Introduction
On What a Great Thinker Said

Raising the question of what a thinker said invites critics, in near knee-jerk reaction, to ask if one’s portrait is of what was “really” said and then to offer the challenge of what could have been “said otherwise.” What someone has said, especially where those words are published, calls for reading the woman or the man. But even in such cases, as we know, what is said is not always what is meant, and to explain the latter often requires those difficult acts of interpretation and the presentation of evidence for the sake of both. To say that the thinker said otherwise, then, is to offer a different and more persuasive interpretation of what she or he meant, and as layers of meaning mount, the eventual formulation of what was “really meant” makes matters more complicated. Such a task is even more difficult where the writer is fearless, ironic, passionate, and poetic.

A humanistic psychiatrist, philosopher, and revolutionary, Frantz Fanon left an indelible mark on twentieth-century thought and politics. His influence continues to grow well into the twenty-first. He was born on the Caribbean island of Martinique in 1925, and after a short life of intense intellectual, professional medical, and political activity—which took him not only to the southern shores of France and the northern shores of Algeria and Tunisia, but also to the then Soviet Union and to his death in the United States—he was laid to rest in 1961 as an Algerian citizen in a grave for martyrs in the desert near one of the Algerian fronts. His death concluded a six-year period on France’s enemy ex-patriot list and several French right-wing assassination groups’ lists.

How did this outlaw intellectual become one of the most influential thinkers of the twentieth century and continue to be so into the twenty-first?

Fanon was a brilliant writer and an extraordinary thinker. His words scratched through the morass of banal rationalizations of political complicity and unveiled a world governed by norms of the living dead—a world of people who “see,” as Søren Kierkegaard once observed, “and still do not see.”¹ The anthropologist and sociologist Peter Worsley, along with many other biographers and commentators, called Fanon a poet; his aphoristic, lyrical style was unusual for a philosopher who was not only a scientist but also a clinician.² Through his words, truth, or something close, was brought to poetic reflection. He had the ability to convey, often persuasively and always passionately, big ideas with an unusual economy of words.

Fanon’s contributions to the history of ideas are manifold. He is influential not only because of the originality of his ideas but also because of the astuteness
of his criticisms of such contemporaries as the psychologist Alfred Adler, the poet Aimé Césaire, the psychoanalyst Anna Freud, the philosopher and psychiatrist Karl Jaspers, the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the philosopher and novelist Jean-Paul Sartre, the poet and statesman Léopold Senghor, the novelist Richard Wright, and such nineteenth-century predecessors as G. W. F. Hegel, Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Friedrich Nietzsche. His originality includes the development of what he called sociogenic explanations, a form of existential phenomenological social analysis that recognizes both the impact of the social world on the emergence of meaning and human identities and how individual situations relate to the development and preservation of social and political institutions. He developed a profound social-existential analysis of antiblack racism, which led him to identify conditions of skewed rationality and reason in contemporary discourses on the human being. His articulation of a problematic rationality led to his developing an explanation of why neocolonialism (instead of postcolonialism) succeeds colonialism and why getting beyond these categories required more commitment than most people would admit or be willing to take on. His bitingly critical analysis enabled him to make a diagnosis of why black and Third World (today, postcolonial and “Global South”) leadership tended to collapse into dependency in the latter half of the twentieth century and unfortunately continues to do so well into the twenty-first, as the waves of protest since the end of 2010 known as the “Arab Spring,” though also the “African Spring,” standing as legacies of his thought, attest. For Fanon, his investigations call for renewed understanding of human possibilities. This renewed understanding requires a conception of radical criticism that challenges the dominance of philosophy as the ultimate critical theory and arbiter. In that regard, he is a major contributor to subsequent reflections on thought and what left-wing revolutionaries call “praxis.” The last contribution and the first have warranted Fanon’s place as one of the twentieth century’s foremost philosophers.

