

## FANON, FRANTZ OMAR (1925-1961)

Frantz Omar Fanon, a Martiniquan-born French-trained activist, philosopher, and psychiatrist whose theorization of the psycho-social elements of the colonial encounter in metropolitan France and colonial Algeria shaped late 20<sup>th</sup> century critical anthropology in Europe and North America.

### Biography and Major Works

Born in the city of Fort-de-France, Martinique, a French territorial possession in the Caribbean, Fanon and his brother were raised in relative middle-class comfort. In the lycée (secondary school) he was taught for a time and was befriended by the anti-colonial poet-activist Aimé Césaire (known for his endorsement of *negritude*), which contributed significantly to his awareness of racial and colonial inequalities. In the midst of World War II he opposed the Vichy French government in several French-administered Caribbean islands before joining the anti-Nazi resistance in France. Despite being decorated for his wartime efforts, the direct encounter with metropolitan racism deeply affected Fanon.

Not long after the war he was awarded a scholarship to study psychiatry, a field still dominated by psychoanalytic techniques at the time. While obtaining his degree he met, and came to marry in 1952, Josie Dublé, a French woman who shared similar moral and political attitudes to issues of race and colonialism. This was also the year he published *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), his first sustained examination of the effects of racism and colonialism on the colonized. The book also included numerous reflections on growing up in Martinique.

The post-war intellectual climate in France tolerated open discussion of leftist ideas in a manner not as possible elsewhere in the West during the Cold War. It was an environment of cross-pollination in theory and practice. Fanon participated in dialogues occurring between and among Marxian influenced activists and progressive thinkers from Africa and France, existential and phenomenological philosophers such as Jean-Paul Sartre, and psychoanalysts like Jacques Lacan refashioning their practice influenced by structural linguistics. These ideas supported his ever growing convictions to contest colonialism and racism. In 1953 he enthusiastically accepted a job managing the psychiatry unit of the Blida-Joinville Hospital in Algiers.

Fanon's clinical practice at the hospital was directed toward reform of the institution's policy and practices, leading some to refer to him as the Phillipe Pinel of Algeria, in reference to the reformist physician who, in the wake of the French Revolution, unchained patients in asylums. In particular, Fanon aimed to be culturally and religiously sensitive to those in his care. The political climate in the colony at this time was tense, and in 1954 the FLN or National Liberation Front (*Front de Libération Nationale*) began its guerrilla campaign to establish Algeria's independence from France. The number of patients increased in the psychiatric unit, many suffering from the effects of sustained interrogations, harassment, and physical and mental torture. Several cases appear in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) in the chapter on 'Colonial War and Mental Disorders'. By 1955 Fanon had joined the National Liberation Front while continuing to work at the hospital. He began to travel widely throughout Algeria, partly in an effort to extend his understanding of the social and psychic life of rural Algerians, and partly to conduct covert activity for the FLN.

Fanon resigned his post in 1956 to distance himself from the French government and to protest the manner in which the war was being conducted by French troops. The letter of resignation is reprinted in *Toward the African Revolution* (1964). From that period onward he no longer defined himself as French or Martiniquan, but as Algerian. Expelled from Algeria by French authorities in 1957, Fanon made his way to Tunis, Tunisia where he continued his activities with the FLN.

The brief period in Algeria, spanning 1953-1957, provided the experiences and observations that formed the essays collected in *A Dying Colonialism* (1959) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961). *Toward the African Revolution*, published posthumously in 1964, consists of a few brief essays written in the 1950's and primarily short pieces written for the FLN broadsheet *El Moudjahid*.

## **Major Works and their Reception in Anthropology**

Although not formally trained in ethnographic techniques, Fanon's ethnographic sensibilities and empathy for marginalized others made him a sensitive observer of social relations of inequality in context. The three major works he published in his lifetime have had rather different receptions within anthropology. Partly this is a consequence of the different intellectual traditions and inflections which inform his works (Marxian anti-colonialism, existentialism and phenomenology, and psychoanalysis), and partly a consequence of the social, political, and intellectual milieu in which English-speaking anthropologists adopted his writings. Generally speaking, Anglophone anthropology focussed especially on *The Wretched of the Earth* from the

mid-1960's into the 1970's, and *Black Skin, White Masks* from the mid-1980's into the 1990's, leaving *A Dying Colonialism* less well incorporated, though not altogether neglected.

### ***The Wretched of the Earth***

Although this was the last book he published in his native French, released just weeks before his death from leukemia in 1961, it was the first to be translated into English in 1963. In the context of the uneven but steady wave of formal political decolonization globally and the growing civil rights movement in the United States *The Wretched of the Earth* found a ready audience. This was a period when many anthropologists more openly expressed their support of the colonized populations they studied. In the wake of a receding McCarthyism this book, among the works of other colonial intellectuals, enjoined anthropologists to take account of the colonial and neo-colonial situation, in contrast to the common ahistorical treatises of the day seeking to describe pure and distinct cultures.

Fanon's writing served as inspiration to many anthropologists of the time, but among the Marxian 'New Left' both in and outside of anthropology it was also considered too simplistic in its Manichean alternatives. This simplicity, however, has also been argued to be a consequence of a translation lacking the nuances expressed in the original French. Contentious too, was Fanon's call for colonized people to respond to colonial violence with counter-violence as a means to overcome colonially generated feelings of inferiority and redefine personal and group identity positively.

