

# FANON

FOR BEGINNERS



WRITTEN AND ILLUSTRATED  
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*Writings and Readings*

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To my daughter

Laura

whose very existence is a gift of God  
and whose love, friendship,  
and collegial support  
are divine excess

And with great appreciation to Leila and Don, for introducing me to the project... to Sean, for professional and emotional help... to Mom and Dad, for the trip to Martinique... to Alfred, for e-schmoozing... and to Genghiz Khan's heir, for the passionate encouragement that makes wonderful things possible.

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**WHO IS  
FRANTZ FANON?**

## WHO IS FRANTZ FANON?

**Philosopher and psychoanalyst, revolutionary and writer, Frantz Fanon has justly been called the voice of the Third World. Throughout his brief but extraordinary life, Fanon was passionately committed to freedom.**

His words and his actions promoted human dignity, honor, and liberation—and unlike many intellectuals, he literally put his life on the line for his beliefs. To people throughout the world,

particularly to people of color in both developed and emerging countries, Fanon remains an inspiration, a revolutionary hero, even a martyred saint.



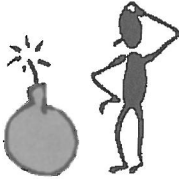
His works continue to be studied because he is one of the 20th century's most powerful social philosophers. Occupying a position both inside and outside of dominant Euro-American culture, Fanon critiques earlier thinkers—such as Hegel, Freud, Marx, and Sartre—who have shaped our modern era. Through his writing, he also challenges us today. He asks us to reexamine our concepts of liberty, selfhood, humanism, equality, and nationalism.

*Fanon for Beginners* is framed by a biographical section and a chapter discussing Fanon's political and cultural influences. Its main portions follow the principle stages of Fanon's thought:



## 1. THE SEARCH FOR BLACK IDENTITY,

as presented in *Black Skin, White Masks*, the stunning diagnosis of racism that Fanon wrote while he was studying medicine and psychoanalysis;



## 2. THE STRUGGLE AGAINST COLONIALISM,

as explained in *A Dying Colonialism* and *Toward the African Revolution*, essays Fanon produced when he was actively engaged in Algeria's war of independence;



## 3. THE PROCESS OF DECOLONIZATION,

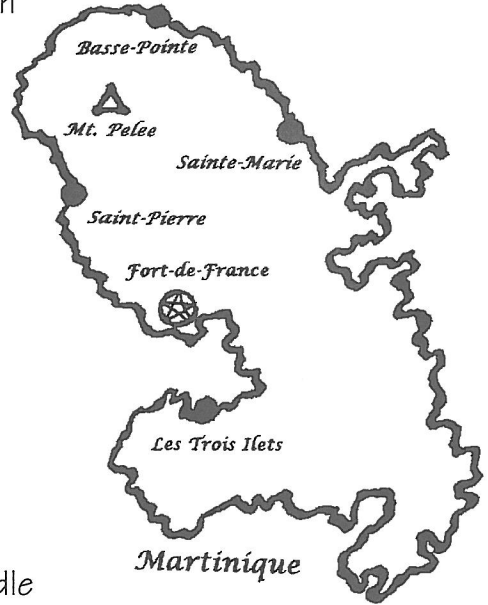
as analyzed in *The Wretched of the Earth*, the book that extended insights gained in Algeria to Africa and the Third World.

I hope *Fanon for Beginners* will give readers with some knowledge of Fanon a useful overview of his life and works as a whole . . . and that it will introduce a new generation of readers to a man who coupled a great mind with a great soul.

## IN MARTINIQUE AND FRANCE

The fifth of eight children, Frantz Fanon was born on July 20, 1925, in Fort-de-France, the capital of the French Caribbean colony of Martinique. His father, a customs official, and his mother, a shopkeeper, belonged to the island's relatively prosperous and often racially mixed (*sang-mêlé*) urban middle class. The Fanons promoted

French language and culture, discouraging their children from speaking Creole or participating in African-based folk traditions. Young Frantz was trained to adopt the values of the *békés* (descendants of white slaveholders) and the metropolitan French rather than to identify with the *noirs* (descendants of African slaves).





# THE COLONIAL HISTORY OF MARTINIQUE

**1502:** Columbus landed on Martinique, inhabited by Carib Indians. The Caribs called the island Mandinina, or Island of the Flowers.

