

## REVIEWS

### **Books and other publications Extended Review**

**A. Alessandrini: *Frantz Fanon and the future of  
cultural politics: finding something different.***

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How might educators understand the nature of their task in today's world? Of course, there is no one answer to the question. It might be argued that, in the "West", where affluence abounds and peace is relatively common, the forces of global competition have functioned to situate research output as central to higher education (Lynch, 2014; Woelert & Yates, 2014). Within compulsory education, high-stakes testing may result in the ultimate sign of success being understood as moving up the ladder of achievement in numeracy and literacy (Klenowski & Wyatt-Smith, 2011; Lewis & Hardy, 2014).

It may just be that this kind of focus for educators in the West (such as myself) is symptomatic of our affluence and high standard of living. Perhaps it is no surprise, then, that alongside measurements of literacy and numeracy, there is an increased interest in the metrics of happiness. The most materially well-off in the world have the means to build "wellbeing centres" and focus on developing a positive psychology in our students, ironically perhaps, in order to help them cope with their knowledge of the problems faced by the world "out there" (Waters, 2011). But are we educators happy with the end goal of our work being about little more than developing citizens who, as a result of their strong foundations in reading, writing and arithmetic, contribute to

the national economy and live “happy” lives despite the ongoing problems in our world?

Anthony C. Alessandrini’s latest book, *Frantz Fanon and the Future of Cultural Politics: Finding Something Different*, while not a book written for educators, provides us an opportunity to reconsider some key aspects of our profession. We are encouraged to reflect on the place of the person – of humanism – and how this influences the way we go about life within the social world of culture and politics. In this sense, his work is deeply important for education which, if nothing else, is always necessarily imbricated in the stuff of humans’ lived experiences. Of course, there is no education free from cultural politics. But what might Frantz Fanon have to say for education today? What use is it for a teacher’s practice to reflect on the work of Fanon?

Alessandrini begins the book with an introductory essay that explores the question of how we might treat Fanon fifty years since his death. He writes, ‘If we are to truly keep Frantz Fanon’s legacy alive, it means treating him as a contemporary, testing and critiquing his work accordingly. He will not spare us, and we in turn must not spare him’ (p.3). Fanon’s influence amongst scholars and activists has really always been a posthumous one. And Alessandrini argues that this has meant that ‘Fanon’s readers have produced an ongoing series of appropriations of Fanon’s work’ (p.5).

To see Fanonian studies as engagement with appropriations removes from the critic’s set of tasks the “discovery” and explication of the “real” Fanon. This does not mean that all appropriations of Fanon are equal, but nor does it mean that ‘every appropriation is a *misappropriation*’ (p.5). At this point, it might appear that there is a risk that to engage with the work of Fanon is simply to ‘wrest him from the past into the present’ (p.6), however, Alessandrini makes clear that an understanding of, and sensitivity toward, the particularity of Fanon’s time and place is essential to a good reading. And so it is that he proposes that the way forward is to take lessons for the contemporary situation in regards to Fanon’s approach to solidarity, but that ‘this can only be approached through an engagement with his singularity’ (p.6). Explaining further, Alessandrini writes:

Fanon's work provides us with an incredibly useful framework for understanding the fundamentally de-humanizing dynamics of racism and colonialism. But the work that is left to us is to pick up and appropriate this framework in order to apply it to specific historical and political instances, including contemporary political struggles (p.8).

Such a strategic use of a scholar, theorist and activist presents a challenge to educators. Is the educator's task to teach Fanon in a way that ensures that students have "the facts straight"? Moreover, is the intention when engaging the historical work of Fanon to prove or disprove his own accuracy in describing the political situation in which he found himself?

Of course, these questions can be applied to the teaching of social sciences and the humanities more generally. These questions do not assume that historical accuracy is unimportant (and "accuracy" must be read differently to "truth" or "fact") but rather assume that the analysis of theory not only help us understand perspectives within a particular historical moment, but also provides us strategic and analytic tools for the problems facing us today. In this respect, Alessandrini uses his analysis of the work of Fanon to read the contemporary event commonly known as the Arab Spring (or African Spring as Alessandrini refers to it) and its aftermath.

In taking this approach, Alessandrini exemplifies his claim that:

...adapting and appropriating Fanon's work for our own present and future must involve two separate but related forms of labor: first, offering close readings of Fanon's work that are equal to the complexity and unsparingly revolutionary nature of his writings; and second, appropriating his work in ways that help to create new contexts for anti-racist and anti-colonial thought and action in the present, and that in many cases force us to move beyond the parameters set out in his work (p.15).

For the educator, this provides a dangerous challenge to see the reading of Fanon, and texts generally, as always political. The real challenge here is not for the educator to try and work out how to bring this to their pedagogy, but rather to re-orient their own relationship to a text so that their pedagogy emerges from this new approach. It is a reminder of the way Edward

Said went about his work; assiduous reading that was always politically engaged in the real-world struggles of the contemporary moment. When the educator themselves practices this, their pedagogy will almost certainly reflect the political character and usefulness of the text.

