BOOK REVIEW


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The authors collected in Nigel Gibson’s *Living Fanon* offer arguments across a range of disciplines suggesting Frantz Fanon’s relevance today. Gibson, a renowned Fanonian scholar, acknowledges the disjuncture between the study of Fanon as an historical figure and Fanon as an emblem of all liberation struggles. The book responds to this debate with a rich, interdisciplinary collection of essays that urge the reader to examine Fanon in various contexts. A majority of the essays may be of interest to the historian and the postcolonial scholar, and others yet raise questions in Geography, Political Theory, Gender Studies, Philosophy and Critical Race Theory. Each essay examines a specific aspect of Fanon’s life and work, beginning with his involvement with the Algerian liberation struggle and concluding with a synthesized understanding of his long-term contributions to postcolonial critical thought. Of course, there is considerable overlap between the disciplinary arguments presented in each chapter. The collection is worth examining, for both its interdisciplinary focus and its thorough analysis of an historical figure whose theory still remains with us.

Introduction

Rarely is Fanon applied to the rhetoric of contemporary emancipations. Certain scholars (including Fanon himself) would argue that his theory belongs only to its own historical context. Yet, Nigel Gibson observes that we see a ‘Living Fanon’ in all forms of modern postcolonial struggles. In a recently published article discussing the 50th anniversary of Fanon’s death, Gibson contends that Fanon’s theory can be defended by the pedagogical autonomous
of the so-dubbed ‘Arab Spring’, the economic protests heard in the global occupy movement, and the Manichean logic that justifies the American ‘war on terror’ (2011a). A foundational analysis of Fanon’s theory does not constrain it to one realm of history. Gibson draws upon a useful example: although The Wretched of the Earth gained popularity during the American Black Panther Movement, Fanon’s discourse was conspicuously absent following his death, in the aftermath of the Algerian war for independence (2011b, p. 3). History reveals that the ‘radical change in consciousness’ characterizing Fanon’s revolution need not be interpreted solely in the context of colonial rule.

Fanon’s theory reveals the commonalities between various historical emancipatory struggles. Recent scholarship, however, has often ignored these commonalities. It instead narrowly defines Fanon as purely an historical figure or examines his ideology only within the framework of Algerian liberation. True decolonization, argues Fanon, requires not only removal of the oppressor from the geographic space of the colony, but also a fundamental shift in consciousness among the oppressed. This collection indicates that only the broadest investigations will shed light on the questions that emerge from emancipation.

Living Fanon is an interdisciplinary answer. In eighteen total essays, it presents Fanon biographically, historically, politically, and philosophically. While some of the essays are accessible to an undergraduate audience, others offer a more dense and critical analysis. The historian may wish to examine the essays by Lewis Gordon, Beläid Abane, and the theoretical analysis presented by Lou Turner. The book also contains essays on postcolonial politics, by Karima Lazali, Grant Farred, Michael Neocosmos, Jane Anna Gordon, and Peter Hallward. The geographer may consider Stefan Kipfer’s essay and Mabogo Percy More’s application of Fanon to South African liberation and the ‘land question’. The Gender Studies scholar will find Seloua Luste Boulbina’s essay of interest. Philosophy and Critical Race Theory appear throughout the collection, in works by Ato Sekyi-Otu, Miguel Mellino, Douglas Ficek, Robert Bernasconi, and Matthieu Renault. Finally, Alice Cherk, Robert Plthouse, and Nigel Gibson summarize and synthesize the applicability of Fanon, discussing his resonance today. The collection can be broken thematically into two schools: the theory of colonialism and the theory of emancipation. In this analysis, I begin with the justifications for colonial rule, both racial and gendered. I follow with Fanon’s theory of emancipation, assessing the logic of negation and nationalism. In these discussions, the collection is unquestionably thorough. Living Fanon brings us to the notion of universalism, while simultaneously pushing inquiry beyond the current attempts to reconcile the past with the postcolonial.
I. Manichean Racial Difference and Colonial Rule

