

In Defense of Fanon's Conception of the Struggle to the Death

Heather Stewart

Department of Philosophy,
University of Western Ontario
1151 Richmond Street
London, Ontario, Canada, N6A 5B8
e-mail: hstewa27@uwo.ca

Abstract:

In this paper, I examine two competing interpretations of Hegel's "master-slave dialectic" from his classic text, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. These interpretations, offered by Frantz Fanon and Ato Sekyi-Out respectively, disagree on what they see as the central feature of the process of obtaining mutual recognition, as Hegel understands and presents it in *The Phenomenology*. While Fanon upholds the importance of the violent nature of the struggle "to the death," Sekyi-Out criticizes this endorsement of violence and aims to highlight instead the features of reciprocity and mutuality. I argue that Fanon's focus on the violent nature of the struggle can withstand this criticism, seeing it as essential that oppressed groups play a role in obtaining their own recognition from those occupying dominant positions in oppressive systems. Considering this claim in contemporary social contexts allows us to shed light on current resistance efforts, and how true independence and the possibility of recognition for marginalized groups often requires the willingness to "risk one's life" or "struggle to the death" for recognition. As such, I endorse Fanon's reading of Hegel's dialectic and consider how it can be applied to contemporary social movements.

Keywords: resistance, oppression, recognition, phenomenology

"He who is reluctant to recognize me is against me. In a fierce struggle, I am willing to feel the shudder of death, the irreversible extinction, but also the possibility of impossibility." (Fanon 2008, 193)

Despite the age of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's influential work, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (originally published in 1807), the text is still viewed as having many relevant aspects that are still being reviewed, analyzed, and contested in contemporary contexts. One particularly illuminating passage comes out of the description of the form of consciousness that Hegel calls "Self-Consciousness" (Hegel 1977, 104).¹ In this passage, Hegel articulates the relationship between two self-consciousnesses², each attempting to validate their own self and elevate their subjective certainty to objective truth (as cited in Sekyi-Out 1996, 57).³ Each form of self-consciousness desires to be recognized by the other, for each self-consciousness exists "only in being acknowledged" (Hegel 1977, 111). Hegel seeks to explain the process that aspires to bring about mutual recognition

between the two self-consciousnesses, an aim that is ultimately unsuccessful by the end of the dialectic, whereby the desired mutual recognition is not achieved.

Throughout this section, Hegel makes clear that the process of attaining mutual recognition necessarily involves a violent struggle between the two self-consciousnesses, and a willingness of each to risk their lives in the struggle for recognition. He states in paragraph 187: “The presentation of itself as the pure abstraction of self-consciousness consists in showing... that it is not attached to life” (Hegel 1977, 113). This being unattached to life is two-fold, viz., each self-consciousness “seeks the death of the other. But in doing so, the second kind of action, action on its own part, is also involved; for the former involves *the staking of its own life*” (Hegel 1977, 113, emphasis not in original). These aspects of the “life-and-death struggle” (Hegel 1977, 114) for recognition between competing self-consciousnesses (the violent struggle, the willingness to stake one’s life for recognition) have been taken up by various theorists who analyze Hegel’s now widely cited articulation of the master-slave dialectic, and many have come to competing conclusions about the relative importance of each aspect to the overall dialectic. One important reading of Hegel’s master-slave dialectic has been advanced by philosopher and critical theorist Frantz Fanon (2008), who addresses the centrality of the *violent struggle* in the process of slaves obtaining recognition from their masters, both within the theoretical master-slave dialectic and in real world accounts of master-slave relations. However, not all scholars who examine the dialectic attribute a similar degree of importance to the *violent* nature of the struggle, and others who have analyzed the passage have criticized Fanon’s account.

One important criticism of Fanon’s analysis of the dialectic has been raised by Ato Sekyi-Otu (1996) who rejects Fanon’s emphasis on the violent nature of the struggle for recognition. Sekyi-Otu interprets the dialectic in such a way as to highlight the importance of reciprocity and mutuality in the recognition process, minimizing the emphasis on the role of violence in the struggle for recognition. In this paper, I will be defending Fanon’s analysis of the dialectic, lending support for his claim that when “recognition”⁴ is merely given to the slave by the master, without the slave independently demanding it, the hierarchical power dynamics are reinforced, such that the master exclusively is in a position to recognize the slave (or not). Following Fanon, I contend that when recognition is bestowed on the subordinate self-consciousness by the dominant self-consciousness, the hierarchy is maintained such that the dependence of the slave on the values and determinations of the master is reinforced. Recognition, then, remains in the master’s control, which deprives slaves of the mutuality of being recognized *on their own terms*. Without the slaves playing an active role in demanding their recognition from masters, recognition can never be truly mutual, and will always necessarily be one-sided in favor of the masters. Even if the type of mutual recognition that Hegel’s dialectic aspires to reach were met, Hegel’s account still leaves the slaves falling short of reaching full subjectivity. The master does not need to be recognized on their own terms, but this is crucial for the slave who realizes that the master is dependent on the slave and the products of the slave’s labor. Full recognition of the slave as an independent self-consciousness requires recognition of the

complex aspects of their violent struggle to the death for recognition, which are not necessary in recognizing the master.