This call to appropriate Fanon's work for the contemporary moment continues in Chapter One, *Reading Fanon Anti-Piously: On the Need to appropriate*. Core to Alessandrini's argument in this chapter is the claim that, 'if Fanon's legacy is to have any real meaning for us today, it will be only insofar as we are able to appropriate his work in order to apply it —with all of its insights and all of its limitations — to the pressing issues of contemporary cultural politics' (p.23). And this claim becomes, then, the foundation for the book. The rest of the chapter provides an example of how close reading, through the demands of paying careful attention to the details of the text, provides the opportunity to read contemporary questions into the text in ways which allow for appropriation in the best possible way – a good lesson for both students and teachers.

Chapter Two, *The Struggle within Humanism: Fanon and Said*, provides an analysis of the ways in which both Fanon and Edward Said work through their understandings of humanism. Alessandrini argues the case that while both Fanon and Said renounce an essentialist Eurocentric form of humanism, they nevertheless workout their humanism from within.

Moreover, it would seem that both Fanon and Said do not see anything better than a reconstructed and reconstituted humanism, freed of its universalism and imperial violence. In arguing that Fanon and Said represent emergent forms of humanism as opposed to a residual Enlightenment form, Alessandrini skilfully works through the range of criticisms that both – but especially Said – have encountered for advocating humanism. The importance of their commitment to humanism is, as mentioned earlier, particularly relevant for those in education. There is a sense that the reason both Fanon and Said remain within humanism rather than dismissing it is because their engagement with it functions at the level of political involvement, not philosophical musing. Indeed, educators are also involved in a practice that takes them beyond the

abstract and the hypothetical. In an era where humanism, if acknowledged at all, gets little hearing in education, this chapter by Alessandrini gives a picture of what is at stake politically should we abandon all forms of humanism.

In the next chapter, *The Humanism Effect: Fanon, Foucault, and Ethics without Subjects*, Alessandrini takes his interrogation of humanism further, demonstrating how scholars as theoretically diverse as Fanon and Foucault may actually share an important commitment to a non-essentialist humanism. Particularly important is the way in which Alessandrini avoids the easy slippage into assuming that Foucault and Fanon represent binary positions in regards to humanism. Too often, engagement with the “problem” of humanism suffers this fate. By taking what I regard as a Saidian approach of working the complex issues without the need to initially set-up position A and position B, Alessandrini is able to reveal a shared project aimed at the political defence of human rights without the need for a sovereign human subject.

Such a project has powerful implications for educators insofar as it provides a framework for helping students to develop attitudes that prioritise human rights without universalising the human and thereby committing an act of violence on the necessary “other”. But the process by which we might come to this, if we are to follow Alessandrini’s argument, is certainly not easy – especially if we are thinking of the task faced by teachers in the compulsory years of schooling. The challenge is to create educational opportunities where students’ relationship to the world involves ‘giving of oneself to that which has not yet come into existence, and may never come into existence, but towards which one’s actions are nevertheless aimed’ (p.93). In doing so, rather than beginning with an ideology or ontology of humanism, a “humanism effect” emerges from a relation to the world that works toward it being a better one.

This argument for a humanism (effect) focused on, and arising from, a future that has yet to come into existence is developed further through chapters four, *The Futures of Postcolonial Criticism: Fanon and Kincaid* and five, *“Enough of this Scandal”: Reading Gilroy through Fanon, or Who Comes After “Race”?*. Moreover, there is an extension and elaboration on the view that humanism must be completely re-thought

after colonialism. Indeed, Alessandrini writes, ‘as both Fanon and Kincaid insist, the only way to “work through” this history is to imagine the human, not as a category that can be redeemed or broadened, but as one that has been completely obliterated and thus must be completely remade’ (p.132).

And part of this re-making, claims Alessandrini, arises from us being engaged with the ‘trauma’ of colonialism which is alive today. One way we do this is through the reading of texts such that transform us into ‘new readers and new subjects’ (p.134). And this comment is a good example of a point Alessandrini makes about his use of humanism as both a concept and a strategy at the beginning of his essay on reading Gilroy through Fanon. Gilroy and Fanon’s strategic humanisms share with Foucault, Alessandrini writes, an orientation towards a ‘future that has not yet come (thus the need to continuously write and rewrite “the history of the present”).

In the case of Gilroy and Fanon, the orientation is specifically towards a radically nonracial future’ (p.139). Another way of putting this is that their humanism is one that ‘is called from the future’ (p.147), rather than one fixed in its essence; and thus, it is a strategy. At the time of writing this, the pages of the newspapers continue to be filled with stories about Islamic State (IS), the killing of Christians in Egypt and, here in Australia, the plight of refugee children in detention. It would be easy for any of us – but perhaps especially our young people – to develop a sense of hopelessness in the face of these global problems. As educators, we cannot provide solutions, but we can provide strategies and we can encourage solidarity.

