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## Critical voices in critical times: Fanon, race & politics - an interview with Mireille Fanon-Mendès France (part 2 of 2)

LINDA HERRERA 3 October 2017

*Mireille Fanon-Mendès France, activist, scholar, and daughter of Frantz Fanon, talks about the enduring relevance of his ideas and passions in contemporary political life.*



Mireille Fanon-Mendès France standing by statue of her late father-in-law, Pierre Mendès France. By Linda Herrera, Paris, 2017

In part 2/2 of her [interview](#) with Mireille Fanon-Mendès France, Linda Herrera asks about the post-2011 migrant issue in Europe. This topic bursts open a rich discussion about the politics of race, neo-colonialism, parallels between Muslims in France and African-Americans in the US, Black Lives Matter, the need for critical education and the scope for more concrete forms of global solidarity.

The work and life of Frantz Fanon (1925-1961), whose incisive and visionary work on revolution, liberation, race, emancipation, and decolonization, continues to resonate in these "interesting" times. Who better to talk about the enduring relevance of Fanon's ideas and passions in contemporary political life than his formidable daughter, Mireille Fanon-Mendès France. In addition to being an authority on Fanon, Fanon-Mendès France is a scholar of decolonialism, UN expert on people of African descent, legal advisor in a law firm in France, and human rights [activist on Palestine](#) and other places where the right to self-determination is in question. She also works on issues of land tenure in countries where people were enslaved and indigenous people annihilated after colonization. She is a member of the [Frantz Fanon Foundation](#). Her most recent article is, "[Charlottesville, un rassemblement, une question allant bien au-delà des Etats Unis.](#)"

Watch part 2 of the interview [here](#):

### Fanon Mendès-France on Race & Islam in Europe & US - 2/2



**The post-2011 wave of migration is changing the political landscape in Europe. Do you think any positive alternatives are coming from this phenomenon?**

If we [make parallels between] colonization and globalization, we could also make parallels between enslavement and migrants. The migrants are the new slaves of the globalization system, regardless of the reasons why they leave their own countries. They are forced to leave due to war, famine, lack of work, ecological disasters, or simply because they dream of a different life. What is common to all migrants, is that they are unwelcome in the host countries, and they are expelled from place to place. In Paris, if you go to the 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> arrondissement in the northeast you could see the police fighting the migrants every day. They try to destroy all their belongings. Why do you think they need to destroy their belongings, their modest belongings? What do they have? One backpack with shoes and a shirt, that's all. They have nothing else. And they try to destroy everything as the former slave [owners] had done with the enslaved. They destroyed all their life as they were trying to flee. In a certain way, these people are considered by this country as non-Beings. They are dehumanized by the system.

It is enough to listen to the national anthem "*La Marseillaise*." Take these lines, for example:

*Quoi! des cohortes étrangères*

*Feraient la loi dans nos foyers!*

*What! Foreign cohorts*

*Would make the law in our homes!*

And,

*Que veut cette horde d'esclaves,*

*De traîtres, de rois conjurés?*

*What does this horde of slaves,*

*Of traitors and conspiratorial kings want?*

These lines help us understand that French society has been built on a xenophobic and even a violent perception of the Other. It has never denied this construction. In this regard, it should be stressed that in 2017, beyond the extremist attacks, the migrant has become part of the "foreign cohorts" denounced in the *Marseillaise*. They are the ones about whom the French ask, "What does this horde of slaves want?" Because behind this xenophobia there's a fear that these "foreign cohorts would make the law in our homes!"

## The Universal Declaration on Human Rights lies in tatters on the floors of national parliaments eager to restrict their obligations under the post-WWII achievements.

Just remember what Marine Le Pen [in France] or Trump [in the US] said about migrants during their campaigns. But it's not only [the populists on the right] who express this xenophobia. Everyone in France forgets, or prefers to forget, that the government that strengthened the laws against the migrants was a socialist government. It was under François Mitterrand (1981-1995) with Daniel Vaillant, who later became the Minister of Interior (2000-2002). We shouldn't forget that. They began to stereotype the figure of the migrant for problems of unemployment and security. These policies reinforced the ideology carried in an anthem like *La Marseillaise*. The demons of colonization, buried under France's "official" history, were brought into the light of day.

