

**Subject to Colonialism: African Self-Fashioning and the Colonial Library,** by Gaurav Desai. Durham: Duke UP, 2000.

This book locates itself at the intersection of several disciplines, utilizing different modes of inquiry, most of which Gaurav Desai commands with fluency. Postcolonial discourse theory and one of its antecedents, poststructuralism, are brought into play, especially as they bear on Africa. Desai is also concerned to explore some of the nexes of recent scholarship on history and anthropology. In examining some of the ways in which Africa came to occupy its place in the European historical imagination, Desai turns to the disciplines that have most thickly described the continent: anthropology, ethnophilosophy, the histories of education and science, as well as history itself. The most important contribution *Subject to Colonialism* makes is to African cultural studies, with particular attention to the figure of the intellectual, the professional, or the "cultural worker" at the historical moment before independence. A secondary contribution consists in its being one of the offerings from the side of literature to the dialogue between literary theory and anthropology on the topics of the relation between colonialism and epistemology.

The book consists of an introduction and three chapters. The first chapter, constellated around European representations of Africans' intellectual abilities, devotes attention to apical figures such as Lévy-Bruhl and Evans-Pritchard and Boas, to psychoanalysis and education, and to the reach of phrenology into twentieth-century African studies. The second chapter consists of a discipline-specific examination of the vexed history of African anthropology. The final chapter engages *Akiga's Story: The Tiv Tribe as Seen by One of Its Members*, an indigenous-language text written around 1935 by Akiga Sai, a Tiv historian from Nigeria. The success of this substantial chapter lies partly in its having made more visible the work of a relatively obscure African intellectual. In part it is due to the organizational focus that attention to a single figure imposes and, still more, to Desai's own devotion to the process of meaning-making. This devotion is well situated to reading the work of a convert who understands himself to be poised on the threshold between a precolonial and a colonized world.

Desai devotes several pages of his introduction to explaining why he aligns himself with "post-foundationalists" rather than "anti-foundationalists." The former are those who recognize the limitations of Enlightenment modes of knowing, including the fact that while such epistemologies developed out of conditions of great inequality, they nevertheless have value for us today "not as an already-existing foundation that all reasonable men and women must naturally agree upon, but [to use Bruce Robbins's language] as a risky, uncertain balancing of the different values, vocabularies, and priorities that reasonably emerge from different circumstances" (567). Desai thus advocates not throwing out the baby with the bathwater but, rather, testing the water constantly for its cleanliness and helpfulness to the baby.

In chapter two, much attention is devoted to Malinowski, some to his student, Kenyatta. Desai seeks to rescue Malinowski from those (leftists) of the "relevance" school who would criticize Malinowski for the racist effects

of his functionalism, rather than understand him as committed not to an ideology nor even colonial practice, but to the profession itself. Making visible the fact that "relevance" is a political question with implications beyond producing professional enemies appears to be the sum total of Desai's own intellectual politics. Here, as well as in his discussion of earlier debates amongst anthropologists, Desai outlines controversies but shies away from taking a political position on them, a curious decision by someone exploring an already fraught field of study and whose book makes epistemological and political freight a subject of inquiry. While Desai readily acknowledges that there are conservative, liberal, and leftist implications to these debates, his own reading practice is to refrain from expressing a political opinion and, instead, to opt for scholarly disinterestedness. As a result there is an aporia of sorts between the abstract and the close reading.

Desai is much more at ease with and effective in articulating excellent theoretical principles than he is in bringing to bear those principles in a clear and direct way on texts of anthropology or history. One only wishes that he had attempted a more focused inquiry that might have made his argument more crisp since the book has a remarkably ambitious reach of geographical and disciplinary scope that is wholly admirable.

—Susan Z. Andrade  
University of Pittsburgh

## WORK CITED

Robbins, Bruce. "Race, Gender, Class, Postcolonialism: Toward a New Humanistic Paradigm?" *A Companion to Postcolonial Studies*. Ed. Henry Schwartz and Sangeeta Ray. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000.

**Frantz Fanon: Portrait**, by Alice Cherki. Paris: Seuil, 2000. ISBN 2-02-036293-7. 19,82.

History has not taken the course Frantz Fanon tried to impel it upon, but the trajectory he cut across mid-twentieth century thought and politics continues to fascinate a wide and heterogeneous readership. There are literally thousands of references to Fanon on the internet, tellingly maybe ten times more in English than French. Little mystery behind this language shift; not only has English become more prevalent globally than, say, in the 1950s, but no small part of Fanon's attraction to recent generations is his penetrating analysis of racism, a topic of inexhaustible consequence in the enormous American "market." To this day, there are few explorations of the deleterious effects of racism on its victims as well as perpetrators equal to his *Peau noire, masques blancs* (1952); even in this age of imperious global capitalization there is still no polemic in defense of the "wretched of the earth" as stirring, at least to this reader, as *Les damnés de la terre* (1961). Fanon, Alice



Cherki demonstrates, was many men wrapped into one, not the least of which a poet whose mastery of language and gift for image might well have produced a literary oeuvre of dimensions equal to, even surpassing, other Caribbean writers of his time, had he lived beyond his mere 36 years.

