. Instead, the historical and economic practices of a foreign civilization structure every encounter with its norms and images, producing a form of alienation experienced both psychically and bodily.²⁰ From this perspective, Fanon expands Althusser’s account of the imaginary by showing how, in the colonial context, it is a site of violent distortion, where the black person experiences their body and actions through the colonizer’s imposed story.

Fanon notes, “In the white world, the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema. Consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity.”²¹ Here, gestures, movements, and glances are read through the colonizer’s imaginary gaze, making the black person experience their body as an unfree object. For instance, a white pedestrian walking alone at night might move “naturally,” their movement expressing the taken-for-granted alignment between their body and the world that ideology interpellates as “obvious.” A black pedestrian, by contrast, is more likely to anticipate the racialized gaze, adjusting posture, pace, and gestures, asking, “Will this confirm the stereotype?” Even simple acts of moving through space are mediated by ideology, with the body not acting spontaneously but adjusting in response to the white imaginary, which seals the black person into “crushing objecthood.”²² Rather than being interpellated as full subjects, colonized people

17 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (Pluto Press, 1986), 109.

18 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 109.

19 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 161.

20 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 13.

21 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 110.

22 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 109.

experience movements as objectified, measured against the dominant gaze. While Althusser shows how subjects are hailed by everyday material practices as subtle domination, Fanon complicates this: when interpellation is refused, it becomes disruptive rather than discreet. Colonized individuals live subjecthood as a “negating activity,” continually negotiating between externally imposed images and embodied experience. In this way, colonial ideology operates both in the realm of the imaginary—where recognition, both of oneself and by others, depends on the colonizer’s imaginary—and materially, through institutions that shape bodies, routines, and social relations in ways that reproduce that same imaginary through interpellation.

In the colonial context, both “Hey, you there” and “Look, a Negro” respond to acts guided by the same ruling ideology: white is the default, abstract, and universal category of the subject. The universal, presupposed category of the subject is fundamentally white, whereas black-skinned persons are particularized and epidermically “overdetermined from without.”²³ Paradoxically, white supremacy is an ‘abstract’ type of universality because it is not objectively universal; it is particular in the material world, since not everyone is white, yet it perceives itself as universal and interpellates others in its terms. If it were objectively universal, it would not heterogenize subjects by skin color. Human subjects act under the misconception that ideology is illusory, despite their actions being based on ideological terms and racial biases, such as when a white person is alarmed by a black pedestrian. Under this ruling ideology, whiteness is internalized, reproduced, and treated as rational and civilized in contrast to the black person, who is conceived and treated as animalistic, violent, inadequate, and “made of the irrational.”²⁴

Althusser’s universal structural description of what it is to be human is experienced as particular by the colonized person, who is not interpellated as a (universal) subject but as race-marked, defined always in relation to the white person: “dissected under white eyes, the only real eyes.”²⁵ The sociocultural unconscious assumes the superiority of white over black. Although Althusser’s example of interpellation (“Hey, you there!”) might seem non-ideological on first impression, Fanon’s train experience—where interpellation is denied—highlights the material dimension of ideology, instantiating the dominance of the white imaginary.

III. The Limits of Althusser’s ‘Always-Already’ Subject

The constitutive character of ruling ideology explains why black persons cannot easily assert themselves as universal, free subjects in the colonial context. Fanon’s experience aligns with Althusser’s claim that what seems to happen *outside* ideology—on the train, for example—actually occurs *within* it.²⁶ The colonized subject cannot escape ideology; its exclusion from subjecthood is reinforced by material circumstances in which the supremacy of white values “imposes a dichotomy upon the whole people.”²⁷ Ideology, like the unconscious, shapes everyday practices so thoroughly that it becomes invisible. Fanon points to how even after the constitutional abolition of slavery in France, the colonial race-marked person could not assert himself as a free self-consciousness.²⁸ The black person was freed by his master

23 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 116.

24 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 123.

25 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 116.

26 Althusser, *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, 31.

27 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 45.

28 This resonates with Du Bois’s concept of double-consciousness: the Black individual sees himself not

and did not fight for this freedom, leaving interpellation bound to white-defined norms.²⁹ As a result, justice and liberty remain white justice and white liberty rather than genuinely universal values.³⁰

Following Althusser, the Repressive State Apparatus does not necessarily transform the Ideological State Apparatuses that continue to reproduce racial subjection. Schools, the family, religion, and culture sustain the white image of the subject even when formal domination appears absent. For interpellation to operate as an undifferentiated process of subjectivization, an entire material transformation of the category of the subject would be required. If Althusser insists that emancipation from ideology is impossible, then a genuinely humane interpellation demands a radically new world—one that institutes an objectively universal, non-racist category of the subject. Even rebellion does not free the race-marked subject so long as the institutions reproducing ideology (ISAs and RSAs) continue to hail individuals in the settlers' terms. Fanon emphasizes that being black does not guarantee awareness of this structural problem: aspiring to whiteness or reacting with hatred to it are complementary responses to how the colonized are denied adequate interpellation.³¹ Colonial ideology thus traps the colonized between trying to fit the colonizer's imaginary and frustration at being deprived of interpellation, keeping them bound to the settler's framework.

