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Chambers, Claire Gail orcid.org/0000-0001-8996-4129 (2018) *A Fanonian Summer*.
Texture: A Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences. 1. pp. 1-6. ISSN 2456-9917

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A Fanonian Summer

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Abstract

This short essay is a reflection by Claire Chambers about what the Martinican psychiatrist and revolutionary Frantz Fanon has meant to her during a career as a postcolonial scholar, and in one ‘Fanonian summer’ in particular—in the volatile and manichaeian year of 2016. The article takes as its point of departure revelations about Fanon’s life yielded by two texts: David Macey’s *Frantz Fanon: A Biography* and Jean Khalifa and Robert Young’s *Écrits sur l’aliénation et la liberté*. It then moves into discussion of the philosopher’s radical legacy for anti-racism and postcolonial studies through readings of three of his works, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), and *A Dying Colonialism* (1959). Chambers considers Fanon’s psychiatric work and activism for the National Liberation Front or FLN during the Algerian War of Independence (1954–1962), as well as his gender politics. The essay concludes by suggesting that never has Fanon’s work been more relevant to postcolonial thought than in our divided, violent late 2010s.

Keywords: Frantz Fanon, postcolonial studies, race and racism, Algerian War of Independence, psychiatry

The summer of 2016 was an appropriate season and indeed year in which to reread Fanon and to devour, for the first time, David Macey’s *Frantz Fanon: A Biography* (2000) and Jean Khalifa and Robert Young’s new edition of Fanon’s essays, *Écrits sur l’aliénation et la liberté* (Writings on Alienation and Freedom). Globally, society appeared to be descending into what Fanon, in 1952, called ‘manicheism delirium’ (*Black Skin*: 183). Repeated terrorist attacks took place in France during 2015 and 2016. The French government responded by declaring a draconian and paranoid state of emergency, which encompassed the French Caribbean territories including Fanon’s homeland of Martinique.

Fanon was born in Martinique—one of France’s oldest colonies—in 1925. He was from a middle-class family living on an island struggling to deal with the residues of slavery. At this time, most of these colonies, like Quebec and parts of India such as Pondicherry, had become independent. Those that remained, such as the five ‘*départements*’ of Mayotte,

Guadeloupe, French Guiana, Réunion, and Martinique, were deemed fully French, even appearing in insets on maps of France. However, when Martinicans like Fanon travelled to Europe, their French citizenship seemed less secure. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon describes being pointed at by a young Parisian child, who exclaimed, ‘Mama, see the Negro! I’m frightened’ (112).

As a young man, Fanon fought for Free France in the Second World War and was decorated for bravery. During his service, he briefly stopped in Algeria—the nation he was later to make his own. Despite becoming increasingly disillusioned with France and its second-class treatment of non-white soldiers, after the war ended Fanon enrolled to study medicine in Lyon. In this deeply conservative city, he witnessed the poor treatment of Algerian immigrants at the hands of the French. For example, French–Algerians were often interrogated by the police for very little reason, who addressed them as ‘*tu*’, rather than the polite second-person pronoun ‘*vous*’. Despite this troublingly unequal society, it was here that Fanon formed significant relationships with two French women. The first, Michelle, he soon abandoned, leaving her with a daughter. He married the second, Josie, with whom he had a son. It was also in Lyon that he developed his specialism in psychiatry—a branch of medicine that enabled him to pursue his interests in philosophy, politics, and psychoanalysis.

Throughout his career, Fanon’s writing exposed black people’s psychological trauma and the inferiority complex imposed by colonialism. His career is bookended by his two most important works, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961). In contrasting ways, these volumes aver that colonialism not only ravaged countries’ economies and political structures, but also devastated the minds of colonized peoples. In order to challenge imperialism, Fanon argued, formerly colonized countries and immigrants on the receiving end of racism would have to rebuild their own psychologies. These ‘wretched’ peoples needed to become the subject, rather than the object, of their history.

Black Skin, White Masks is characterized by its eclectic but sharply focused reading and quotations, its neologisms and Creole inflections, and its anger. Crucially, it details the collective mental illness imposed by racism. Fanon flays European psychoanalysis’s obsession with the Oedipus complex. He observes that for non-white subjects, trauma does not usually occur in early childhood within the family setting. Instead, it is experienced outside the home and at a later age. At school, colonized children are educated in contempt for their language and culture; likewise, on the street, adults are confronted with the white gaze of misrecognition (see Thompson and Yar).

His book scarcely making a ripple in the French intellectual scene, Fanon accepted a position as a psychiatrist in Algeria. He did not anticipate the War of Independence that was imminent, and nor did he have much knowledge of the country, its language, or that the French colonial regime was harsh in its treatment of Algeria (including its refusal to accord all of the nation's inhabitants French citizenship). In Algeria, he worked at the Bilda-Joinville Hospital, which was a remarkably progressive environment compared to dominant societal beliefs surrounding the mentally ill and their needs. Bilda-Joinville emphasized the need to build a community in the carceral space of the psychiatric hospital. The ill were encouraged to live as outpatients rather than inhabiting the clinic full-time. Occupational therapy was the order of the day, and Fanon wanted to tailor the chosen activities to reflect the tastes of the specific Muslim North African context in which he found himself. Nonetheless, he was still a clinician who believed in the use and effectiveness of drugs and, more controversially, in narcotherapy (induced sleep through the use of sedatives) as well as electro-convulsive shock therapy or ECT. Once war broke out, Dr Fanon treated a curious mix of French–Algerian women with mild neuroses and male Arab fighters suffering from post-traumatic mental collapse. He became increasingly involved with the National Liberation Front or FLN. His essays for their magazine, *El Moudjahid*, were posthumously compiled in *Toward the African Revolution*, and he acted as the party's ambassador in other French colonies, such as Mali. Although he was never admitted to the FLN's innermost circle, while he was recovering from a car accident at an Italian hospital he was nearly assassinated by French agents for his involvement in the Front.