In the late 1980s and throughout the first decade of the twenty-first century, “Fanon studies” has come into its own in the American and British academies despite the neglect his work in France and many Francophone countries, though the latter situation is improving. In Fanon: A Critical Reader, my coeditors and I characterized its development in five stages: reaction; biography; social and political science; colonial, anticolonial, and postcolonial critique; and pragmatic use for continued development of thought. These five positions could be rephrased through the following questions: Why is Fanon dangerous for conservatives and liberals and emancipating for some progressives and irksome to others? Why is Fanon’s life interesting biography? How has Fanon contributed to social and political theory? Is Fanon’s thought “postcolonial”? And how is Fanon’s thought useful for contemporary theorists across the spectrum of human studies and critical thought?
For readers who demand names, each of these variations has its share of noteworthy contributors. In the first, the most familiar names make up the unusual grouping of the philosopher and political theorist Hannah Arendt, the philosopher Sidney Hook, the anticolonial writer Albert Memmi, the Black Panther Huey Newton, and the Marxist historian and critic Jack Woddis. In the second, Peter Geismar’s, David Caute’s, and Irene Gendzier’s critical biographies were the most influential, and since then Patrick Ehlen’s spiritual biography, David Macey’s detailed and often acerbic tome, and Alice Cherki’s intimate portrait offer insights from hitherto unknown material. In the third, among the most noteworthy are the writings of the social theorists Peter Worsley and Renate Zahar, the political scientist Emmanuel Hansen, the Africana theorist Chester Fontenot, the political scientist Cedric Robinson, and the political theorist Ato Sekyi-Otu. The undisputed leaders of the fourth stage are the literary theorists Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Abdul JanMohamed, but others include the literary theorist Henry Louis Gates Jr., the sociologist and literary scholar Neil Lazarus, and the historian and political theorist Achille Mbembe. The fifth stage was inaugurated by the psychologist Hussein Bulhan’s book on Fanon’s relevance to psychology; it inaugurated work on Fanon’s relevance to human studies or the humanistic disciplines. In this stage, work also appeared on Fanon’s relevance to feminist theory, albeit with much ambivalence, and to global dependency theory, and his influence is canonical in Africana philosophy and Africana critical thought, Caribbean philosophy and anticolonial thought, Creolization theory, decolonial studies, Latin American philosophy, philosophy of liberation, and what is sometimes called, primarily in literary circles, simply “Theory.” Scholars in these areas include the philosopher Judith Butler, the political theorist George Ciccariello-Maher, the philosopher and legal theorist Drucilla Cornell, the literary theorist and cultural critic Nathalie Etoke, the political theorist Nigel Gibson, the political and Africana theorist Jane Anna Gordon, the sociologist and philosopher Paget Henry, the philosopher and decolonial theorist Nelson Maldonado-Torres, the decolonial theorist and cultural critic Walter Mignolo, the philosopher Michael Monahan, the literary and cultural theorist Alejandro J. De Oto, the political theorist Richard Pithouse, the political and Africana theorist Neil Roberts, the Africana critical theorist Contat Rybalka, the legal and social theorist Boaventura de Sousa, the cultural critic and political theorist Françoise Vergès, and the literary theorist, novelist, and cultural critic Sylvia Wynter.

One could argue, however, that there is a sixth development: the characterization of the five previous ones. In other words, the sixth development could be the self-reflective realization of Fanon studies itself. That stage is marked by Gates’s reflections on the postcolonial efforts of his colleagues in literature and cultural studies, Anthony Alessandrini’s, Nigel Gibson’s, and Cedric Robinson’s critiques of the same, and by the various critical anthologies on reading Fanon that have emerged since the 1990s. Since then, important work by Nigel Gibson, Jane
Anna Gordon, Alejandro D. Oto, Contat Rybalka, and a growing body of writings in the French-speaking world by such scholars as the literary theorist, cognitive linguist, and political activist Mireille Fanon-Mendès-France, the sociologist and philosopher Sonia Dayan-Herzbrun, the philosopher Étienne Balibar, Achille Mbembe, the philosopher and novelist V. Y. Mudimbe, the political theorist and historian Matthieu Renault, and the literary theorist and critic Jean-Paul Rocchi come to mind. This brief survey is, of course, not exhaustive.

The aim of *What Fanon Said* is to offer a study of Fanon and his ideas in their own right. “What Fanon said,” then, pertains not only to the black-letter words in his writings but also to their spirit, their meaning. This task also involves stepping outside of a tendency that often emerges in the study of intellectuals of African descent—namely, the reduction of their thought to the thinkers they study. For example, Jean-Paul Sartre was able to comment on black intellectuals such as Aimé Césaire, Fanon, and Léopold Sédar Senghor without becoming “Césairian,” “Fanonian,” or “Senghorian”; Simone de Beauvoir could comment on the thought of Richard Wright without becoming “Wrightian”; the German sociologist Max Weber could comment on the African American sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois without becoming “Du Boisian.” Why, then, is there a different story when black authors comment on their (white) European counterparts? “Standard” scholarship has explored whether Du Bois is Herderian, Hegelian, Marxian, or Weberian; whether Senghor is Heideggerian; and whether Fanon is every one of the Europeans on whom he has commented—Adlerian, Bergsonian, Freudian, Hegelian, Husserlian, Lacanian, Marxian, Merleau-Pontian, and Sartrean, to name several.

