



WRITERS **MOSAIC**

Quarterly 03

**Frantz Fanon:
revolutionary
psychiatrist**

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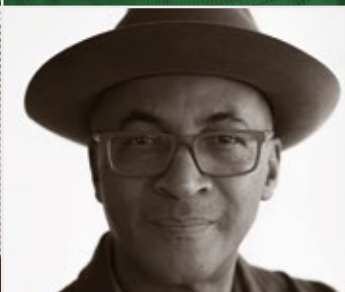
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WritersMosaic Quarterly 03

WritersMosaic, a division of the Royal Literary Fund, has been online since 2021 at www.writersmosaic.org.uk. The print *Quarterly* was launched in May 2025 celebrating the centenary of the birth of Malcolm X. In our third edition, writers reflect on the legacy of the psychiatrist and freedom fighter Frantz Fanon.

Editorial

Throughout my early adulthood at medical school in the 1980s, I had never heard of the revolutionary Martinique-born psychiatrist Frantz Fanon, author of *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), both classics of anti-colonial literature which have inspired generations of thinkers, activists and writers.

Occasionally, I'd pop into Freedom Press, the radical bookshop on Whitechapel Road, but it's unlikely I'd have picked up a book with the title *Black Skin, White Masks*. As the child of black Jamaican migrants, I was drilled in not drawing attention to myself, in not foregrounding my blackness. Fanon's book would have seemed too on the nose for me then, too embarrassing. I didn't want to accept the possibility of my blackness being more of a stain than a simple birthmark, or to consider that I might be a damaged victim of colonial history.

I'm drawn to Fanon now. I admire him because of his fierce, uncompromising intellect, his charm, his cunning and his support for Algerian rebels in their fight against French colonisers in the 1950s. Undoubtedly, a kind of black pride features in my empathy towards Fanon and the recognition of his fearless and uncomfortable truth-telling from which white people, and sometimes black people, also recoil.

The origin of the title *Black Skin, White Masks*, which echoes the quest by black people to mask their differences from their former colonial masters, is grounded in themes explored in the text. These themes include the desire to eloquently match the coloniser's language; an examination of the patronising tendency of his medical colleagues to mimic the pidgin French of their patients when treating them; and the damage to the psyche of black people from the perils of interracial love.

In this third edition of *WritersMosaic Quarterly*, ten writers explore Fanon's legacy, his radical work as a psychiatrist, his literature, and his commitment to the fight against colonialism – all part of a remarkable life that came to an end when he died from cancer at the age of just 36.

Colin Grant

From the individual to the collective

I'm witnessing our current political moment in the West with despair and a sense of futility. I see individuals lost to groupthink, masses falling under the spell of delusions, convinced that the world is divided along lines of good and evil and that they must eliminate the scapegoated other. Whole groups are denying genocide as it is being carried out.

As a psychiatrist and writer, I've tried to understand what is happening through a psychiatric and psychoanalytic lens, but reasoning has slipped through my fingers. I've worked as an adult psychiatrist for years – through the height of the COVID pandemic, the Black Lives Matter protests, the return of Trump, and now, during this overwhelming and rapid shift into authoritarian populism. My patients tell me they feel guilty, helpless, scared and numb. Trans patients are afraid for their bodily and existential safety. Children of immigrants are worried about the violent intrusion of the state. Some patients simply tune out of the news. I've tried to validate all their fears. Sometimes I get annoyed with their passivity, or I burn out on empathy. I try to guide my patients toward self-compassion, self-care, healthier relationships, and encourage them to create more structure in their lives. Still, they express a sense of

hopelessness. They worry that individual acts of protest, dissent, and mutual aid are buckets of water being thrown onto an expanding inferno. Sometimes, I feel the same way.

I've been stuck in traditional psychoanalytic thought: a strangely neutralised, apolitical, western model of the mind. As I've tried to escape this trap, I've turned to the work of Frantz Fanon, specifically to his seminal work *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), in which Fanon explores the group behaviour, identity violence, and self-agency of colonised Africans – theories directly informed by his work with Algerians and the French.

With Fanon, I've begun to see a more complex picture of how people are affected by oppressive systems. Fanon understood that social circumstances shape our identity. The individual exists within the group, and the group indoctrinates the individual. This principle is often only superficially present in our therapeutic training, popping in as 'cultural competency' or 'an awareness of marginalization' instead of a vital reality in all our psyches: that we are shaped by man-made systems and our position in society.

I've learned that those who oppress others are driven to their deluded,

terrible actions by their own fear and shame. That individual healing doesn't just start within and spread outwards, but is also based in material realities; protection from violence, more resources, safety. Most importantly, Fanon has provided me with the insight that healing is not just individual, but an active and group process, requiring collective empowerment and political consciousness.

Fanon combined psychiatric insights and political awareness in his writings. He pointed out how colonialists, like the aspiring fascists of today, were driven by rigid fear, shame, delusional entitlement and existential fear. Keeping Fanon's theories in mind, I understand that people act out of a fear of annihilation. These oppressors are desperate for safety within

the authoritarian group and try to achieve safety by annihilating the threatening other. If we pursue self-protection above all else, even those who believe themselves morally righteous can take up the mantle of oppressor. Those who are oppressed are left with feelings of hopelessness, inferiority, rage, and their own shame. Both the oppressed and the oppressor are isolated and afraid.

Fanon believed that the only way to heal the individual and break free of oppressive systems, which by their nature were rigid and violent, was an initial act of violent resistance: "The colonial regime owes its legitimacy to force [...] "It's them or us" does not constitute a paradox, since colonialism, as we have seen, is in fact an organization of a Manichean world.'