Above all, the Western world should be ashamed that its so-called "first world status" means nothing (and certainly not

a descriptor of enlightenment or humanity) in light of the treatment of those who need the greatest help. Children drown in the Mediterranean, "fortress Europe" closes its borders and members of the European Union opt for militarized responses. All these acts will render future generations aghast. The Universal Declaration on Human Rights lies in tatters on the floors of national parliaments eager to restrict their obligations under the post-WWII achievements. Do the great legalistic and human rights achievements of post-war Europe now apply only to those with white skin? For shame.

**You have headed the United Nations Working Group on people of African descent (PAD). Can you explain the approach of France and other countries towards PAD?**

In France they want to integrate African people into French society by force, saying we are "*métisse*" (mixed race/ half-breed). This is when African people have children with European people; the children are "mixed," what they call "*métissage*" (crossbreeding). What does it mean to be *métisse*? This is ideologically, philosophically and politically disgusting because we are not "*métisse*." We are who we are with our background. The richness of the world lies in encounters, in the approach of the other, in the gaze of one to the other crossing in a perpetual act of discovery and understanding. What the Americans, Europeans and other people [who espouse whiteness] propose, is to maintain a system with minimum connections. They want to control the skin color, they want others to bleach their skin, follow their religion, and accept Eurocentric modernity as the single cultural reference.

For them, using this new category *métissage* is a way to whiten "race." Race is itself a socially constructed concept that exists neither as a category of science nor nature. It has even less validity as a legal category. The more "race" is whitened, the more we forget the origins and cultures of different people as we construct a narrative of "humanity." This becomes yet another way to render a

portion of humanity invisible. Moreover, the way *métisse* is used, precludes an epistemological difference between those descendants of the enslaved who have been “mixed” for generations, and those who are “mixed” by means of [consensual coupling] and marriage. It’s towards the latter that the nation looks. They don’t want to reflect on a history of enslavement, crimes against humanity, and the genocides committed against the enslaved and their descendants. Here again, we are faced with categories that separate people into “non-Beings” and “Beings.”

Take my background for example. My father is of African descent and my mother is from Europe. That’s all. But I’m not “*métisse*.” My background is partly African and partly European. I personally do not encounter problems because of the level of pigmentation of my skin. For these people I’m like a white person, a “Being.” My parents were doctors, I went to the university, I live in a bourgeois way, etcetera. But for these people my African origin is invisible, they ignore it. This is the perfect example of the structural racism that begins to change your history. Thus, they change the narrative of the structural racism by saying there is no longer structural racism and hence, they can affirm, “We are not racist. We are in favor of the *metissage*.” But at all levels of the society we see the expression of structural racism.

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For example, laws are differently applied according to whether you are in the French metropole or in a French territory like the Antilles, Mayotte or la Reunion, countries which are still under French colonization. There are laws that specifically stigmatize people of the Muslim faith. And really, that is a problem. But when you say that, people reply, “What, are you crazy! It’s not true. You are an anti-white racist!” And this is now the new ideology. If you criticize white supremacy it’s because you are an “anti-white person.” If you criticize the ideology of European-centric domination, you can be accused of wanting to destroy society, or even risk being labeled a potential terrorist.

But it is the reality, and it is not new. Look for example at Brazil and how they tried to whiten the people with their many entreaties for the Afro-Brazilians to classify themselves [as white]. At first, many people were defining themselves as white, the conclusion being that Afro-Brazilians were in a minority. However, after policies put in place by the government of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2003-2011), and the installation of structures like the Special Secretariat of Policies to Promote Racial Equality (SEPIR) and other positive actions, Afro-Brazilians claimed their African origins in the 2011 census. Brazil woke up with an Afro-Brazilian majority population. They accepted and recognized Afro-Brazilians, whether of African descent and/or descendants of the enslaved.