I. Fanon's Account of the Dialectic: On the Violent Struggle to the Death for Recognition

In order to understand Sekyi-Otu's criticisms of Fanon's position on the violent struggle for recognition, it is first necessary to examine Fanon's argument. Fanon's account of the centrality of the violent nature of the struggle for recognition is given in his book *Black Skin, White Masks* (2008)⁵. In the section entitled "The Black Man and Hegel", Fanon presents his understanding of Hegel's theoretical master-slave relationship, arguing that historically, Hegel's theoretical dialectic was inconsistent with the historical realities of how things actually played out between French slaves and their masters. Fanon suggests that the recognition of French slaves was achieved without conflict, viz., without this recognition being demanded by the slaves themselves. Rather, recognition was granted to slaves when masters *decided* to "raise the animal-machine man to the supreme rank of *man*" (Fanon 2008, 194). Fanon argues that this weak recognition, given to the slaves by the master rather than struggled for and demanded by the slaves themselves, is useless. To enforce his point, Fanon quotes Hegel himself, stating that, "Action from one side only would be useless... *they recognize themselves by mutually recognizing each other*" (Fanon 2008, 192)⁶. Fanon's direct citation of Hegel's *Phenomenology* helps to illustrate his point that this type of recognition, that which is granted to the slave by the master without a struggle on the part of the slave, will not lead to mutual recognition. Granting of recognition to the slave by the master simply reinforces the dominance of the master and does not allow for the slave to gain independence through the process of demanding to be recognized. As the passage from the *Phenomenology* articulates, these instances of one-sided recognition are useless if the goal is to obtain the mutuality Hegel's dialectic sets out to achieve.

Fanon argues that a slave's active struggle or demand for recognition from the master is necessary to gain true independence. He again quotes Hegel's *Phenomenology*, which states, "It is solely by risking life that freedom is obtained." (Hegel quoted in Fanon 2008, 192) Fanon interprets this to mean that independence of affirmation of self can only be achieved through conflict and at times, may even require armed violence. Fanon illustrates this by arguing that when French masters decided to recognize slaves as persons, the slaves did not have to struggle or fight for this recognition, and thus, according to Fanon, cannot be truly and meaningfully free or independent.⁷ Being given recognition and being declared free by their masters affords slaves the *illusion* of freedom, but genuine independence belongs exclusively to the master, who had the power to freely choose whether or not to recognize the slaves as free, independent selves. Fanon states, "The black man is a slave who was allowed to assume the master's attitude. The white man is a master who allowed his slaves to eat at his table." (Fanon 2008, 194) Note Fanon's usage of the phrase "was allowed" in reference to the slave, whose actions have to be permitted by the master, implying that the slave is not genuinely free or independent. The master, however, is in a position to do the allowing; the master is able to grant permission to the slave to sit at *his* table (note that the ownership is also in the

hands of the master), and so it is by the will of the master only that the slave is able to assume an *illusion* of independence. Fanon's brilliant selection of words illustrates his point that in the absence of conflict and violent struggle on the part of the slave, the illusory freedom granted the slave does not afford the slave a true independence; the slave is unable to gain independence from the master. The slave is not recognized as an independent equal in the eyes of the master (again, note Fanon's intentional usage of "is allowed" and "allows"). Thus, the slave is not truly free at all, even upon the master's declaration of their freedom, and the two self-consciousnesses fall short of mutually recognizing each other, the goal of the dialectic.⁸

Given that Fanon has illustrated the impossibility of genuine mutual recognition and true independence for the slaves when their "freedom" is merely bestowed upon them by their masters, Fanon goes on to emphasize the importance of slaves' *activity* in obtaining their recognition from the masters, as opposed to merely being *acted on*. Slaves must come to know the cost of freedom (Fanon 2008, 195), and must be willing to risk their lives in pursuit of it. Furthermore, Fanon understands that this struggle for recognition of independence is often violent in nature because the colonizing practices that enslaved so many people were violent in nature. For Fanon, violence – and sometimes armed violence – is justified, and indeed often necessary, for the colonized to free themselves from their colonizers and to be recognized as independent selves. He also points out that colonizers use violence and oppression to gain recognition as masters from those they are colonizing. The struggle for recognition then, demands a violent response from the colonized to force the colonizers to recognize their true independence. He states, "we are told that none of this is given free" (Fanon 2008, 196). Genuine independence of self and freedom for slaves will never be given, it must be demanded and taken from the masters.

II. Sekyi-Otu's Objection: A Rejection of the Role of Violence in the Dialectic and a Turn Toward Mutuality

Given this understanding of Fanon's interpretation of Hegel's master-slave dialectic, Ato Sekyi-Otu finds Fanon's account overly pessimistic; Sekyi-Otu rejects Fanon's claim that the "freedom" that is merely "given" to slaves by masters is not actual. As Sekyi-Otu points out, given their subordinate status, this is the most likely route of enslaved persons obtaining freedom and this method requires no conflict, struggle, or death. Why then does Fanon insist on slaves' active role in obtaining their own freedom, endorsing means of violent conflict, if it is possible for slaves to obtain freedom (not necessarily genuine independence, but at least non-slavery) without it?

Ato Sekyi-Otu poses this question in regard to Fanon's insistence on the violence within the struggle for freedom. In *Fanon's Dialectic of Experience* (1996), Sekyi-Otu analyzes Fanon's application of Hegel's master-slave dialectic to colonial racial systems. Whereas Fanon emphasizes the violent aspects fundamental to the struggle for recognition, Sekyi-Otu argues that this is not actually the most essential part of the dialectic. Instead, Sekyi-Otu (1996) takes the essential part of the dialectical experience of master and slave to be *reciprocity*, or the recognition of the mutual

dependence on one another (Sekyi-Otu 1996, 56). Sekyi-Otu argues that Fanon is recalling and focusing on the violent aspect of Hegel's passage about the process of searching for mutual recognition at the expense of considerations for the importance of reciprocity. While Sekyi-Otu is willing to acknowledge that the violent aspect Fanon emphasizes can certainly be found in a reading of this section of the *Phenomenology*, he disagrees with Fanon's insistence on its critical importance. He also points out that the "result of this violent confrontation, however, cannot be the death of one partner and the survival of the other. The death of one participant would eliminate the possibility of recognition by the other" (Sekyi-Otu 1996, 57). Mutual recognition requires both parties, so the struggle cannot actually be "to the death." In this way, Sekyi-Otu believes that the violent conflict Fanon sees as essential to mutual recognition can indeed hinder mutual recognition, or even render it impossible.