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon states that the dialectic of race becomes embedded in the consciousness of the colonized subject. This Manichean racial subjugation, Gibson argues, is established by ‘hegemonic culture’—alienation that manifests itself in every sociopolitical and cultural structure within the colonized state (2011b, p. 7). Lewis Gordon’s contribution to the book, ‘Requiem on a Life Well Lived’, notes the historical significance of this binary in Fanon’s personal experience. In *Black Skin*, Fanon writes that he presupposed non-raciality until he faced the internal disruption of hearing a small white boy say to his mother, ‘*Tiens, un nègre!*’ in his presence. As Fanon critically analyzes this episode, he discovers the intrinsic illegitimacy of his own black existence. The black body is a body manqué, or a body ‘gone bad’. In Gordon’s words: a self-defeating structure, whose presence constitutes an absence (2011, p. 18). This characterization of black bodies signifies the ‘historical-racial schema’ where white failure and black success are considered exceptions to the rule (2011, p. 21).

As authors (Sekyi-Otu, Kipfer, Boulbina) in *Living Fanon* note, Fanon defined this logic as a spatial and temporal phenomenon. To start with, geographic distance reinforces the distorted binary of racial otherization. Hegemonic culture appears in distinct spatial terms, targeting different audiences in the metropole and its satellite. To use the terms of Fanon, it compounds the power of colonialism as a ‘simplifying force’. In ‘Fanon and the Possibility of a Postcolonial Critical Imagination’, Ato Sekyi-Otu defines spatial apartheid as the most alarming manifestation of the colonial duality (2011, p. 47). He writes, ‘See apartheid, then, as something more than an extreme order of separation and exclusion, one made palpably manifest in social space’ (2011, p. 51). For the colonizer and the colonized, racial polarity becomes imagined in divisive geographies.

While spatial discrimination physically isolates and alienates the colonial subject, temporal stasis prevents her from internal transformation and revolution. In ‘The Times and Spaces of (De-) Colonization’, Stefan Kipfer notes that Fanon discovered a contradiction in the ‘weak’ hegemony of colonial rule. Colonial compartmentalization is restrictive, not transformative; it freezes the satellite into a state of enduring lifelessness. Empathy with the colonial condition is meaningless because it is empathy to the inhuman. The colonized state is reified, alienated, ‘a world of statues’ (2011, p. 95). On the other hand, rule itself is fluid, dynamic, and adaptive; the colonizer can subjugate in any environment. Reification denies the capacity for resistance, self-rule, and indeed the very humanism that the colonizer uses to justify brutality.
Preferential space and temporal enslavement create a fundamental contradiction: dialectical transformation cannot take place between the colonizer and the colonized because the latter is inhuman. Hegel’s well known narrative of the master and slave requires that the master see himself in another. Spatially and temporally confined, the colonial subject relinquishes her ontology, and therefore cannot take part in any such conciliation. In response to this problematic, Fanon’s theory of revolution calls for negation of the spatial and the temporal. He engages a Marxist dialogue, ‘the space of human development’ (Sekyi-Otu 2011, p. 49), where physically ousting the colonizer creates the transformative arena for humanist evolution. His theory of resistance contains two central components: violence generates the physical rupture, but intellectual capacity turns the satellite into an independent nation over time.

Seeking liberation from the constrained racial binary, Fanon examines his own dialectical experience, assessing black representations through the white gaze. At the same time, he uses the rhetoric of deliberate racial hybridization in A Dying Colonialism, stressing a non-polarized response to racially dichotomous rule. Fanon explicitly rejected notions of racial essentialism that arose in the counter-colonial discourse of his time. In ‘The Great White Error and the Great Black Mirage’, Robert Bernasconi discusses how the racial binary emerges in Fanon’s theory of colonization but not his theory of revolution. Bernasconi notes the blurred distinctions between ‘race’ and ‘culture’ within colonial rule. The racial classification of a black body ascribes the cultural practices of laziness, violence, and ineptitude. Fanon identifies the same simplifying racism applied to all colonized peoples, regardless of race. The essentialist duality surfaces in the first essay of Toward the African Revolution, titled ‘The “North African” Syndrome’. Lewis Gordon remarks that the historical-racial schema simultaneously polarizes and jumbles signifiers to the brink of absurdity. The cultural designations that justify colonial rule are inextricably linked to race, but evidently, to no race in particular. Consequently, Fanon suggests that negation ought not to essentialize, but rather, to hybridize the identities of the oppressed. His usage of phrases like ‘we Africans’, and even ‘we Algerians’, in A Dying Colonialism comes to mind (1965, p. 159).