The problem of subordinated theoretical identity is a theme against which Fanon argued. It is connected to another problem—the tendency to reduce black intellectuals to their biographies. Critics of this approach ask: How many biographies of Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Fanon do we need before it is recognized that they also produced ideas? It is as if to say that white thinkers provide theory and black thinkers provide experience for which all seek explanatory force from the former. As there are many studies of Immanuel Kant without reducing him to Jean-Jacques Rousseau (who had the most influence on the former’s moral philosophy), my approach will be to address Fanon’s life and thought as reflections of his own ideals, with the reminder that no thinker produces ideas in a vacuum. Thus, the focus will not be on who influenced Fanon but on how Fanon developed the ideas of his time to another level in relation to those other thinkers and how that development has enabled him to issue an original set of criticisms of and solutions to theoretical and practical problems that persist into the present.

A problem in Fanon studies in the Anglophone world has been the limitations of the English translations of his writings. As a result, I have decided to translate all the passages, sometimes without elegance, from the original
This matter of translation raises an additional question of the title of this book. It is in part dictated by the debates on Fanon’s writings. I have found even distinguished scholars rebuking the man for things he simply did not say (for example, an eminent scholar at one of my presentations once claimed Fanon called his fellow Martinican Mayotte Capécia a “whore”), and in some cases, for things that are the standard, whether spoken by women or men, in the French language. The situation has at times been so bad that I have actually wondered if such scholars have even taken the time to read Fanon in French or, for that matter, in any language beyond secondary sources or hearsay, and to consider his writings beyond a few passages taken out of context, if that much at all.

An additional dimension is what could be called cross-cultural and racial allegiances. The cultural ones emerge where French authors emphasize Fanon’s Frenchness. The racial one focuses on his blackness. What makes matters difficult is that many white scholars tend to want to evade race issues; black scholars want to confront them. To be effective at the former, many white and racial eliminativist scholars tend to emphasize cultural difference or the cultural and class dimensions of the kinds of circumstances about which Fanon wrote. Many black scholars simply point out, however, that if the cultural and class considerations were really supervening, Fanon’s books would not have emerged. In other words, although some white French scholars may stress Fanon’s being a Frenchman, French society was sufficiently racist for Fanon to have the kind of double consciousness about how he was perceived to make him quite at home with the writings and company of people such as the Anglophone African American Richard Wright and the Afro-Barbadian George Lamming, though admittedly primarily so in relation to whites. A stark example of this difference is the portrait of Fanon offered by two specialists in psychology and psychiatry; Hussein Abdilahi Bulhan and Alice Cherki. Racism is very central in the thought of the former, whereas it appears more as an inconvenient intrusion in the portrait of the latter. Although there are those who write otherwise, it is difficult for many white intellectuals to take seriously the notion of a racist society, especially when it is the one that has nurtured their development and through which their identity was formed. If the concept is accepted at all, racist societies are for them always ultimately elsewhere, which is what enabled many in the United States, for example, to look self-righteously at South Africa during the years of apartheid, even though the latter was in fact modeling itself after the former. Overcoming this race versus culture and class divide requires taking seriously Fanon’s own insights on meeting people on the terrain where they live, even if it is, to some extent, alien territory. To look at Fanon’s life and thought as though he were only black or only French would be a distortion of the fact that he was not only both but also a Martinican and much more, given the multitude of roles he played throughout his short life. To their credit, Bulhan’s and Cherki’s studies converged
more than many other portraits on a topic often elided in the United States and France—namely, slavery.

The objective of this book, then, is to be a useful guide to those entering the world of Fanon’s ideas and to convey the relevance of that thought to problems of today. I will therefore not discuss every one of his writings or even all the dimensions of those included but instead focus on those that have been sites of controversy and others relevant to the illumination of those works and his overall thought, which, I hope, will give the reader much with which to continue study and reflection on her or his own. Fanon’s thought was ironic in that he despised notions of prophecy and destiny, but in the end, the accuracy of his prophecies revealed an existential paradox in the man. He spoke and wrote as truthfully as possible in the hope that he was, in the end, wrong.

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3 This development is due to the work of French and Francophone scholars who have devoted attention to research on Fanon, and the catalyzing efforts of Mireille Fanon-Mendès-France, his daughter, who directs the Fondation Frantz Fanon. Scholars also include Sonia Dayan-Herzbrun, who organized a United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) conference on Fanon in 2007, and Achille Mbembe, who has worked in a variety of Francophone institutes and think tanks, such as the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA). There are also articles in journals such as *African Development* (Senegal), *Tumultes* (France), *Mouvement* (France), *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy* (United States and France), and a growing number of studies, such as Matthieu Renault’s *Frantz Fanon: De l’anticolonialisme à la critique postcoloniale* (Paris: Éditions Amsterdam, 2011). There is also continued interest in the Hispanophone and Lusophone worlds as new translations of Fanon’s writings, with commentaries by some of the most influential scholars in the humanities and social sciences, come to print. Particularly noteworthy in this regard are De Oto’s *Fanon* and Frantz Fanon, *Piel negra, máscaras blancas*, trans. Ana Useros Martín (Madrid, Spain: Ediciones Akal, 2009), which features in...
Chapter 1

“I Am from Martinique”

Before 1939, the Antillean said he was happy, or at least believed himself to be so. He voted, went to school when he could, took part in the processions, drank rum, and danced the beguine.

