# Frantz Fanon: Anti-colonial and Pan-African Revolutionary

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***Frantz Fanon – The Militant Philosopher of Third World Revolution***

by Leo Zeilig

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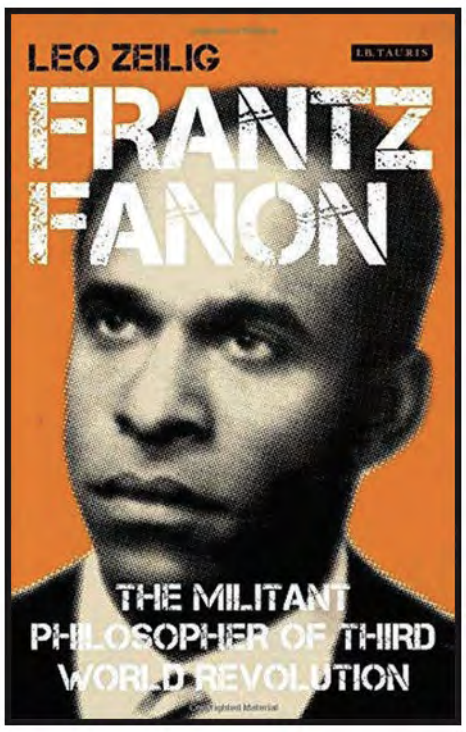
Frantz Fanon could be rightly considered as one of the major anti-colonial voices of Africa that sprang into vocal and physical action after the devastations of World War II. Fanon was a personage of formidable intellect mixed with a passion for political action on behalf of the decolonisation process in Africa. In this regard, Fanon stands on the same podium with the chief architects of anti-colonial action and discourse. That anti-colonial podium would include Cheikh Anta Diop, Kwame Nkrumah, Amilcar Cabral, Patrice Lumumba and others. But Fanon would have a special place on that podium for his incisive and sharp analysis of the African colonial situation as opposition mounted against Europe's colonial presence on the continent.

Fanon's remarkable role in Africa's movement towards independence is ably displayed by Leo Zeilig's biography, *Franz Fanon – the Militant Philosopher* of *Third World Revolution*. Fanon has been much written about; so the question is what would Zeilig add to the Fanon story, a veritable odyssey. Fanon has become such a prominent activist intellectual in the anti-colonial struggle that the following works, among others, should be noted: the biographies by David Caute (1970) and Irene Gendzier (1974), and the works of Renate Zahar (1969), Bulhan (1985), Sekyi-Out (1996), Alessandrini (1999), Lazarus (1999), Chekri (2000), Macey (2007), Ehlen (2001), Gibson (2011), Bird-Pollan (2014), Gordon (1995, 1996, 2015), and Mbembe (2016). In spite of the fact that Africa was the focus of his intellectual exertions and literally his battleground as in the case of Algeria, his impact on Africa's intellectual life has been rather muted. A likely explanation for that could be found in his prescient chapter in *The Wretched of the Earth*, 'The Pitfalls of National Consciousness'. According to Fanon, at the dawn of African independence, a rapacious neocolonial comprador class would be fighting against the urban workers and peasants to step into the political vacuum created by the end of colonial rule to continue the exploitation of the masses. The end result would be that the 'wretched of the earth' remain wretched. On this basis, the works of Fanon have not become standard fare in the political science and history departments of Africa's universities. Africa's neocolonial comprador classes are not particularly interested in the development of Africa's intellectual life. The same problematic is noted with regard to the works of Kwame Nkrumah and Cheikh Anta Diop. Yet, the influence of Fanon has been so impressive that books such as *Coloniser and Colonised* (Albert Memmi) and *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Paulo Freire) could arguably be viewed as Fanonesque in their approach.