Sekyi-Otu argues that Fanon's account of the master-slave dialectic underscores the primacy of the notion of reciprocity, or the idea that the slave and master are dependent upon each other as well as the idea that slaves obtain a sense of independence through their labor and their ability to see themselves in the things they create in the world. Sekyi-Otu takes these aspects of Hegel's dialectic to be absent in Fanon's analysis, leading him to read Fanon's work as unnecessarily pessimistic, insofar as it does not allow the independence of the slave to be redeemed through their labor in the ways the dialectic in the *Phenomenology* suggests (Sekyi-Otu 1996, 58-9). Additionally, Sekyi-Otu considers Fanon's claim that freedom is exclusively dependent on the proclamation of the master, leaving the slave entirely inactive in the process, is problematic insofar as it ignores the possibility of the slave gaining independence through recognizing him/herself in the objects of their labor. He argues that Fanon's account is not really representative of Hegel's theoretical bondsman from the dialectic, but is actually closer to Nietzsche's conception of the slave (Sekyi-Otu 1996, 60-61). Sekyi-Otu points out that interpreters of Fanon have largely disagreed about whether or not Fanon's application of the master-slave dialectic is an appropriate interpretation of Hegel or a total misreading of Hegel. Those who think Fanon has unfairly applied Hegel think so primarily because they hold that Fanon has largely disregarded the redemptive property of slave labor, and the possibility of independence through the objects of that labor. Sekyi-Otu points out that Fanon has written that the slave might even abandon the object of his labor, a suggestion that Sekyi-Otu calls an "aborted dialectic" – a move so far from Hegel's intended meaning of the dialectical interaction that it is no longer interpreting the dialectic as Hegel presented it (Sekyi-Otu 1996, 60-61). Abandoning the object of labor, Sekyi-Otu argues, removes the ability for redemption of the "inessential" slave to a status of "immanent necessity" (Sekyi-Otu 1996, 60-61). He thinks Fanon's interpretation could not be further from the "story of liberation which Hegel's dialectic enables the *Phenomenology* to tell" (Sekyi-Otu 1996, 60-61). Instead, Sekyi-Otu thinks Fanon is telling a story closer to that of the conflictual portrait of human interaction painted by Jean-Paul Sartre in *Being and Nothingness*. If his reading of Fanon is indeed correct, then it would seem as if Hegel's dialectic

is unable to accurately portray the historical reality of slaves and masters in the colonial context (Sekyi-Otu 1996, 60-61).

Sekyi-Otu is highlighting an important ideal by trying to recapture the significance of the notion of reciprocity in the dialectic; this ideal is relationships of mutuality and reciprocity among individuals regarded as equals, though of course, this is not where Hegel's dialectic leads us. However, just as he accuses Fanon of ignoring the centrality of reciprocity, Sekyi-Otu ignores the importance of the violent struggle to the death that is just as equally a part of the dialectic Hegel presents. It seems problematic to ignore *either* aspect of the dialectic when an accurate reading of the passage would surely require attention to both. Just as mutuality is the end goal of the dialectic, the violent struggle is an essential means of moving towards that end. For instance, Hegel presents the staking of one's life as central: in the passage, self-consciousness had to risk going "beyond life toward an ideal that is the transformation of subjective certainty of my own worth into a universally valid objective truth" (Fanon 2008, 193). This is indeed a struggle to the death, and only a willingness to die is strong enough to confirm the desire to be recognized and affirmed. If the slave is never able to demand this recognition of the master, or never able to stake his life, he will never have a true sense of his own independence, and the master will not take him seriously as an independent consciousness. If the slave's freedom does not come by the slave's own demands but instead comes by the decision of the master, this reinforces the independence of the master, not the slave. The slave's fate is once again in the hands of the master. For this reason, it is fair and justified for Fanon to argue that this is not true independence for the slave, which makes mutual recognition impossible.

III. Defending the Appropriateness of Fanon's Reading through Historical Considerations

In defending Fanon's interpretation of Hegel, it is useful to consider the background conditions of Hegel's writing of the *Phenomenology*, and how the context might suggest that Hegel did indeed intend to emphasize the role of resistance and at times even violent resistance, in his analysis of the master-slave dialectic. For example, there is historical evidence to support the idea that Hegel was fascinated by resistance efforts among slaves in their attempts to demand freedom and recognition. In fact, historical correspondence suggests that Hegel was fascinated in particular by the events of the Haitian Revolution, which he read about in German press. In an interesting article that documents Hegel's likely interest in the events of the Haitian Revolution, Susan Buck-Morss (2000) attempts to situate the *Phenomenology* within its specific historical and philosophical context to better understand Hegel's motivations and influences when composing the work. Throughout the article, she illuminates the stark disconnect between Western philosophers' analysis of freedom and slavery and the practices that were taking place in that same historical moment. She explains that by the 18th century, Enlightenment thinkers used slavery, which she describes as the "systematic, highly sophisticated capitalist enslavement of non-Europeans as a labor force in the colonies" as the "root metaphor... connoting everything that was evil about power relations" (Buck-Morss 2000, 821). They contrasted this with freedom, which was often articulated as the "highest and universal

political value” (Buck-Morss 2000, 821). But, as she points out, as these philosophical comparisons of slavery and freedom were gaining intellectual traction, the economic practice of slavery was also rapidly increasing. Buck-Morss (2000) argues that this discrepancy between abstract thought and actual practice was fueled by the acceptance of “the exploitation of millions of colonial slave laborers” as part of the given world “by the very thinkers who proclaimed freedom to be man’s natural state and inalienable right” (Buck-Morss 2000, 822). She goes on to give examples of how freedom for enslaved peoples, though represented as a theoretical ideal by these Western thinkers, did not become realized as a result of their “ideals of universal freedom” or “revolutionary ideas”, (Buck-Morss 2000, 833) but instead occurred as a result of the very manifestations of violent resistance that Fanon (2008) defends. She illustrates this in her examination of France and French colonies. She states:

It took years of bloodshed before slavery—really existing slavery, not merely its metaphorical analogy—was abolished in the French colonies... Although abolition of slavery was the only possible logical outcome of the ideal of universal freedom, it did not come about through the revolutionary ideas or even the revolutionary actions of the French; it came about through the actions of the slaves themselves. (Buck-Morss 2000, 833)

She specifically references the struggle of the colony of Saint-Domingue, wherein 1791 over a half-million slaves “took the struggle for liberty into their own hands, not through petitions, but through violent, organized revolt” (Buck-Morss 2000, 833). She explains how in 1794, the armed black slaves of the colony forced the French Republic to abolish slavery on the island and other French colonies. The former slaves, now free, fought British forces from 1794 to 1800, which sought to reestablish slavery on the island. However, under the leadership of Toussaint-Louverture, the slaves were able to defeat the British military, ultimately bringing about suspension of the British slave trade in 1807. In 1801, Toussaint-Louverture wrote a constitution for the colony and in 1804 the new military leader Jean-Jacques Dessalines finalized the declaration of independence of the island from France, thus “combining the end of slavery with the end of colonial status” (Buck-Morss 2000, 835). The newly declared independent state was to be called Haiti. In an unprecedented act of revolt, enslaved persons, through violent resistance, were able to demand their recognition, freedom, and independence from their former masters.

The Haitian revolution as described above was widely covered in the German press, including in the journal *Minerva*, of which Hegel was a regular reader (Buck-Morss 2000, 842). Buck-Morss suggests that the coverage of the Haitian Revolution was the source of inspiration for Hegel’s account of the relationship between master and slave as presented in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. The Haitian Revolution represented a clear instance of the violent, struggle to the death for freedom that Hegel articulates (and Fanon defends). She notes that the *Phenomenology* was written in 1805-1806, and was published in 1807, the year in which Britain passed the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act of 1807. Despite the evidence that Buck-Morss suggests clearly indicates that Hegel was

inspired by the current events of his time, she notes that other scholars and intellectuals locate the source of ideas for Hegel's work elsewhere, such as in the writings of Plato and Aristotle (Buck-Morss 2000, 843).⁹ Other scholars resist such connections to intellectual predecessors or historical events altogether, instead considering Hegel's formulation of the dialectic to be an entirely abstract example that was theorized independent of, and disconnected from, real world situations and philosophical precursors (Buck-Morss 2000, 843). As Buck-Morss points out, it is hard to believe that Hegel was completely ignorant to the events of the Haitian Revolution and incredibly likely that Hegel was not only aware of the events in Haiti, but was intrigued by them, leading him to articulate the dialectic of slave and master in response to his contemporary context.

Whether or not Buck-Morss is correct in her claim that Hegel was aware of the events of the Haitian slave revolution and wrote the passage of the *Phenomenology* in response to them is up for debate, and will likely never be answered definitively one way or another. However, whatever Hegel's true inspiration for the dialectic, we can certainly examine the events of the Haitian Revolution in light of the dialectic. Doing so, I contend, offers a clear historical representation of Fanon's interpretation of the dialectic. In this actual historical instance of a dialectical encounter between masters and slaves, the white masters (and political leaders and intellectuals), despite claiming to value freedom and independence universally, were quite unlikely to ever grant that freedom and independence to their colonial slaves. This is likely a result of the political and economic advantages (for the masters) of arrangements of colonialism and enslavement, despite the theoretical inconsistency with their burgeoning commitments to freedom and independence as political and philosophical ideals. In this historical instance, as demonstrated above, slaves had to take the struggle for freedom into their own hands, viz., they had to engage in a violent struggle to the death, in which they were able to stake their own lives for their freedom and for recognition of their independence. It is quite unlikely that the masters would have willingly and voluntarily given up the many advantages bestowed on them by arrangements of colonial enslavement. Thus, it is unlikely that a more reciprocal, egalitarian approach to recognition, such as the one advanced by Ato Sekyi-Otu would have ever brought freedom and independence to the slaves under the given circumstances. To gain their freedom, the slaves had to demand it – to engage in violent revolt – and claim recognition from their masters. Whether or not Hegel was inspired by the events of the Haitian Revolution, and I believe Susan Buck-Morss (2000) presents a compelling case that he was, the events of the Haitian Revolution provide support for Fanon's reading of the dialectic, and what is most likely to be effective in bringing about recognition, freedom, and independence for enslaved peoples in real life contexts.