He believed violent rebellion would allow the colonised to grab their own agency; 'violence frees the native from his inferiority complex [...] despair and inaction.' The oppressed can take back actual power, be active, and create change. Fanon's theories were a fascinating contradiction – advocating violence yet deep humanism – and I struggle to reconcile with this 'inevitable' violence. Yet how else do people resist the realities of abuse, displacement, starvation, genocide? Who is legitimately allowed righteous violence? I believe that so much of his work, while universal, is also quite specific to his particular moment in history, his position as a French West Indian post-war thinker.

I thought Fanon's insights would simply help me understand my patients. Yet I found Fanon, first and foremost, offered me a new way of seeing myself in these tumultuous times. I was the one stuck in hopelessness, avoidance and shameful anger. I felt isolated. Traditional psychoanalytic thought and Western individualism, as well as my own tendencies, told me I had to work

out these fears through therapy, self-contemplation and individual acts of dissent and resistance.

Fanon offered me more possibility. He helped connect my individual experience of defeat and helplessness with larger movements of collective action. I could talk to others, *right now*, and actively engage with collective efforts to feel more inner agency and empowerment. I have learned a simple fact: I can't resist alone, and we all must make an active choice to resist injustice. As Fanon wrote in *The Wretched of the Earth*, there is no 'demiurge', no 'famous man who will take responsibility for everything.' No one will come to save us. We are all, together, collectively responsible for what happens next. We must accept this responsibility and engage with each other. My engagement with mutual aid and social justice might contribute to higher-level change, while also feeding back into my inner healing and self-awareness. I can breathe a sigh of relief. The struggle is enormous, but it cannot and should not be fought alone. I hope I can help my patients to be empowered in the same way.

**No one will come to
save us. We are all, together,
collectively responsible for what
happens next.**

TAÍNO MENDEZ

The person and the nation

I first read Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* in the summer of 2017, through the lens of the Black Lives Matter movement, which mobilised each time a black person in America died at the hands of police or a white civilian. I wished *Black Skin, White Masks* had been placed in my hands at 15 as part of a library of consciousness that might have helped better prepare me for life encased in a black, male body.

At 35, I was undergoing a process (that continues) of unravelling an education that did not centre my subjectivity. I realised that *black* is a qualifier, like *gay* or *poor*, suggesting some kind of compromising modification away from the norm. A *man* is an able-bodied, heterosexual, cisgender white man, whose subjectivity is unquestioned. A *man* is expected to thrive regardless of whatever misfortune he might encounter; to fail upwards. This world is not set up for me as an individual to thrive in unless I follow a path dictated by my race, class, gender and faith. I contribute to a capitalist effort centring white patriarchy, which it is impossible to be fully liberated from, so the freedom I assumed I had was an illusion. Fanon says that 'for the black man there is only one destiny. And it is white.' But I didn't know any of this at 15. It was never put to me that 'the black man is a black man; that is, as the result of a series of aberrations of affect, he is rooted at the core of a universe from which he must be extricated.' I didn't yet understand my own deep-lying inferiority complex, or the strange, violent, dehumanising that happened before I was born to people who looked like me.

Rereading *Black Skin, White Masks* in tandem with Fanon's final book, *The Wretched of the Earth*, I see that the latter is more responsible for his legacy as a founding postcolonial theorist. *Black Skin, White Masks* primarily focuses on creating a 'new man' for a new era, while seeking to 'help the black man to free himself of the arsenal of complexes that has been developed by the colonial environment'. It was a book for Antilleans who saw themselves, and continue to see themselves, as French. The Fanon of *Black Skin, White Masks* was not looking for Antillean independence or reparations from the mother country, but

What Fanon nailed **was the cognitive dissonance one experiences in pursuing assimilation** only to lose one's identity and authenticity.

simply to move forward with a different, more inclusive and universal mindset. 'I am personally interested in the future of France, in French values, in the French nation. What have I to do with a black empire?' he asks. 'The authentic grasp of the reality of the Negro could be achieved only to the detriment of the cultural crystallisation.' This latter point is furthered, but from a decolonial perspective, in *The Wretched of the Earth*, in which newly independent nations are encouraged to realise their own subjectivity, and to avoid becoming a facsimile of Europe.

Fanon was born and raised in Martinique, which remains an overseas department of France. As an Antillean, Fanon sought to establish a France that was both multi-ethnic and multicultural. While understanding that the national consciousness of the Antilleans is French, he also notes how visitors from the Antilles to France are infantilised: 'A white man addressing a Negro behaves exactly like an adult with a child and starts smirking, whispering, patronising, cozening.' He uses the example of how French doctors speak to black patients as opposed to white patients.

Those who would accuse Fanon of hyperbole should know that the Antillean experience in the UK was no different. Consider the case of my paternal grandfather, a labourer who moved to England from Jamaica in 1956 as a healthy, expectant father. Soon after arriving, he began to experience strong headaches, blurred vision, and a gradual loss of sight. When finally he went to see a doctor, he was quickly examined and advised, in the manner of a parent breaking down a difficult concept for a child resisting sleep, that the sun in England is very different than in Jamaica, and that because he was relatively tall, he was closer to the sun than most. He died still undiagnosed, having been sent back to Jamaica

by my grandmother (who could not be his full-time carer while nursing two toddlers and working) to be cared for by his relatives. A possible cause of his death was stroke, a treatable condition had he been taken seriously. The family got their story straight and were otherwise circumspect. What Fanon nailed was the cognitive dissonance one experiences in pursuing assimilation only to lose one's identity and authenticity, almost as if there was no such thing as black, only *nigger* or *white*. Those who speak well are told by their colleagues and fellow students that they are no longer black, then sit on a train minding their own business only to scare a small child simply by being there.

