



BRILL

NEW WEST INDIAN GUIDE 93 (2019) 279–285



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Review Article



New Perspectives on Frantz Fanon

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Raphaël Confiant, *L'Insurrection de l'âme. Frantz Fanon: Vie et mort du guerrier-silex*. Martinique: Caraïbéditions, 2017. 392 pp. (Paper € 21.30)

Frantz Fanon, *Alienation and Freedom*. Edited and compiled by Jean Khalfa & Robert J.C. Young, translated by Steven Corcoran. London: Bloomsbury, 2018. xii + 816 pp. (Cloth US\$ 29.95)

Marie-Jeanne Manuellan, *Sous la dictée de Fanon*. Coaraze, France: L'Amourier Éditions, 2017. 179 pp. (Paper € 17.00)

David Marriott, *Whither Fanon? Studies in the Blackness of Being*. Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2018. 407 pp. (Paper US\$ 29.95)

Frantz Fanon (1925–61) needs no introduction. He is by far the most read Francophone author (meaning from the former colonies writing in French) in the world. Yet he is not a literary writer, and he did not publish much. He has earned his reputation through three books only: *Peau noire, masques blancs* (1952), *L'An V de la révolution algérienne* (1959), and *Les Damnés de la terre* (1961). These publications alone have spurred a substantial amount of research ranging from studies on Fanon himself to the development of concepts in the social sciences and the humanities.

Paradoxically, based on his theories, the one place where Fanon seems to be least known is his native Martinique. In his *Caribbean Discourse*, Édouard Glis-

sant tries to explain why that is and cites Fanon as the greatest case of a typically (French) Caribbean attitude of “diversion,” that is, the inability to directly connect to and live the surrounding reality. The fact that Fanon is known in the wider world and not so known on the islands illustrates this resistance to seeing one’s own creativity and productivity. Fanon’s destiny is also an example of diversion in that he became the adoptive son of another country, Algeria. In this context, one can read Raphaël Confiant’s *L’Insurrection de l’âme*, published with a local press (Caraïbéditions), as an attempt to change Fanon’s reception in the Francophone Antilles. It was not the first time that Confiant wrote about great Martinicans—he had already published a now-infamous book on Aimé Césaire. His take on Fanon is different perhaps precisely because Fanon does not have the same impact on Martinique as Césaire, and because Confiant can identify with Fanon’s belligerent attitude. Adopting the form of a biopic novel, he follows Fanon’s life, but whereas most biographers let his engagement in the Algerian cause dictate the perspective, Confiant creates links between Fanon’s experiences elsewhere and his native Martinique. Alternating between first- and third-person narration, the story jumps between spaces and times. The reader follows Fanon’s thoughts as he lies dying of leukemia in Bethesda Naval Hospital in Maryland. Portions of the text recount his work as a psychiatrist in Algeria (Blida and later Tunis); we meet him in exchange with patients, the Front de Libération Nationale (FNL), and Jean-Paul Sartre. Other passages recount Fanon seen from the outside by his adversaries. In other words, the book is a daunting attempt to give a full portrait of a complex man through different perspectives. And this is what literature can bring to the biographical genre—the permission to imagine, to go beyond facts. Admirers or scholars of Fanon might be bothered by the directness of Confiant’s portrait, which does not always resonate with Fanon’s own composite prose and thought. But I think the intended audience is young Martinicans with an urge to know the great radical humanist. If he succeeds in reaching this audience, that’s a win. And if the book is read in France too, even better.

For Fanon is not only “diverted” in Martinique. The fact is that he remains a marginal thinker in France, too. In *Sous la dictée de Fanon*, published by a small French publisher, L’Amourier Éditions, Marie-Jeanne Manuellan has an interesting hypothesis as to why that is: Fanon, who started as a member of the *Partie Communiste*, never became known as a revolutionary, a communist, within France as he had in leftist movements in other countries. Despite Sartre’s interventions, his engagement in the Algerian war marginalized him from the French left. In addition, she recalls, after his experiences in Blida, Fanon came to a point where he hated France. When she invited him and his family to her

home in Tunis, his response was “glacial”: “I do not socialize with French people” (*Je ne fréquente pas des Français*). His cause was not the French workers.

