

## Fanon: A Critical Reader

*Fanon: A Critical Reader*

Edited by Lewis R. Gordon, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting & Renee T. White  
Oxford: Blackwell, 1996, 368 pp.

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This book includes twenty-one articles on Fanon as well as a 'Forward', an 'Introduction' and an 'Afterward' which are all valuable pieces in their own right. The standard of the work is generally high and a particular feature of this volume is that many of the contributions make use of the editors' new, and often illuminating, translations from Fanon's original French.

The introduction includes a brief but compelling biographical sketch and a useful five stage outline of the development of Fanon studies. This runs from the early engagement with Fanon's ideas by practical revolutionaries like Che Guevara and Paulo Freire through to biographical research; investigations into Fanon's contribution to political theory; the analysis of Fanon by postmodern and postcolonial thinkers like Said, Bhabha, Gates and Spivak and on to the recent attempts to use Fanon's thought to develop original work. The editors make it clear that this is where they locate this volume and that their purpose 'is neither to glorify nor denigrate Fanon but instead to explore ways in which he is a useful thinker' (p. 7).

Fanon is clear about the necessity to develop 'a voracious taste for the concrete'<sup>1</sup> and it's no surprise that Marxists like Cedric Robinson have attacked Homi Bhabha, Louis Gates Jr and Gayatri Spivak for bringing 'an imagined Fanon in (to) their self-referential debates on colonial discourse'<sup>2</sup>. Most writing here takes the world outside the seminar room into account and the majority of the papers collected are valuable attempts to investigate how Fanon's work can help us to make sense of the world. Fanon's ideas are bought to bear on everything from the struggle to decolonise psychiatry and psychoanalysis through to the politics of identity, the sociology of resistance and the relationship between national and feminist struggles.

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<sup>1</sup> Robinson, Cedric in *Race and Class* 34,1 (1993) p. 78.

<sup>2</sup> Fanon, Frantz 1976. *The Wretched of the Earth*. London: Penguin, p. 74.

In recent times, Fanon has often been appropriated and domesticated by commentators who chose to ignore his clear commitment to, as Cedric Robinson puts it, 'locate and subsequently advertise a fixed and stable site of radical liberationist criticism and creativity' (p. 87). Moreover, as well as ignoring Fanon's commitment to revolutionary change in the economic structure of society, many commentators have also ignored,

his understanding of the role of the intellectual as well as his critique of the national bourgeoisie's attempt to reduce the nation to itself, his Leninist theory of imperialism and his insistence that the struggles of black Africa and black America are not equivalent<sup>3</sup>.

While not all of the papers in this book take Fanon's African radicalism as their central concern, none of them can be accused of writing as though Fanon were not a revolutionary. Only a few write as though Fanon saw no distinction between material conditions in America and Africa. The majority of the papers here, as well as the introduction and afterward which frame the collection, do give due and welcome recognition to the consciously and explicitly radical and African intellectual legacy of Frantz Fanon.

The South African fascination with Fanon didn't end with Biko's murder. On the contrary, Fanon's burning passion, heroic life, and deeply sophisticated analysis continue to challenge and inspire South Africans whether they be graffiti artists, poets of the stature of Lesego Rampolokeng or radical academics like Mabogo More, Benita Parry, David Goldberg, Andrew Nash and Grant Farrel. Indeed, Fanon's name was mentioned more than any other at the successful conference on Racism and Multiculturalism held at Rhodes in June 1999 and it is abundantly clear that Fanon's critique of neo-colonialism is of enormous relevance to contemporary Africa.

Although all the contributors to *Fanon: A Critical Reader* were based in the USA at the time of writing their papers, at least five of the 21 papers in the volume are likely to be of particular value to readers seeking to think from Africa about Fanon has to say to Africa.

The first is by South African émigré David Goldberg. He contributes an excellent paper on race and in/visibility. He begins with a careful analysis of Fanon's highly nuanced phenomenology of invisibility (in terms of his excellent analysis of the significance of 'the veil' in colonial context) and goes on to argue that 'the value and virtue of in/visibility are contextually determined' (p. 189). And so, the invisibility of a group can make them powerless *and* shield them from power.