This was also done in Columbia and in different parts of Latin America where white people in the minority have tried to minimize and ignore the blackness of the people. And it is exactly what they tried to do here [in France]. This hierarchy of races that resulted at the time of enslavement, that said that black would be less beautiful than white, continues in different forms. The most terrible thing is that people have ended up internalizing such false beliefs and have become the ideological carriers of these beliefs in many societies. Some westerners maintain an Afrophobia, and some Africans and people of African descent (PADs) are willing to follow them for the sake of assimilation and integration. This is why they tried to develop the ideology and new philosophy of the *métissage*. It is not only a stupid policy, but a dangerous one because they try to make Africans and PADs invisible.

**Does this concept of *métissage* apply to Arabs and Muslims of North African descent, or is this strictly connected to people of sub-Saharan African descent?**

People of Muslim origin [from North Africa, West Asia, and the Levant], that is something different because the dominant groups cannot invent a new category for them. They are stigmatized regarding their religion. And I think this Islamophobia is coming from the history of Europe, and it is particularly true in

France. We need to look to France's history of colonialism, its war in Algeria, and place in Morocco. People of Muslim origin have been growing as part of French society for a long time, but [the government was] not paying attention.

In the past, about twenty years ago, I was a literature teacher in a school in a suburb close to Paris. More and more people with migrant or refugee backgrounds were in the classroom. Some of them were born in France and a lot of them have gotten French citizenship. And of course all these people grew up. Now they are adults. Some of them are parents. They are French. The profile of the French population has changed, totally changed. Suddenly they discovered, "Oh my God! We are not anymore *des français de souche*," or a country with French roots. In fact, it means *white* roots, European *white*.

## The recognition of the damned can only be carried out by the damned.

Look around us. We are here in the Luxembourg Garden. I'm sure if we ask anybody, if we make some inquiries, a lot of [people] will have Arab or Muslim surnames. This is France now. It's our face and we cannot act as if nothing has changed. We have evolved and we have been enriched by the cultures and traditions of each other. We are open to the world, even if it happens with hostility. And they refuse to see that. They want to keep the white supremacy, but we cannot go back. By producing laws against migrants and against non-native French,

they only reinforce nationalist and populist sentiments and deepen the epistemic gap between groups of people they consider to be unequal. Their main concern is to keep white supremacy intact. But all of these people are French. They were born in France and at this moment they can get French citizenship by birthright, "*droit du sol*."

These people came [originally] from outside of France with their own traditions and knowledge. The different French governments ignored these traditions. It's not like in India where if you go to one part of a city you see one tradition, and on another side you see another tradition. It's possible to live side by side with different traditions. But here, they don't see the French population in a way other than white Christian with a Eurocentric perspective and culture. They cannot admit that because they see themselves as the first Nation in the evolved world. There is nothing else besides them. And even if they agree to say we are all coming from Africa, that is all. For them Africa does not exist as culture with traditions and knowledge. Africans just emerged to the modern world when the colonizer arrived.

It's terrible, but these notions are deeply rooted in the minds of the people. They refused to see the change, and now they're surprised. All these [different] people are there. And they want their place. They want work. They want to have fun. They want to buy. They want to live. They want to have a lot of things. They are very energetic, very powerful people, but they are targeted for their religion. Now they consider all these people not as French citizens, but through their religion. And the Muslim religion is targeted as the enemy. And for that, they give the reason of terrorism. But they don't ask who is building the extremism, and for what? It is better to speak about extremism rather than terrorism. We have to refuse their own wording. These people are exhausted. They will be in the street someday, and there will be no mercy. I will use the expression, "they cannot breath" in this country. They cannot breath. They are not allowed to live.