Once, while working part-time in a restaurant, I was casually threatened with lynching by a white lady if my rosé wine recommendation was found by her to be inadequate. Whether she was joking or not (and I doubt she was, because she repeated it), I was the only black member of staff, so I can be certain that I was the only person whose presence would have provoked the idea in her mind of lynching.

The threat of lynching made me hyper-aware of my (biologically male) body and

my presence, and of how the character and knowledge

I have built for myself

can be wished away

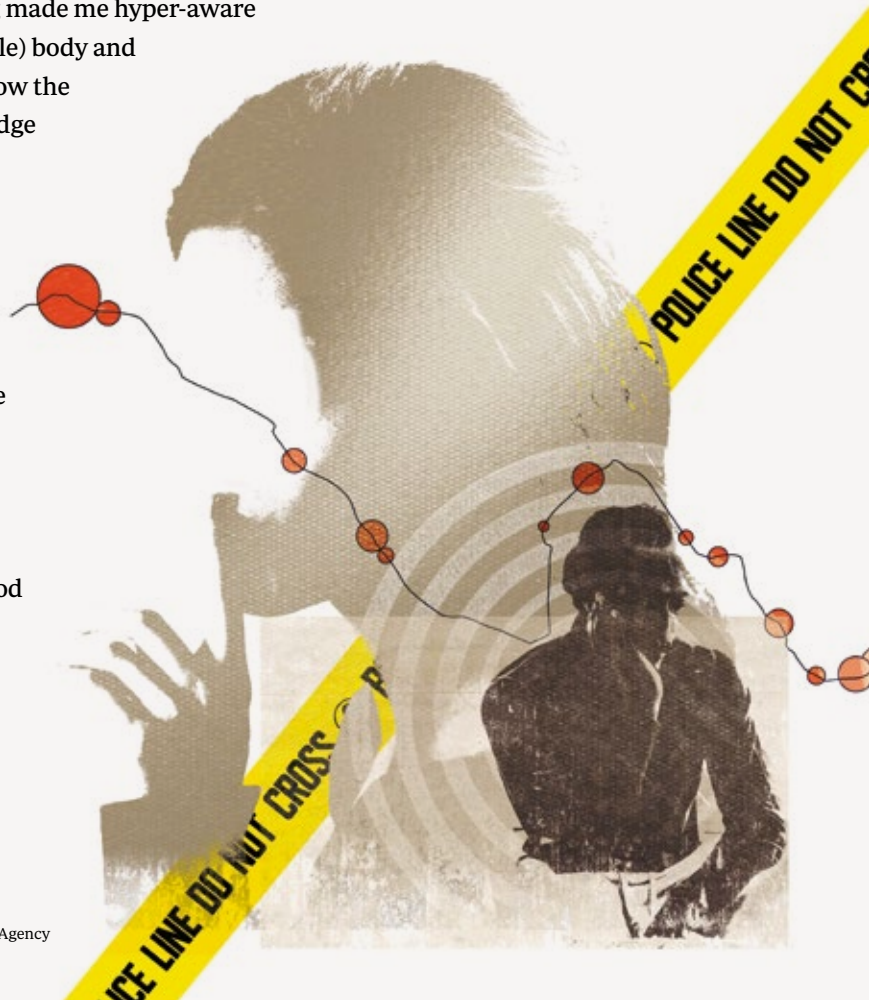
by someone who

only sees the body,
and their own idea

of what my body is
capable of and must be
prevented from doing.

We navigate life based
on who recognises us
on their own terms.

Fanon, at 27, understood
this deeply.



Blida, Algeria, 1953

Today you make a new attempt at group therapy. To create a sense of occasion you cover the table in the big refectory with a white cloth and place a vase of flowers at each end. Azoulay and Lacaton sit beside you, along with another young, progressively-minded intern, Charles Géronimi. The men shuffle in, not looking up as they take their seats.

You try to rouse their spirits. This hospital can be a place of equality where the sick and the well work together to create a world even better than the one outside, you say. That is why the liberation of patients is not just a matter of individual treatment. The structures that surround you men – the hospital itself – must be reformed. Not just the old practices of restraining and locking up patients. But also the regimes of forced idleness and numbing routine. Your days here must evoke the texture of everyday life. Slowly, hand in hand with the doctors and nurses, you can become your full selves again.

When you finish speaking, the men stare blankly back at you. One patient yawns noisily, scratches his stubbly chin, then slouches off to the courtyard. The

only one of them who seems to be paying attention is a former customs official and notorious bore, who launches into a long monologue in French – chiefly, it seems, to make it known he’s ‘made of better stuff’ than the others. The whole session was nothing more than an empty exercise, you complain to Lacaton afterwards. Absurd. Devoid of meaning. An embarrassment.

Your fellow doctors watch your efforts with amusement. Ramée takes you aside one afternoon to offer his advice: ‘When you’ve been in Algeria as long as I have, you’ll understand how futile it is to expect anything from Muslims. They are simply too undeveloped in their thinking to ever change.’ Behind your back, says Azoulay, the other physicians call you the ‘Arab Doctor’.

You know they are mocking more than your sympathy for the men in the hospital. To your colleagues, there’s no fundamental difference between you and your patients. If you’re not European it’s all the same to them, whether you’re Arab or West Indian. The first time you understood that this was how such people thought was when you arrived from

To your colleagues, there’s **no fundamental difference between you and your patients.**



Artwork © Michael Salu/Vestibule Agency

Martinique to study in Lyon. It was an ugly realisation. There were some 20 students from West Africa at the university, while you were the only one from the Caribbean. At home you'd been brought up believing in Martinique as a district of France, seeing yourself as a child of the home nation, rather than belonging to the colonies like a Malian or a Senegalese. It turned out your white classmates made no such distinction.