IV. Applying Fanon's Interpretation: An Examination of the Struggle for Recognition in Contemporary Contexts

Employing Fanon's analysis of Hegel's master-slave dialectic to more contemporary situations of dominance and subordination can help strengthen the case for the defense of Fanon's

position. For instance, examining The Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s-1960s can provide a more recent example of individuals who are willing to stake their lives for their recognition, as well as the often-necessary violent nature of this struggle. This is true, I contend, of both violent and non-violent approaches to The Civil Rights Movement. In non-violent protests and acts of civil disobedience, the individuals who are participating are still acting out a mode of resistance to the dominant group, and are still exhibiting a willingness to stake their lives for their cause, as made evident by the numerous individuals who were killed, beaten, hosed, and so on for their acts of resistance. John Ansbro (1988) recalls, for instance, the spirit of resistance in Martin Luther King Jr., a figure largely associated with non-violent modes of resistance to injustice. Ansbro details how a young King, faced with countless traumatic experiences of the brutality of segregation, became “fascinated with the notion of noncooperation with an evil system” (Ansbro 1988, para. 5). King, Ansbro writes, “appealed to his followers to be true to their consciences and not to cooperate with an evil system that refused to recognize their personal dignity” (Ansbro 1988, para. 5). In this quote, we can see King’s appeal to the importance of *recognition* for the oppressed black people that he was leading in protest. He also calls on his followers to take action, through noncooperation with the unjust system, in pursuit of their recognition. This is consistent with Fanon’s account of the dialectic that requires those in the slave position to take matters into their own hands and demand their recognition from their oppressors. Interestingly, Ansbro points out that King was inspired by the work of Hegel, citing King as calling Hegel his “favorite philosopher” during the Montgomery Boycott (Ansbro 1988, para. 11). He writes:

King readily identified with Hegel’s insight that conflict is essential to progress and that each synthesis – that is that each achievement of a degree of freedom – can become a new point of departure for further struggles for total freedom. Hegel had indicated that seriousness, suffering, patience, and labor of the negative constitute the dialectical life of the spirit in search for freedom. King reaffirmed this principle by his contention that the passionate concern of dedicated individuals, as well as their sacrifices, struggles, and tireless exertions, are necessary for every step toward the goal of justice. (Ansbro 1988, para. 12-13)

We can see in this connection between Hegel and the non-violent philosophy of resistance of Martin Luther King Jr. that *activity* in the struggle for resistance can take many forms, and not all of these forms are necessarily violent. However, consistent with Fanon’s reading of the dialectic, Martin Luther King Jr.’s leadership in the Civil Rights Movement, through various forms of non-violent protests and civil disobedience, reflects the importance of oppressed persons demanding their recognition and independence, through a struggle that is often violent in nature (even if it is not intended to be), and for which participants are willing to risk their lives in pursuit of that recognition.

Of course, Martin Luther King was not the only important leader of the Civil Rights Movement, and non-violent civil disobedience was not the only philosophy of resistance employed

during that time. More actively aggressive, and at times violent, approaches to black liberation during the era of the Civil Rights Movement were also advanced, for instance the methods advocated by Malcolm X. Malcolm X recognized that violence, specifically in the form of self-defense, could be a legitimate response for black individuals to take when they found themselves in unsafe and unjust environments. He stated:

We assert in those areas where government is either unable or unwilling to protect the lives and property of our people, that our people are within their rights to protect themselves by whatever means necessary. A man with a rifle or club can only be stopped by a person with a rifle or club. (Malcolm X as cited in Breitman 1967, 106-7)

I take the violence that Malcolm X is promoting in this quote to be justified – not unnecessary or unwarranted. This quote, and the general philosophy advanced by Malcolm X, acknowledges that violence can, at times, be justified in response to violent systems, *especially* when that violence represents a form of self-defense or a step in the direction of liberation. When social and political systems are structured such that black lives are not being valued and/or protected by that system, this very well may necessitate that black persons take matters into their own hands to protect themselves and/or to demand recognition from that system on their own terms. If the systems that black people found themselves in were more just, and offered equal amounts of necessary protections and resources to black persons as it provides to white persons, (viz., if black persons were afforded equal recognition by various social systems as white persons), violent forms of resistance would never be justified (or for that matter, necessary). However, there are many reasons to believe that we are not in such a system at all, but rather we are in a social system that disproportionately advantages white people while systematically disadvantaging people of color. When society is structured such that white people (masters, if you will), are able to get away with perpetrating violence against black individuals without consequence, then black persons (representative of a slave class), are put in a position to have to defend themselves and to fight for their equal recognition. Often, responses by those in the oppressed position (black people in American society) will be violent, because the oppression that keeps them in the subjugated position is violent. On this, Malcolm X stated:

Tactics based solely on morality can only succeed when you are dealing with basically moral people or a moral system. A man or system which oppresses a man because of his color is not moral. It is the duty of every African-American community throughout this country to protect its people against mass murderers, bombers, lynchers, floggers, brutalizers, and exploiters. (Malcolm X as cited in Breitman 1967, 106-7)

Malcolm X's ideas of black self-defense in response to corrupt systems and immoral societies that fail to recognize black individuals can help shed light on more recent activist movements, such

as the current Black Lives Matter Movement. The Black Lives Matter Movement is a racial justice organization and movement that arose in 2013 in the wake of the acquittal of George Zimmerman after he shot and killed a black teen, Trayvon Martin.¹⁰ The movement has gained further attention and support in response to various additional murders of young, unarmed black men, whose white shooters, often law enforcement officers were either not indicted or not found guilty upon being indicted. The movement gained attention for its demonstrations and protests responding to several deaths of unarmed black folks following the 2013 murder of Trayvon Martin, including the deaths of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Sandra Bland, Samuel DuBose, Freddie Gray, and several unforgotten others.¹¹