Despite the plethora of works on Fanon, Zeilig's biography of Fanon stands out for its wealth of detail on its subject's life, both as engaged militant and incisive intellectual. Above all, there is much detail about Fanon's early life in Martinique, a tiny outpost of France's *Départments d'outre mer*. We learn not only about Fanon's family but also about the racial caste system put in place by the French that sought to justify the enslavement of captive Africans in the Americas. So even after slavery was abolished, the ideas on race and its permutations, engendered during the period of enslavement, were still dominant. Zeilig informs the reader that 'In the 1920s and 1930s, Martinique was deeply marked by colour and race' (p.15). He also states that there was a profound inequality in terms of race. Here was a society truncated into a tripartite differentiation of 'white planters and businessmen, mulattoes, and blacks…. On the island, pigmentation, specifically the whiteness of your skin, to a large extent determined your trajectory in life and your sense of self-worth' (p. 15). This was the sociological context in which the young Fanon grew up. As a result, even Martiniquians of African phenotype saw themselves as French, descendants of 'nos ancestres, les Gaulois'. There was indeed a direct reaction to this as expressed by the *négritude* intellectual movement developed by Fanon's compatriot, Aimé Césaire, and Léopold Sédar Senghor of Senegal.




Zeilig takes the reader through Fanon's mid-teenage years when he volunteered to travel to France in 1943 to join the Free French forces led by Charles De Gaulle. Petainist rule was overcome while Fanon was in transit to France and he was sent back to Martinique. But the young idealistic Fanon was still fired up with the idea that the fight against Fascism was a worthy cause. From then onwards, Fanon began the intellectual trajectory that resulted in his struggle against French colonialism in Algeria and the production of revolutionary texts such as *Black Skin, White Masks, The Wretched of the Earth, Studies in a Dying Colonialism,* and *Toward an African Revolution*. Fanon was sent to North Africa as part of the Allies' thrust against the German army. It was under such circumstances that his intuitive knowledge of race matured. First, he was drafted into a French army structure that followed certain principles of race. The racial hierarchy put the French in the dominant position, the Antillais as *négres/Africains evolués* in the intermediate position, with the lowest rung reserved for the French colonial subjects from Africa proper – especially West Africa and North Africa. At the same time, Fanon was able to note how 'sociological race' played its role in his military unit in Algeria and Morocco. As he put it: 'the French do not like Jews, who do not like Arabs, who do not like Negroes [sic]' (p. 26). It was under these circumstances that the intellectually precocious Fanon began to understand how the idea of race was played out phenomenologically. Fanon returned to Martinique after the war and obtained his baccalaureat, which meant that he would return to France for further studies. First, he began with dentistry in Paris, but eventually switched to medicine in Lyon. Two momentous events occurred after that in the year 1952. Fanon got married to Marie-Josèphe Duble, who became his intellectual partner; then he produced his *Black Skin, White Masks* – a veritable work on the phenomenology of race. Fanon was merely twenty seven years when this path-breaking work was produced – evident proof of his intellectual precocity.

Fanon was not just the medical doctor intellectual who read voraciously in all academic areas; he later branched off into the study of psychiatry. After graduation in 1951, Fanon began his medical career at Saint-Ylie hospital in the Jura 'where he began making copious notes on patients and their neuroses that he would later use in his books' (p. 42). During this time Fanon became acquainted with the work of the not-yet-famous psychoanalyst, Lacan, and built up an intellectual relationship with Paul Valvet, ex-director of the famous psychiatric hospital, St Alban. Zeilig informs us that 'through Balvet, Fanon met Francois Torquelles, who was now running St.Albans' (p. 43). After Césaire, the anti-colonial poet of *négritude,* the older Fanon's new role model was Francois Tosquelles. According to Zeilig, 'Born in 1912 in Reus, Catalonia, Tosquelles had read Marx at an early age and supported Catalan nationalism in the 1930s. Trained in phenomenology and psychiatry at the Institut Père Mata in Barcelona, Tosquelles came into contact with refugees influenced by Sigmund Freud…. [and later] started to develop his own notions of "institutional psychotherapy"' (p. 43). It was this interaction with Tosquelles that influenced Fanon's own views of patient-doctor interaction.

This approach to psychiatry was the model Fanon adopted when he was posted to Blida-Joinville, a small town not far from Algiers. Fanon's move to Algeria was pure happenstance, but this move set the foundations for his remarkable revolutionary path. With the war having ended but with the evident weakening of France as a colonial power, the time was ripe for the colonials to fight for their own freedom. Fanon had the conviction that freeing France from German occupation also entailed freeing Algeria and colonial Africa from French colonialism. In this, he was in agreement with the French philosopher, J.P. Sartre, who wrote the preface to *The Wretched of the Earth.*

