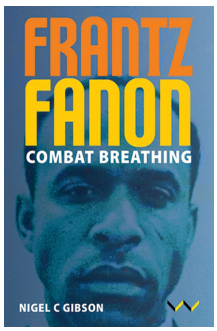
BOOK TITLE:
Frantz Fanon: Combat Breathing



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A life in motion: A review of 'Frantz Fanon: Combat Breathing'

What more can one say about Frantz Fanon? Whether you like him or not, he is surely one of the most important anticolonial thinkers of our time, canonised by some as "the most noble approach to the human that has ever been made until now in this inhuman world" (p. 141). For Francis Jeanson – it was he who urged the title, *Black Skin, White Masks* – Fanon was clearly more than a man: he had become a guide, a yardstick like no other. If, however, we are *all* his interlocutors – and it is hard not to be in a country like South Africa – then perhaps it is more fitting to describe him as "a climate of opinion", as W.H. Auden intoned in the wake of Freud's passing.

It is an odd turn of phrase – 'whether you like him or not' – to use for a man who died over 60 years ago. But it is an apt one – because no one reads Fanon and remains unaffected. When Jeanson – Fanon's editor – asked him to explain a sentence from *Black Skin, White Masks*, his response was as follows: "This sentence is inexplicable. I seek, when I write such things, to touch my reader with affect… that is to say irrationally, almost sensually." (p. 60). Viscerality is a standout theme in Nigel Gibson's latest offering, *Frantz Fanon: Combat Breathing*. Indeed, by referencing the most basic human process in the subtitle of his book, Gibson dials it back to the elemental. He observes how Fanon repeatedly uses the words "suffocated", "smothered" and "imprisoned" in his own writing, capturing the constrictedness of lives hemmed in by racism and colonialism. Space, food, water are denied. Even the act of breathing must be controlled: "Under these conditions, the individual's breathing is an observed, an occupied breathing. It is a combat breathing"[1(p.65)], a struggle to survive, giving rise to underground forms of existence that supply the oxygen "shap[ing] a new humanity"[1(p.181)].

Combat Breathing is an intellectual biography that, from one perspective, frames Fanon's life as *a life in motion*. Fanon was always acutely aware of the body's movement through space – no doubt reinforced by the courses he took with Merleau-Ponty at the University of Lyon – whether reminiscing about Fort-de-France's main park, the savannah, and its after-school crowds of young people "walking up and down, greeting one another, grouping – no, they never form groups, they go on walking"[2(p.14)]; or theorising the imposition of "a racial epidermal schema"[1(p.84)] that corrupted the possibility of "creat[ing] a real dialectic between my body and the world"[1(p.83)]; or explaining the *lack* of movement, "the colonized's idleness… a protection… since labour… leads to nothing"[3(p.530)].

Yet Fanon also displayed a unique understanding of how his own body operated in relation to his mind. It is now a well-known fact that, when composing his works, he would typically ask for someone to type as he spoke his thoughts out loud. He followed this method with his play *Parallel Hands;* he used it for *Black Skin, White Masks*, and he did it again with *A Dying Colonialism*. He would pace up and down the room, embodying the dialectic in motion: "His thinking seemed to spring from the movement of his body, like something physical" (Aubenas, 2017 quoted in Gibson p. 56). Invariably, he relied on no notes and the end-product required minimal revision.

Not much is known about Fanon as an ordinary person: he was not one to talk about himself, while his widow, Josie, seldom spoke of him in public after his death. Even so, Gibson brings together a range of first-hand impressions of the man himself. According to Marie-Jeanne Manuellan – the assistant and friend who typed *A Dying Colonialism* – he loved to teach and "grow brains" (p. 189); for Alice Cherki – his colleague in Algeria and Tunisia – "[h]e was much too fond of love and friendship and too sensitive to human suffering" (p. 190). And still for others who knew him, he was a devoted husband and father, had a wonderful sense of humour, and proved himself several times on the battlefield – although there appears to be some debate about whether he was a team player, especially on the soccer field. His writings, however, are a testament to his radical humanism: for Gibson, "[j]ust as Fanon was not an individualist, his universalism did not mean uncritically following orders" (p. 44–45).

There is a distinctly hagiographic feel about *Combat Breathing*, which places its portrayal of Fanon some distance from, for example, David Macey's[4] comparatively measured assessment in *Frantz Fanon: A Biography*. On the other hand, Gibson's obvious admiration for Fanon in no way diminishes the importance of this book: on the contrary, the growing popularity of pathography and its concern with making greatness accessible – or, to use a different idiom, with dragging the sublime into the dust – has robbed us, arguably, of heroes at a time when they are in short supply. Fanon, though, rightly belongs in the pantheon of great liberation theorists. On more than one occasion, his older brother, Joby, asked him why he was making other people's fights his own. His reply on being asked why he was joining the French army in World War II was characteristically withering: "Whenever liberty is in question, I feel concerned. We're all concerned, whatever our color – white, black, yellow, coconut, dark brown, cocoa. Your teacher is a bastard and I swear to you, today, that whenever liberty is threatened, I'll be there" (J. Fanon, 2014 quoted in Gibson p. 38–39).

Needless to say, *Combat Breathing* goes far beyond the terrain of anecdotes. Gibson is a leading Fanonian scholar, and he has produced a highly engaging account stitching together Fanon's life and key ideas, walking us through the main arguments of his three most famous texts: *Black Skin, White Masks*[2], *A Dying Colonialism*[1] and *The Wretched of the Earth*[5]. Accordingly, this book is for anyone needing an entry point into Fanon's challenging corpus, for (training) psychotherapists grappling with the role of politics in the consulting room, and for activists and intellectuals troubled in these genocidal times by the cravenness of the powers that be. Frantz Omar Fanon: political theorist, psychiatrist, freedom fighter.

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