The book begun by suggesting that the strategy for appropriating Fanon involves reading him in his singularity and through this, we learn about solidarity. That is, not only might we find solidarity with Fanon, bringing him into the contemporary context, but we are challenged to stand in solidarity with our contemporaries engaged in political struggles. But we must work through just how it is that we are able to understand, read and participate in these political struggles. As Alessandrini points out,

National independence may indeed be the indispensable condition for the human liberation that Fanon is calling us

towards, but he takes pains to point out that “independence” itself is not a magic formula that will set the colonized free. Similarly, “true liberation” is not the automatic or natural outcome of national independence; while the latter is the condition of the former, it will not come about without a further struggle (p.165).

Yet while national independence is no guarantee of liberation, the title of chapter six makes explicit the argument that Alessandrini nevertheless adopts: “*Any Decolonization Is a Success*”: *Fanon and the African Spring*. It is a bold argument in light of the significant ongoing implications of the African Spring. Alessandrini locates his argument in the kinds of claims made by the revolutionaries that suggest a feeling of self-determination and achievement when a regime has toppled. If nothing else, he suggests, momentum has been gained. But, of course, critics may counter that the long-term effects have to be the evaluation. If what comes after the initial revolution is worse than that which existed previously, in what way can any decolonization be seen as a success? But the claim that any decolonization is a success gains its required nuance from the acknowledgement that ‘decolonization, in the narrative provided by Fanon, is not a thing achieved all in one blow’ (p.171). What opens up through this chapter is an example of the kind of critical reading that students need to develop in a complex global age.

Teachers need to help students to ask questions such as: how important is the success of the will of the people, irrespective of the initial outcome? What kind of involvement should the “democratic West” have in conflict such as the African Spring? What kind of criticism is necessary and helpful? What conditions see Western critique function as an act of solidarity? It is the questions that don’t assume easy answers, cause-and-effect logic or binary oppositions that create the environment for the kind of critical thinking that is necessary in today’s world. But importantly, Alessandrini also offers a significant challenge to educators to consider what it might mean to eschew the intellectual pretence to detached objectivity and to instead “get political” by standing in solidarity with those struggling for freedom and justice.

In the final chapter, *Conclusion: Singularity and Solidarity: Fanonian Futures*, Alessandrini writes of his attempt throughout the book to provide ‘both a scrupulous

attention to the specificity of particular political and historical contexts, and a scrupulous remembrance that engaging in politics necessarily involves struggling towards the sorts of difficult generalizations that make collective social change possible' (p.190). To understand the kind of singularity which Alessandrini believes is important to our being able to appropriate Fanon in a move of solidarity is significant. While singularity may initially evoke images of something static, fixed and detached, Alessandrini, following Hardt and Negri, suggests instead that 'movement, metamorphosis and multiplicity' are at the heart of singularity politics (p.191). Why this is important is because it guards against the potential reification of Fanon's work and 'is the antithesis of the Manichean [logic within the] world of colonialism' (p.193).

We can see how this view of singularity fits with the argument that Fanon, Said (and Foucault) speak of an emergent humanism. The logic of singularity, as opposed to stasis, ensures that something like humanism or the nation is something that is moved towards and achieved by the collective will of the people and 'cannot be reduced to any other particular form of identity or essence' (p.195). So rather than humanism being of a fixed essence or ontological structure that is either true or false, it is something that exists only insofar as it emerges. Furthermore, the emergence of humanism from the collective will can be understood as a process embedded in solidarity. Illustrating this, Alessandrini ends the book by discussing the situation in Palestine where internationals (part of the International Solidarity Movement) have tried to intervene in the conflict on the West Bank and in Gaza. He notes that the events that have played out (often tragically) signal something greater than a movement of national independence; something more Fanonian. Alessandrini's contention is that the ISM has come to represent a solidarity movement whose concern with national sovereignty has been replaced by a broader concern for national consciousness. What this amounts to, for Alessandrini, is 'a renewed sense of solidarity, in the sense of quite literally putting oneself at the service of the other, in the name of the betterment of humankind' (p.223).

The reality is that this book is not an obvious choice for educators – indeed, it is not aimed at them. But the focus on contemporary conflicts and issues of global significance,

through an appropriation of Fanon that puts his (and others') humanism at the centre is of such great importance for educators looking to be and do something more than the policymakers have in mind. The book provides a very different (postcolonial) conceptualisation of humanism than that which has historically had a stronghold on Western educational thinking. In an era when old constructions of humanism have largely been abandoned, finding new ways to think and act – especially within education – that are oriented toward the betterment of humankind is not just relevant, but urgent. For those educators unfamiliar with the heritage of postcolonial theory and Fanon, this will not be an easy read. But doing the hard work to get through it should prove to be generative, prompting ideas for how educational thinking and practice might be reshaped in light of the cultural and geo-politics of the contemporary moment.

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