### Do you see parallels between the situation of Muslims in France and African Americans in the US?

We could make some parallels, but not completely. I know the situation pretty well as we made a country visit, a mission for the United Nations Working Group of People of African Descent. The situation for African Americans is really more violent and difficult in the US. Of course we have police violence here. We have the death of young people, but not at the same level as the US. We never had Jim Crow laws, we never had segregation. I read the book by Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2012). We don't have such laws. Of course, we have some laws affecting parts of the society, but not at such levels as in the US. It's really terrible, absolutely terrible. Here in France we can ask if we're ready for such a movement, because the level of violence is not the same as it is in the US. It's similar to the US but not at the same level. But what is identical is that in one

way or another the system protects those agents of the State who commit these crimes.

In the US, there is really institutional violence against African Americans due to structural racism. Here, when they see a black person in the streets they are suspicious. But they don't arrest systematically. This could [possibly] happen in France later down the line, but it's not the case now. That's why I think it's not really fair to try to compare the African American situation and the African descent in France. It's something not similar. But having said that, I wonder if I am assessing the situation correctly, because the situation of Muslims in France is something different.

Regardless of the level of violence, state violence exists in the two cases. In the United States it particularly affects African Americans, and in France it affects people of the Muslim religion, or people who are perceived to be Muslim. Here again we must understand that this is the consequences of the colonial wars and particularly that of Algeria which has profoundly transfigured France.

Whatever the differences we have, it is not a reason not to try to build an international movement. Since the rulers refuse to acknowledge us and our rights, we "others" must build the movement for our "Being." The recognition of the damned can only be carried out by the damned.



Mireille Fanon-Mendès France, portrait by Linda Herrera Frantz Fanon artwork by "Egyptian Leftist" <https://www.gaberism.net>

#### **Do you consider Black Lives Matter a political movement that can lead to social transformation?**

The foundation of Black Lives Matters is very important, but I'm not sure it will become a political movement. Right now, I don't think it's a political movement. But I am rethinking my position. The fact is that it's an important movement because for the first time in a long time, the primacy of the right to life of African-Americans is being restated with clarity, as something non-negotiable. No exceptions to this basic principle will be accepted, whatever the reason. BLM has succeeded in creating a powerful relationship which obliges the dominant powers—at the level of the nation and the states—to recognize the need to inverse the policy of domination. It is changing the power dynamics by bringing to the forefront people considered by power as "non-Beings." These are the people who are killed without any reason or legal justification.

In this sense, we can say that BLM needs to move forward, to go beyond being a movement that awakens people and raises consciousness, to becoming a political party. The determination shown by the organizers must be transformed into a political force to question and change the paradigm of domination. It should make proposals to achieve social transformation. These initiatives would be carried out by members of BLM and by their network of alliances which continue to be built. It's in this sense, for example, that an alliance between BLM and the Frantz Fanon Foundation can be envisaged. We should be doing projects together around the deconstruction of the colonality of power and knowledge, around political, cultural and social relations, not forgetting our relationship with nature. Frantz Fanon invites reflection and action on these matters when he questions the conditions of the emergence of the new human.



This is the only way for all the damned to leave the peripheries, the ghettos. We have no alternatives except to build zones of resistance and to think of political and social alternatives to hegemonic, imperialist, financial, military and elitist policies that exclude more than three quarters of humanity. In this sense, we need to build ourselves politically and it is this expectation that created the emergence of a movement like BLM, well beyond the borders of the United States.

**In your work and travels, do you see movements talking to each other in the effort to build an international movement?**

Yes, they are talking to each other. Sure. And they discover some similarities. I know many of them are willing to work together but it's complicated. But maybe we could see a global movement against structural racism. Because really, if we don't defeat the racial racism, and therefore the structural racism, we will never get the opportunity for social transformation. Because it is the basis of the system. Not only in France, also in India. In India, it is expressed as caste. It's exactly the same thing. Race, class, caste, or ethnicity in Africa. If we don't work on that, on how "race" impacts class, gender and their intersectionality, we will really miss the point.