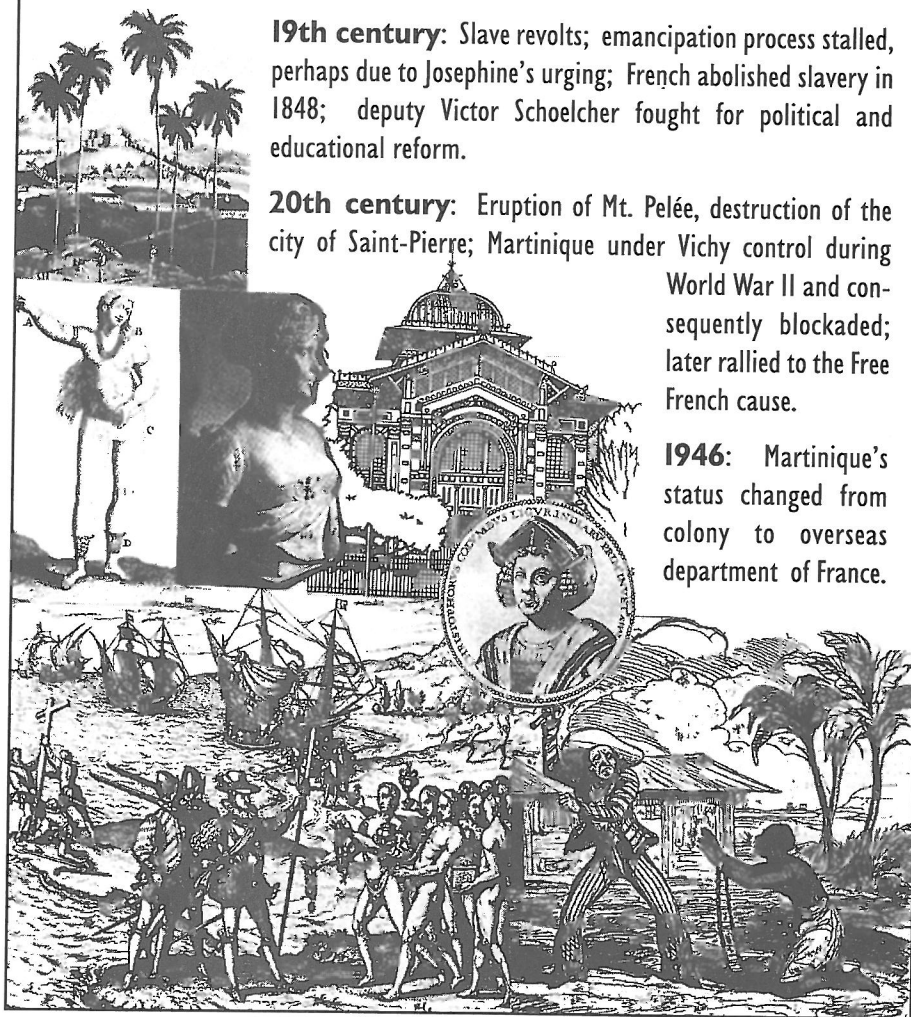
**17th century:** The French began colonizing Martinique and introduced sugar cane; Caribs completely exterminated; Louis XIII authorized the African slave trade to the Antilles.

**18th century:** Plantation system established; struggles between white planters and French administrators; England challenged French domination; French and Haitian revolutions caused unrest on Martinique; the future Josephine Bonaparte born near Trois Ilets.

**19th century:** Slave revolts; emancipation process stalled, perhaps due to Josephine's urging; French abolished slavery in 1848; deputy Victor Schoelcher fought for political and educational reform.

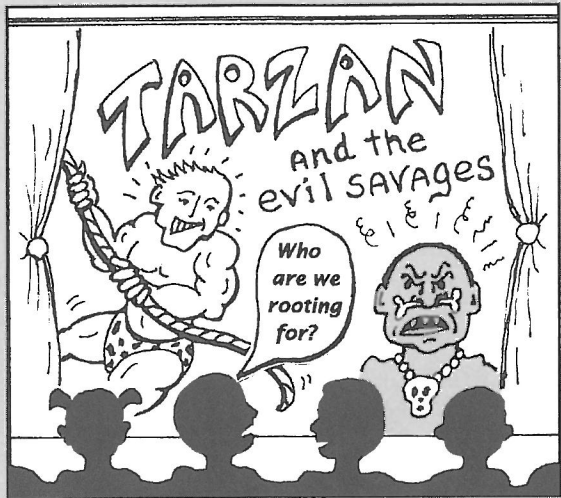
**20th century:** Eruption of Mt. Pelée, destruction of the city of Saint-Pierre; Martinique under Vichy control during World War II and consequently blockaded; later rallied to the Free French cause.