—Frantz Fanon, “Antillians and Africans”

Think of the body in motion. Dancing. Then think of it standing still. Perhaps leaned back. Consider the body in question or, perhaps, indifference. Fanon’s body, a troubled, frenetic body that was simultaneously elegant, rhythmic (he did, in spite of his protestations, dance the beguine), and beautiful, is a subtext of all his writings. It gropes at reality, shivers, and quakes. It is at times frozen, often hot with anger while constrained by reflection and realization; black, two-dimensional; prodigious; handsome; dangerous, prurient, lustful; strong one moment, lame another; funny, yet often also sad; and, above all—searching.

The body is the man, and the man his body. Anxiety over embodiment is a dimension of Western civilization against which Fanon was in constant battle. The body, he laments, is a denied presence, and black people are a denied people. Embodied by the writings of a black man, Fanon’s reflections carry an urgency born of intimacy. He and the alienated subjects of his books—denied, often, even of subjectivity—are both body and body denied.

Frantz Omar Fanon, this denied body through being too much body, was born on the 20th of July 1925 in Fort de France, Martinique. Malcolm Little, who then became Malcolm X and eventually El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, the famed black revolutionary thinker in the United States, was born two months earlier. So, too, was Patrice Lumumba, the martyred father of the Congolese Revolution, as well as the extraordinary bebop drummer and political activist Max Roach. If creativity were like wine, one could argue that 1925 was a vintage year.

Frantz’s father, Félix Casimir Fanon, was a customs agent, and his mother, Eléanore Médélice, was a shopkeeper. They were able to provide a lower-middle-class existence for their eight children—four boys, of whom Frantz was the youngest, and four girls, two of whom died in childhood. His mother, by virtue of race obsession on the part of several commentators, is often distinguished by her biracial status as a woman of a black Martinican mother and a white Alsatian father. His father was the son of a freed black slave and an East Indian woman. Fanon was the youngest of four sons in this once symmetrical family of ten.
One’s biography is a story of wonder if it is occasioned by fame or an allegory manqué of infamy. For the former, each childhood incident tags the hero with heroic qualities: An otherwise banal childhood becomes marked by prophecies of greatness. For the latter, the tragic stage is set, through which prophecy also portends doom. Fanon’s life was such that both readings could apply. As a testament of a great revolutionary, it could easily be read on a level of biblical proportions. There is, for instance, the incident recounted by his brother Félix, where a childhood friend Clébert (then about fourteen years of age) had visited the Fanon household with his father’s revolver to impress the Fanon brothers. Unaware that the gun was loaded, Clébert fired the gun, hurting his index finger and nearly shooting Frantz. The younger boy Frantz calmly tore a sheet, wrapped Clébert’s injured finger, and explained to his mother that the noise was a toy backfiring and that they had decided to take a walk. He then took Clébert to the hospital. Such an incident could be interpreted as marking the “nature” of the future physician and revolutionary, a man who will remain cool in dire circumstances, a man who would find himself training guerrillas in an Algerian hospital basement, despite his philosophical aversion to notions of human “nature” and his moral detestation of violence.

There are, as well, those who despise what Fanon represents. They interpret, as we find in the work of Albert Memmi, early Françoise Vergès, later Stuart Hall, Isaac Julien, and Henry Louis Gates Jr., the unfortunate influence of a very troubled man, a man plagued by self-hatred, fear of miscegenation, and Oedipal anxieties. For some, Fanon’s relationship with his mother and her father’s whiteness are central. Did Fanon dream of possessing little white girls while a child and wish, given his critical letters to his father while at war—“Papa, you were sometimes remiss in your duty as a father”—that his father had been white? Did Fanon leave Martinique for Dominica to train for the French Resistance during his brother’s wedding to upstage his brother? Was it an act of aggression from a narcissistic scene-stealer?