The end of World War II provided the backdrop for the continuation of the nascent anti-colonial movement in Algeria. Zeilig makes the following observation: 'Though Algeria's modern war of independence and national liberation is popularly seen as starting in 1954, the 1930s and 1940s were dominated by a number of

different "constitutional" nationalist parties. A wave of working class militancy escalated throughout the war until 1945' (p. 50). Thus, Fanon was necessarily caught up in that anti-colonial struggle as it picked up pace after World War II. As a product of French colonialism, Fanon instinctively understood the basis and dynamics of the anti-colonial struggle in Algeria and other parts of Africa. Although the anti-colonial war in Algeria is popularly seen as the war of the FLN against the French *pied noirs,* there were important precursors to that organisation. The information on this presented by Zeilig affords useful details that Fanon himself was much aware of. Messali Hadj was the founding member of the ENA (*Etoile Nord Africaine*) and subsequently the *Parti du Peuple Algérien* (1937). There was also violent French counter-revolutionary action which resulted in the massacres of 1945 – immediately after the end of World War II. This was the basis for the subsequent rise of the FLN (*Front de Liberation Nationale*), which in turn came to compete with Messali Hadj's party, which had by then reconstituted itself into the MNA (*Mouvement National Algérien*). The anti-colonial war started in earnest in 1954, one year after Fanon had arrived in Algeria (1953) to serve in the hospital in Blida. Fanon joined the FLN in 1955 and, as Zelig states, 'remained a member of the FLN until his death. After 1956 every significant book and article he wrote was *for* the Algerian Revolution and against the degeneration of national liberation' (p. 65).

Fanon's life took a severe personal toll with the death of his sister in 1955 – one year after his involvement in the Algerian struggle. At this point, the anti-colonial struggle and French colonial reaction to it continued with the proliferation of numerous movements. This was the era of the vast array of anti-colonial movements headed by prominent African names such as Nasser, Sekou Toure, Kwame Nkrumah, and Julius Nyrere. The ideological engine behind this flurry of revolutionary activity was the theory of Marxian socialism and the Soviet state model. Although the FLN was able to lead the nationalist revolution, it had to contest its ideological position with the PCF (Parti Communiste Français) and its Algerian sister organisation, the PCA (Parti Communiste Algérien) .

As the anti-colonial struggle continued, Fanon became increasingly involved. As a member of the FLN, he became acquainted with its leadership, including Ahmed Ben Bella, Mohammed Khider, Mostefa Locheraf, and others. The struggle was in full bloom at this time (1956) with the guerilla activities of both the FLN and ALN (Armée de Liberation Nationale). A significant military engagement was taking place at that time, The Battle of Algiers, which came to an end in 1957. As the war progressed, tensions grew and the hospital at Blida, where Fanon worked, increasingly came under surveillance. According to Zeilig, 'Members of Fanon's staff were arrested and beaten, others joined in the FLN strike action or went to fight in the mountains' (p. 98). Fanon continued his work, healing both revolutionary fighters and their assailants at Blida, but things eventually came to a head with widespread arrests being made. When he began receiving death threats and rumours that Blida was about to be raided, Fanon tendered his resignation. Zeilig informs us that 'The *ministre résident's* office formally expelled Fanon from Algerian territory in December 1957' (p. 100). Fanon and his family quickly left Algeria, days before the hospital was raided.

Fanon then moved back to France, but given the urgency of the situation in Algeria, he and his family travelled on to Tunisia. There he obtained work at the Hôpital de Manouba and continued his research and writings for the Algerian cause. He encountered a bit of Arab racism there but he shrugged it off and pushed on with his writings and psychiatric work. The indefatigable Fanon then took up work with another hospital, Hôpital Charles Nicolle. His activist work, as one of the editors of *El Moudjahid*, the revolutionary news outlet of the FLN, continued in Tunis.