**1946:** Martinique's status changed from colony to overseas department of France.





According to his older brother Joby, Frantz was a mischievous, headstrong boy who sneaked into movie theaters without paying and engaged in minor vandalism . . . as well as playing soccer and excelling in school. He was admitted to the prestigious Lycée Schoechler, then the French Antilles' only secondary school, where the great poet Aimé Césaire taught language and literature.





Fanon wrote later about the tremendous impact Césaire's *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, published in 1939, had on his fellow Martinicans:

FOR THE FIRST TIME A LYCÉE TEACHER . . . WAS SEEN TO ANNOUNCE QUITE SIMPLY TO ANTILLEAN SOCIETY THAT IT IS FINE AND GOOD TO BE A NEGRO. TO BE SURE, THIS CREATED A SCANDAL. IT WAS SAID AT THE TIME THAT HE WAS A LITTLE MAD . . . NEITHER THE MULATTOES NOR THE NEGROES UNDERSTOOD THIS DELIRIUM. (AR 21-22)

Although Fanon later disagreed with many assumptions behind Césaire's philosophy of Négritude, Césaire's work opened space for a profound reassessment of racial identity.

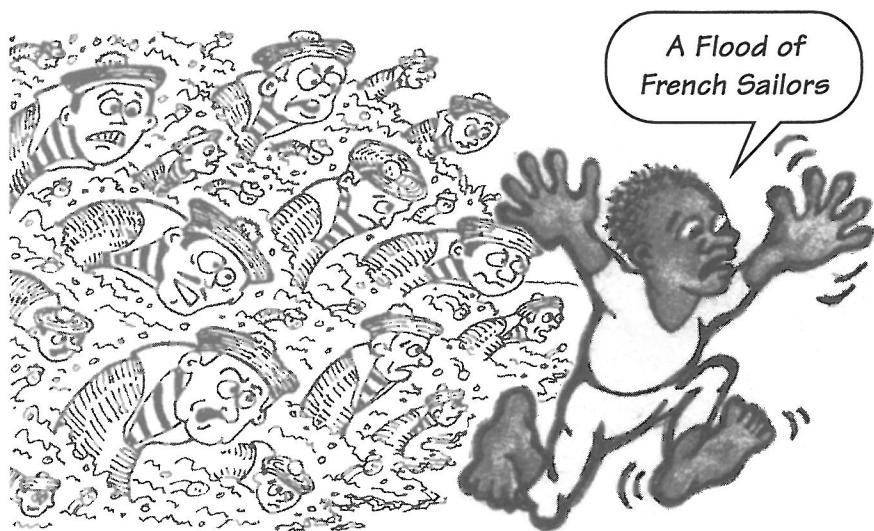


## AIMÉ CÉSAIRE

- 1913—born in Basse-Pointe, Martinique
- 1931—begins school in Paris
- 1939—publishes *Notebook*
- 1945—elected Mayor of Fort-de-France; sent to Paris as deputy from Martinique
- 1956—breaks with Communist party
- 1958—founds Parti Progressiste Martiniquais (PPM)
- 1960s—writes stage plays
- 1983—elected President of the Regional Council

“MY NEGRITUDE IS NOT A LEUKOMA.  
OF DEAD LIQUID OVER  
THE EARTH’S DEAD EYE  
MY NEGRITUDE IS NEITHER  
TOWER NOR CATHEDRAL  
IT TAKES ROOT  
IN THE RED FLESH OF THE SOIL  
IT TAKES ROOT  
IN THE ARDENT FLESH OF THE SKY  
IT BREAKS THROUGH THE OPAQUE  
PROSTRATION  
WITH ITS UPRIGHT PATIENCE”