I will not pretend. I consider such readings of Fanon’s life to be highly problematic. They often fail to address the complexity of human failings and triumphs, as well as the political and historical contexts of the subject’s life. As a human being, Fanon was both heroic and flawed. The combination was expressed in the ways he negotiated his historical situation as a member of a society marked by radical inequalities. Fanon lived in a colonial world, and racial hierarchy was a reality of that world. The Martinique of his day was dominated by the Békès, the approximately 1,000 whites who controlled the political and economic realities, that is, three-fourths of the land and business, of that island of nearly 300,000 blacks and, as some prefer, mulattoes, which they control to this day. Readings of Fanon simply as a troubled man prioritize the psychological over any other model of human study. Interesting though Fanon’s relationships with his parents may have been, and curious though one may be about his sex life, the fact remains that
it is not Fanon’s biography that brings us to his writings and political
accomplishments but his writings and political accomplishments that bring us to
his biography. Thus, even the model of the charismatic revolutionary is of value,
in the end, to the theorist of political charisma. From the standpoints of many
approaches, whether political, economic, psychoanalytical, or sociological,
seemingly valid interpretations of Fanon’s life could be fallaciously written. What
many of his critics fail to realize is that intelligent and strong though Fanon was,
his impact on his fellow human beings would be without effect if it were not also
for his sense of humor and passion. The elevation of some interpretations to levels
of the best interpretation of his life hides the man, and this is so because, in the
end, the man could never be completely revealed, although he could, to a great
extent, be understood.

Fanon’s biography is, among its many manifestations, a political tale of
pedagogical and moral value with ethical challenges. It is so because its
engagement teaches us much about how emancipatory projects succeed and fail,
and beseeching many of us to be like him would, in the end, demand for many of
us to be better than we are. Each stage of his life was decisive in a historically
consequential way. Hitler took Paris when Fanon was fifteen and set up the
Marshal Pétain–led Vichy government as a puppet for Nazi Germany to rule
France and its colonies. This led to several thousand French soldiers and sailors
occupying Martinique and unleashing on the local population heavy doses of
antiblack racism. These events awakened many Martinicans for a time from their
racial naïveté and political slumber. Before that encounter, Martinicans imagined
themselves to be a privileged group within the French colonial hierarchy. They
regarded themselves as French, not black or African, and expected, if not to be
treated as whites, to be acknowledged, at least, to be better than other “real”
blacks, especially sub-Saharan Africans. In his essay “Antillians and Africans,”
Fanon describes this period in Martinican history as politically transformative. It
was marked not only by the historical weight of World War II but also by the
poetic philosophical challenge of Aimé Césaire, the famed Martinican poet and
statesman, who brought to the island, as Moses did on clay tablets to the Israelites,
prescriptions with promises of a Promised Land to a formerly enslaved population:
Black was not only beautiful, he declared, but the heart of such darkness—
Africa—was also its majestic center at which aesthetic and spiritual emancipation
awaits. The ugly behavior of the white occupiers subverted white authority and
called for Martinicans to imagine the impossible: fighting evil in white face. Were
Germans and Frenchmen more than continental cousins?

For many Martinicans deeply invested in French identity, the idea of white
Frenchmen identifying more with white Germans than Frenchmen of color was
unthinkable, which made reality nothing short of traumatic. Others were, however,
skeptical throughout. Some of Fanon’s countrymen regarded World War II as a
European in-house affair. According to his brother Jobi, Fanon’s response, one
that remained with him to his dying day, was resolute: “Each time that liberty is
affected, be we whites, blacks, yellows, or kakos . . . I swear to you today that no
matter where it may be, each time that Freedom is threatened, I’ll be there.” Frantz
escaped to the neighboring island of Dominica, where he trained for six
months and returned to Martinique. He was then recruited into Battalion 5, a
coalition of troops from Guadeloupe, Guyana, and Martinique, to fight against
Germany during a recruitment drive that took him to Algeria.

Fanon’s service in World War II was a rude awakening. Each triumph was
tainted by racial indignity. On the ship that took him to North Africa to fight for
France, he and his fellow Martinican soldiers received racial insults of varieties
that included the degradation of the Martinican Women’s Corps by making them
concubines of the white officers. In spite of their efforts to differentiate themselves
from the much-despised black soldiers from other regions—which included
wearing a special beret—the Martinican divisions found themselves treated as
badly as those other blacks. The old joke about a black surgeon applied to them:
“What do you call a black surgeon? Answer: Nigger.” According to his good
friend Marcel Manville, as related by Hussein Abdilahi Bulhan, “The French
subjected us with everyday humiliation in the ranks. Even if we wore the berets,
the lesser ranked officers of the French army who were Cretans, imbeciles, and
fossils . . . tu-tued us [addressed us informally in the diminutive] as if we were
Senegalese and, for us, to be addressed in such a way was humiliating.” Tu is the
second-person familiar pronoun used by the French to designate intimate
acquaintance or lower status (as in an adult addressing a child) as opposed to the
respectful form vous. The equivalent is the Anglo use of “boy” or “girl” to address
black men and women, which, in effect, is to assert that they are not men and
women.

