

Frantz Fanon

*Toward a Revolutionary  
Humanism*

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## Introduction

# Unthinking Fanon

### *Worlds, Legacies, Politics*

Reality, for once, requires a total understanding.  
On the objective level as on the subjective level,  
a solution has to be supplied.

—*Black Skin, White Masks*<sup>1</sup>

Frantz Fanon was born in 1925 on Martinique in the French Antilles, an archipelago of islands scattered across the southeastern edge of the Caribbean between Haiti and South America. He died in 1961 from leukemia in a hospital in Bethesda, Maryland, just outside Washington, D.C. Trained as a psychiatrist, Fanon achieved fame as a political theorist of anticolonial liberation struggle. During his brief thirty-six-year life, he published two seminal books: *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), the latter appearing in print just days before his death. These two books addressed the psychological effects of racism and the politics of the Algerian Revolution (1954–62), respectively. He also wrote a less-appreciated third book titled *Year Five of the*

*Algerian Revolution* (1959, reprinted and translated as *A Dying Colonialism* in 1967), in addition to numerous medical journal articles and political essays both under his name and anonymously, a selection of which appeared in the posthumous collection *Toward the African Revolution* (1964). Despite the brevity of his life and written work, Fanon's observations and analysis of colonialism and decolonization in these books have remained vital, due to their firsthand immediacy as well as the incisiveness of his ideas.

Indeed, Fanon's prescient insights have influenced a range of academic fields, such that the term *Fanonism* has been invented as shorthand to capture his interrelated political, philosophical, and psychological arguments. Through penetrating views and a frequently bracing prose style, the small library of Fanon's work has become essential reading in postcolonial studies, African and African American studies, critical race theory, and the history of insurgent thought, to name just a few subjects. The secondary literature on his work continues to grow apace. Above all, Fanon remains a political martyr, who died before he could witness the birth of an independent Algeria, his stature near mythic in scale as a result. To invoke Fanon is to bring forth a radical worldview dissatisfied with the political present, reproachful of the conformities of the past, and consequently in perpetual struggle for a better future.

But who is Frantz Fanon? His diverse career, personal geography, and complex ideas defy any simplistic rendition

of his life. Indeed, the wide-ranging influence of his work over the past fifty years has often prompted a rudimentary sense of his biography, with his books and essays being a substitute for the man himself. Like other writers and intellectuals, Fanon is regularly appreciated in textual terms, rather than through the facets and challenges of his own personal experience. Explaining the political orientation of the Black Panther Party, Huey P. Newton (1942–1989), one of its leaders, once declared, “We read the work of Frantz Fanon, particularly *The Wretched of the Earth*, the four volumes of Chairman Mao Tse-tung, and Che Guevara’s *Guerrilla Warfare*.”<sup>2</sup> Such is the approach that emerged shortly after Fanon’s death and has since extended to the present day, with his insights still providing vital methods of political interpretation.

However, this critical application has had, at times, a seemingly incongruous effect. Edward Said (1935–2003), the esteemed Palestinian scholar, once insisted, for example, that Fanon be read alongside Jane Austen as a means of rethinking the Western canon.<sup>3</sup> Others have taken this textual approach even further, to the point of scripture, seeing Fanon as a near spiritual figure akin to the Indian nationalist leader Mohandas Gandhi (1869–1948).<sup>4</sup> Though this textual angle is understandable, given the range of Fanon’s ideas and the highly personal nature of his work, it has also frequently sanctified his writing, resulting in overwrought assessments and muted debate, with sharp criticism of Fanon typically played in a minor key—a situation that lends itself to hagiography.