Nonetheless, Fanon's text made a substantial contribution to anthropology as the discipline grappled with how to 'reinvent' itself in a manner which more directly considered how the 'colonial encounter' shaped fieldwork and disciplinary ethics. Despite the charge of oversimplified Manichean racial categories, his call to pay closer attention to (Marxian inspired) class dynamics among colonized and colonizers alike promoted a complexity and fragmentation of the social dynamics most anthropologists faced. The previous bounded and integrationist approaches in ethnography excluded the variety of colonials and their conflicting interests in shaping socio-cultural context. These functionalist ethnographies also paid insufficient attention to the dialectics of inter- and intra-ethnic social relations among colonized groups. In the 1960's and 1970's *The Wretched of the Earth* was also a source of inspiration for intellectuals and academics, including anthropologists, from Western minority groups in metropolitan centers, and in newly or emergent post-colonial states, where their critiques of previous representations of colonial life reshaped the direction of Anglophone anthropology.

### ***Black Skin, White Masks***

Of Fanon's three major works, this was the first written, but the last to be translated into English, in 1967. With its greater theoretical emphasis on existential, phenomenological, and psychoanalytic themes this work was not as strongly taken up initially by an anthropology rethinking and re-inserting historical materialism into its analyses in the 1960's and 1970's. As the discipline's focus shifted to the politics of representation, discourse theories, and identity politics, *Black Skin, White Masks* drew more attention. This was partly in response to a re-examination of the book in feminist, cultural, and post-colonial studies.

Written initially under the title 'Essay on the Disalienation of the Black', the analytic focus on the construction of a racially inflected identity always had a practical and clinical goal of achieving psycho-social health for those labelled racially inferior. As such, Fanon was broadly attuned to cultural context. Methodologically the work has characteristics similar to what has come to be known as autoethnography in that many elements of his personal experiences in Martinique and France, such as a white child's automatic fear of his black body, are taken as indicative of racialized colonial situations. Such processes of racial alienation are historical constructions which are specific to time and place. Disalienation, he concludes, requires recognizing the Other of the (black) Other is not the (white) Self.

Because of his style of writing, his analysis has been criticized on the grounds of overgeneralization. Even though his insights to colonial identity formation were recognized in anthropology at the time, there was also criticism of his not being able to substantially address the dynamics of identity formation among women of color or homosexuals, even as he incorporated them within his schema.

As Foucauldian conceptions of discourse became more widespread in anthropology, the psychoanalytic currents within Fanon were increasingly disregarded as a form of essentialism and reductionism, even though his use was far from orthodox or mechanical. A theme more resonant within the anthropology of the 1980's, and the intellectual climate broadly, was his concern to re-establish the study of bodies and corporeality in analysis in order to disrupt what many considered the undue privileging of the Cartesian Ego, or mind over body, in the

ethnographic writing of culture. The consolidation of a historical anthropology of colonialism as a subfield during this period also selectively drew inspiration from Fanon's publications.

### ***A Dying Colonialism***

The five essays which make up *A Dying Colonialism* are arguably Fanon's most ethnographic writings. It is perhaps because of this that this work has not been as closely scrutinized in anthropology. Unlike the overtly geopolitical and nationalist concerns of *The Wretched of the Earth*, these essays span a variety of different topics loosely threaded around a theme of changes in social and cultural institutions in an anti-colonial war of independence. Based on his four years of observations in Algeria as a clandestine operative for the FLN, the essays all consider an element of society undergoing redefinition. In doing so he challenged the assumption, frequent among Euro-Americans, of tradition and custom being static and repetitive rather than dynamic practices. Nonetheless, since this is not fieldwork in any usual ethnographic sense, the essays have an idealistic, and sometimes superficial, character.

The opening essay uses the redefinition of the meanings associated with veils and veiling practices to challenge both colonial assertions of unchanging tradition and women's inferiority. The following essay considers the adoption of the radio by Algerians, and generally serves Fanon as a metaphoric instrument to suggest non-indigenous technologies are adopted or rejected according to the social, political, and economic context. The essay on the family in a situation of anti-colonial war traces redefinitions in social relations of age and generation toward greater egalitarianism and personal independence as a result of resisting French colonialism. 'Medicine

and Colonialism' parallels, in the realm of knowledge and epistemology, what the radio stood for in terms of the adoption of technology according to circumstance. Lastly, Fanon addresses the political and economic heterogeneity of Algeria's Jewish and European minorities, emphasizing that further stereotypes should not be the response to colonial stereotypes.

An issue Fanon could not address, due to his early death, was the extent to which the transformations he observed in the context of war mostly did not become embedded and normalized in the post-colonial independence period. Fanon's attention to changes in meaning and practice in the revolutionary period prefigures the theme of violence recreating identity found in *The Wretched of the Earth*.

## **Fanon's Influence on Anthropology**

Engaging two generations of anthropological thinking, the reception of Fanon's works have always been shaped by the larger political milieu within which anthropology operates, and also by the major theoretical and methodological concerns predominating any given moment in the discipline. His appeal over time is connected to his political and ethical commitments toward undoing colonialism and racial oppressions as well as his early use of intellectual currents which later became widespread in Anglophone anthropology. Fanon's version of historical materialism in colonial contexts was considered, if not always fully adopted, by anthropologists such as Eric Wolf and Bernard Magubane in the 1960's and 1970's. As the discipline shifted to post-colonial approaches to racism, culture, and identity his works were critically engaged by Stephan Feuchtwang and Ann Stoler, for example, in the 1980's and 1990's. Despite not always being



directly named, Fanon's works have exerted a pressure within anthropology to pay attention to the psycho-cultural effects of cross-cultural encounters marked by economic and racial inequalities.

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Cross references:

Suggested Readings:

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