

H-France Review Vol. 25 (January 2025), No. 2

James S. Williams, *Frantz Fanon*. London: Reaktion Books, 2023. £12.99 (pb). ISBN 9781789148312; £12.99 (eb). ISBN 9781789148350.

Review by Miron Clay-Gilmore, Purdue University.

In this book, readers are presented the biography of a thinker who can only be described as a phenomenon. Frantz Fanon was not only “a well-regarded author of scientific articles, a groundbreaking political essayist and theorist, a teacher, ambassador and journalist, and a major Pan-Africanist and internationalist” but also a “new model” of the engaged intellectual--an “outlaw of Europe” whose “lasting reputation rests on his writings on political theory and philosophy” (p. 1). Williams charts “Fanon’s exemplary commitment to movement and change by exploring his life and work together as part of a fluid and necessarily incomplete organic process of consciousness--an evolving, multi-textured self in continual motion” (p. 16). In so doing, the reader is presented with an account of “Fanon’s lifelong search for a genuinely progressive humanism” and existence beyond the rigidity of the colonial system in which he was born (p. 16).

Williams’s *Frantz Fanon* is an original work that complements any research agenda focused on this figure. The work is also impressive in its scope and as a result is a great contribution to the study of Fanon across disciplines. Fanon’s corpus is rarely contextualized so meticulously and the origin of his ideas concerning violence, Pan-Africanism, and sociogeny are made clear here for those with interests in intellectual history. The intended audience for this work is students and professors interested in Fanonian thought. More generally though, it would greatly benefit those interested in Africana philosophy, anti-colonial thought, and history.

Williams’s portrait of Fanon (a particularly mysterious and enigmatic figure) as a thinker who was preoccupied with *becoming* (self-invention) and marked by contrasts which saw him exude “pure affirmation” yet also be “permanently haunted by death” is aided by newly available primary materials (p. 13). Williams also expands the frame through which Fanon is understood to include influential females in his life. This includes but is not limited to his mother, his colleague in medicine and friend, Alice Cherki, and his wife, Josie Fanon, who outlived him by three decades. With this basis in scholarly and oral sources, Williams provides readers with an account of a figure whose life and work fit “together as part of a fluid and necessarily incomplete organic process of consciousness--an evolving multi-textured, self in continual motion” (p. 16).

This work is highly recommended. Williams's clarification of the conceptual origins and evolution of Fanon's theory of "sociogeny" was refreshing. Williams explains that the term "sociogeny" was put forth in the introduction of Fanon's first book, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952)--a work best understood "as a form of socio-diagnostics informed by Fanon's clinical training and psychiatric research, with Fanon offering himself as his own case material" (p. 66). Several themes and their relationship to the Black condition are discussed. These include "language, embodiment, gender, sexuality (including interracial relations), the dependency complex of the colonized, psychopathology, and (self-)recognition" (p. 66).

While Fanon commandeers psychoanalytic paradigms to "describe the transference of White fantasies onto the Black man (and, specifically, the projection of the sexual onto the abject Black body)," ultimately, he reasoned that western "theories cannot deliver a full explanation of Black alienation" (p. 67). These patterns of thinking led Fanon to coin the term sociogeny (as opposed to ontogeny or phylogeny) to express the view that "all elements of human being are created in the social world and thus without essential attributes" (p. 67). That is to say, "racism is a discursive rather than a biological regime" whose implanting of racist stereotypes "renders self-perception alienated and dislocates the ego from the body, dividing the black subject" not only in language (Fanon argues that language is the colonizer's founding tool of oppression) but also "in his lived, corporeal experience" (p. 67). Fanon understands this ontological predicament of Black people under colonial rule as a "zone of nonbeing" (p. 67). Within this state of negation, "there is an alien other lodged inside the [Black] self, and it leads to an identification with stereotypes that may be consciously rejected by are introjected and internalized" (p. 67).

Imitating his colonizer over many years produces "a neurotic personality that, in a delirium bordering on pathological, requires White recognition yet remains suspicious that full acceptance will ever be offered" (p. 68). While the Black body is presented by Fanon as "a site of diseased symptoms, it also holds the promise of decolonized revolutionary existence" and is the basis for Fanon's thinking about a universal subjectivity (p. 72). To break out of the "zone of non-being," attain Being and "be-for-himself-only" rather than remaining "'a-being-for-the-Other' in a system where the internalization" of white desire and narratives of civilization/existence reign, Fanon articulates anti-colonial account of master-slave dialectics based around the distinction between the colonizer and the colonized (p. 72). Exploding the basic assumptions in Hegel's dialectical account of the master-slave relation that imply mutual recognition between the two, Fanon argued that "the total lack of reciprocity inscribed in the positions of the colonizer and the colonized" necessitates a violent confrontation and the slave's/colonized subject's "eventual struggle to the death" against the colonizer/master (p. 72).