In Europe, the black soldiers found themselves mistreated not only by the
white soldiers alongside whom they fought, but also by the whites they liberated
from village to village, town to town. At celebration dances of emancipation,
many white female celebrants preferred to dance with Italian (fascist) prisoners
than the black soldiers who had shed blood and risked their own lives to liberate
them. Dear France did not behave significantly better. The black heroes were sent
back to Martinique ahead of the white soldiers on the San Mateo, a cargo ship,
with short rations, to a return without the fanfare afforded their white
counterparts.

Fanon’s political sensibilities before the Second World War, although
patriotic and at times humanistic verging on sentimental and zealous, were no
more nor less radical than those of his colleagues, which, for the most part,
reflected French liberalism with an awareness of Marxism as its primary
challenge. France’s Communist Party enjoyed considerably more influence than
other Western European Communist parties in the twentieth century; it thus played
a role in national politics that presented communism as a live option. In the
colonies, political affiliations were complicated by the impact of race. One could be *economically* radical but *racially* conservative. Césaire was among those few who converged radically on both counts in the 1930s and 1940s. Fanon recounted in “Antilleans and Africans,” for instance, that Césaire’s racial radicalism was initially mocked, and for Martinique’s fledgling petit-bourgeois black population—who, because of their education and Martinican status in the prewar racial hierarchy, expected economic rewards as civil servants of French colonialism—Césaire’s radicalism, albeit aesthetically rooted in surrealism, was not welcomed. What is certain, however, is that after his return to Martinique, Fanon publicly allied himself with Césairean politics by working with his brother Joby in the mayoral election campaign for Césaire, who ran as a Communist candidate. Césaire was elected mayor of Fort-de-France in 1945.

Despite his growing involvement in radical politics and admiration for the literary power of Césaire’s writings, interests that suggested work in politics, poetry, and drama, Fanon opted for a scholarship for World War II veterans, no doubt certain also because of his valor (he was twice wounded during the war), which enabled him to go to Paris to study dentistry.

Yes, Fanon at first sought the path of becoming a dentist. A revolutionary *dentist*? One could imagine the many awful puns and plays on words that would have emerged—from grabbing the “jaws” of history to getting to the “root” of oppression—had he not changed course. He went to Paris with his sister Gabrielle, who chose to study to become a pharmacist. In a short time, however, Fanon left Paris for Lyon, where he took preparatory courses in the natural sciences, studied philosophy, and earned admission to the school of medicine at the university there. Fanon’s biographers appealed to boredom and disgust with the Parisian black population as reasons for his transfer. Perhaps. It is significant, however, that Fanon’s medical training focused on psychiatry and forensics instead of, say, internal or general medicine. In psychiatry, Fanon found a convergence of the natural and human sciences that appealed to his multiple interests, and forensics tapped into his penchant for investigation.

While studying for his medical degree, Fanon attended lectures by the philosopher Jean Lacroix, a proponent of personalism, who argued for the human being overcoming schisms between social essences and idealistic conceptions of individual inner life devoid of social being, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the famed philosopher who was teaching at Lyon before achieving his venerable post at the Collège de France. Fanon also wrote three plays, *Les mains parallèles* (“Parallel Hands”), *L’oeil se noie* (“The Drowning Eye”), and *La conspiration* (“The Conspiracy”), none of which, at his request, was ever published), edited a journal, *Tam-Tam*, and participated in various left-wing political groups attracted to Lyon because of its reputation as a hotbed of radical politics.
The period of study in France was marked by three important personal events. Its dawn was troubled by his father’s death in 1947. Shortly afterward, Fanon had a brief romantic affair with a Russian Jewish woman whom he met in his philosophy class, which resulted in the birth of his daughter, Mireille, in 1948.9 Now Mireille Fanon-Mendès-France, she is a former lycée professor, with doctorates in classical literature and semiotics, a political activist, and president of the Fondation Frantz Fanon (Frantz Fanon Foundation).10 Fanon had also a relationship with Marie-Josèphe Dublé (“Josie”), a French woman of Corsican and Gypsy descent, who shared his political and literary interests. They married in 1952. Olivier, the only child from that marriage, was born in Algeria in 1955. He worked through to his retirement as an official at the Algerian Embassy in Paris.