Grasping his life and its human limitations in detail provides a more acute sense of his ambition, the experiences that informed it, and why his books have offered continued resonance for different audiences. Henry Louis Gates Jr., a leading intellectual of African American studies, once noted the relative disregard for Fanon's personal history in contemporary scholarship, which occasioned the anachronistic use of Fanon's work that was too alienated from the specific colonial contexts and revolutionary spirit that influenced his thinking.<sup>5</sup> The tendency toward mythmaking surrounding Fanon has often rendered him an uncomplicated universal symbol—an emblematic, and thus ahistorical, voice against colonialism in its varied forms across time and place, without attention to the reception and meaning of his work during his lifetime.<sup>6</sup> When we remove him from history, we risk making him a cliché.

This book offers a historical portrait of Fanon. It is written in the belief that it is essential to understand his life experiences in order to grasp the origins of his thought and its evolution over time. Indeed, the aura of destiny presents a constant challenge. Fanon is too often treated as a fully formed thinker, without granting him a period of apprenticeship that is indispensable to any political or intellectual life. As Alice Cherki, a former colleague of his, has forcefully argued, an “unrestrained idealization” of Fanon has created a “heroic image” that “cuts him off from history.”<sup>7</sup> But the profile offered here is not a mere recounting of facts. His writing and biography are tightly

interwoven. Understanding his life and the life of his philosophy at once not only serves to address the complex sources of his ceaselessly energetic thinking—what political theorist Achille Mbembe has called his “metamorphic thought”—but also underscores dramatic shifts in perspective over the course of his youth and adulthood, the improbability of his status as a revolutionary, and the intellectual and professional restlessness that carried him from Martinique, to France, and, finally, to Africa.<sup>8</sup> Intellectual figures are often perceived as solitary, inhabiting a realm of thought and therefore existing primarily on the page. While textual engagement is integral to this book, understanding Fanon as a historical figure is central.

In this regard, we must unthink Fanon. We must situate him in time, beyond the shifting vicissitudes of social and political theory. Fanon was profoundly shaped by the people he encountered and the social contexts and historical period in which he lived. He assumed a number of roles: being a son, a sibling among eight children, a husband, and a father, in addition to his better-known vocations as a psychiatrist, writer, and revolutionary activist. His philosophy was drawn from interacting with unnamed Algerian patients in his capacity as a medical doctor, as well as from relationships with such esteemed intellectual figures as Aimé Césaire (1913–2008) and Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980). His history must also be anchored within a deeper history of slavery, colonialism, and racism in the Americas that touched his life in different ways. Fanon is part of the history of the Black

Atlantic—a world of transatlantic connections between Africa, Europe, and the Americas—as well as the intellectual milieu of mid-twentieth-century European continental philosophy. Above all, Fanon witnessed the emergence of a new world order through European decolonization and political independence in Africa and Asia, achieved through strident public criticism and violent armed struggle. Fanon occupied several political, professional, and intellectual worlds that underwent profound shifts over the course of his brief lifetime—worlds that he himself helped define.

The colonial and metropolitan settings Fanon traversed have also generated an intricate set of political and intellectual legacies that must be untangled—from the Caribbean, to Africa and the Middle East, to university settings in Europe and North America. His life presents a distinct historical problem, resisting conformity to many existing narratives of black intellectual history and the origins of revolutionary thought. David Macey, a biographer of Fanon, has written that despite the continued popularity of Fanon's books and his widespread name recognition, he remains something of an enigma, a quality that can be attributed to his contingent cosmopolitanism: from his birth and childhood in Martinique, to his military service and early career in France, to his eventual activism in Algeria and North Africa. These contrasting contexts produced a sequence of identities that were geopolitical—Martinican, French, and Algerian—as well as occupational—soldier, student, psychiatrist, writer, and



diplomat. They added layers of experience that both reinforced and unraveled his sociopolitical status as a black citizen of the French Empire, as he critically examined in first book, *Black Skin, White Masks*. This wide-ranging geography has also contributed to an uneven memory of Fanon that has been romanticized, contested, and, in some locales, nearly forgotten.