You were even taken for an African at a party near Place Guichard, the old town with its narrow, dark buildings, the student district. A girl called to you from the other side of a crowded room, 'Omar, Omar!' She rushed over to you and then, realising her mistake, dropped your arm, saying, 'I'm sorry, I thought you were Omar Traoré.' She smiled and you smiled,

and you both agreed it was an unfortunate error. Except that similar mistakes kept happening, often enough that you were forced to understand it as a deliberate refusal to recognize you as the Frenchman you'd been raised to believe that you were. Your friends at the university praised your 'good French', as if you hadn't been speaking it all your life. In the next breath they told you they didn't 'see' colour. Once, during a class, you made an observation about the connection between Caribbean and European poetry that won the praise of the professor. As you filed out of the lecture hall, one of those friends patted you on the back. 'Well done, Fanon, at heart you're basically a white man.'

Text extracted from *The Strangers* by Ekow Eshun, published by Hamish Hamilton.

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Writing the wound: politics, poetics, psychiatry

I read Frantz Fanon because I live in an ageing and timorous society. I'm one of those migrants that Europe is nervous about. I came to psychotherapy because I wanted to understand my own history, and what my inner experiences have to do with the outside world. I work in the field of mental health, where power and care are often overlooked. I'm interested in practical decolonisation and the formation of new, expansive national identities.

I find Fanon's writing difficult, lyrical and dry, but I've persisted long enough to read the major books several times. He has interesting things to say about the current behaviour of the African upper-middle classes, about racism, social therapy, the psyche, power relations and gender in his native Martinique, and in France and North Africa. Fanon insists that the effects of French colonialism are radical, enduring, material and psychological. He's more interested in the mindset of colonisation than in colonial identity. He insists on a radical shift in power, and he refuses to rule out counter-violence.

Fanon brought to psychiatry his interest in difference. Progressive psychiatry looked for the causes of illness in the social and historical context of the individual. Fanon's analysis paid attention to three groups categorised as subhuman: namely, Jews, blacks and colonial subjects.

Fanon learned social therapy from the Catalan Marxist psychiatrist and resistance organiser François Tosquelles. Tosquelles thought the authoritarian power relations in the asylum made illness worse. His remedy was to give people within the institution some meaning, purpose and agency over their lives. That innovation is still a radical departure from the norm.

Fanon is a phenomenologist. Much of what he asserts is based on his own experience and observations. He takes alienation, or *Selbstentfremdung*, seriously. He describes the workings of alienation through the categories of black and white, at the level of the body and in politics. I recognise its symptoms: the suspicion; the expectation of

ritual humiliation; and then the exhaustion when my vigilance is rewarded by safety. I recognise the anger at an unmistakably racist incident, which arrives accompanied by a certain measure of relief before doubt sets in once more. You become strange to yourself.

The Wretched of the Earth (1961) has the clearest vision I have encountered of what can go awry after a revolution is won. In the most meaningful sections, I'm reminded of my birth country, and of my father's hushed rage at the inefficient, censored, and heavily surveilled post-independence state by which he was employed.

Fanon explains to me the society in which I grew up. I'm part of the class he excoriates. The conditions he observes and describes are the laboratory which created my family and my birth country, Cameroon. He'd say we were the African would-be *évolués* who aspired to the status of the West Indian assimilated class, while they adopted white colonial dominant attitudes towards us.

Fanon is at his weakest on sexual identity and gender. If he had not been engaged in dismantling systems of hierarchical oppression, perhaps his description of homosexuality as a 'colonial perversion' might have been buried in the footnotes of commentaries about his work. Fanon's writing about anti-colonial struggle is criticised for offering limited agency to women. In 1960, he met Simone de Beauvoir in Rome. De Beauvoir's book *The Second Sex* had been in print since 1949. It seems to have made no impression on his work.

The most serious critiques of Fanon are from black feminists and feminists of colour. These critiques address the lack of depth and agency in the women he writes about. He seems anxious about fictional black female characters 'lactifying', or 'milkifying' themselves by jumping into bed with white fascists. As a student and then as a soldier, Fanon suffered from the widespread, crude sexual racism, where the *toubab*, or 'white' was preferred to the black Frenchman and the African.

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Personally, I'm interested in looking at the current situation of women. The international school in Douala, Cameroon is next to the French supermarket, 'Casino'. Entry to the street is controlled by private security guards armed with weapons that resemble semi-automatic rifles. There is a plethora of security companies to guard the property and the bodies of those who can afford safety. Most of the women I see at Casino are yellow-skinned, long-haired and adorned with ultra-feminine accessories. Fanon would have condemned this aesthetic as *lactifying*.

Two long aisles in the Casino building are stacked with skin whitening preparations: creams, lotions, cleansers and antiseptic soaps. When I was a teenager, we used to get our Topsyngel and Topicort from the Nigerian-run supermarket downtown or from the local pharmacy. The appearance of the women in the skin-lightening aisle at Casino is a side effect of a yearning which is echoed in Asia and the Americas. Skin brightening is a multibillion-dollar global industry. This is female desire in action. It's not terribly different from the drag-adjacent aesthetic right-wing femme influencers and politicians adopt.

The desire of non-white women for the markers of middle-class whiteness is easy to caricature as ignorant or absurd *lactification*. It's also a serious health risk. But skin lightening is one way in which women can use their appearance to telegraph their aspired status. If the desire for social advantage is automatically fed by a complex of inferiority, or by another pathology, then everyone who wants to change their class status is suffering from the same complex.

While I'm glad to have deeply engaged with Fanon's work, I suspect he'd disapprove of my choices. I've settled in Europe. On the other hand, given what happened to African states after his death, he might have been moved to compromise. His writing reveals his enthusiasm for multi-ethnic citizenship, as well as his disinterest in Islam, Algerian traditions and Arab nationalism. I don't believe he could have stayed in today's Algeria.