Not much is written about Josie Fanon.11 She was his partner in struggle and ideas. Fanon rarely wrote out his work, choosing instead to dictate it to a typist, which explains why his articles and books are often best read aloud. In most instances, that typist was Josie, who also coedited some of his published work.12 She was, then, in many respects the actual reader/listener/audience, the flesh-and-blood presence, to whom the texts were addressed and who, to some extent, haunts his writings as one among their many subtexts. Frantz and Josie’s relationship was marked, as well, by the challenges not only of interracial marriage in a racially hostile world but also of a partnership in which one member was an extraordinarily handsome, passionate, charismatic, and intellectually gifted secularist. Although accounts are not documented, it is informally claimed among Fanon scholars that Fanon was not a monogamous man, and the demands of his professional and later political life were such that he spent much time away from his family.

The period in Lyon was also marked by the publication of a few essays, the most famous of which were “L’expérience vécu du Noir” (“The Lived Experience of the Black”), which appeared in the May 1951 issue of Esprit, and “Le syndrome nord Africain” (“The North African Syndrome”), which appeared in the same review in 1952.13 The second essay, which I will later discuss, came about through Fanon’s initial interest in pursuing a degree in legal medicine under the supervision of Michel Colin, in addition to his work in psychiatry. The essay demonstrates Fanon’s investigative skills, especially in circumstances where the mystery is not physical but social. In the first essay, to which we will soon return, Fanon presents his complex struggle to develop what he calls “ontological resistance” to antiblack racism. His account relates the “explosion” of his identity as a Frenchman through an encounter with a little white boy’s surprise and horror at seeing him on a train, his hopes and despair at the presentation of Négritude as a philosophical ideal in Léopold Senghor’s famous 1948 collection of poetry by black Francophone poets, Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française (“Anthology of New Negro and Malagasy Poetry in the French Language”), and his disappointment at Jean-Paul Sartre’s famous critical
foreword.14 Discussions of Négritude—which was an effort to present a positive, revolutionary conception of black identity—and Sartre’s foreword will come later.

The first Esprit essay was part of Fanon’s premier book, Peau noire, masques blancs (Black Skin, White Masks), which he had proposed as his medical thesis under the title “Essai sur la désalienation du Noir” (“Essay on the Disalienation of the Black”). It was rejected by his doctoral supervisor, Professor Jean Dechaume, who was a proponent of psychosurgery, so he quickly composed and submitted two weeks later a thesis on a neuropsychological disorder titled “Troubles mentaux et syndromes psychiatriques dans l’Hérédité-Dégénération-Spino-Cérébelleuse. Un cas de maladie de Friedreich avec délire de possession” (“Mental Illness and Psychiatric Syndromes in Hereditary Cerebral Spinal Degeneration: A Case Study of Friedreich Disease with Possession Delirium”), which he defended in 1951.15 As the subtitle states, Friedreich’s disease is a genetic condition involving degeneration or thinning of the spinal cord. Although the title suggests acquiescence to the psychophysiological dictates of his adviser, Fanon in fact offered an element of his original thesis that would remain a foundation of his thought: Drawing on ideas from the anthropologist, philosopher, and sociologist Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, Fanon argued that one should, as a psychiatrist, reach to the patient’s humanity instead of the material nexus of effects or symptoms. Patrick Ehlen offers an excellent summary:

In the context of Fanon’s developing theory of human psychology, his attention to Lévy-Bruhl’s law of participation [the coexistence of logical and prelogical thought] reveals an early understanding of and sympathy for the patient’s cultural worldview above and beyond any medical theory. The task of the psychiatrist, then, becomes not simply to interview the patient and then thumb through a book to uncover the diagnosis and solution, but to make an effort to “reach” the patient through the patient’s own symbols and belief systems. Rather than focusing on symptoms, the approach focuses on the patient, or even beyond the patient, as the psychiatrist struggles to uncover those cultural “participations” at work in the patient’s psyche. Before subscribing to any doctrine, the task of the doctor is to learn the doctrine of the patient.16

Learning the doctrine of the patient is a task to which Fanon devoted the rest of his life through extending it, as we will see, to the environment in which the patient not only lives but also emerges as a patient. Completing his medical degree, Fanon was then free to return to his more complex study. He secured publication that same year for his originally proposed thesis in a fashion characteristic of his personality, as related by Alice Cherki:

On reading the manuscript, [one of the senior editors, Francis Jeanson] promptly wrote Fanon requesting a meeting. Both men recall that first encounter as a stormy affair: Jeanson recalls the tense and touchy young man who turned up at his office that day; he had barely started praising the work when Fanon cut him off with a “not bad for a
Nigger!” Jeanson, both angered and hurt by Fanon’s barb, wasted no time in showing Fanon the door, thereby gaining Fanon’s immediate respect. After this disastrous first encounter, work on the manuscript progressed smoothly with Fanon agreeing to Jeanson’s suggestion of *Peau noire, masques blancs* as the title for the book.17