Fanon then took his ideas and his role in the Algerian revolution to the All-Africa Peoples' Conference in Ghana in 1958. Fanon's credentials as a full-fledged operative of the continental African anti-colonial struggle were enhanced with his central presence at the First Conference of Independent African States in Accra in 1958. Peaceful negotiations or anti-colonial war was the central debate of the day. At this point, he was in direct communication with the anti-colonial movements in the Portuguese territories such as Amilcar Cabral's PAIGCC (Guinea Bissau) and the MPLA and UPA of Angola. As an *intellectuel engag*é, Fanon's remarkable output now included highly significant and acclaimed works such as *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs (Black Skin, White Masks), Les Damnés de la Terre (The Wretched of the Earth), L'an V de la Révolution Algérienne (The Year V of the Algerian Revolution),* and *Pour la Revolution Africaine (For the African Revolution)*. By then, Fanon had met and conversed with important figures such as Patrice Lumumba and Kwame Nkrumah. But time was getting short for this meteor of activism and intellectual brilliance. Fanon was stricken with leukemia. He first sought treatment in the Soviet Union but eventually had to travel to the U.S. for further treatment. Fanon died in Bethesda, Maryland (U.S.A.), on December 6, 1961 – his last hours paradoxically monitored by a CIA officer, Ollie Iselin.

The above, in brief, represents the lived life of Fanon, the brilliant and precocious meteor of Africa's physical and intellectual resistance to colonialism. He was the first to overturn the subject-object phenomenological dialectic between an imposing Europe and an imposed – upon Africa. This was the meaning and significance of *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs.* The other classic work is *The Wretched of the Earth (Les Damnés de la Terre)*, which again focused on the subjective feelings and intuitions of Africa's colonised subjects. The human response in reaction to dislocation and colonial oppression was often violence, as was eloquently portrayed in that text. Fanon, as a colonial subject of 'France d'outre mer', whose ancestors had been cargoed from Africa to the tiny island of Martinique for hard agricultural labour, had been transformed into the authentic voice for African liberation from colonial domination.

In the last chapter of his text titled 'Legacies', Zeilig presents what he views as the legacies of Fanon's works and his life. The influence of Jean Paul Sartre, who wrote the Preface to *The Wretched of the Earth,* was outlined, but the most significant point mentioned by Zeilig and noted by others who study Fanon's works is his prescient understanding of the psychology and dynamics of colonialism and its aftermath. Fanon's legacies were not restricted just to Africa and France but also to North America, where the African-American population was fighting for its human and economic rights. Zeilig points this out with reference to the impact that Fanon's writings had on the U.S. Black Panthers (p. 245).

The strong point of Zeilig's biography is that he has offered the reader details about the life and careers of Fanon not generally known to those otherwise familiar with his ideas. Readers of Fanon have come to know him as a driven and committed activist and intellectual who slept little. For example, in a day-long meeting with Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, the discussion was finally put to an end by De Beauvoir who told Fanon 'that Sartre needed his sleep, to which he characteristically replied, "I do not like people who limit themselves". Fanon was a whirlwind of words and analysis' (p. 228). Fanon packed into a short life of thirty-six years much more contributions to the human condition than other notable figures twice his age.

Fanon's intellectual energy produced at the precocious age of twenty-seven the classic text *Black Skin, White Masks*, which could be seen as the first text in the colonial era on the phenomenologyof race. How does an African feel internally when in actual interaction with Europeans when in Europe? The issue is that while the colonial African, who has been exposed, as in Fanon's case, to French culture, experiences no shock when visual contact is made with the French people in places like Martinique, in France, the colonial subject is quickly disabused of his/her false consciousness of *'nos ancestres les Gaullois'*. An African/black in motion on a Paris street is abruptly confronted with 'Mama, see the Negro! I am frightened!' (*Black Skin, White Masks*, hereafter *BSWM*, 112). But this appraisal of blacks was not unique to French society. As Fanon puts it: 'Some ten years ago I was astonished to learn that the North Africans despised men of colour. It was absolutely impossible for me to make any contact with the local population. I left Africa and went back to France without having fathomed the reason for this hostility' (*BSWM*, 103-103). In this singular text, Fanon soliloquises in anguished terms on the meaning of being black in an increasingly post-colonial world. His fall-back position in such a situation was always his humanistic stance that humans should be judged in evaluational terms *a priori,* as members of the human race. But a specious history haunts the African as expressed by Fanon in this passage: 'Face to face with the white man, the Negro has a past to legitimate, a vengeance to exact; face to face with the Negro, the contemporary white man feels the need to recall the times of cannibalism'(*BSWM*, 225). Fanon's universalist answer to this is that 'The Negro, however sincere, is the slave of the past. Nonetheless, I am a man, and in this sense the Peloponnesian War is as much mine as the invention of the compass' (*BSWM*, 225).