Some revolutions go wrong in Fanonian ways, but I'm still hopeful. It's up to each of us to imagine a world that cares for all.

The black man
had to live
his life **with**
a kind of
subservient
awareness
every day.

ROGER ROBINSON

The racial allocation of guilt (after Fanon)

Once, at a writers' festival in the late nineties, I was sitting at a table with some high-profile writers. The conference was a high-minded snoozefest, so I told everyone I was heading back to the hotel. To my surprise, most of the writers on my table, who by chance were all Black, decided to leave with me. That prompted one writer to whisper, with much concern, that we couldn't all leave at the same time.

I asked why.

He said, 'It will look bad.'

I asked, 'To who?'

And that question forced him to confront the ludicrousness of his suggestion. The truth is, I knew what he meant: that it would look bad to white people, as if we were doing something wrong. I wasn't angry with him for feeling that way. What I felt instead was a deep sadness: that he had to live his life with that kind of subservient awareness every day, and that only through my observation was he confronted with the weight of that struggle.

The same writer told me that he was an Oxford man before he was Black. I tried to imagine what it meant, to be stitched into stone like ivy, the river punting its way through your bloodstream, the chapel bells loosening

the body into certainty. But I also knew how quickly skin betrays the order of things; how, in the dark pane of a pub window, his face would arrive first, before the vowels of his speech, before the Latin in his step. There is always that moment when, walking into a room, the air tilts toward what it thinks you are. Even here, among friends, I imagine the old dream: a banquet where the guests lean forward, smiling, and for a moment he believes himself invisible until one of them gives, without malice, an opinion on Black men that he grits his teeth to ignore. Oxford, I think, was never first. It was a mask held steady in the mirror, and behind it a man was waiting, almost gently, to be misnamed.

Fanon tells us: the colonised man is guilty before he speaks. His very skin is testimony. He inherits the crimes of conquest not as victim but as culprit, accused before the act, condemned without defence. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, he writes of the white gaze pinning him to the wall, demanding justification for his existence. This is not guilt earned. This is guilt bestowed, a transference of shame. The empire fires the gun, and the wound bleeds on the Black body, yet the finger of accusation points not to the trigger but to the chest that received it.

In the 2010s, my band King Midas Sound was very popular in Poland, Russia and Spain, which meant I was taking a lot of flights, often returning on Sunday evenings through Stansted Airport. At the time, I was full of main-character, front-man energy: broad-brimmed hats, a full beard, and snakeskin boots. Let's just say I dressed distinctively, to say the least.

One time, I came through the passport scanner and was accosted by a short, plain-clothes policeman who identified himself and asked me to follow him. He proceeded to fire off question after question, with no logic in their order or intention. I was tired but calm. After making me wait 20 minutes while he disappeared with my passport, he returned and said I could go.

The next week, the same plain-clothes officer stopped me again. It felt

like Groundhog Day. Again, I was tired, but I kept calm, and again, he eventually let me go.

The following week he stopped me for a third time. I asked to see his supervisor. He reacted as if my request was some sign of anger or guilt. I told him plainly that this was the third time in three weeks that he had questioned me. He looked at me as though I'd fabricated the whole story. I refused to answer his questions without his supervisor present.

At that moment, one of his colleagues walked up, whispered something to him, and suddenly he handed back my passport, saying I was free to go. I can only assume his colleague remembered me from the previous two times and recognised his bias. And I can only assume an escalation on my part towards his supervisor would not be desirable.



Lasso: each time, through Nothing to Declare, my body remembers its own guilt. Even when innocent, I feel watched, as if the mirrored glass has eyes that hunger. It's the table, too, the way it waits for your belongings like an altar stripped bare, where nothing is meant to be cherished. Then the lasso rope comes. A new weapon among the others – taser, pepper spray – and I hear it, a sound like a whip cutting the air clean open. The lasso's loop falls, almost tender, closing around my arms, a kind of embrace, except it drags only me sideways, in front of everyone. Questions, questions, spill: Where do you come from? Where are you going? When were you born? Their voices work on me the way shame robs your stature. The next time, another airport. And again the rope with its whoosh through air, its swift tightening, and the pull. I begin to

understand: this is the shape travel takes now, a lasso loop in the air, always finding its mark, tightening and dragging.

Fanon believed decolonisation must be a cleansing, a wresting back of the right to innocence. But what does innocence mean in a world that insists on your guilt? Even joy can feel like defiance. Even laughter can be cross-examined. The colonised carry a double task: to live, and to justify living.

Colonial violence is a theft of blame. It moves like smoke: unseen yet suffocating. The police officer who stops me does not say I am guilty; he simply acts as though I am, and the action makes it so. This is how power works: it transforms suspicion into evidence, and evidence into sentence, without the inconvenience of proof. Fanon knew this: 'The Negro is comparison'. His very being is a trial without jury.

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own guilt.** Even when
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hunger.**

On entering the zone of being

Allow me to introduce you to two people. One is the man from Martinique, born in one of France's 'vieilles colonies' in the summer of 1925. A man of many masks: some imposed, some acquired, others seized for himself. Black Frenchman, soldier in the French army, West Indian medical student, non-Muslim revolutionary in the Algerian resistance, African, philosopher, poet, doctor, and psychiatrist. The other is a British-Indian woman from peaceful, affluent, southwest London, born in the spring of 1979 or, as it will come to be known, the winter of discontent. What could this man possibly have to say to this woman? Nothing, surely. There is no overlap between their lives, races, experiences, or time on this earth.

And yet.
He speaks to me.