Despite the widespread criticisms that have been leveled against the Black Lives Matter Movement, there is a wide array of evidence to support their claims of injustice in the so-called criminal “justice” system, particularly directed against people of color. Furthermore, despite only recently getting substantial attention, the issues being challenged by the Black Lives Matter movement (primarily mass incarceration and police brutality against people of color) are not new problems. In a 1976 article, John Goldkamp compares the rates of minority deaths by capital punishment to the rates of deaths in the process of apprehending suspected minority criminals. He argues that although evidence of racial disproportion in capital punishment has been widely discussed, even suspended in 1972 by the Supreme Court, that equal consideration has not been given to the decades’ worth of studies that have shown that racial minorities are disproportionately killed by deadly force, by individual officers in high-pressure situations (Goldkamp 1976, 169-183). The racial disparity in minorities being killed by deadly force evidenced in the work of John Goldkamp continues to be relevant, even in the year 2015. An article in *The Washington Post* chronicles various cases of the murders of unarmed black men in 2015; when the article was published in August, there had been 24 such cases. The article reports that black men accounted for 40% of the victims of shootings of unarmed individuals, although they only constitute 6% of the U.S population (Somashekhar et al. 2015, para. 8). This means that unarmed black men are seven times more likely than their white counterparts to die by police gunfire while unarmed (Somashekhar et al. 2015, para. 8). Clearly, Black Lives Matter supporters have a point when they claim that unarmed black men are being killed at disproportionate rates, as reflected by the statistics. This disproportionate and unjust treatment of black people by the criminal justice system represents a failure of recognition of their independent self-consciousnesses, and the reality that the struggle for that recognition is as Fanon understands, often a violent struggle.

Not only are black individuals being killed at disproportionate rates through capital punishment and police shootings, but they are also incarcerated at disproportionate rates, making up an alarming portion of the imprisoned population in the United States.¹² An October 2015 story in *The Atlantic* reports the following statistics:

In absolute terms, America’s prison and jail population from 1970 until today has increased sevenfold, from some 300,000 people to 2.2 million. The United States now accounts for less than 5

percent of the world's inhabitants – and about 25 percent of its incarcerated inhabitants. In 2000, one in 10 black males between the ages of 20 and 40 were incarcerated –10 times the rate of their white peers. In 2010, a third of all black male high-school dropouts between the ages of 20 and 39 were imprisoned, compared with only 13 percent of their white peers (Coates 2015, para. 16).

This boils down to the following alarming statistic: “One in four black men born since the late 1970s has spent time in prison” (Coates 2015, para. 23). Interestingly, as the rate of imprisonment is escalating, the rate of imprisonment for violent crimes is decreasing, and we are seeing more people, especially black people, being jailed for non-violent crimes.¹³ There is much more to be said about the unequal and unjust treatment of black persons by the criminal justice system in America. However, rather than criticizing activist groups who are displaying resistance towards these oppressive institutions, such as the Black Lives Matters Movement, we ought to consider the legitimate reasons for these resistance efforts. Further, given Fanon's interpretation of Hegel's master-slave dialectic in the *Phenomenology*, we can consider how these active forms of resistance are playing an important role in the continued struggle for black recognition.

A criticism that plagues Fanon's analysis, as highlighted by Sekyi-Otu, one which might also be leveled against these applications to current forms of active resistance, is the lingering question of why these active struggles and modes of resistance would be favored over a more reciprocal, mutual process of recognition. Following Fanon, I argue against these criticisms, and I do so on two grounds. First, a non-violent bestowing of recognition onto an oppressed group, without the active struggle of that group, leaves the fate of the oppressed group in the hands of those in the dominant position. This means that the oppressors are still free to determine, when, if ever, those in the oppressed position are worthy of their recognition, whether or not they ought to be recognized and treated as free, and so on. The lives of the oppressed group remain entirely dependent on the determinations made by those in the controlling group, which reinforces the unjust and problematic power differential that allowed for that oppression in the first place. Second, even if we were able to justify (following Sekyi-Otu) that having recognition bestowed on the oppressed still represents genuine recognition, there are reasons to believe that the dominant group would never freely do so. Those in power might have a range of social, political, and economic reasons to maintain the status quo where their position allows them to benefit from it. If so, those in power might willfully choose to remain ignorant to the needs of the oppressed group. Nancy Tuana and Shannon Sullivan (2006) have articulated this motivated, active ignorance and the process of maintaining that ignorance within what they call the epistemologies of ignorance (p. 1). They describe these acts of *not knowing*, as more than a simple lack of knowledge or understanding, but rather as a complex, intentional process that is directly tied to oppression and exclusion. Dermot Feenan (2007) suggests that this type of ignorance is actively constituted and reproduced as an aspect of power (p. 510). Considering these theories of motivated, actively constituted ignorance of oppression by those in power, it is doubtful that recognition is likely to arise naturally and in the mutual, reciprocal sense that Sekyi-Otu suggests. Forcing those in power to acknowledge realities that they have chosen to remain ignorant to is likely

going to take the methods of resistance and actively struggling for recognition that Fanon advocates for in his interpretation of the dialectic. Without some pressure from the oppressed group, the dominant group is likely to remain comfortably and blissfully ignorant, while continuing to enjoy the benefits of occupying the dominant position. For these reasons, I defend an approach to recognition that appreciates the necessity of resistance, violent struggle, and the risking of life.

Despite my support of Fanon's analysis of the dialectic, as well as current resistance efforts that are seeking independence and recognition in contemporary contexts, it is important to briefly acknowledge the risks associated with even the most necessary forms of active resistance. In light of the explication of epistemologies of ignorance, there is reason to believe that powerful institutions have a stake in maintaining the power hierarchy, and as such, often respond negatively to the resistance efforts of marginalized groups. One potential risk for those who are engaging in resistance and struggle for recognition is the response of the criminal justice system. For instance, interactions between the Black Lives Matter Movement and law enforcement officers have not been particularly favorable, and this puts those activists at an increased risk of punitive measures from the criminal justice system. Additionally, when protests and resistance efforts do become violent, even when this violence can be reasonably justified, the risk of imprisonment or death at the hands of the criminal justice system increases.