In 1959, Fanon published *A Dying Colonialism*, his angrily utopian book about the Algerian War. He took a non-essentialist stance on national identity, believing that anyone could become Algerian if they embedded themselves in the country's culture and supported its struggle. In his complete immersion in Algerian culture, Fanon almost proved his own point about the fluidity of national identity, but was never fully accepted as a citizen by Algerians themselves. In *A Dying Colonialism* he appealed to Algerian Jews to trouble the rigid racial and religious divide between *pied-noirs* (white settlers) and Arabs or Berbers. As a doctor, he excoriated the colonial medicine that was practised in 1950s Algeria, whereby French–Algerian doctors also acted as torturers. He called for the people to wrest medicine from the hands of the oppressors. The book also contains his urgent, if rather masculinist, essay 'Algeria Unveiled' which tackles the issue of modest Muslim dress and resistance. Deborah Wyrick notes the importance of viewing Fanon as a man of his time, but also

comments that his ideas about women ‘can range from the dismissive to the peculiar’ (24). In *Black Skin, White Masks* Fanon attacked Mayotte Capécia’s novel *Je suis martiniquaise* (I Am a Martinican Woman), in which the protagonist attempts to make her fortune by marrying a white man. However, he didn’t submit her male counterparts to similar treatment when examining their fiction. Almost a decade later, in the essay ‘Algeria Unveiled’, he depicted the first female Algerian freedom fighters disguising themselves in Western dress; French occupiers assuming that the wearing of Parisian fashions denoted a lack of sympathy with the FLN. As the colonizers became conscious of this ruse, the women changed tactics. Veils created a cloak of invisibility under which bombs and grenades could be secreted. Fanon speculated that Western men abhorred the veil because it disrupted their gaze on the imagined beauty of the Other women, and that the desire to unveil constituted rape fantasy.

Fanon contracted leukaemia in his mid-thirties. With the knowledge that he was dying, he wrote *The Wretched of the Earth*, dictating it, as usual, to his white wife, Josie. His final book’s advocacy of violence continues to cause controversy. He writes that ‘[t]he colonized man finds his freedom in and through violence’ and that this violence functions as a ‘cleansing force’ (68, 74). However, Fanon was primarily identifying the violence in the colonial system. Thus, according to him, the only way to combat this deeply racist and sadistic system was through counter-violence. Fanon was, of course, not just theorizing, but actually fought for his beliefs. Moreover, his espousal of violence has to be understood in relation to its Algerian context of torture, mass murder, and the trauma this engendered. Such trauma was exemplified when Fanon’s cancer compelled him to seek treatment in the US. There, his five-year-old son, Olivier, saw his father’s intravenous blood bag and thought he had been murdered. Following this horrific discovery, the boy briefly went missing, only to be found defiantly waving an Algerian flag outside the hospital. We should remember that, for many years, the French government refused to use the term ‘war’ when referring to the conflict in Algeria that spanned the years from 1954 to 1962. Moreover, in 1961, the River Seine ran red with the blood of hundreds of Algerian immigrants cut down by security forces at a peaceful anti-war protest. As Fanon so powerfully demonstrated, the colonizer is ‘the bringer of violence into the home and into the mind of the native’ (*Wretched*: 29).

The Wretched of the Earth is also about the perils of decolonization. Fanon’s use of the phrase ‘national bourgeoisie’ (120–143) signalled that many of the nationalist leaders who replaced the British colonizers were remarkably similar to those they unseated and subsequently took over from, barring the difference in race. Fanon was scathing about the

national bourgeoisie's opportunism and willingness to replicate the colonizers' divisive systems of control. He maintained that postcolonial nations should reconstruct or abandon the racially segregated cities that were a legacy of colonial rule. Instead, the countryside and the peasant were Fanon's hope for the future. With these ideas at least, he echoed Gandhi, even if the two men's attitudes towards violence were completely opposed. In *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi asserted: 'If India copies England, it is my firm conviction that she will be ruined' (33). The Congress leader likewise believed that India's beating heart could be found in her villages.

In the summer of 2016, the Panama Papers unmasked state corruption around an Algerian petroleum industry deal (Fitzgibbon np.); a remake of *Tarzan* recalled *Black Skin, White Masks*' description of young Afro-Caribbean boys who identify with the original film's white Tarzan; and a video emerged exposing French police forcing a burkini-clad woman to strip on a beach in Cannes. In these contexts, the relevance of Fanon's work could hardly be overstated.

Acknowledgements

This essay first appeared in the eminent Pakistani newspaper *Dawn* and was then expanded for inclusion in my book *Rivers of Ink: Selected Essays* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2017). To the team at *Dawn*, as well as to the organization for permission to reprint my material, my thanks. I am also indebted to Ameena Saiyid, Nadia Ghani, and Afifa Ali at OUP, and to my wonderful freelance editor Elizabeth Welsh.

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