'When people like me they tell me it is in spite of my colour.' Those unbearably on-the-nose words, written by Frantz Fanon in France nearly 30 years before I was born, when he was not yet 30 himself, so accurately describe my own life they take the breath from my body.

I grew up in Richmond-upon-Thames, at least until our house was repossessed in another (not unrelated) winter of discontent. And while it's true that some of my friends' parents in this immaculately preserved swathe of British imperial history were professors, doctors, and psychiatrists, none, as far as I know, kept a copy of *Black Skin, White Masks* by their bedside. And if I had heard about Fanon then, he would probably have been traduced as an apologist for terrorism. As for my parents, they were born under the British Raj and came of age around the time Fanon's anti-colonial ideas were setting the newly independent India alight. But they never mentioned him – nor, for that matter, did they talk much about the mother country. As for me, all my friends (and foes!) were white, and assimilation was the only option. At Glasgow University in the 1990s, I studied philosophy. In the political module there was Marx, Mill, Hume and, in the modern continental module, plenty of Sartre, Foucault and, looming behind them all, Freud – but no Marxist existentialist from Martinique.

I did not find Fanon when I most needed him. Which is to say, for the entirety of my childhood and youth, too much of which was spent – to borrow one of Fanon’s most grimly evocative and famous phrases – in ‘a zone of non-being’. In this zone, white people of all ages and persuasions would squeeze my skinny brown arm whilst saying, with genuine pity or – worse – affection in their eyes, *but not you*. It was ‘when people like me they tell me it is in spite of my colour’, all over again.

Fanon found himself in the zone when he left Martinique a French subject and alighted in Lyon and Paris a black object. His hurt and incensed response to the brutal shock of being racialised for the first time touch me deeply, no doubt because there were no such shocks for me. It is a necessary condition of the second generation, born as we are into a country that deems us strangers, to know no different.

I’m a writer – like Fanon and all the others who have been othered – preoccupied with trying to find the most befitting and beguiling language to illuminate experiences for which, away from the controlled environment of the blank page, there are no words. Sometimes, though, a little wish-fulfilment creeps in. I wish I’d had a profound, lifelong relationship with *Black Skin, White Masks*, but I have not. My political thinking was not shaped by *The Wretched of the Earth*. I read Fanon properly – in his own words rather than all the ones written about him, which is very much not the same thing when it comes to Fanon – for the first time in my early forties, which is the decade I’m still in. I’m ashamed to write this until I remember those incantatory words: ‘Shame. Shame and self-contempt. Nausea.’ The racialised psyche, Fanon reminds us again and again, has nowhere to turn but upon itself. ‘I have a phrase for this,’ he writes helpfully in *Black Skin, White Masks*: ‘the racial allocation of guilt.’

‘I honestly think it’s time some things were said,’ he notes in that book’s incandescent introduction. Thank god, he said them – and in the most rousing and oblique prose. People say Fanon is hard to read, but I love the way his words flash, tremble, and haunt like crazy weather. His writing is as resistant as his politics, which is surely the point. ‘Only some of you will guess how difficult it

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was to write this book,' he writes. And some of us do. He never sat at a typewriter or wrote with a pen, which is unsurprising considering all he got done in his brief, tumultuous, urgently lived life. Instead, he dictated his prose, pacing up and down – and that's exactly how it reads. The sentences keen with frustration, unspent rage, bursts of clarity and hope.

Lived experience.

White gaze.

Man of colour.

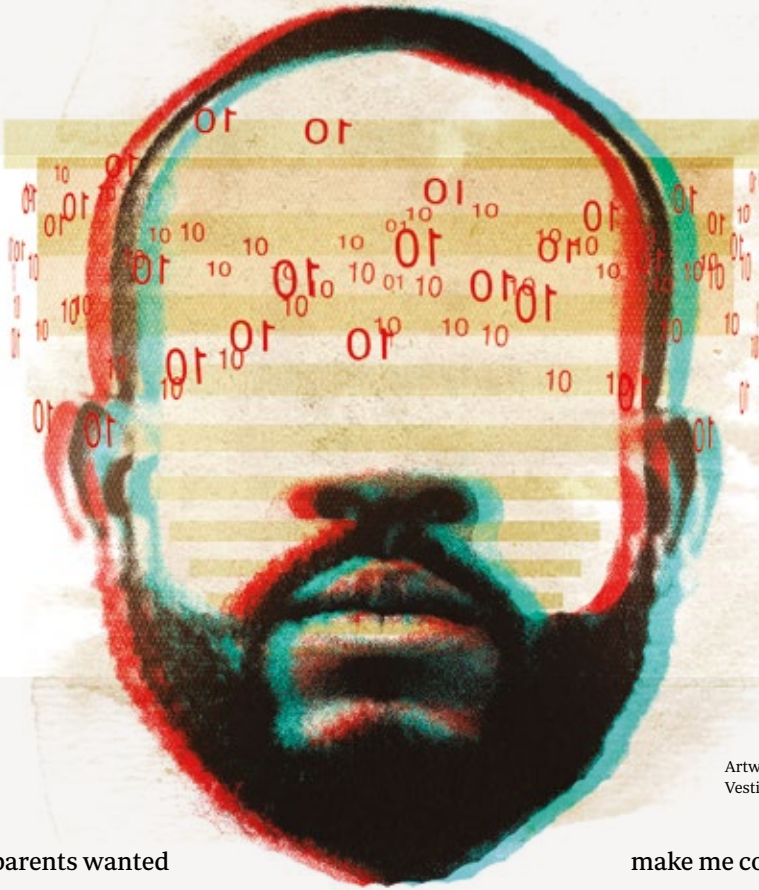
Woman of colour.