from *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*

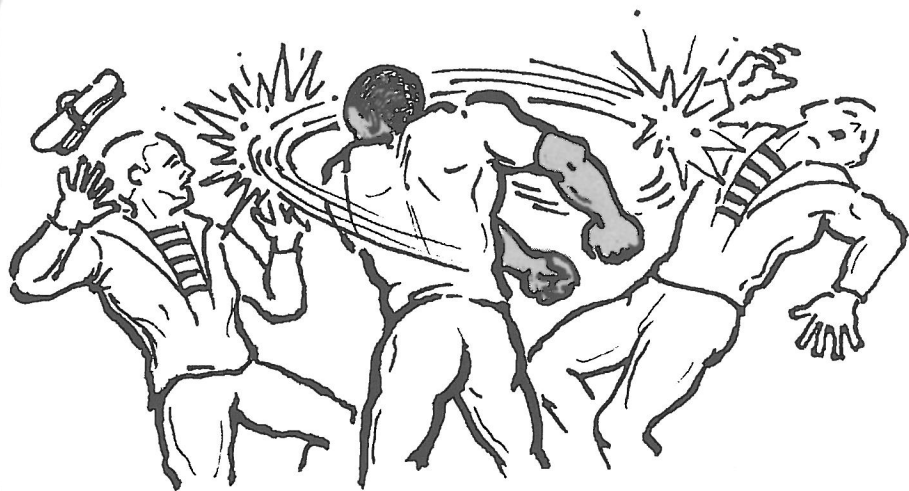


In 1940, another event occurred that affected Martinican identity—the German defeat of France. Martinique became subject to collaborationist Vichy rule, so the Allies blockaded the island and a good part of the French Atlantic fleet that had harbored there. The island found itself flooded with 10,000 French sailors, increasing the white population by 500% and bringing overt racism to Martinique.

Before World War II, Martinicans had considered themselves French. “Race” was neither an essential category nor a hardened position, in part because the vast majority of Martinicans have African ancestors. Much more important than skin color were economic status and social class. But the French sailors saw the islanders through the lens of racial prejudice. To them, Martinicans were Negroes, indistinguishable from Africans, undifferentiated among themselves, at best second-class citizens and at worst savages. Fanon called this confrontation with institutionalized racism the Martinican’s “first metaphysical experience.” They questioned their values and, inspired by Césaire, began to reverse them.



During this time, Fanon developed a racial consciousness quite different from that taught by his parents. The following incident illustrates his growing activism in the cause of racial justice.



In downtown Fort-de-France, Fanon and his companions saw two French sailors beating up a young Martinican. Without consulting his friends, Fanon jumped into the fight to rescue his outnumbered countryman. He wasn't bothered to learn later that the Martinican had stolen money from the sailors: to him, the incident demonstrated a clear, racially motivated injustice that called for an immediate remedy. Even as a teenager, then, Fanon showed the readiness to back up principles with action that became the hallmark of his adult life.

"THE FLAME OF  
FRENCH RESISTANCE MUST NOT AND  
SHALL NOT BE EXTINGUISHED"