This is one of many insights that can be found in Manuellan’s book. She worked for him in Tunis, first taking notes during his sessions with patients and then dictating *L’An V de la révolution algérienne* and *Les Damnés de la terre*. What is perhaps most intriguing with this book is that it lets readers view Fanon through the perspective of the French working class in the Maghreb. Manuellan was born in a poor family in the Limousin and became engaged with the Communist Party at an early age. Even if there is a link between her background and Fanon’s political engagement, it is clear that there was a rift between Dr. Fanon and his secretary. In straightforward prose, she paints the portrait of a composed man of principle who does not let anyone in. He is described as distant but brilliant, cold yet very sensitive. He starts as a boss who ignores her, then he becomes her teacher, and, ultimately, they become close. This is an intimate book about a friend who died too young, written to another friend, Omar Benderra, who encouraged Manuellan to write the book. At the same time, her story reveals a problematic tension between the Fanon we read today and the Fanon she encountered as his secretary. A telling example is the episode in which he is treating an Algerian patient who had been the victim of French torture and did not want to be in the presence of a French woman. Fanon responds to the patient that Manuellan is not a “lady” (*une dame*); she is but a “recorder.” Not only does he erase her subjectivity; he seems to take advantage of her presence, as it may reenact the trauma and therefore have a cathartic effect on the patient. Yet, according to Manuellan, Fanon only comments on this in passing, and nothing is said about which language they spoke. These omissions are intriguing, and part of the beauty in this book: the direct observations offer a fresh view on a sometimes overanalyzed writer and thinker.

Manuellan is one of the many contributors quoted in the English translation of the massive compilation of Fanon’s entire work that came out in French in 2015. It is clear that the editors, Jean Khalifa and Robert J.C. Young, two renowned Fanon scholars, already had the English publication in sight when the French version was published. This is an impressive collection, and its most significant contribution would presumably be presenting new texts by Fanon. But in fact, the editorial work, the research behind it, and the critical analysis presented in the long introductions to each section are just as important for Fanon studies. The collection is the result of long, thorough, and meticulous archival and biographical work, and it is organized in five parts. The first three contain texts by Fanon, beautifully translated by Steven Corcoran. The first part, on dramatic writing, presents two unpublished and unstaged

plays, *The Drowning Eye* and *Parallel Hands*, both written in 1949, influenced by Aimé Césaire, Paul Claudel, and Sartre, and steeped in the mold of a Nietzschean view of drama, which will later inform his political thinking. His psychiatric writings can be found in the second part, including his thesis, *A Case of Friedrich's Ataxia with Delusions of Possession*, editorial texts published in the newspaper of Saint-Alban Hospital in the early 1950s, and articles from the newspaper Fanon himself created at the Blida-Joinville hospital. There are notes from lectures he held on society and psychiatry at the Institut des hautes études in Tunis, written by sociologist Lila Ben Salem. Finally, the political writing section owes much to previous works by editors Giovanni Pirelli and Giulio Einaudi in Italy and François Maspero in France, and it presents texts that appeared in *El Moudjahid*, 1958 and onward. The fourth part, "Publishing Fanon (France and Italy)," includes letters by Fanon to Maspero and a scholarly article by Neelam Srivastava on the Italian editions. The last part is a useful inventory of Fanon's library.

It requires time and patience to read this massive work in its entirety. Whereas some texts are written in that singularly Fanonian style that we know from his published works, other pieces are less captivating unless one reads for research. Most fascinating to a literary scholar like myself are the two plays. In a sense, they are symptomatic of the difficulty of the volume. For while the plays in themselves are hardly great literature, Young's introduction is a masterpiece of literary analysis. In a pedagogical manner, he manages to give depth to each word, like Fanon's rather incoherent use of visual language, which he reads positively as surrealist *métaphores filées*. One could accuse Young's brilliant analysis of making a mountain out of a molehill—after all, these are plays that never reached an audience, written by a twenty-four-year-old—but the point is that it shows in detail the aesthetic fundamentals of Fanon's writing and his sometimes-opaque language. Jean Khalfa provides the equally brilliant and informative introduction to the psychiatric writings, contextualizing Fanon's education and situating his *socialthérapie* in psychiatric experiments and philosophical debates of the time. In this section the breadth of Fanon's radical humanism in practice and in writing comes into focus. "Colonialist psychiatry as a whole has to be disalienated," he writes in a letter to Maurice Despinoy (p. 417). The pieces from the weekly ward journal he initiated in Blida give extraordinary insight into the everyday life of the hospital, his methods, and theories put into practice, as well as the way he gradually became devoted to the Algerian revolution. Many of the key observations in *The Wretched of the Earth* are there, such as the division of the colonial city. We learn that the man who was so associated with violence was against punishment in the context of psychiatric hospitals.

The political writings, prefaced by Khalfa, present a more familiar Fanon. We find discussions of the necessity of revolution and the French silencing of the Algerian war. There are devastating descriptions of torture and massacres of civilians. In a letter to an Iranian revolutionary, Ali Shariati, who translated *The Wretched of the Earth* into Persian, Fanon presents Islam as the strongest counterforce to Western dominance. An article on Richard Wright shows traces of a more literary Fanon, and another, "In the Caribbean, the Birth of a Nation?," transposes the struggle for liberation in Algeria to Martinique. What becomes increasingly important in these articles is the connection to the outside world. The internationalization of the Algerian crisis constitutes an opening for the revolutionaries and a way out of the vicious dialectics of France-Algeria. This internationalization is also visible in the book's fourth section, which is about publishing Fanon. The correspondence between him and Maspero, the French publisher, shows to what extent it was dangerous to print Fanon. Manuscripts were smuggled, code names were used, and Fanon was always underscoring the importance of sending copies to other countries so that the entire work would not be seized by the French intelligence. While finishing *The Wretched of the Earth*, he was already thinking about the English translation. So here we have the origin of Fanon's global success: an extreme local situation seeking international attention.

Alienation and Freedom will no doubt be very important for Fanon scholars. Even if it does not give us an entirely new Fanon, the book deepens and nuances the one we know, and new attention to the material "on colonialist alienation as seen through mental illnesses" (p. 1) will pave the way for refreshing readings of Fanon as a literary author and as a psychiatrist, perhaps as a response to a certain tendency in our polarized era to read him first and foremost as a political writer. One scholar who has gone in this direction is David Marriott. His *Whither Fanon? Studies in the Blackness of Being* focuses on the psychiatric works in order to reconsider the question of blackness as a destiny, which, for Marriot as well as for Fanon himself, is ultimately a political question. He writes, "By presenting the concepts through which Fanon remains faithful to the difficulty of thinking blackness as a future tense, I have become more and more convinced that to have no certainty of judgment is the only certitude that Fanon's conclusion demands" (p. ix). This sums up his thesis, namely that Fanon's radical humanism has no directionality. From these premises, Marriott reconfigures key concepts in Fanon's thinking, notably blackness. His methodology is to read Fanon's texts as one work, starting from the psychiatric experiments (and experiences), which are usually glossed over, particularly in political readings. The approach finds its motivation in Fanon's conviction that desire and politics are imbricated in one another, but more importantly,

Marriott dares to touch on the (deliberate?) shortcomings in Fanon's work. What Fanon teaches us, Marriott suggests, is that neither political nor psychiatric thought alone can resolve the colonial dilemma. Yet it is precisely this insecurity, this failure, that harbors the radical potential of his thought. As the title suggests, the point is to interrogate the contemporary moment and the future for Fanonism, and in so doing, he gives readers a Fanon without the messianic moment, whose theses are open-ended rather than dialectical.

Marriott's study is significant in many ways. It enters into a polemical yet highly productive dialogue with other Fanon scholars, such as Achille Mbembe, David Scott, Peter Hallward, Gordon Lewis, Ato Sekyi-Otu, and Homi K. Bhabha, to name a few. The analysis is detailed, precise, and very well researched. Marriott takes his readers through terms, such as negrophobia and liberation; means such as language and violence; frameworks such as the law and the clinic, all against the backdrop of psychiatric as well as philosophical debates of the times. He discusses Fanon's readings of Karl Jaspers and Georges Sorel as well as readings of Fanon by Sartre and Hannah Arendt. He lets a long reflection on C.L.R. James's work complicate Fanon's Marxism. A significant part of the book is devoted to *négritude*, not only as a predecessor to Fanon but also as a poetics of blackness in its own right.

Whither Fanon thus covers vast ground and carefully goes through relevant concepts and thinkers. It addresses the central political notions in Fanon's work, notably violence, revolutionary *tabula rasa*, and radical humanism, but Marriott reads them through the prism of the psychiatric notions of the vertigo and the abyssal. When entangled in psychic and bodily experiences, Fanon's thought becomes radical in a different way. Marriott demonstrates that Fanon's alienated subject has no being, but is caught in an existence of vertigo; therefore, there is no solution, even in revolution, and no racial redemption either. In this setting, decolonial violence is not dialectic. It is interpreted as the attempt of colonial subjects to break with the fetishistic perspective imposed upon them rather than a search for recognition by the (white) other. It is a detoxification that is radically reinventive, an event that has no directionality or content and exceeds the representational forms of the political. Therefore, Marriott claims, Fanon's writing creates a "future imperfect," which is constituted as a leap into history that unsettles the relationship between self and history. Liberation for Fanon is not necessarily equated with emancipation. It is carried by an uncertain subject, not determined by history but not entirely free from it either. The strength of this book is that Marriott is not just examining Fanon; he is continuing Fanon. This is more than an academic book. Its arguments are carried by a style and a thinking of its own. In a way, Marriott performs the

question in the title. The contemporary and future Fanon is in the exploration of thought through poetics.

Acknowledgments

I wish to express my gratitude to Riksbankens Jubileumsfond for facilitating the writing of this review article.