All are terms Fanon was using in the early 1950s, though, of course, I wish he had used 'woman' more, and more humanely. Still, I love the way his sentences pile up, demanding we get on with the impossible business of decolonising our minds. No one was talking like this in 1980s Richmond-upon-Thames, just as they weren't talking about it in Lyon and Paris when Fanon wrote *Black Skin, White Masks*. That book explains what happened to me and why, which is when the lifelong work of taking off the white mask really begins.

I love the
way his
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KHALDOON AHMED

Brown skin, white mask



Artwork © Michael Salu/
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My parents wanted me to become a doctor. They were conscious of the need to survive as a minority – something I didn't understand when I was young. Frantz Fanon wrote *The Wretched of the Earth* in 1961, the very same year my father arrived in London from Pakistan. They were both born as colonial subjects who travelled to the imperial centre. For me, reading Fanon today is as incendiary as ever. He exposes my own 'white mask' – a mask erasing my origins that might

make me complicit in racist structures.

As an NHS psychiatrist, it could not be clearer to me that racism causes mental illness. I work in an inner-city area where the majority are non-white. COVID-19 showed the vulnerabilities of minorities in Britain. Black people were four times more likely to die in the pandemic. Also, if you are black, you are much more prone to a severe mental illness like psychosis – and then more likely to have forced treatment

under a section. The system puts a white mask on me: I am the one sectioning patients.

A friend of mine is part of the all-white, all-male leadership of an organisation. When faced with a race issue, he turned to me. His employee had thrown a hand grenade when she left her job, saying that the organisation was 'toxic, white and male'. My friend didn't know what to do. A few weeks later, I asked what had happened next. He said that they now have 'race' as a recurring item on their monthly meeting agendas. This is why Fanon is relevant for me today. When Fanon sees oppression, he picks up arms. But in our organisations, when we see structural racism, we bury the issue in an agenda item.

At my senior clinical management meeting, the issue came up again of why ethnic minorities, particularly black people, are more likely to end up in the psychiatric intensive care unit. There was a call to join a committee to look into this. My impulse was to put my hand up to volunteer, but I didn't. At that point, I felt frustrated and demoralised that the inequalities I first heard about as a medical student are still operating.

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon writes, 'Decolonisation is always a violent phenomenon.' During the Black Lives Matter protests, the statue of the slave trader Edward Colston was thrown into Bristol Harbour. It was a visceral and symbolic moment that I am completely behind. But I also agree with David

Olusoga, who writes that 'you can topple Colston, but how do you topple racism?' There is a disconnect between the singular action that happened in Bristol and the hard-to-grasp task of unravelling racial inequalities and injustice.

Fanon talks about the 'dependency complex of the colonised'. Sixty-four years later, I know that something like this still operates. I monitor what I say depending on what setting I am in. An awareness of my identity as perceived by others modulates my speech. A friend of mine of similar background to me is a politician. She wears a light red cotton scarf to represent her support for Palestine, although nobody would know what it represents apart from herself – because publicly she chooses to remain silent about what is happening.

I envy Fanon. His position is an immediate and unambiguous call to arms. My options are perhaps to join or not join committees, to boycott or protest. He shows through his words and his life a point of no return – of realising his position in a structure, identifying with the oppressed, and making that the starting point of resistance. This is a process of radicalisation, of seeing, and of coming into consciousness.

I can now see the two elements in me that are in opposition to each other. I have the white mask that is my institutional self. This is opposed by my radical/ radicalised self that cannot unsee the exposed structures around us. My agency is caught somewhere in between.

Alternative destinies

In their last year of secondary school, two Haitian students were selected to participate in a French essay competition in Martinique. They flew together from Port-au-Prince and gaped at the French flag flapping under the familiar sun. They noted the thin and white licence plates, the good roads and the Carrefour store with a flamboyant tree in front. They were standing in an alternate universe – one in which the colony persisted. After a while, one of the students kissed his teeth. ‘Bah,’ he lashed out, ‘Land of welfare recipients.’

Here is the paradox at the heart of Frantz Fanon’s life and work. Fanon was a Martinican psychiatrist who became a pivotal figure in the Algerian War of Independence. In Fanon’s eyes, the Martinican man, unlike the Haitian, carries the additional burden of having allowed the master to free him. Fanon grew up walking past the statue of the white abolitionist Victor Schoelcher on his way to school. The Haitian, by contrast, fought for his liberty and prevailed, and has been punished by the colonial powers. Nevertheless, Haitians, no matter how poor or wretched, carry their victory in the marrow of their bones.

The pupil’s harsh outburst concealed his sadness. People in Martinique live a hundred times better than people in Haiti or Algeria. Frantz Fanon became a psychiatrist in 1951 after serving with De Gaulle’s liberation forces, not because his family could afford medical school, but because he was French. His first book, *Black Skin, White Masks*, is the beginning of his exploration of power and race. He is a Black man ‘in and of his time’, yet he is an outsider, unable to escape the colour of his skin and unwilling to accept either of the options the whites offer him: ‘erasure’ or inferiority. Fanon’s writing is full of the cadences, humour and wit of his island. His accent rises from the page. Jokes about ‘rolling the Rs’ in French, or about the snobbery of those who’d seen Paris and forgotten their Creole, are familiar. When he writes about the tragedy of Mayotte Capécia, a Black Martinican obsessed with marrying a white man, an uncomfortable truth emerges. Haitian writer Cléante Valcin had written an eerily similar story in 1933 called ‘La Negresse Blanche’.

Black Skin, White Masks turns out to be as relevant to the Haitian psyche as to the Martinican’s. Somehow, the Haitians, after finding the



courage to eliminate the French, settled into the same kind of colonial complexes as those denounced by Fanon.