For Fanon, the negation and death imposed on the colonized by the colonizer have a dialectical potentiality of making possible "the Black man's self-constituting activity" through counter-violence which will secure the ascension of the Black subject from the "zone of non-being" to a register of "universal being" even beyond race (p. 72). As Williams explains, Fanon's underlying project is revealed as the liberation of "humankind from all determination by race and history by moving beyond identity *tout court*" (p. 72). Fanon thus introduces "a new kind of perpetual self-invention beyond the colonial bounds of history, which impose merely stasis and reification, and also beyond the pre-programmed narratives such as Marxism and psychoanalysis" (p. 73). The structure and organization of a program of violence or how such an endeavor might work in

practice is not articulated in this first work, but Fanon continued to develop sociogeny in his clinical career. Later in the same year that *Black Skin, White Masks* was published, he took a post at the Saint-Alban-sur-Limagnole psychiatric hospital in France.

Fanon was at Saint-Alban for fifteen months. During this period, he was able to observe “for the first time how patients could play a central part in the institution that constituted them as psychical and social subjects, and so work actively towards their own recovery” (p. 79). Previously, Fanon “had been aware of the essential role culture played in mental illness, but now he properly grasped how the act of curing renewed the link with fellow humans through an exchange of speech, enabling the patient to be reborn into the world” and gain a normative form of consciousness “in which the self is autonomous and in full control” (p. 79). After his post at Saint-Alban, Fanon arrived in French Algeria to serve at Blida-Joinville, the only public hospital in the province in 1953.

Right away, Fanon attacked “the doctrinal basis of the Algiers school of colonial ethnopsychiatry, founded by the hospital’s former director Professor Antoine Porot, and its reductive racial stereotyping” which justified the “inherent racism of France’s colonial mission” in Africa (p. 89). Fanon sought to decolonize psychiatry during this time and in line with his clinical training at Saint-Alban and predisposition towards socio-diagnostics “proposed a sociological and phenomenological understanding of ‘the Algerian personality’ that involved replicating communal forms familiar to his Muslim patients” (p. 92). Under his leadership, “Blida-Joinville was fast becoming a dynamic centre for research” (p. 92). Throughout this period, Fanon worked on several clinical fronts, including shock treatments, new neuroleptic drugs and psychotropes, as well as pharmacological research to treat acute mania. While Fanon surely contributed to major advancements at Blida-Joinville, there were outside events taking place that would quickly impinge on these developments.

Foremost among these was the start of the war for Algerian independence in 1954. The following year, the French army was granted extensive powers and the country was placed under martial law. The Algerian war for national liberation proved to be “a watershed moment for Fanon,” and “when the nationalist rebels made initial contact with him in early 1955 to enlist his support, he needed little convincing” (p. 95). Thereafter, Fanon found himself in regular (covert) contact with the military of the *Armée de libération nationale* (ALN), treating “respectable-looking Arabs who were serving as messengers between the hospital and the FLN [*Front de libération nationale*] of wilaya IV,” (one of seven military zones of combat as defined by the FLN during the war) allowing “clandestine FLN meetings to be held at the hospital”--he even “transmitted information, hid weapons and forbade police from entering with their guns loaded” (p. 96). He also taught “fighters to manage their body language when placing a bomb and how to resist torture” (p. 96).

In this context of anti-colonial revolution, Fanon clarified his ideas about sociogeny even further. As Williams writes, Fanon “conceived of the struggle for freedom and a new, postcolonial nation in the same way he approached the two-stage treatment of alienation in social therapy, that is, a process first of destruction (the shock of colonization), then re-creation (revolution)” (p. 97). By the middle of 1956 Fanon decided that he could no longer manage his double life and left Blida to eventually settle in Tunisia. He first worked at the Razi de la Manouba Hospital before being

tasked by the health minister “with a study of the reorganization of psychiatric institutions in Tunisia and the reform of different methods of treatment” at Charles-Nicolle Hospital (p. 116). At Charles-Nicolle, Fanon created and directed “Africa’s first psychiatric day clinic with the help of the local authorities” (p. 116).

As he did at Blida-Joinville, Fanon explored “the sociogenic aspects of symptomatology: symptoms originated from a dialectic between the ego and the world that had been distorted” as well as “from the internalization of social conflicts” (p. 117). As a revolutionary doctor, his “primary goal was therefore to ‘consciousnessize’ his patients’ conflict by enabling them to verbalize their symptoms and consolidate their sense of self” (p. 117). He was highly successful at his endeavors and his efforts resulted in “a day centre that was low-cost and efficient” and offered Africa “a new holistic model of psychiatric care” (p. 118). By 1959, Fanon’s duties with the ALN/FLN increased. He was “at the top of his game” and his various “activities--doctor, clinical director, researcher, media representative, journalist, teacher--were coming together seamlessly in a total practice of engagement” (p. 121).

