

[Review] Nigel C. Gibson, ed. (2011) Living Fanon: global perspectives

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Living Fanon: Global Perspectives. Nigel C. Gibson (ed.). Basingstoke, U.K.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. v + 257 pp. (Paper US\$ 30.00)

In her contribution to this timely volume, Alice Cherki maintains that “reading Fanon helps us to ‘resist the air of our present time’ in the fields of politics, culture, and individual becoming, with his quest to join everything human, every relationship of the singular to the collective in the ordeal of alienation” (p. 132). The distinctive features of Cherki’s chapter correspond with many of the book’s underlying aims and imperatives. Published half a century after *The Wretched of the Earth*, the collection argues for Fanon’s peculiar resonance in a geo-political context marked by the Arab Spring uprisings and their aftermath, while also seeking to situate his oeuvre in more compelling historical and discursive contexts. As such, it is the many motivations and polyglot interventions in *Living Fanon* that set it apart from other companions published to coincide with a particular anniversary, be it in relation to the author and/or the events with which they are associated. By framing Fanon and his intellectual legacy in light of the “series of revolts that have rocked regimes across North Africa and the Middle East” (p. 2), Nigel Gibson’s introduction sets the tone for much of what follows. Of equal significance, however, is the supplementary question that accompanies the title to his introduction, “Living Fanon?” Irrespective of readers’ schooling in Fanonian thought, the question mark immediately sensitizes them to the collection’s interrogative thrust. If numerous contributors foreground the prescient, often prophetic quality of Fanon’s work, they are complemented by those, such as Michael Neocosmos and Peter Hallward, who privilege greater degrees of critical ambivalence. In pointing to the inevitable blind-spots of Fanonian discourse, they contest those more reductive and/or romanticized portraits of the man and his legacy. Fittingly, therefore, the debates within *Living Fanon* have traces of the robust urgency and energy that characterizes the work and thought of its central subject. As such, some of the volume’s most memorable contributions are combative tributes, authored in the spirit of Fanon’s final prayer: “Make of me always a man who questions!” (Fanon 1967: 232).

I found many of *Living Fanon*’s most provocative interventions clustered in its second half. Mabogo Percy More, for instance, offers a *Wretched of the Earth*-inspired critique of South Africa’s ruling ANC. Suggesting that “The Pitfalls of National Consciousness” could have been written “with

postapartheid 'New South Africa' in mind" (p. 173), More maintains that, while the flag, constitution, and faces of those in power may have changed, certain underlying structures, ideologies, and inequities, most manifest in terms of the "land question," are as conspicuous as they are entrenched. Chapters by Lou Turner and Grant Farred are similarly striking. In "Fanon and the Biopolitics of Torture," Turner uses *Wretched's* hauntingly prescient section, "Colonial War and Mental Disorders," to point toward complicity and culpability in everyone from "the chattering classes of the [modern] media" (p. 117) to "cowboy intellectuals" (p. 123). If the tone of Farred's philosophically dense intervention is understated by comparison, his discussion will linger just as long in the reader's mind. For Farred, "Encoded in the Fanonian declarative is a philosophical uncertainty that enriches *Wretched*" (p. 167). The significance of "uncertainty" here lies in its defamiliarizing intensity. As such, it is once more contiguous with some of the volume's central tenets; urging readers to suspend what they think they might know about Fanon in order to foreground and then re-view some of the nuances of his work and legacy. This in itself creates areas of productive tension within and between different offerings. In "Fanon and the Possibility of Postcolonial Critical Imagination," for instance, Ato Sekyi-Otu sets himself apart from many of the contributors, provocatively declaring that "[in] most parts of the African continent, the name Fanon sounds today like a spectre from another time and place, an emanation from a past so recent yet so remote" (p. 45). If, at times, readers risk losing the subject himself in prose that tends towards the labyrinthine, Sekyi-Otu's discussion of Fanonian interlocutors also has a certain defamiliarizing quality.

To a significant extent, this book argues, a re-engagement with Fanonian discourse enables, perhaps even actively compels us to "resist the air of our present time," as Cherki's chapter, 'Fanon, Fifty Years Later: Resisting the Air of Our Present Time,' suggests. If Fanon's critique of a neo-colonial bourgeoisie, hiding their nepotism behind obscurantist rhetoric, struck a chord in readers during the 1950s and 1960s, its power remains undimmed in so many ways and in so many places today. While such re-negotiations continue to provide counter-hegemonic inspiration, the essays in *Living Fanon* maintain that we can only refine our understanding by paying much closer attention to the peculiarities of geo-political, economic, ideological, and cultural contexts, both in relation to the period from which the original texts emerge and in terms of the peculiar dynamics of the historical present.

At its strongest, Gibson's volume succeeds in achieving its multiple objectives. As it breathes new life into Fanon's work for specialist and novice readers alike, it also makes vital demands on the critical industry that has sprung up around him over the past decades. One of the most trenchant cases it presents is that, now more than ever, we must oppose the reproduction of stale debates and all-too-easy caricatures of the man and his legacy. As Richard Pithouse suggests in the volume's poignant final chapter ("Fidelity to Fanon"), "sixty years on [from *Black Skin, White Masks*], the truths that [Fanon] wrought from a militant engagement with his world now illuminate ours" (p. 225). Throughout *Living Fanon*, Pithouse and his fellow contributors demonstrate how and why the compelling, necessarily combative legacy of Frantz Fanon and his work refuses to die.

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Reference

Fanon, Frantz, 1967. *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York: Grove Press. [Orig. 1952.]