But in spite of Fanon's idealistic approach to the human condition and human history, 'it is going beyond the historical, instrumental hypothesis that I will initiate the cycle of my freedom. The disaster of the man of color lies in the fact that he was enslaved' (*BSWM*, 231). It is this subordination to Europe, nourished from the seventeenth century onwards by a scientific racism, that presented

the African as an evolutionary retardate, compensated for by his assumed physical superiority. The African is all biology and 'a phobogenic object, a stimulus to anxiety' (*BSWM*, 151) as exemplified in Fanon's psychiatric work both in France, Algeria, and Tunisia. Fanon was faced with the triple problem of the African being viewed principally in biological terms, backward and primitive in culture and victimised by a false consciousness in places like Martinique and St. Louis (Senegal), where the blackman was set on the path toward becoming a cultural *evolué'*. France obviously took its *mission civilisatrice* quite seriously. The goal was to transform the African with all his ethnic trappings into a 'civilised black Frenchman'.

In this situation, where the African subaltern has to propose an antithesis to the Western thesis of his biological and cultural inferiority, Fanon had to grapple vigorously with Jacques Howlett, Michel Salomon, Michel Cournot, to name a few, and their confident views that the African/black was all biology, the counterpoint being 'the Jew as calculating reason' – Europe's ego bounded on both sides by its African id and Jewish superego. In contrast to the responses by the Negritude writers, Césaire and Senghor, whose answer to the problematic of 'blackness' was to proclaim 'Hooray for those who have invented nothing. And blackness is sensuality while Europe represented reason', Fanon's retort was always to appeal to a universal humanity. He adopts a curiously ahistorical stance in this regard without noting that history is an important component in the development of human self-consciousness. The question is this: does the recognition of an African historical past in any way influence the consciousness of those living under conditions of oppression? Fanon writes: 'In no way should I dedicate myself to the revival of an unjustly unrecognised Negro civilization. I will not make myself a man of any past. I do not want to exalt the past at the expense of my present and my future' (*BSWM*, 226). Even though he would recognise an African intellectual past when brought to his attention, being 'very happy to know that a correspondence had flourished between some Negro philosopher and Plato. But I can absolutely not see how this fact would change anything in the lives of eight-year-old children who labour in the cane fields of Martinique or Guadeloupe' (*BSWM*, 230). Fanon could be in error here: it is on the basis of the biological and cultural inferiorisation of the African with the rise of scientific racism that consciences were free to exploit the African for the benefits of a growing capitalism. Particular human identities were suppressed, to be replaced by the objectifying term 'negro'. Rehumanisation requires rectifying a human past as a means to revaluing the African *qua* human. It was this approach that was undertaken by Cheikh Anta Diop, and it has yielded some result.

Fanon argues that 'the disaster of the man of colour lies in the fact that he was enslaved'. This claim is, of course, problematic. Slavery was a universal phenomenon on all continents before the age of machines and technology. Ancient Greece and Rome were noted for their practice of slavery and, when Rome conquered most of Europe, the harvesting of slaves from the conquered territories was a normal practice. The tragedy of the African is that he/she is yet to recover from the psychological trauma of a specifically dehumanising enslavement and subsequent colonialism. The colonial experience was not unique to the African continent. Yet, it must be noted that while Korea and Taiwan were harshly colonised by Japan, they have now fully recovered. Both countries are now economic powerhouses in terms of technological and industrial output.

Africa and its diaspora are now overcome with a quiet angst combined with a cultural anomie and atrophy. In this regard, *BSWM* is very much relevant for contemporary times. The superaltern-subaltern relationship still exists in subconscious racial terms. The existing 'black-white' mode of classification focusses on biology and not culture or geographical origin as the natural way of describing persons of African and European origin. With other groups such as East and South Asians this is not the case. Fanon wrote as much: 'What is important to us here is to show that with the Negro the cycle of the *biological* begins' (*BSWM*, 161). In this regard, Fanon's ideas and musings in *BSWM* are still relevant in the twenty-first century. The language that Europe imposed on Africa from the sixteenth century onward still traps the African principally at the level of the biological. The intellectual foundations for this are to be found in the various writings of writers such as Compte de Gobineau, Blumenbach, and Agassiz. The final assessment is that Fanon as psychiatrist was well equipped with the clinical tools to explore the concept of race not only at the material but also at the psychiatric level.