That same year, Fanon published *A Dying Colonialism* as his “contribution to the *littérature de combat*” produced by the ALN/FLN and reflected his refinement of sociogeny as a dialectical model of decolonization (p. 126). As Williams explains, Fanon sought to “articulate clearly and accessibly the cause of Algerian independence and to detail the remarkable mutations now emerging in Algerian society and the national consciousness after five years of revolutionary struggle”--that is, the transformation of Algerians “from colonial subjects into autonomous subjects” (p. 126). Fanon offers readers an “account of how national liberation struggles can break up the colonized nations’ old strata of culture and allow for the renewal of forms of expression and the rebirth of the imagination in the process of producing more equal relations between people freed from their inferiority complex and ultimately birth a new humanity” (p. 126). Sociogeny had now not only a new domain of application-- “[t]he ‘I’ of *Peau noire* has now morphed into ‘we Algerians’”--but it also foregrounded the dialectics of decolonization in terms of a whole people (men and women) in revolt (p. 127).

Fanon’s “perfect fusion of the roles of engaged writer, clinician and political activist” yielded more sophisticated thinking about sociogeny in *A Dying Colonialism*, but also corresponded to his growing interest in “the possibility of a federation of African states” and a pan-African Legion (p. 135). Indeed, Fanon came to be “viewed by many not only as in the vanguard of the movement for freedom in Africa but as the primary lynchpin bridging the gap between Arab North Africa and Black sub-Saharan Africa” (pp. 138-139). At the second All African People’s Conference in 1960, Fanon “confidently requested on behalf of the Algerian delegation,” the formation “of an international body of African volunteers whom Algeria would train in the methods of ‘subversive warfare’” (p. 139). By February of 1960, Fanon was appointed permanent representative of the provisional Algerian government to Ghana in Accra.

In his role as an ambassador in Ghana, “Fanon focused on three main issues: a pan-African campaign to recruit volunteers to fight in Algeria, part of his burgeoning idea of an African Legion; the establishment of a southern flank in Mali for channelling these recruits to the front; and the armed struggle in Angola and events in the Congo” (p. 141). During this time, he “sought to promote African unity as a prelude to the creation of a United States of Africa, with Accra the

headquarters of African liberation south of the Sahara” (p. 141). His final work, *Wretched of the Earth* (1961), was authored as Fanon was dying from leukemia but conveys the full evolution of his thinking around sociogeny, violence, and decolonization. The central argument of the work is that “because the colonial world is indelibly marked by violence (it is violence in its natural state), it calls for a liberatory counter-violence” or what Fanon calls *la praxis absolue* (“absolute line of action”) (p. 154).

Throughout the work, Fanon identifies the class fracturing and violent modus operandi of colonial territories. However, he posits the lumpenproletariat (as opposed to the urban working or westernized intellectual) class as the vanguard of national liberation. The work charts “the process of indigenous people rising up in collective armed revolt to reclaim both their land and dignity by externalizing their internalized violence and destroying their inferiority complex” (p. 155). Sociogeny and his views of violence were expressed at their most potent blended with “prophetic” and “messianic” patterns in his thinking (p. 155). As Williams explains, “the shock of resubjectifying has an immediate cleansing and cathartic force” on the colonized, “disalienating their consciousness through the exultant idea of common cause, of a national destiny and of a collective history” (p. 155). Despite these elements of transcendentalism, Fanon now also took “what he had personally witnessed in Algeria, including the fact that interpersonal violence among indigenous men” due to “tribal warfare had been positively channelled into the common fight” (pp. 155-156).

Despite his “romantic, utopian claims about the revolutionary force of the peasantry and his unshakeable belief in the power of the masses (the ‘great orgasm of violence’) to determine the flow of history,” (p. 156) *Wretched of the Earth* ends by reiterating the need for new inventions of human subjectivity, orienting readers towards futurity and the process of *becoming*—a hallmark of Fanon’s thinking throughout his life that is masterfully outlined by Williams. The only drawback of this work is Williams’s sanguine assessment of the importance of Fanon’s ideas in global debates premised on identity politics. To be fair, Fanon remains influential. However, his idea of sociogeny, its key insight that “the categories and fictions of the white mind become the negations in black consciousness,” and his postulation that the resolution of this ontological condition occurs through violence/armed struggle are not major themes in scholarship associated with Black/Africana Studies or Africana Philosophy (p. 171). But with Williams’s rigorous account of the diachronic evolution of Fanon’s thinking about violence and the creation of a universal humanism, a new debate can begin.

Miron Clay-Gilmore  
Purdue University  
mclaygil@purdue.edu

Copyright © 2024 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither

bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172