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Review

What Fanon Said: A Philosophical Introduction to His Life and Thought

Lewis R. Gordon. New York: Fordham University Press, 2015. 216pp.

Terrence L. Johnson *

Frantz Fanon's imprint on twentieth century political philosophy and strikingly poignant role in shaping black radical traditions throughout the African Diaspora in the 1960s and 1970s is undeniable. Black activists and intellectuals found refuge in his writings, where *blackness* was made visible, embodied and cultivated into an epistemic resource for mapping revolutionary responses to antiblack racism, colonialism and gender and sexuality. Stokely Carmichael, the chief architect of the Black Power movement in the U.S., routinely referred to Fanon's writing in his public speeches on Black Power, and for many others in the U.S. and throughout the African Diaspora Fanon's writings were read and discussed as living scriptures. In fact, Fanon's work, including *Black Skin, White Masks* and *The Damned of the Earth*, stirred transnational liberation movements among subjugated peoples and their political efforts to end colonialism and apartheid and segregation.

Fanon's appeal, in part, stems from the precision with which he dissected race within the subtext of the body and colonial domination, and through the lens of psychoanalysis, sexuality, and to some extent Marxism. Black subjugation, indeed, not only emerged as political and economic injury to a colonized and racialized people, but it too manifested itself in and through the body, justified based on normative beliefs in

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the moral, intellectual and aesthetic inferiority of black bodies in particular and blackness in general. This approach, similar to W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*, captured the political and moral imagination of the African Diaspora for it revealed the tragic nature of black existence under colonial rule and white domination.

Retrieving the body as central in the narrative of black subjectivity is critical for understanding Fanon and his significance in philosophy and Africana Studies. As Lewis R. Gordon brilliantly argues *What Fanon Said: A Philosophical Introduction to His Life and Thought*, Fanon lifts black subjectivity from the epistemic sphere of "experience" or "pure exteriority" and places it within realm of embodied knowledge with an "inner life," capable of producing knowledge. It is a form of knowledge, writes Gordon, that requires a "renewed understanding of human possibilities" based on a "conception of radical criticism that challenges the dominance of philosophy as the ultimate critical theory and arbiter" (3).

Gordon, a distinguished philosopher at the University of Connecticut and the Nelson Mandela Visiting Professor of Politics at Rhodes University in South Africa, has written an exceptional and compelling study of Fanon's contributions to Africana philosophy, psychoanalysis, and gender studies. The reader is taken on a winding road as Gordon describes Fanon's personal and political life as a backdrop to understanding his rich and multilayered writings. "To look at Fanon's life and thought as though he were only black or only French would be a distortion of the fact that he was not only both but also a Martinican and much more, given the multitude of roles he played throughout his short life" (7). Fanon was an original thinker, Gordon persuasively suggests, someone who explored human phenomenon within the context of shifting social frameworks long before the allure of postmodernity. In one such example, Fanon developed a critical hermeneutical lens called the "sociogenic explanation," what he characterized as "a form of existential phenomenological social analysis that recognizes both the impact of the social world on the emergence of meaning and human identities and how individual situations relate to the development and preservation of social and political institutions" (2). *What Fanon Said* is an extraordinary contribution to Fanonian studies. The guiding thesis is clear: unlike most philosophical thinkers during and after his lifetime, Fanon developed a new knowledge for exploring subjectivity through the prism of black embodiment, and from this epistemic framework he remolded existing vocabularies and resources to extend the boundaries of human possibility. What frames Gordon's thesis

carries significant ethical import: Fanon places an ethical burden upon his readers, an ethics not based on a strict sense of duty or obligation but an ethics in the form a critical and creative commitment to rethinking and (potentially) extending the familiar epistemic boundaries of one's imagination. It is the lifelong struggle of lifting the veils through which one sees and feels the world, and inserting one's subjectivity as one grapples with the reigning ideas within her social context.

The ethical burden is evident within the subtext of the black body as knowledge. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, for instance, Fanon described to his reader the time a young white boy called him a *nigger* as he stepped upon the train's platform. The "force of language froze Fanon in his tracks," writes Gordon, and created a moment of piercing reflection upon the social nature of blackness (48). Though he was in medical school pursuing a career in psychiatry at the time of the encounter, his training had not prepared him to address the psychosocial dynamics of blackness. For the first time, it appears, Fanon could see and feel the social ontology of blackness: how the cultural perceptions and demonization of blackness preceded his existence, erasing his individuality and collapsing Fanon into the category of the "problem," the *black*. "The idea is to imagine being wholly taken over, seized, in the presence of the object. What is rich about the example is that the seizure, so to speak, is also an act of seizing; the boy's experience of being ensnared, dried up, and laid out in a world of ice-cold exteriority" (48). The encounter left Fanon facing an ethical dilemma: he could dismiss the boy's comments as an innocent moment that said more about his individual family and social location than of his own inclination, or embrace the moment as real and reflective of a socially-construed response to seeing the black.