Bernasconi maintains the importance of distinguishing race as a scientific classification from its role as a mechanism of cultural oppression. Fanon’s negation of the colonial problematic relies upon this divergence, because his theory grants phenomenological agency to the victims of rule. Bernasconi delineates the recent history of the term, ‘race’—in particular, he notes the significance of UNESCO’s 1950 declaration of race as a social myth (2011, p. 89). He also considers the distinct experiences of the various peoples subjected to colonial rule. Whereas black Africans feel illegitimacy in the very act of being black, Martinicans see no such disparity between themselves and their white colonizers. Finally, Bernasconi examines Fanon’s invention of the term se racialiser (to assign one’s own race), as well as Fanon’s usage of the term ‘facticity’, which ‘...confirms that his
The experience of black Martinicans underscores the falsity of racially essentializing liberation struggles. Fanon discarded the black unification behind the Negritude movement, for fear that this chosen phenomenology only served to negate its oppressor. While Fanon understood and accepted the origins of Negritude, he denied it legitimacy for its rigid definitions of blackness and emancipation (Bernasconi 2011, p. 89). Negritude indispensably reverses the ontology of the subject-object relationship. It establishes colonized subjectivity through an irreducible identity (Moulard-Leonard 2005, p. 233). Fanon feared psychological adherence to the ontology of blackness, and warned that race itself could not be the primary instrument of revolution. Indeed, negating the powerful racial binary is an essential element of colonial rupture; yet, direct negation can be as essentializing as subjugation. The inversion of colonial racism is reflexive, not deliberate. Fanon therefore precariously avoided discussion of race as the singular response to colonial rule. While it may generate enough social unrest to oust the colonizer, its essentialism undermines the internal transformation necessary in the nascent postcolonial state. In his work, Fanon then deliberately identifies with the Arab Algerian experience, treating global negations with a crossbred response. Although we must bear contextual importance in mind, there is danger in interpreting Fanon’s theory as race theory alone.

II. Transcendence of Tradition: Manicheanism and Gender

Selections from Living Fanon also recognize gender as a dialectical signifier. Despite Fanon’s limited study of gender and colonization, one of his most famous essays directly addresses this problematic. ‘Algeria Unveiled’, delineates the Manichean abstraction of gender to justify French colonial rule; even more, Fanon scrutinizes the irrational dimensions of this mentality. He presents a considerable score of arguments about European sexual aggression and the French man’s internal battle with the veil. European colonial dominance is underscored by sexual fetish. In Fanon’s view, this perversion manifests itself through criticism of Algerian female morality: ‘her timidity and her reserve are transformed in accordance with the commonplace laws of conflictual psychology into their opposite, and the Algerian woman becomes hypocritical, perverse, and even a veritable nymphomaniac’ (1967, p. 171).

According to Stefan Kipfer, the objectification of Algerian women during French rule reinforced the objective geographies of the colonized (2011, p. 98). The physical barriers created in Algerian urban spaces destroyed the capacity for female resistance and
fortified a history of physical and social gender division. Fanon viewed women as twice confined, first by the physicality of the veil itself and second, by the substantial barricades created by the Algerian home (1967, p. 171). Both obstructed the potential for female participation in anti-colonial struggle, yet ironically did not preclude France’s mission to ‘unveil’ and sexualize the state. In ‘Fanon and the Women of the Colonies’ Seloua Luste Boulbina comments on these colonial assaults, and the symbolism of forcibly removing women from their homes and unveiling them in public (Fanon 1967, p. 184; Boulbina 2011, p. 141). Such acts exaggerated duality and justified colonial dominance by characterizing Arab society as internally corrupt on the basis of sexual differentiation. As Fanon observes, the colonizer traps the colonized Algerian in a sadistic double bind by introducing new cultural ideals for female behavior. For instance, a French boss invites his Algerian counterpart for dinner, asking him to bring his wife. Here, the Algerian man faces a crucial choice. He will either surrender to bringing his wife to dinner and feel the shame of presenting her publicly, or will keep her home, and acquiesce to the perceived barbarity of her sexual difference (1967, p. 169).

