

Christopher J. Lee, *Franz Fanon. Toward a Revolutionary Humanism* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2015). pp. 233.

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Christopher J. Lee's *Frantz Fanon: Toward a Revolutionary Humanism* offers a new perspective on Frantz Fanon's life and thoughts, which are often mystified or oversimplified by popular accounts.<sup>1</sup> Lee, who is a lecturer at the University of the Witwatersrand (South Africa), writes an intellectual biography that situates Fanon historically and geographically. The book is structured into six chapters. Four chapters retrace Fanon's residences, while the other two analyze his main works. Doing justice to Fanon's legacy requires remembering both his writings and actions; by situating and historicizing Fanon, Lee analyzes Fanon as both a theoretician and political activist.

Lee argues that it is essential to geographically situate Fanon in order to understand Fanon's idea of "radical empathy"<sup>2</sup> and his stance on a new humanism—a concept that transcended race, class and national origins. Born in Martinique in 1925 to a black middle-class family, Fanon's life spanned three continents. Consequently, Lee explains that for Fanon, recognizing and understanding others could not be circumscribed within political or racial borders.<sup>3</sup> Instead, Fanon's radical empathy, which Lee defines as "a political outcome of cosmopolitanism,"<sup>4</sup> developed across the transcolonial space.

According to Lee, Martinique was, for Fanon, "a place of origin, not destination."<sup>5</sup> The island's history of colonialism and slavery served as the backdrop to Fanon's childhood. Furthermore, the development of the Négritude movement in Martinique during Fanon's youth radically influenced his thoughts.<sup>6</sup> Lee argues that Aimé Césaire, who taught Fanon in high school, "liberated and constrained Fanon's ambitions."<sup>7</sup> Césaire was an intellectual and personal role model for Fanon. Through Césaire's writings and Fanon's racial experience in France, Fanon critiqued the ideas emanating from Négritude.<sup>8</sup>

Fanon's encounter with the colonial center involved several paradoxes. During the Second World War, Fanon joined the liberation forces fighting fascism in Europe.<sup>9</sup> After the war, Fanon pursued psychiatric studies in Lyon. Here, he confronted racism and the contradictions of being a black French citizen. This

experience profoundly shaped Fanon's revolutionary thought. He then experimented with psychiatry to counter racial divides.<sup>10</sup> It was in this context that he wrote *Black Skins, White Masks* in 1953.

Fanon moved to Algeria for professional reasons and lived there for three years, witnessing the outbreak of the Algerian war.<sup>11</sup> Fanon, who had already made contact with native Algerians and *pieds-noirs* in France, knew the effects of colonial domination on the Algerian subconsciousness. He claimed that "psychiatry. . . has to be political"<sup>12</sup> and became more and more politically involved in the national liberation struggle, a circumstance that drove him into exile in Tunisia in 1956, according to Lee.<sup>13</sup>

Fanon, who at this point identified as Algerian, remained in Tunisia until his death in 1961. He was an active member of the FLN. Aside from his medical activity, he became a spokesperson and a diplomat. Furthermore, he wrote several articles for *El Moudjahid* (the FLN newspaper) and a book, *A Dying Colonialism*. In *A Dying Colonialism*, Fanon justified the FLN/ALN's struggle.<sup>14</sup> His writing, as his life, became more pragmatic and politically oriented within an international scope.<sup>15</sup> Fanon continued to document the challenges newly independent nations face, particularly neocolonialism. In Lee's words, "[d]ecolonization only marked a political end point. It still remained a starting point for remaking humankind."<sup>16</sup> However, as Lee argues, the assassination of FLN leader, Ramdane Abane, who defended the idea of a pluralistic, inclusive and secular Algeria, displaced Fanon's presence in the FLN.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, Lee rejects the critiques that deemed Fanon as an advocate of violence, arguing that he only considered it legitimate within the particular context of the Algerian liberation war and besides diplomatic strategies and cultural resistance.<sup>18</sup>

Analyzing *Black Skins, White Masks* (1953) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) in the context of Fanon's life allows Lee's reader to better understand his thoughts. Written in Fanon's eclectic style, both books address race as a social construction to overcome. In *Black Skins, White Masks*, Fanon explained that blackness is defined by the perception of the other; racism creates races, and impacts people's subconsciousness.<sup>19</sup> On this basis, Fanon proposed to overcome the colonial black-versus-white dialectic. According to Lee, in *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon blurred the line between the colonizers and colonized.<sup>20</sup> For

Fanon, the liberation struggle, in the frame of national independence, should aim at a broad human decolonization.

For those without prior knowledge about Fanon's personal history or his tracts, or those looking for a Fanon manual, *Frantz Fanon* is a perfect book. Well-written, clear and yet drawing a nuanced picture of the man and his thoughts, Lee innovatively combines biographical and theoretical elements to reconstruct Fanon. Fanon's legacy, as Lee stresses throughout the book, remains extraordinarily significant in present-day politics. Indeed, the radical empathy and the new humanism Fanon championed are highly topical in our postcolonial world.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Christopher J. Lee, *Franz Fanon. Toward a Revolutionary Humanism* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2015), 25-9.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 119 and 134.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 110 and 131.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.