By choosing to interrogate the child's racism, Fanon discloses what many others had stumbled over but ignored in their exhaustive efforts to understand the *nature* of antiblack racism: black subjectivity as possessing an interiority, an inner life. "Fanon announces the experience of a world that denies his inner life; he examines this supposed absence *from the point of view of his inner life*. The paradox of black experience is thus raised: Black *experience* should not exist since blacks should not have a point of view" (48). Gordon's insight into Fanon's thought is novel: black bodies matter, and not because of any constitutionally-protected right; instead, they matter because they are in possession of knowledge and capable of producing new epistemic resources for (re) imagining and transforming oppressive social contexts.

Gordon's examination of Fanonian interiority places the thinker alongside W.E.B. Du Bois, another major thinker who imagined black subjectivity as possessing knowledge and consciousness of the world through his formulation of double consciousness. As Gordon put it: the "interplay of ironic dimension of sight and thought of doubled doubling," are critical hallmarks of Fanon's thought (20). Instead of describing the crisis of souls as rooted in what Du Bois characterized as identity, Fanon construed it as a problem emerging from desire. "By adding the dimension of what blacks want, Fanon raises and expands the question of the subjective life of blacks, of black consciousness, that parallels the Freudian question of women—What do women want" (21). The insertion of desire is "prereflective and reflective" (21). According to Fanon, any investigation into black life requires what he called "*ontogenic*" (the individual subject), "*phylogenic* approaches" (based on the species) and "*sociogenic*" (that which emerges within the social context). Both Du Bois and Fanon struggled to construct a "critical consciousness," but their approaches, Gordon suggests, diverged (22). One wonders, however, if Du Bois's yearning to invent a "truer" self from the collision in double consciousness stems from an interior desire to acquire, replace and insert a political and erotic power over whites, and especially white men.

Still, Fanon, unlike Du Bois and many other thinkers during his lifetime, was unapologetic in his biting criticisms of Freudian-based psychoanalysis of sex and sexuality. Indeed, Fanon illumines the "failure of a special kind, that which emerges from the retreat from the public sphere of language to the supposed private sphere of sexual intimacy" (33). What is unacknowledged among Freudians, according to Gordon, is the "failure to escape the social reality principle of antiblackness through a loving whiteness" (35). This does not foreclose interracial relationships, but instead points to the pathology that emerges when the "basis of the liaison" is rooted in the intoxication with whiteness.

Frantz Fanon was born in 1925 on the Caribbean Island of Martinique and died in 1961. He served in World War II, attended medical school in Lyon, France, and later supported the Algerian resistance movement. *The Damned of the Earth*, the translation Gordon assigns to what is commonly translated as *The Wretched of the Earth*, is one of Fanon's most important works, if not the most visible text among social activists and intellectuals. Written at age thirty-five, and in a matter of ten weeks, the book grapples with cultural and political implications of colonialism and offers a vision for imagining human existence beyond white subjugation. In his interpretation of the text, Gordon

focuses on the misreading among scholars and activists of Fanon's call for revolutionary violence. Gordon is clear: any disruption to the social conditions in colonialism and apartheid, for instance, demands an individual and collective struggle that is violent by virtue of its disruption to the social order. This kind of revolutionary violence creates the conditions for embodying freedom. "Although one's liberty license, or absence of constraints could be handed over by another, it is the struggle for liberation that actually engenders one's freedom" (97). Indeed, revolution is the only way toward freedom and liberation. Reformist politics, which may, for instance, assume liberation and social justice can be acquired by replacing whites with black and brown bodies, fails to understand oppression and its systemic role in reinforcing itself both among the colonized and colonizer. Gordon summarizes the point aptly: "Eliminating colonial occupation is not identical with achieving independence" (119).

Fanon's recognition of colonialism's wide reach from material resources to the consciousness of the colonized reflects the burden of ethics that fuels his thought. Gordon teases out this point in his poignant analysis of Fanon's writings. The double consciousness of the colonized, for instance, emerges in Fanonian thought as a struggle "for the ethical to emerge, for ethics and morality, proper, are relationships between human being or in terms of demands placed on living in a human world" (69). Within this context, it is not surprising that Fanon ends with a prayer directed at humankind and designed to transform the ethical burden into human action. "Although not *the* universal, because of the fundamental incompleteness at the heart of being human, the paradox of reaching beyond particularity is the simultaneous humility of understanding the expanse and possibility of reality and human potential" (130). This is the prayer Fanon offers to the subjugated: the awakening and subsequent embodiment of a new humanism.