The publication, reprint, and history of critical assessments of *Black Skin, White Masks* have been items of discussion and debate among Fanon scholars, particularly regarding questions over which of his writings should receive the most attention. Its availability in English, through the auspices of Grove Press in the United States in 1965 and Paladin in England in 1970, succeeded translations of his subsequent work. That translation had gone out of print in England by the late 1970s but was soon brought back into print in 1986 by Pluto Press with a controversial foreword by Homi Bhabha, the famed Lacanian literary postcolonial theorist. By the 1980s, the work ascended in postcolonial and cultural studies, primarily as the subject of criticisms regarding its lack of political correctness on gender and sexual orientation and mixed-racial identities. From Bhabha’s Lacanian psychoanalytical reading of Fanon’s writings to subsequent criticism by others, such as the literary theorist Gwen Bergner, the novelist Maryse Condé, and the filmmaker Isaac Julien, there also followed a discussion of the usefulness of the text itself. The search for postcoloniality may require more than *Black Skin, White Masks* offers. Henry Louis Gates Jr. criticized the critics for failing to see that Fanon was supposedly not a “global theorist,” a theorist who could supply a “unified field theory” of oppression and postcoloniality. He counseled readers to concentrate on the biographical resources of the text. In response, Cedric Robinson criticized Gates for focusing on the supposedly “petit-bourgeois” *Black Skin, White Masks* in his essay.18 What is needed, he argued, is a Marxist-informed critique that reputedly emerges in Fanon’s later work. More, Robinson castigated the contemporary postcolonial critics as ultimately anxious about what Fanon historically represents and, as in the case of, say, W. E. B. Du Bois, who seems, from the standpoint of contemporary scholarship, not to have lived past thirty-five, for preferring to focus on the young petit-bourgeois black doctor at this stage in his career and thought rather than on the mature revolutionary. They wanted, in other words, the man in a period of his life that most reflected their own condition and politics.

I joined the fray on two occasions. In the first, my *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man*, I argued that Gates represented the tendency to privilege literary theory as *theory* in contemporary thought and Robinson represented the tendency of political thought to privilege politics as the *sine qua non* of theory. Both positions I characterized as “disciplinarily decadent,” where the theorists criticize other theorists for not focusing on the critic’s discipline. Such positions, I argued, exemplified a failure to realize that Fanon’s project was larger than such concerns. That is why his writings drew on so many sources; a radical critique was simultaneously metatheoretical and metacritical—that is, self-critical and
concerned with how the project of thought could be realized or how it could fail. In the second instance, I argued that Gates’s position advanced an insidious fallacy: that Fanon (the black writer) offered, by virtue of his biography, “experience,” which, in effect, left theory to white theorists. Literary and cultural critics often advance white philosophers such as Pierre Bourdieu, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault in literary and cultural theoretical studies of society without reservation and reduction to their European experiences and historical time, whereas many of Fanon’s critics studied him as though he were trapped in his. The famed Luo philosopher D. A. Masolo, for instance, appealed to Fanon’s remark, in the introduction to *Black Skin, White Masks*, that he did not come with “timeless truths,” to mean that Fanon offers no ideas that transcended his time. Fanon was not, however, a reductive historicist. A relativistic reading of his remark is, therefore, problematic. Fanon was also not a philosophical idealist, a thinker who reduces reality to “ideas.”

Here, we should bear in mind some of the contradictions of how great thinkers are read across racial lines. Foucault, for instance, read Marx as trapped in the nineteenth century, yet he built his ideas on Nietzsche’s thought (which was in turn built on Hegel’s contemporary, Arthur Schopenhauer). Why was Nietzsche a nineteenth-century writer who was able to speak to the later twentieth century but Marx supposedly not? In similar kind, why is Foucault, a contemporary of Fanon, appealed to at the end of the twentieth century and well into the twenty-first with less suspicion than Fanon? Cedric Robinson’s criticism returns with ironic force: Marx and Fanon were revolutionaries and are thus held suspect at the end of a century that began with the call to revolution, became wary, and came to a close with antirevolutionary (if not counterrevolutionary) suspicion. But without such a charge, the obvious criticism holds: A short treatise exploring the lived dynamics of antiblack racism and colonialism in the 1950s is, nevertheless, a twentieth-century text that should have some relevance for late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century thought on the human condition, if but for the fact that so-called “postracialism,” a buzzword into the second decade of the twenty-first century, is little more than a way of referring to continued racism that is simply now ashamed of itself.

Many interpretations of *Black Skin, White Masks* have emerged over the past two decades. Let us now turn, in the next chapter, to a close reading of what, in this inaugural work of his career, Fanon argued and, thus, said.

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1. “I Am from Martinique”

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