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<sup>3</sup> Fanon, Frantz 1976. *The Wretched of the Earth*. London: Penguin. p. 174.

Equally, the visibility of a group can make them powerful *and* leave them exposed and threatened. Goldberg applies this insight to a number of contemporary examples including the way in which the increased visibility of the racially marginalised in Los Angeles and Johannesburg has led the powerful to organise the entrenchment of spatial segregation and the insulation of racialised daily life experiences through 'fences, alarms, and private armed response units' (p. 196).

Another useful paper is the one by Gail Presby who is now working on the Sage Philosophy project in Nairobi. She develops a comparison on the role of violence in the thought of Gandhi, Mandela and Fanon. Her argument is that all three thinkers share a common diagnoses of the colonial condition and that, while their strategies for achieving a more human world have much in common, there are significant differences. In particular, Fanon aims at quick and total destruction of relations of domination, while Mandela seeks to 'force the enemy to give in while preserving as much as possible the future hope of healing the community' (p. 296), and Gandhi advocated the preserving of the lives of the enemy in order to win them over. Her assessment is that the best strategy will be determined by 'the concrete circumstances of each situation, where history and culture play a role in shaping the consciousness of the people' (p. 296)

Further contributions are by Olufemi Taiwo and Paget Henry. Taiwo applies Fanon's critique of the national bourgeoisie to Nigeria and Henry's piece is an interesting meditation on the failure of Caribbean Philosophy to cultivate (as has been achieved with other forms of expression, such as music) a Creole identity.

The volume closes with Lewis Gordon's excellent paper on Fanon's 'Tragic Revolutionary Violence'. There is some overlap between this paper and Gordon's well-known contribution to Emmanuel Eze's *Post-colonial African Philosophy: A Critical Reader*. That paper is a general investigation into the tragic dimensions of neo-colonialism but here, Gordon's focus is more specifically on Fanon and the idea of revolutionary violence as tragedy. Gordon begins, by way of Aristotle, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, with some incisive observations on the nature and social function of tragedy. He then shows that colonialism is a state of institutional dehumanisation which is nevertheless inhabited by humans. Gordon points out that violence in support of, or against the system must, tragically, be directed at a 'shrieking flesh-and-blood reality' (p. 305) rather than some dehumanised enemy. However, the struggle for liberation is morally distinct from the struggle to maintain oppression because

in the accomplishment of the former's struggle is the possibility, fragile though it may be, of a world that is not by dint of its very structure violent (p. 306).

Gordon's paper will be of enormous value to anybody interested in trying to understand the ethical dimensions of struggle or the nature of post-apartheid reconciliation.

*Fanon: A Critical Reader* is a very well thought-through collection of essays and an excellent tool for stimulating critical thought about Fanon's rich legacy. Readers will occasionally have to remind themselves that a few of the papers collected in this volume are specifically American attempts to harness Fanon to American issues. Nevertheless this is top-class critical reader which should be in the library of every (South) African university.

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### Three Recent Poetry Collections

*Songs of Africa: Collected Poems*

by Alan Paton

Durban: Gecko Books, 1995, 218 pp.

ISBN: 1875011153

*Ferry to Robben Island*

by Alan James

Durban: Eyeball Press, 1996, 105 pp.

ISBN: 0620202564

*Tongue Tide*

by Geoffrey Hutchings

Durban: Preprint Publishing, 1996, 86 pp.

ISBN: 0620203080

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The most entertaining part of Alan Paton's *Songs of Africa* is the 'notes and personal recollections' of Douglas Livingstone, with which the volume begins. In a series of anecdotes, Livingstone shows how he eventually got beneath Paton's severe and 'forbidding carapace' (p. xi) and discovered the man who loved poetry 'with a rare and untidy passion'. Livingstone comments on Paton's own poetic talents: