



What Fanon Said

Philosophical Introduction to His Life and Thought

Lewis Gordon

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What Fanon Said is organised into two strands. The first charts Frantz Fanon's life from his infancy in Martinique to his death in the United States, with Lewis Gordon explaining these movements as directed by Fanon's involvement in psychiatry, black liberation movements, or both. The second strand is philosophical, fraught with literary lyricism and parable-like vignettes, reading at times like a sermon in the church of black existentialism. Under Gordon's elucidation, Fanon's philosophy emerges as that which seeks to lay down the conditions that will make possible black-woman and black-man subjectivity. Gordon weaves the more uncomfortable and controversial aspects of Fanon's philosophy over and inside Fanon's chronological biography, an interlacing that is brought to life by Gordon's own role as a philosophy critic.

Gordon outlines Fanon's discussion of Western anxiety over black embodiment, where the white gaze claims that the "(black) body is the man, the man his body." By doing so, the white gaze makes of black people bodies and not-bodies, thus denying them subjectivity. The second chapter, "Writing through the zone of nonbeing", explores Fanon's account of the role of language as a tool of subjugation in *Black Skin, White Masks*.

Explained against the backdrop of Gordon's own philosophy, its rich tone is mired in the leaden honesty that is a feature of black existentialism.

"Living experience, embodying possibility" is the most philosophically dense and challenging chapter of the entire book. Gordon smoothes out the accusations of sexism and homophobia that plague Fanon through a close reading of Fanon's philosophy in the original French. This chapter is breathtaking in its description of the controversial chapters in *Black Skin, White Masks* regarding interracial relationships. What emerges is an analysis of how the anonymity imposed on blackness in an anti-black world results in the black man and black woman living in a world of epistemic closure, a world without reciprocity, in which possibilities are closed off to the black. This chapter gives the reader a high-order crash course in Gordon's own black existentialism as he makes reference to and disputes Negritude, the myth of Black Orpheus and Sartre's anti-racist racism.

More biographical than philosophical, the fourth chapter, "Revolutionary therapy", charts Fanon's life in North Africa and his discussion of Algerian women who frustrate the coloniser by seeing without being seen. "Counselling the damned" discusses violence as a

major theme in Fanon's work, which, like the discussion concerning sexual racism, is laced with controversy. Fanon states that the colony sets the stage for a conflict of rights where one side must lose and violence is inevitable. If colonisation is to win, then violence continues for the colonised; if the colonised win, this would be violence to the colonial forces. The necessity of violence and the inevitability of one side losing make the colonial situation a tragic one. This invocation of tragedy juxtaposed with the important task of creating possibility highlights the remarkable manner in which Gordon's philosophical criticism draws out the most original, disruptive interpretations of Fanon's work.

The closing chapter deals with the end of Fanon's life and his quest for treatment for his cancer. Gordon also runs a final discussion of the major themes of anti-black racism in Fanon's works, such as bad faith, double consciousness and potentiated double consciousness and the over-determination of the black body.

What Fanon Said is a remarkable addition to the Fanon canon. This is not an introductory work for those who are new to Frantz Fanon, Lewis Gordon and black existentialism; it is rather a more intimate exploration of Gordian knots that cannot be undone and the vexingly honest aspects of both Fanon's and Gordon's work. [NA](#)