Fanon does not deny Algerian patriarchy altogether. In fact, he suggested that overcoming the barriers to female resistance would be a driving force of the counter-colonial struggle. According to Kipfer, Fanon’s view of gendered colonial resistance mandates the transformation of urban space (2011, p. 99). As freedom fighters, women not only shed the veil, but also adopt the physical movements linked to a new individualism, which Fanon believed would ultimately end patriarchy (2011, p. 98). Kipfer explains that the veil and physical confinement of Algerian women depict general immobility (2011, p. 98). Thus, the female transcendence of these bounds brings to light the frozen dialectical world, and lays the groundwork for resistance. On another end, female subversion need not be defined only by such overt demonstrations of individualism. As Fanon observes, women integrated into the revolutionary struggle hide weapons, explosives, money, or may confer messages and verbal orders from a position of concealment beneath the veil (1967, pp. 181-2). Given the penalties of torture and death under capture by the French police, Algerian men hesitated to include women in the struggle, but eventually accepted them out of necessity (1967, p. 174). The decision illustrates a powerful moment, where Algerians defeat internal discriminatory mechanisms for the sake of their own emancipation. The veil, which appears to speak for the legacy of discrimination, in fact plays an instrumental role in facilitating the revolution.

III. Defeating Polarity by Thorough Negation

*The Wretched of the Earth* opens with a controversial justification of violence; yet Fanon adamantely argued that revolution does not end with rupture itself. As Nigel Gibson notes, ‘the damnation of the world’s majority ... does not end with the negotiated settlement and the withdrawal of colonial rule’. Gibson alternatively suggests that we
continue to see the duality of racial alienation in economic disparity, resource use, and issues of access today (2011b, p. 4). Indeed, the psychopathological forces of colonial rule remain instituted long after the oppressor leaves. They coalesce and define the behaviors of the corrupt bourgeoisie that seizes power upon the colonizer’s departure. The ‘Living Fanon’ that Gibson continuously refers to perhaps arises most directly today in the second phase of revolution: psychological decolonization. Gibson asks, how do the victims of Manichean dominance fully isolate themselves from the hegemonic culture that they absorb for decades, even centuries?

The movement toward negating hegemonic culture, according to Fanon, requires both human subjectivity and extended praxis. In Gibson’s view: decolonization consists not only of the violence required to remove the metropolitan power from the satellite state, but also requires extended intellectual capacity to disengage with a culture of difference and dehumanization. The combination of these two comprises what Fanon refers to as ‘the radical mutation in consciousness’ that takes place within emancipation struggles. In his chapter, Lewis Gordon calls upon W.E.B. Du Bois’ discussion of ‘double consciousness’ to characterize this struggle and the ultimate transformation within the colonized subject: ‘The first involves seeing oneself through the eyes of the hostile Other. The second is the realization of the first as a constructed reality’ (2011, p. 20). In the same vein, Matthieu Renault’s chapter, ‘Rupture and New Beginning in Fanon’, considers the continuity of double negation. The racial binary remains frozen despite expulsion of the enemy; only societal renewal and internal decolonization can fully defeat the problematic.

While education may surface as an early solution, Gibson reminds us that the native intellectual (indeed, Fanon himself) is in fact a product of Western renderings, and therefore cannot empathize with the masses (2011b, p. 7). ‘New Humanism’ is an autonomy that diverges from the falsified humanism of the oppressor. It mandates the reconstitution of newly liberated society so that it does not formulate national consciousness upon negation alone. Briefly put, the formulation of colonial subjectivities is ontological at its core, but by no means at its zenith. Full psychological decolonization requires epistemological resistance (Renault 2011, p. 113). Gibson urges us to remember that this capacity must be found in the masses rather than confined to a class of elites (2011b, p. 7). Such corruption risks the formation of the very falsified humanism that Fanon sought to resist. Renault concludes by briefly examining the postcolonial espousal of European culture during periods of rupture. He writes, ‘the paradox is that it is precisely in the struggle to rupture oneself from the colonizer that the colonized adopts the former’s weapons, opens himself to him, to his influence’ (Renault 2011, p. 115). For true liberation to take place, the emphasis on essential negation must fade, giving way to a knowledge-based subversion.
IV. The Nationalism of ‘Living Fanon’: The Nascent Politics of the Postcolonial

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon cautions against the hollow rhetoric of a hastily constructed nationalism. He discusses the new bourgeoisie, and the reconstituted social order that materializes in the moment of rupture. Fanon warns that the liberties taken by the new middle class ‘will give rise within its ranks to catastrophic reactions, and will oblige it to send out frenzied appeals for help from the former mother country’ (Fanon 1967). The internally divisive order will eventually dissolve into war or conditions more detrimental than former colonial rule. Gibson’s collection of essays pays note to the fragility of the immediate postcolonial social and political order. A falsified nationalism binding the newly liberated state poses a tremendous threat to internal stability. The nationalism that Fanon warns against can be compared to the Negritude movement: it places its subject in a position of ontological inflexibility. The analyses presented in *Living Fanon* deconstruct the fundamental nature of national consciousness, and pose questions regarding postcolonial political economy.