Fanon's skills as clinical analyst served him in good stead as he observed the psychological impact of colonialism, specifically on the Algerian psyche. Fanon's text *A Dying Colonialism (ADC)* testifies to this. French colonialism effectively challenged the patriarchal structure of the Algerian family, leading to psychological stress on the part of the colonised. Fanon's many case studies testify to this. The chapter 'Algeria Unveiled' explores the structure of Algeria's patriarchal Muslim society, according to which the adult female plays a specific role first as daughter and then as wife. Fanon's clinical analyses revealed the complexities of this situation. In this regard, colonialism can often be viewed as a form of 'creative destruction'. The following passage more or less sums up the dynamics of anti-colonialism: 'The veil was worn because tradition demanded a rigid separation of the sexes, but also because the occupier [was?] *bent on unveiling Algeria.* In a second phase, the mutation occurred in connection with the Revolution and under special circumstances. The veil was abandoned in the course of revolutionary action' (*ADC*, 63).

It is Fanon's final work, *The Wretched of the Earth (WE),* that establishes him, however, as arguably the major intellectual and activist for Africa's anti-colonial struggle. The text deals essentially with the phenomenology of colonial domination. At some point in time, as Fanon observed, there will be rising violence. In Fanon's language, the struggle is always that of the 'native confronting the settler'. But within the anti-colonial struggle itself there is the internal problematic of the urban versus the rural. Fanon writes: 'The overwhelming majority of nationalist parties show a deep distrust toward the people of rural areas. The fact is that as a body these people appear to be bogged down in a fruitless inertia' (*WE,* 109). Yet the peasants have an important role to play given that they are often the most exploited of the colonised people (*WE*, 131).

A key argument of *WE* is expressed in the chapter titled 'The Pitfalls of National Consciousness', in which, in soothsayer fashion, Fanon intuits the aftermath of the anti-colonial struggle. National consciousness, rather than being the expression of the liberation of the people as a whole, becomes a 'crude and fragile travesty of what it might have been' (*WE*, 148). For the new political ruling groups, 'nationalization quite simply means the transfer into native hands of those unfair advantages which are the legacy of the colonial period' (*WE*, 152). This new bourgeoisie is of the parasitical comprador type whose 'innermost vocation seems to be to keep in the running and to be part of the racket' (*WE*, 150). Fanon's prescient analysis points to the genesis of the political and economic problems now plaguing Africa. Bourgeois nationalism then seeks to protect its class interests by forging a neocolonial pact with the erstwhile coloniser. This is the genesis of what is commonly known as 'neocolonialism'. In its scramble to garner the trinkets, baubles, and luxury items of Euro-Asian capitalism, ethnic and faux-religious factors – already exploited by colonialism – are brought into the neocolonial equation. Under such circumstances, there is no time or thinking for development. Africa is still mired in underdevelopment, trapped as it is in the negative aspects of Ricardian comparative advantage. The negative aspects of such a state of affairs have been amply explored by Erik Reinert (2007) in his text *How Rich Nations Got Rich and Why Poor Nations Stay Poor.* In an atmosphere of globalisation, the Ricardian comparative advantage mantra translates into the cheap agricultural goods produced by Africa's workers and peasants being exported and exchanged for the finished technologically produced goods for the urban classes that could afford them. The perennial question ever since independence has been how to break through Africa's present political and economic impasse. The details of such a situation are clearly expressed in the UNDP's annual Human Development Index metrics, where most nations of Africa occupy the tier of the least developed countries.

The root cause of the present stasis of underdevelopment lies with Fanon's post-colonial bourgeoisie, which in cynical fashion has excised from Africa's memory bank the purveyors of the ideas that set in motion the anti-colonial struggle. These individuals paid the ultimate sacrifice for the anti-colonial cause. Mostly forgotten are the names of Lumumba, Moumie, Mondlane, Cabral, and others. There are also neocolonial centripetal forces that are always on the alert to extirpate attempts to break free from the present impasse. The fates of the late Thomas Sankara and Muammar Gaddafi testify to this. Yet it is authors like Leo Zeilig who, more than fifty years after Fanon's death, continue to recognise the significance of the singularity of his activist and intellectual life. Zelig's biography of Fanon is more than worth the read.

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