The implication is that in the colonial context, interpellation is twofold: the world is divided between colonizers and colonized, interpellated and non-interpellated. Althusser's "Hey, you there" represents the ideal condition of interpellation, yet Fanon provides an example of how interpellation concretizes under colonialism while highlighting its dehumanizing dimension. Colonization imposes a forced recategorization of the subject, constituting the colonized only in relation to the settler. Althusser treats interpellation as an act of domination, whereas Fanon emphasizes that some are denied interpellation altogether, which also manifests relations of domination. Althusser presumes that hailing succeeds in constituting subjects and primarily addresses class reproduction, but he overlooks how race and colonialism can obstruct subject-formation, and how such failures themselves reinforce ideology.

Fanon's phenomenology offers insight into what Althusser's framework does not account for: the denial of interpellation for race-marked subjects. For Althusser, ideology operates through recognition and misrecognition within the imaginary. Subjects recognize themselves as interpellated, misrecognizing this recognition as self-standing agency.³² Misrecognition is not being mistaken for the wrong person but mistaking one's ideological positioning for genuine autonomy. In the familiar scene of interpellation, a passerby responds to "Hey, you there!" and is inserted into the imaginary relation ideology requires. Fanon's train

fully through his own self-consciousness, but constantly through the eyes of the dominant group, measuring his worth and existence against a world that denies him full interpellation. As Du Bois writes, the black person is "born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight... One ever feels his twoness, —an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings" (W.E.B. Du Bois 1903, 3). In the colonial context Fanon describes, a similar dynamic operates: the Black subject is denied interpellation as a full subject, forced to negotiate identity and bodily existence within the imposed values of the white master.

29 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 219. Fanon explicitly draws from Hegel's dialectic of recognition, citing that "man is human only to the extent to which he tries to impose his existence on another man in order to be recognized by him" (216). Yet unlike Hegel, Fanon exposes how colonial relations foreclose mutual recognition, making the very conditions of reciprocity—the foundation of human freedom—historically impossible.

30 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 217.

31 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 10.

32 Althusser, *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, 29.

example, by contrast, illustrates being excluded from interpellatory processes since he is not hailed as a self-conscious subject but objectified, "abraded into nonbeing."³³ This appears as an illustration of non-interpellation that cannot be explained through Althusser's framework. The child does not expect Fanon to "turn round" because he does not view him as a subject in the first place. The colonized are necessary to the system yet subordinated; their labor and bodies are exploited to sustain the world that denies their subjecthood.

It is important to note that Fanon does not aim to recover a pre-existing essence of black selves but insists on an active struggle for what one might, in Althusserian terms, call humane interpellation wherein the colonized must "make himself recognized."³⁴ Fanon's expression "All I wanted was to be a man among other men"³⁵ captures the structural impossibility of adequate interpellation within a racialized world. His experience³⁶ shows the colonized are barred from subjecthood and that this exclusion turns subject formation into a struggle to exist otherwise. Interpellation is thus a fight against the colonizer's ideology: "I demand that notice be taken of my negating activity insofar as I...do battle for the creation of a human world—that is, of a world of reciprocal recognitions."³⁷ Fanon reframes subjectivity as a contested field in which interpellation must be wrested from historical structures that deny it by making it seem natural, showing that Althusser's "immutable" subject³⁸ is neither neutral nor universally experienced.

Putting Althusser and Fanon into dialogue raises the question: what form of being is available for those excluded from subjecthood? While Althusser helps explain how ideology constitutes subjects through interpellation, Fanon implies that it also reproduces itself through *non-interpellation*—through the systematic refusal to constitute certain individuals as subjects. In this paper, I have argued that non-interpellation is not a failure of ideology but part of its function. It sustains the ruling order by determining who is recognizable as human in the first place. Fanon's account of racialized exclusion thus exposes the limit of Althusser's claim that "we are always-already subjects," further suggesting that interpellation's universality is fractured by the colonial and racial conditions that underwrite it. Fanon's vision of "a world of reciprocal recognitions"³⁹ opens onto the possibility of reconfiguring ideology itself, toward a form of subjectivity grounded not in the reproduction of whiteness as universal, but in the interpellation of all humans as subjects with distinct histories and equal humanity.

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33 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 109.

34 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 217. Fanon does not use the term 'interpellation' himself; I am arguing that his account of the struggle for recognition can be read as a fight to be properly interpellated.

35 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 112.

36 The suggestion that his personal experience is not merely personal is evident when he writes "I was responsible at the same time for my body, for my race, for my ancestors" (Fanon 1986, 109).

37 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 218.

38 Althusser, *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, 22.

39 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 218.

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