Where are the fruits of the Haitian Revolution? In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon provides a method for the oppressed to kick out their European colonists. It follows the Haitian strategy of the time. Because all exploited people have been subjugated violently, it is only with a rifle that the 'peasant' can become a man again – through killing the settler. 'Violence hoists the people up to the level of the leader.'

Jean-Paul Sartre is scathing in his judgment of Europe in his introduction to *The Wretched of the Earth*. He calls for the violent end of their empires: 'To shoot down a European is to kill two birds with one stone [...] There remains a dead man and a free man.' As a European, however, Sartre does not write about what happens after liberation. Fanon also struggles to formulate a postcolonial future not defined by European thinking. There is only one possible answer for him: Marxism. Anything else will be perverted by a local bourgeoisie that will wear the 'mask' of the coloniser. Fanon calls himself an Algerian. He embraces the FLN as the surrogate movement that did not happen in Martinique. Yet, for all his identification with the Algerians, Fanon never learns to speak Arabic. He idealises the Algerian peasant but knows little about Berber culture or Islam.

Fanon died in 1961, one year before Algeria declared independence. He was spared the sorrow of seeing his idealistic dream reduced to a totalitarian Islamist state. Three decades later, Algeria was still struggling with a civil war so brutal that its massacres echoed the colonial atrocities Fanon had condemned. The rifle won sovereignty; it could not guarantee a plural republic.

A century after Fanon's birth, the structural facts he named persist. Supply chains still consign the South to exporting raw commodities while the North refines; armoured vehicles idle outside tenements from Caracas to Gaza. Just like the Haitians, the Martinicans bled for France in cane fields and slave holds. Haven't they suffered enough to claim the benefits of a state enriched by their blood and tears? Now a French passport delivers paved roads, pensions, and first-rate clinics – comfort that to many looks less like capitulation and more like an overdue dividend on centuries of exploitation. Yet most Haitians, made equal through violence, still speak of fighting against life instead of living it. Fanon yearned for the dignity of those who had freed themselves. He could not have imagined the price the people would pay for their successful revolutions.

Inglan mad dem

‘**W**hy are black people six times more likely to be diagnosed with schizophrenia than their white compatriots?’ asked Professor Walvin. It was 1981, and that year there were only two identifiably black students among the intake of The London Hospital Medical School: Amaju Ikomi, a foreign student from Nigeria, and me.

Walvin stood at the lectern. His eyes ranged across the auditorium and stopped at me. He waited. I was flushed with embarrassment. ‘Mr Grant, would you care to hazard a guess?’ When it became apparent that I would not be drawn on the subject, Walvin answered for me, averting his gaze and addressing the body of students. ‘Black people suffer a higher incidence of schizophrenia because black people are schooled in paranoia.’ I was affronted by his assertion, but I said nothing.

Had I read *Black Skin, White Masks*, I might have recognised that, from Frantz Fanon’s perspective, Walvin was practising what the psychiatrist called ‘the racial allocation of guilt’. Fanon referred explicitly to the spectre of black soldiers subjugating rebellions at the behest of their French overlords, but the notion speaks generally to the way, writes Fanon, that enslavers and colonisers recruited ‘peoples of colour’ who ‘annihilated the attempts at

liberation’ by other ‘peoples of colour’. During the period of the Atlantic Slave Trade, for example, the black slave driver did his master’s bidding in whipping the enslaved. Walvin’s assessment boiled down to the idea that, in the generations after abolition and colonialism, black intermediaries – equivalent to drivers – had wielded the whip of paranoia over their brethren. Walvin had neatly absolved descendants of colonisers of their part in the mental ill-health of my black British peers.

A decade earlier, I recall there had been numerous stories in Luton, where I grew up, of troubled Jamaican youngsters being sent by their parents back to the Caribbean. When I asked my mum, Ethlyn, what was going on, she answered dryly, ‘Inglan mad dem’. Ethlyn’s sad observation came to mind later at medical school whenever I was assigned the task of looking after the pitiful black patients on psychiatric wards.

I imagine Fanon would have reached the same conclusion as my mum about the assault on the mental health of the formerly colonised and their descendants in hostile environments – whether in Luton or Blida, Algeria, where Fanon practised.

‘In psychiatry,’ argues Fanon, ‘there are latent forms of psychosis that become evident following a traumatic experience.’

In psychiatry,' argues Fanon,
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 experience.'**

Fanon died in 1961. He never used the phrase *generational trauma*, which only started gaining traction among psychologists in the mid-60s, but its notion haunts the pages of his first book, *Black Skin, White Masks*.

Fanon's book has a youthful, searching urgency to it; he was 27 and had only recently completed his training at medical school. Frequently, it reads like a literature review of different types of texts – academic research as well as novels – especially those with an autobiographical slant that offer up case studies.

The purpose of *Black Skin, White Masks*, writes Fanon, is 'to enable the colored man to understand by way of clear-cut examples of psychological elements that can alienate his black counterparts.' I'd argue that Fanon recruits himself as a case study for his thesis – an inquiry into the inner life of an intellectual and traumatised black man who shuttles between the white and black world as a proxy for an 'abandonment neurotic' who must make a choice about where his allegiance lies. That conundrum

later resulted in Fanon electing to become a participating observer, siding with Algerian rebels in their violent fight for independence from France – a decision which challenged a core principle of medicine: first, do no harm.

Fanon's use of 'we' throughout *Black Skin, White Masks* is at first unsettlingly academic and distancing until his sincerity and generosity becomes clear, at which point his empathy is also apparent. The book is particularly insightful in its interrogation of strategies for neutralising the impact of the hierarchical racial code (an 'epidermal racial schema') introduced by colonisers as a construction of racism.

I wish I'd been introduced to Fanon's study 40 years ago at medical school; it would have helped to skewer the fallacy that black people had brought psychological misery upon themselves by schooling each other in paranoia.

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