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Knowing that this false concept of race has existed only relatively recently in human history, it is time to deconstruct, at several levels, the social organization of our societies in which "race" and class are superimposed. I recall here a quote from the critical sociologist Felipe Lagos Rojas for whom race is « *la première catégorie moderne, car elle permet de classer la population à partir de différences phénotypiques, la couleur de la peau en particulier, la différenciation et la subordination sociale de certains groupes apparaissant comme l'effet d'un processus naturel* » (the first modern category, it allows the classification of populations according to phenotypical differences, in particular the color of the skin. The differentiation and social subordination of certain groups appear as the effects of a natural process.) [1]

**Thinking about the role of education, what authors do you recommend who can help us understand our condition and find affirmative avenues for change?**

I think the work done by decolonial studies—not *postcolonial* studies but *decolonial* studies—is important. But of course it's very small. Enrique Dussel, Walter Dignolo, Anibal Quijano Boaventura de Sousa Santos, Frantz Fanon, of course, Nelson Maldonado-Torres and Lewis Gordon. Let's see, did I miss someone?

**What about Aimé Césaire?**

Aimé Césaire yes. *Discourse on Colonialism* (*Discours sur le colonialisme*, 1955) is really a huge masterpiece. But, Césaire also participated in the "assimilation movement," particularly in Martinique and Guadeloupe, in the Caribbean French islands. When he was member of the French national Assembly, he worked in 1946 on drafting a law for departmentalizing. That law, (LOI n° 46-451 adopted 19 March 1946), classified Guadeloupe, Martinique, Réunion and French Guiana as French departments. Since then, these departments have been under colonial rule and have not yet liberated themselves.

Since this time, these islands have had a direct relation, deeper than before, with the French metropole. The people became more and more alienated. And now if you are going there it's like a postcard. You can see the people with a lot of cars and so forth, but they don't have a good life because they are excluded from the system. ... It is French now, an overseas *département* and *région* (DOM-ROM). The French civil service used to send white people to this island. Of course, we cannot say it's explicit, but their project is to whiten

the population of the Caribbean island. It is a perfect example of post-colonial colonization and it is related to what I tried to explain about *métissage*.

For all that, Aimé Césaire remains an important thinker of decolonization and negritude. He is also a magnificent poet and man of letters. I dare say that unfortunately, as an anti-colonialist, he did not go far enough in his decolonial action. This may be the difference with Frantz Fanon.

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But getting back to education, I think it's not only students we have to educate, not only young people because the problem is not coming from them. The problem is coming from the elites, from political, intellectual and media elites. And they are responsible for the place where we are in now. It is *them* we have to educate. And when you see how this Emmanuel Macron is coming—he has an education, he's a technocrat, but *he is not educated*. I'm sure he never read Césaire. I'm sure he never read about the decolonization of knowledge, about the poor, of being poor, the problems of the globalization system, this violent system.

How, on the epistemological level, can we build a real [human] Being, not a non-Being. Because right now we have [in the global system] some people who are "Beings," and a large part who are "non-Beings"—for different reasons. And our work at the [Frantz Fanon Foundation](#) is to work, to think, and to make visible, the reason why it is so difficult to build a "Being" regarding the system we have in front of us. As we work with others on the same topic who take a similar approach, we learn how to build solidarity and a thinking movement oriented towards building the world of the Other, of the dignified human.

Gloria Anzaldúa has written, "We are all wounded, (...) we can connect through the wound that alienated us from others. When the wound forms a scar, the scar can become a bridge linking people who have been split apart." [2]

Let us be the healing of the wound.

[1] Felipe Lagos Rojas, "Hegemonía, heterogeneidad, clasificación social: hacia un programa latinoamericano de sociología cultural", in: *Persona y Sociedad*, vol. 22, n°3, p. 45-65, 2008, p. 60-61.

[2] In *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*, edited by AnaLouise Keating, 303-317. Durham: Duke University Press quoted by Nelson Maldonado Torres, in *Outline of Ten Theses on Coloniality and Decoloniality*, October 2016; <http://frantzfanonfoundation-fondationfrantzfanon.com/article2360.htm>

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