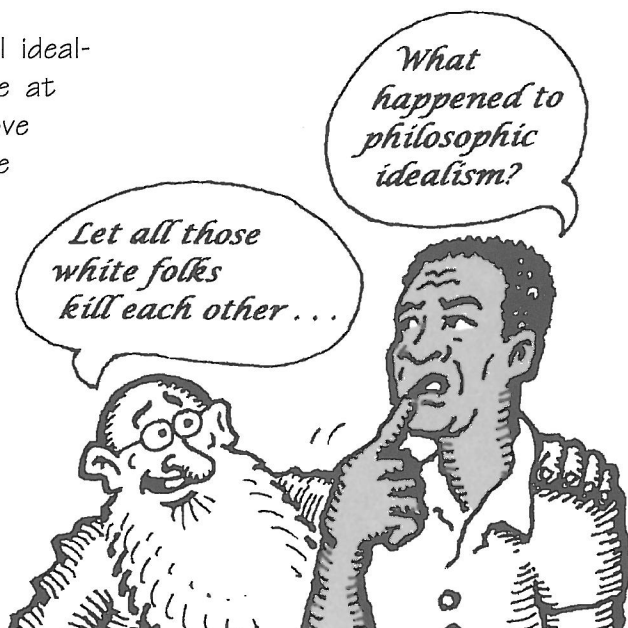
—CHARLES DE GAULLE



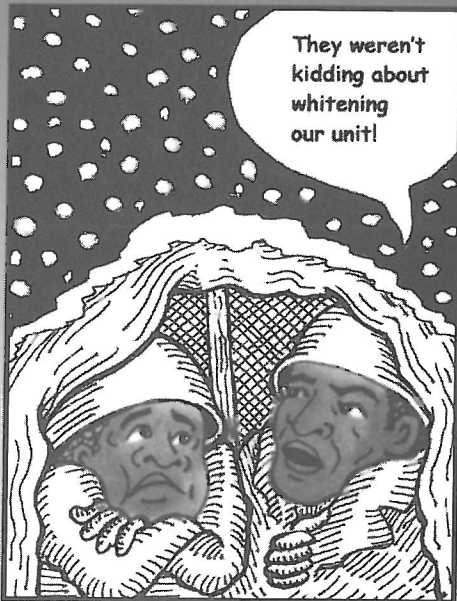
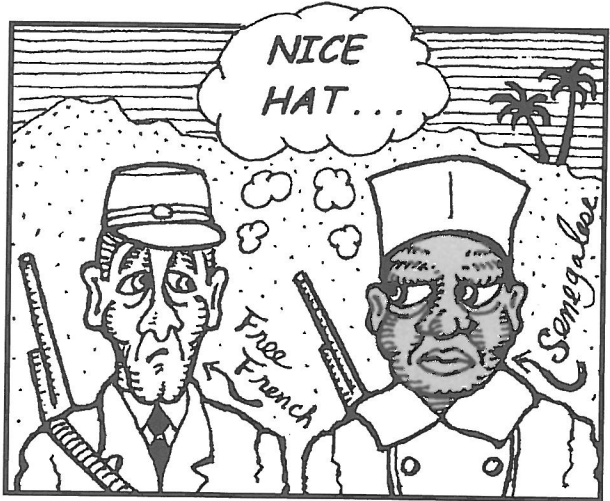
Fanon demonstrated a similar conviction in 1943 when he joined the Free French forces assembling on the neighboring island of Dominica. Before he left Martinique, he shared his intentions with a philosophy professor at the lycée. The professor claimed that the war was not theirs, that aiding the effort to liberate France reinforced colonized black people's chains of servitude. To this, Fanon replied:

"EACH TIME LIBERTY IS IN QUESTION, WE ARE CONCERNED, BE WE  
WHITE, BLACK, OR YELLOW; AND EACH TIME FREEDOM IS UNDER SEIGE,  
NO MATTER WHERE, I WILL ENGAGE MYSELF COMPLETELY."

Behind this youthful idealism lies the outrage at oppression, the love of justice, and the commitment to human dignity that guided Fanon until his death.



Fanon was attached to the 5th battalion and sent to Morocco, where he served with white Frenchmen, white North African colonists, and other black Antilleans. Also stationed there were African units like the Senegalese, who wore distinctive uniforms and were treated as less civilized partners in the war effort. Being able to observe how French colonialism operated in North Africa enlarged Fanon's view of racial, economic, and cultural oppression. It also revealed some of the more absurd ambiguities of racial thinking.



For example, when the Moroccan-based soldiers were needed in Alsace, military commanders decided to "whiten" the battalion. Senegalese troops were left in Africa with the excuse that they could not endure the cold North European climate. However, the Antillean soldiers—raised in a similar tropical climate and having the same dark skin—were officially considered "European." Their reward was the privilege of nearly freezing to death during the brutal winter campaign in Alsace.

It was in France that Fanon became truly disillusioned with the war, particularly with what he saw as cowardly conduct by French soldiers and civilians. A moving letter to his parents explains why:



IT'S BEEN ONE YEAR SINCE I LEFT FORT-DE-FRANCE. WHY?  
TO DEFEND AN OBSOLETE IDEAL . . . I DOUBT EVERYTHING, EVEN MYSELF.  
IF I DON'T RETURN, IF YOU LEARN ONE DAY OF MY DEATH AT THE  
ENEMY'S HANDS, CONSOLE YOURSELF, BUT NEVER SAY: HE DIED FOR A NOBLE  
CAUSE. SAY: GOD CALLED HIM BACK, BECAUSE THIS OTHER FALSE IDEOLOGY,  
THE SHIELD OF CIVILIANS AND IMBECILIC POLITICIANS, SHOULD NOT INSPIRE US  
ANY LONGER. I HAVE FOOLED MYSELF.

NOTHING HERE, NOTHING JUSTIFIES THIS SUDDEN DECISION TO MAKE  
MYSELF THE DEFENDER OF A FARMER'S INTERESTS WHEN HE HIMSELF  
DOESN'T GIVE A DAMN . . .

I LEAVE TOMORROW, HAVING  
VOLUNTEERED FOR A DANGEROUS MISSION.

I KNOW THAT I WILL NOT RETURN.

Frantz  
Fanon

Despite his premonitions, Fanon did survive World War II and return to Fort-de-France. He was wounded in combat, however, and received the Croix de Guerre. (The officer who personally awarded the medal, Raoul Salan, would lead the French offensive against the Algerian freedom fighters a decade later, when Fanon was fighting for Algeria's liberation). In Martinique, Fanon finished his lycée examinations and was awarded a veteran's scholarship to study abroad. In 1947, he went back to France.