In France the legacy of Fanon has largely been absent or ignored until recently, in step with a general French ambivalence toward Algeria. Representing a profound loss to France, the French government refused to call the Algerian War—known as the Algerian Revolution in Algeria—a war at all, since defining it as such would imply that Algeria was a separate territory apart from France, an idea antithetical to many French. Because of the French government's preference for classifying it as a police action until 1999, it became popularly known, particularly among critics, as the “war without a name.”<sup>9</sup> In contrast, Fanon's intellectual contributions have been eulogized extensively within the field of postcolonial studies, as well as African American and African diasporic studies in North America. Engagement with his work by such scholars as Homi K. Bhabha, Ato Sekyi-Otu, Lewis Gordon, Nigel Gibson, and others has resulted in the canonization of *Black Skin, White Masks* and *The Wretched of the Earth* as essential works for understanding the psychological impact of colonial racism and the politics of decolonization during the twentieth century. Such assessments have created a stronger Anglophone, rather than

Francophone, tradition in Fanon studies. Indeed, there is an incongruity that Fanon's reputation has reached its apex in the American academy, given his criticism toward the United States and his premature death there—the only occasion he visited the country. A more tragic irony is that his posthumous status in Martinique is a contested one and that his memory in Algeria has greatly diminished. Algeria has moved well beyond its revolutionary period, its politics more recently defined by civil conflict since the early 1990s that has pitted the government against Islamic insurgents, leaving as many as 200,000 dead. The places that meant the most to Fanon have treated the contributions of his life either with gradual forgetfulness or disregard.

Fanon's relative obscurity in Martinique until recently has been attributed to his permanent departure from there and his eventual burial in Algeria. Regarding his compatriot's unsettled memory, the critic Édouard Glissant (1928–2011) once wrote, "It so happens that years go by without his name (not to mention his work) being mentioned by the media, whether political or cultural, revolutionary or leftist, of Martinique. An avenue in Fort-de-France is named after him. That is about it."<sup>10</sup> Joby Fanon has recalled that his younger brother Frantz was seen as a traitor for his radical politics against France, given that Martinique has remained a part of France to the present day.<sup>11</sup> But Martinique was ultimately a place of childhood. Fanon achieved his fame elsewhere. Martinican residents such as Césaire,

Glissant, and Patrick Chamoiseau (1953–present) have contributed more to the island’s intellectual and political life. Albert Memmi (1920–present)—the Tunisian writer whose influential work *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (1957) is often compared with Fanon’s—has suggested that Fanon developed an ambivalence toward his home, as witnessed in arguments made in *Black Skin, White Masks*.<sup>12</sup> At a 1978 United Nations (UN) conference held in tribute to Fanon’s legacy, the intellectual C. L. R. James (1901–1989) discussed how Fanon left the Caribbean in the same way that activist George Padmore (1903–1959) and James himself had once left, believing more fervently in Africa’s revolution than any political change in the Caribbean. However, James believed that Fanon would have returned.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, this possibility is indicated in a late essay attributed to Fanon. Titled “Blood Flows in the Antilles under French Domination” (1960), this piece compares Martinique’s situation to Algeria’s, with Fanon expressing the sentiment of being “violently shaken” by recent events in the place of his birth.<sup>14</sup>

The decline of Fanon’s memory in Algeria poses equally difficult questions. One answer for this absence was his lack of a top leadership position within the anti-colonial National Liberation Front (Front de Libération Nationale or FLN) and his consequent marginalization within the pantheon of Algerian nationalists. The nature of the Algerian struggle itself stressed the role of the popular masses—one slogan being “Only one hero: the People”—over the importance of individual leaders.