Immediate entry into the criminal justice system is not the only source of risk for those who resist their oppression, however. For example, when students from oppressed groups are resistant to unfair educational policies or unequal treatment in schools, they often face punishment for resistant or defiant behavior. This punishment often takes the form of removing students from the classroom, which decreases their opportunities for in class instruction, often causes them to fall behind academically, and may even have the consequence of starting their push down the school to prison pipeline (Tyler 2011, 291-295)¹⁴.

Another potential risk faced by those who display resistant or defiant behavior has been outlined by Nancy Potter (2012) in her proposal of a virtue theoretical account of defiance. Potter argues that the "readiness to be defiant" is a virtue that may be a necessary character trait for oppressed persons to cultivate in order to live with self-respect under the rule of authority and to potentially challenge that authority and enact social change (Potter 2012, 24). However, despite her call for defiance among subjugated persons, she also warns us of potential repercussions of defiant behavior among oppressed persons, which can go as far as diagnosing healthy individuals who are exhibiting justified (given their circumstances) defiant behavior with a mental disorder (Potter 2012, 24). While she does not want to deny the existence of genuinely pathological behavior that necessitates psychiatric intervention, Potter's concern is that from the dominant position of the oppressors, normal, healthy, and even virtuous responses to one's oppression might appear deviant or pathological. Potter writes: "As with other virtues, defiance has extremes and a mean. But identifying the extremes is difficult because actions that are appropriate from the perspective of the subjugated frequently are cast as an extreme (an excess) by those in authority" (Potter 2012, 32). She

develops her argument by way of an extended example of young black boys in the American school system, for whom *bad* behavior is often conflated with *mad* (or pathological) behavior. This can even lead some “defiant” children to be given a mental disorder label, namely that of Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD). Potter writes:

Some children who are deemed “defiant” are eventually diagnosed with Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD), with behavior characterized as “persistent stubbornness, resistance to directions, and unwillingness to compromise, give in, or negotiate with adults or peers” (American Psychiatric Association 2000, 100). In other words, defiance sometimes is managed socially by medicalizing it (Potter 2012, 33).

As Potter’s (2012) account shows, the institution of psychiatry, reflecting the interests of the dominant, oppressor class, might utilize the tools of psychiatry in attempt to subdue resistance efforts through the attachment of stigmatizing diagnoses to those who challenge the mainstream or the dominant social order. While Potter’s analysis suggests that this is currently taking place through the diagnosis of “defiant” young black boys in school settings, there is also reason to believe that psychiatric diagnoses have been used in similar ways in past efforts to restrict resistance efforts of oppressed persons. In his incredibly insightful book, *The Protest Psychosis: How Schizophrenia Became a Black Disease* (2009), Jonathan Metzl critically analyzes how Schizophrenia became a diagnosis primarily given to black men during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Metzl’s historical account and Potter’s analysis of current practices provide a compelling case of how psychiatry as an institution can be used to suppress the struggles for recognition of oppressed persons. Risk of hospitalization, being medicated, or social stigma can result from psychiatry’s pathologizing of resistance efforts among oppressed persons. When these risks are paired with the previously mentioned risks of incarceration, violence, or even death at the hands of the criminal justice system, it becomes evident that the violent struggle for recognition, even where necessary and justified, is not without risks. This is a *dialectic*, after all, and *both* sides are in struggle. The oppressor class has its own ways of resisting the struggles of the oppressed (criminalizing and pathologizing resistance efforts), and they employ those tools in an effort to maintain their position as dominant “masters”.

V. By Way of Conclusion

When reading Hegel’s classic master-slave dialectic, it is important to reflect on *why* Hegel chose to include the ideas of “violence” and the “struggle to the death”. While Sekyi-Otu claims that some other Hegelian notions are absent or underscored in Fanon’s interpretation of the dialectic, I argue that Fanon’s account is entirely justifiable reading of Hegel, and also provides a more accurate picture of historical and contemporary resistance efforts. As evidenced by the historical and contemporary contexts examined, without active struggle there will never be genuine recognition of the oppressed group. Without a willingness to risk life in the struggle, the oppressed and/or the

enslaved can never truly understand the cost of freedom or show that they value independence and truth of self even more than they value life itself. Further, when the master(s) begin to see that freedom is so valuable to the slaves, that they are willing to stake their own lives for it, the master can start to cultivate an appreciation of the slaves' desire for independence and begin to move towards genuine recognition.

When slaves are simply set free by their masters without being able to risk their own lives demanding their freedom, the slaves are prevented from the attainment of individual, independent self-consciousnesses. If this is the case, then actual historical slaves do not gain the independence that Hegel's theoretical slave can obtain by seeing themselves in the objects of their creation. The historical slaves never gain the status of master, because when "there are no longer slaves, there are no longer masters" (Sekyi-Otu 1996, 219). Even if the slaves are freed from slavery, if they themselves did not play the essential role in obtaining this freedom, and it was instead granted out of the values and dominance of the master, then the master is still in control of the possibilities available to the slaves. Thus, their futures are still dictated by the freedom proclamation of their white master. And, given the aforementioned work in the area of epistemologies of ignorance (Tuana and Sullivan 2006), there is reason to believe that the masters would never willingly give up their power and bestow freedom on those individuals who they benefit from keeping under their control.

For these reasons, I maintain that Fanon's account is able to withstand Sekyi-Otu's criticisms and represents the strongest reading of Hegel's master-slave dialectic, as well as the most accurate representation of the dialectic as it manifests itself in real world applications. Fanon's emphasis on the role of the violent struggle to the death for recognition can shed light on contemporary resistance efforts by various subjugated groups in their struggles for recognition by society. This resistance, which at times necessitates violence and the risking of lives, is arguably necessary for oppressed persons to obtain their recognition on their own terms. Having a societal recognition imposed upon them by the dominant members of society merely reinforces and reproduces unjust hierarchies of power and systems of domination and oppression. Only resistance efforts that involve the demanding of recognition on behalf of oppressed persons can upset these systems and begin to move us towards a society in which mutual recognition could possibly be achieved.