Fanon’s books on Algerian liberation are written ‘from within the subjectivities of the sequence’ (Neocosmos 2011, p. 190): from the Algerian perspective. Fanon’s identification with the struggle despite apparent racial boundaries may seem peculiar, but it critically illustrates Fanon’s very argument in *The Wretched*. *Living Fanon* does not overlook his inclination to write from the perspective of a removed heritage. In Fanon’s ideology, true nationalism must emerge from a fundamental and unifying experience, not from a sought after behavioral standard. The urgency of the post-revolutionary moment faces the highest susceptibility to such falsity. The void created by the expulsion of the colonized invites renewed identity formation. In *Living Fanon*, Karima Lazali indicates that the forged nationalism of the postcolonial moment erupts in political turmoil and psychological alienation for citizens (2011, p. 151). In ‘The Emergence of the Subject in Politics’, she writes, ‘This liberated anguish could lead to a new and creative future, but also carries the risk of a prolonged situation of domination’ (2011, p. 151). This is, to suggest, ‘introjection of the oppressor’ (2011, p. 151), in the frantic search for national unity through makeshift ideologies. Of the Algerian case, she makes note of civil war and the ‘dissolution of an experience of living together in Algeria’ (2011, p. 151). She draws the conclusion that historical continuity ought not to be a divisor from the moment of colonial rupture—the crucial moment that formulates the ‘becoming-subject in politics’, a transition from ‘native’ to ‘citizen’ (2011, p. 155).

The violent conditions of the colonial fissure, not surprisingly, may tempt the solidarity of race rather than that of nationality, the latter which Fanon encourages in his use of the phrase ‘we Algerians’ (1965, p. 159). Fanon clearly believed that a racialized polity succumbs to internal fracture. As Gibson makes note, many Algerians
rejected Fanon’s theory as he was a Christian, and not even Arab, (2011b, p. 3). In the same vein, Lazali writes of the descent into civil war, reliance upon oil, and the crucial ‘identity void’, that postcolonial Algerians face (2011, p. 151). Once again, the unifying rhetoric of racial solidarity offers a critical choice. In ‘Wretchedness’, Grant Farred returns the reader to the fundamental dialectical struggle and the process of negation. How do the subjugated seek redress, if not within the same discourses used by their oppressors? (2011, p. 163). In the case of Fanon’s incorporation into the Black Panther movement, Gibson makes note of an acute historical episode: by association, a group of Black Panthers moved to Algeria in the 1960s—only to find a profound lack of the very unifying consciousness they sought (2011b, p. 3). Racial alienation, Farred observes, is ‘both individual and collective in penetration and suffering’ (2011, p. 163). However, the lack of social and political cohesion in Algeria sent the Panthers back to the United States, forever disassociating from its liberation struggle (Gibson 2011b, p. 3).

V. Fanon’s Contemporary Resonance

Nigel Gibson’s Living Fanon presents the historical Fanon while isolating his ideology so that it may be situated in new historical moments. Despite Fanon’s explicit rejection of universalism, his theory at once calls the reader in the moment of emancipation to avoid blind negation, essentialism, and falsified solidarity. The contextual irregularities of Fanon’s writings demonstrate that the reader must not ossify him within his own history. As Gibson argues in his introduction, the foundational elements of his ideology can be found surrounding us today: Manicheanism and the polarized geographies of race and class; negation of economic and political power through a dialectical struggle; unification along forged lines of racial allegiance. Divided thematically, one can envision Fanon’s theories of colonization and emancipation as applicable to all forms of postmodern liberation struggles. Living Fanon engages the universalism question with diverse academic insight, thus urging the reader to consider the contextual versatility of Fanon’s work.

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