Authority within the FLN was also no guarantee, as the party was wracked by internal divisions during and after the war—the untimely removal of Ahmed Ben Bella (1916–2012), Algeria’s first president, in 1965 being a case in point. More significant, however, was the perception of Fanon as a foreigner in Algeria, despite his political allegiance to the FLN and his burial in the eastern part of the country. It is a view that has never diminished. Although his name marks the hospital where he once worked, as well as a school and a street in Algiers, Fanon has remained an outsider, his personal history in Algeria being fixed to a specific period. At the same 1978 UN meeting, Mohamed Bedjaoui, the Algerian ambassador to France, tacitly captured this ambiguity, saying Fanon was “still alive in our hearts” seventeen years after his death, though Bedjaoui would not “give way to the very strong temptation to claim him for Algeria, because that most certainly would narrow the scope of a man whose only frontiers were the boundaries of freedom, of justice and of dignity.”<sup>15</sup> Fanon himself began to think beyond Algeria toward the end of his life, with *The Wretched of the Earth* outlining a broader political geography that encompassed the rest of Africa and the rising Third World. But the political language he articulated has also had, arguably, less utility and declining meaning over the past fifty years for Algerians, given its strident critique of French colonialism. The paradigms of thought that his work confronted—including Négritude and ethno-psychiatry, in addition to French racism and colonialism—appear to

be a world apart for generations of Algerians born since the revolution.

This book is written against this perception of irrelevance. Following the lead of other scholars, it argues for Fanon's continued significance based on his enduring insights. He was not only a critic of colonialism but an early critic of postcolonialism, with hard-won assessments that still apply to present-day Algeria and elsewhere. This book further makes this case for Fanon's importance through the example of his life. In particular, this book stresses the form of political engagement Fanon cultivated—what I call radical empathy. Radical empathy is not an expression that he used. I introduce it in this book to reinterpret his concerns and to capture the individual, rather than national or anticolonial, politics he defined and exemplified. Indeed, Fanon ultimately declared himself Algerian, exemplifying a revolutionary transformation in his own subjectivity. But radical empathy provided a first step. As a concept and practice, it seeks to move Fanon away from textual abstraction by outlining a personal and more affective dimension to his political commitments. Grounded in his medical work and his strong identification with the Algerian struggle, it outlines a political ethic beyond the antiracism and anticolonial violence he famously promoted, though this practice of moral engagement emerged from these better-known positions. Fanon's politics were not purely contrarian. They equally sought new forms of connection and solidarity.

This approach thus not only seeks to provide an alternative understanding of his life. It intends to make him more accessible—less a myth, and more human. Since his death in 1961, Fanon's thought has influenced activists across the world, from civil rights struggles in the United States to the Black Consciousness Movement in South Africa. More recently, the Arab Spring that swept North Africa and the Middle East in 2011 recalled earlier histories of regional political dissent, of which Fanon was a vital part. Controversy over Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank has also revived Fanonian views toward settler colonialism. Fanon presents a genealogy of twentieth-century activism different from figures like Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr. (1929–1968), and Desmond Tutu (1931–present), each of whom espoused nonviolence as a means for achieving political change. Similar to figures like Mao Tse-tung (1893–1976), Ernesto “Che” Guevara (1928–1967), and Amílcar Cabral (1924–1973), Fanon instead advocated certain forms of violence as a political necessity, reflecting an extended period of armed struggle during the 1950s and 1960s that included the First Indochina War (1946–54) against French rule in Southeast Asia, the Mau Mau Uprising (1952–60) in British colonial Kenya, the Cuban Revolution (1953–59) led by Fidel Castro (1926–present) and Guevara, and the turn of South Africa's antiapartheid struggle to armed resistance, most notably through the Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), a military organization founded in 1961 by the African National Congress and the South African Communist Party.

Violence remains the most controversial issue regarding Fanon—an intrinsic, yet polarizing, dimension of his work that has strengthened his critics and been an inconvenient topic for his admirers. It arguably explains the greater popularity of *Black Skin, White Masks* over *The Wretched of the Earth*—the latter outlining his argument for violent struggle. It is an issue that still deserves debate. But to mark this embrace of violence as the singular feature of Fanon’s politics is too reductive. Violence remained a strategic choice. It was historically situated for Fanon—a response to the pure violence of colonialism. Armed struggle did not apply universally across time and place. Indeed, this prevalent critical perspective on Fanon, popularized by other intellectuals such as Hannah Arendt (1906–1975), often elides his experience as a psychiatrist who treated victims of torture and violence during the Algerian War.<sup>16</sup> Fanon did not categorically promote violence for this reason. Unlike Mao, Guevara, and Cabral, he did not pick up a gun and find a permanent place on the battlefield of revolution. Though he argued for its tactical necessity and cathartic potential, Fanon recognized its traumatic impact from firsthand experience.