Endnotes:

1. Hegel (1977) states in paragraph 175 that "*Self-consciousness achieves its satisfaction only in another self-consciousness*" (Hegel 1977, 110). He introduces the Lordship and Bondage metaphor, which has come to be known in the literature as the "master-slave dialectic" beginning at paragraph 178. I will be referring to the content of these passages as the master-slave dialectic throughout.
2. Hegel develops the two self-consciousnesses as lord (master) and bondsman (slave). He describes the self-consciousness that is master as the consciousness that "*exists for itself*" (Hegel 1977, 115). The slave, however, is in bondage and is necessarily tied to the master (Hegel 1977, 115). Each seeks recognition as an independent self-consciousness from the other.
3. Frantz Fanon (2008) elaborates upon the importance of recognition by another for achieving certainty of one's self-consciousness. Fanon states: "Each consciousness of self is in quest of

- absoluteness. It wants to be recognized as a primal value without reference to life, as a transformation of subjective certainty (*Gewissheit*) into objective truth (*Wahrheit*)” (Fanon 2008, 192).
4. By “recognition” here, I am referring to the recognition of the independence of the other self-consciousness, here being the slave. The claim is that when masters choose to recognize their slaves, of their own will and not as a result of slaves demanding their recognition, the power of the masters (and not the slaves) is reinforced. The masters remain in a position of being able to choose whether or not to recognize the independent self-consciousness of the other – they are not being forced to do so. This leads to a merely illusory independence for the slave, but not an independence that is actual.
 5. Fanon’s *Black Skins, White Masks* was originally published in 1952, but was translated and published in English in 1967. The translation used here is translated by Richard Philcox in 2008, Grove Press New York, NY. Fanon examines Hegel’s dialectic in a subsection of the chapter “The Black Man and Recognition” found in this edition on pages 191-197.
 6. The quote Fanon is using from *The Phenomenology* can be found at paragraph 184 (Hegel 1977, 112).
 7. It is important to note the relation between the terms recognition, freedom, and independence as used in Fanon’s analysis of the dialectic. When he is referring to the theoretical struggle for recognition, he is primarily focusing on how recognition is necessary for independence of self. When he transitions into his discussion of French slaves being “freed” by their masters, he begins talking about the notion of freedom (for example, “As master, the white man now told the black man: ‘You are now free’”) (Fanon 2008, 195). Fanon seems to be suggesting that recognition of another, as a truly independent self, is essential for that person’s being truly free. In these ways, genuine recognition and mutuality are preconditions for genuine freedom, on Fanon’s account.
 8. It is also important for Fanon that masters recognize slaves *as they are*, in their genuine difference. Fanon notes that masters often deny difference, in a shallow attempt at mutuality that again is illusory and falls short of genuine recognition. Fanon states: “The white man says to him: ‘Brother, there is no difference between us.’ But the black man *knows* there is a difference. He *wants* it” (Fanon 2008, 196). I think this is important to note in light of the application I am making to the contemporary racial context in America. Given the push towards so-called “colorblind” ideologies that claim racial neutrality and reject racial difference, Fanon’s quote can remind us that genuine recognition requires coming to see people as independent selves *in their many differences*. When the masters deny that there are any differences between them and the slaves, they are masking differences that are important to the slaves and who they are. Genuine recognition requires seeing and appreciating differences, not masking them in pursuit of superficial neutrality.
 9. For an example of another scholar who locates Hegel’s inspiration for the passage in his intellectual predecessors, as opposed to his witnessing social and political events around him, see Remo Bodei (2007). Bodei argues that Hegel followed Aristotle in his articulation of the master-slave dialectic.
 10. Interestingly, Ciccariello-Maher (2012) has analyzed the conflict between Martin and Zimmerman, and ultimately Martin’s murder by Zimmerman, through the lens of Fanon’s interpretation of Hegel’s dialectic. This application of Fanon’s reformulated dialectic to gain insight into the murder of Trayvon Martin lends support to my claim that Fanon offers the most informative understanding of the dialectic, particularly for its use in contemporary applications.
 11. For more information on the activist group and racial justice movement, Black Lives Matter, or to find out how to get involved, see their website at <http://blacklivesmatter.com>.
 12. For a more comprehensive analysis of the racialized system of mass incarceration in the United States, see Michelle Alexander’s 2010 book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. Alexander provides compelling and jarring statistics on the racial dimensions of mass incarceration in the United States, and particularly on its racial dimensions. She argues that mass

incarceration of black bodies in the United States is a new racial caste system, following the tradition of slavery and Jim Crow.

13. Alexander (2010, see footnote 12) attributes this to the War on Drugs, calling the War on Drugs the engine of mass incarceration of black individuals for non-violent crimes.
14. See also Fowler (2011). Fowler describes how "zero tolerance policies" and the expansion of school-based policing have transformed school misbehavior into criminal offenses (Fowler 2011, 15). Fowler also notes that "schools' discretionary decisions to suspend, expel, and/or criminalize student misbehavior contribute to student push out, dropout, and ultimately to what researchers call the "school-to-prison pipeline" (Fowler 2011, 16). These disciplinary actions that function to push students out of school and toward jails or prisons have drastic consequences, and disproportionately so for students of color (Fowler 2011, 17). For further discussion of how school disciplinary policies disproportionately impact impoverished children and children of color, leading to further adverse educational, health, and career outcomes, see chapter 9, "Education" in Tyler (2011).

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