*Frantz Fanon: Portrait* is a compelling read because of Cherki's own literary skills and her personal familiarity with Fanon the psychiatrist. Her "distanced portrait" is thus vastly more complex than the quasi-mythic icon of decolonization and the Algerian revolution to which he has sometimes been reduced. Édouard Glissant remarked that Fanon was alone among Antillean intellectuals to have crossed from thought into action. To some extent, Cherki's *témoignage* is an extended investigation of this and other facets of his exceptionality. Fanon himself believed that although human experience is situated in and must be defined in terms of given social milieux (Cherki's background chapter on French Algeria circa 1953 deserves in this regard special note), this experience is irreducibly subjective and concretely particular.

Many critics have placed Fanon within the philosophical traditions he studied concurrently with his medical training in Lyon starting in 1946, in particular the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty and the related existentialism of Sartre. Cherki reports that his intellectual tastes in that period were omnivorous, including Lévi-Strauss, Mauss, Heidegger, Hegel, Lenin, and Marx, though Fanon apparently never bothered to read *Capital* and kept his distance from the French Communist Party. Having worked alongside him at Blida in French Algeria and afterwards in Tunisian psychiatric hospitals after both had been driven from Algeria, Cherki brings an invaluable dimension to the story of Fanon, since she knew him initially as a colleague whose struggles with official currents of French psychotherapy in the 1950s ran parallel to her own, though her roots were in the Jewish community of Algeria. Accordingly, she shows us Fanon the clinician, a young doctor who was professionally committed to psychiatric healing before committing himself to revolutionary politics, a "partisan of institutional psychotherapy in the lineage of Tosquelles, Jean Oury and Félix Guattari, among others." The manuscript of *Peau noire, masques blancs* was initially submitted as a dissertation in psychiatry, though it had to be replaced by a second text Fanon unwillingly yet competently cut to fit the reigning paradigm, a study of Friedrich's ataxia, a genetic condition affecting the cerebellum and upper spinal cord. In one among the many intriguing footnotes Cherki has gathered from those who knew him in those years, Fanon is depicted as rarely having stooped to taking the voluminous clinical notes expected of an apprentice psychiatrist, and thus accused of arrogance. Cherki's explanation is telling: "[S]imply enough, Fanon did not accept that clinical personnel and staff should act as if they were guards (*gardiens*). He was unforgiving of staff who refused to remind themselves that mental patients were also living and thinking human subjects" (32). Fanon's swing from the clinical to the political sphere was thus far from abrupt and unprepared. To the end, Fanon remained "much more a psychoanalyst than usually thought, much more than he himself admitted" (278).

Like the man, this book leads off in a multitude of directions impossible to resume in a review—much like therapists would say of a session. Cherki's goal is to retrieve Fanon from Fanonism, a living subject from the essentialist abstractions into which he has been cast. One feels upon concluding her book that Fanon had in some prescient manner the same objective, one succinctly expressed in the famous lines from the end of *Peau noire, masques blancs* (lines which, Cherki observes, scan in literary French): "Mon ultime prière: oh mon corps, fais de moi toujours un homme qui interroge" 'My final prayer: Oh my body, make me a man who questions for ever.'

—George Lang

University of Alberta, Edmonton

**Nation Building, Propaganda and Literature in Francophone Africa**, by Dominic Thomas. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2002. xxii + 270. Bibliography, Index.

Despite the extended coverage suggested by its title, this is in fact a highly focused work dealing primarily with the postindependence writing in the Congo Republic, in particular the work of Sony Labou Tansi, Henri Lopes, and Emmanuel Dongala, a focus that reflects an acknowledgement on the author's part of "the territorial imperative" as a determinant of what he calls the "similar sociological circumstances" that account for the specific thematic and formal orientations of their work. The restricted scope of the study thus represents an advantage insofar as it enables Dominic Thomas to propose in-depth readings of the works of these writers, against the background of the tumultuous history of the Congo Republic since independence. At the same time, Thomas suggests that this local history, in all its intensity, is in fact representative of the broader evolution of African political and social life in the past four decades or so.

The point of departure of Thomas's examination of Congolese literature is the premise of "nation building," on which the book's thesis revolves. This term is to be understood here in a wide sense, to mean not merely the effort to employ literature as a means of generating a national consciousness, but also, and more significantly, as a mode of critical engagement with the vicissitudes of the nation's history, as the principal actors involved in its fortunes wrestle with the problems that attend its formation and development. It is in this context that literature assumes a strategic value, as a mode of discourse charged with varieties of social meaning. The writings of Eta-Onka, discussed at some length by Thomas, afford an illustration of the propaganda uses of literature promoted by official policy. Given its limitations in both aesthetic and political terms, one wonders what place this kind of writing really occupied in the development of Congolese literature, beyond its minimal interest as a feeble counterpoise to the more serious work of the three writers with which this study is mainly concerned.

Sony Labou Tansi, the first of these writers considered by Thomas, has been the object of so much critical attention that it seems hardly pos-