His greater political legacy—still relevant today—is the form of political empathy he nurtured in Algeria and Tunisia, while active with the FLN. Fanon was neither Algerian, nor an Arab, nor a Muslim by birth. Unlike many anticolonial leaders and activists, he did not participate in a struggle located in his country of origin. His arrival in Algeria was based entirely on professional contingencies.

Fanon's identification with the Algerian struggle, however, ultimately rested with his own experience with French colonialism, the self-knowledge he gained with *Black Skin, White Masks*, and his consequent ability to empathize with the Algerian people and their situation as depicted in *A Dying Colonialism* and *The Wretched of the Earth*—despite his own experiences of discrimination by Algerians, despite class and cultural distinctions between himself and those he sought to represent, despite lack of fluency in Arabic, despite being considered a foreigner.

Josie Fanon, his wife, once said that people “have often wondered why he should have taken part in the liberation of a country which was not his originally.” Her reply was that only “narrow minds and hearts” for whom race or religion “constitutes an unbridgeable gulf” fail to understand—there was no contradiction or dilemma for Fanon, only necessity.<sup>17</sup> Fanon achieved this kind of transcendence of identity only through the intense self-reflection that characterized his intellectual life, combined with the personal mobility and expansive geography that his life eventually encompassed, granting him a perspective he would not have attained otherwise. Yet radical empathy is not synonymous with cosmopolitanism. It is a political outcome of cosmopolitanism. It is a civic effect of his transcolonial experiences in Martinique and Algeria, as well as his postcolonial experiences in Tunisia, Morocco, Ghana, and Mali. Radical empathy is one struggled-for result of the “total understanding” Fanon sought and first identified in *Black Skin, White Masks*, as cited in the



opening epigraph. It is a mechanism for the new humanism he aspired to at the end of *The Wretched of the Earth*. His internationalism and political evolution were firmly interwoven.

This book therefore does not propose an uncritical nostalgia for Fanon, renouncing the present and the future to reclaim a mystical past, to paraphrase his own words.<sup>18</sup> Instead, this short book seeks to humanize Fanon—to reclaim his life and make his work immediate, as he himself sought. A historical approach is vital in this regard. Rather than Fanon being an entry point for understanding the Algerian Revolution, this book proposes the converse: the prefatory need to understand the complexities of Algeria in order to comprehend Fanon. Rather than resorting to Fanon's work first to explain colonialism, decolonization, and a once-emergent Third Worldism, the history set forth here positions these phenomena as indispensable for situating Fanon's ambitions. Approaching Fanon in this manner is not meant to diminish him as simply a product of his time. He defined his time. This historical technique is intended to underscore his uncanny ability to interpret the politics of the period, what was at stake, and what needed to be done.

In like fashion, this book aims to reestablish the relevance of his life and philosophy in the political present—after the wave of global decolonization that occurred during the twentieth century, after the end of apartheid in South Africa, and after the Arab Spring. At a certain level, this argument for his continued importance

is at odds with Fanon's own perspective on his life and work—a tension that emerges from time to time in his writing between fixing his ideas to a specific political horizon and casting his critical glance toward the future. “In no way is it up to me to prepare for the world coming after me,” he writes at one point in *Black Skin, White Masks*. “I am resolutely a man of my time.”<sup>19</sup> In calling for a continuation of Fanon's legacy, this book reflects this need for balance—for addressing and adhering to historical specificity, while also emulating Fanon's own intellectual and political aspirations that were in constant search for solutions, to realize a better world.