Fanon's social therapy

An interview with Alice Cherki

Born in 1936 in Algiers, Alice Cherki is a Jewish French-Algerian psychiatrist, psychoanalyst and essayist who worked as an intern with Frantz Fanon at the hospital of Blida-Joinville in the early 1950s, and shortly at the Manouba hospital in Tunis. Engaged in the Algerian anticolonial struggle from early on, she fled Blida in 1957, to resettle in Tunis, before moving to Paris in 1965, where she worked as a psychoanalyst. A colleague and close friend of Frantz and Josie Fanon, she authored the first in-depth biography of Fanon (Frantz Fanon, Portrait*) in 2000, which was translated into English in 2006. She also published* La frontière invisible. Violences de l'immigration *(Édition des crépuscules, 2006), an essay on immigration, frontiers and alterity, and a book of memoirs,* Mémoire anachronique. Lettres à moi-même et à quelques autres *(Édition de l'Aube, 2016). The interview was conducted by Lucie K. Mercier at Alice Cherki's flat in Paris in October 2022.*

Lucie Mercier: Your biography of Fanon has become a landmark in the history of Fanon studies. As both a colleague and a friend of Fanon – first in Blida-Joinville, then at the Manouba hospital in Tunis – you offer a perspective on him that is at times more critical, but also more affectionate and, above all, more embodied than that of other biographers. From your footnotes, we see that your research was enriched by numerous interviews conducted in the late 1990s. To begin, I was wondering under what circumstances you undertook this work nearly forty years after Fanon's death. Why was there such a long gap between his passing and the writing of your book?

Alice Cherki: When I arrived in France, I came to finish my thesis and to undertake the psychoanalytic work that I thought would be useful. What ultimately determined my decision to write it much later was the evolution of societies and the world, particularly from the 1990s onward. It started in the 1980s, when the descendants of former colonised people were relegated to housing projects in the suburbs. There was a profound ignorance, among other things, of what Fanon's work had been. The only way Fanon was talked about, even among historians, was in relation to Sartre's preface [to *The Wretched of the Earth*]. In Algeria, there was what I call 'monumental memory' – his name was given to schools and hospitals, but no one actually knew who he was. If you asked a young person in Algeria about Frantz Fanon, they might say, 'Oh, was he a captain in the French army?' Things like that. And even in a major contemporary authors' dictionary of the time, Fanon's name only appeared under Sartre's entry. Writing the book wasn't just a concern – it was a necessity.

Of course, in the United States, there was some reception of his work, but the English translations of *The Wretched of the Earth* and *Black Skin, White Masks* were often highly problematic. It was just a fragment of Fanon. People took what they believed was relevant to them and adapted it to their own needs. There were many, many factors that ultimately convinced me to write. I should add that, at the beginning, I wanted to collaborate with Charles Géronimi, who had been forced to flee Algeria in a hurry. He was a neurologist, a professor of neurology in Algeria, but was under death threats. I thought it was legitimate to include him in the project. But when it came to writing, he couldn't follow through. He

had many ideas and was an excellent neurologist, but translating those ideas into action was more complicated. Some people are like that. So, I continued on my own.

LM: And when did he return to France?

AC: Between 1990 and 1994, during the Algerian civil war, when he was under threat and had to leave suddenly. He fled to France under emergency circumstances, like the Chaulets[1] and many others who were threatened – not just Europeans with Algerian nationality, but also Kabyles, Arabs, and university professors. That was the atmosphere at the time.

LM: Your deep connection to Fanon's writings is even stronger because you yourself have been engaged throughout your life with questions close to his: the relationship between psychiatry and politics, and between psychoanalysis and politics. I'd like to focus on these parallels with you – particularly through institutional psychotherapy, which was a key point of connection at the time. Had you already heard of this movement before arriving in Blida?

AC: Yes and no. At first, I was just a medical student and hadn't even chosen a specialisation. I knew I wanted to go into psychiatry, but in Algeria, the word 'psychoanalysis' didn't exist – not even among psychiatrists, who were dominated by primitivist theories. Even the professor of psychiatry in Algiers wasn't actually a psychiatrist. I had started reading Freud, that's for sure, but in a casual way, like someone reading an engaging book at night. But I didn't know about [Francesc] Tosquelles. I didn't even know what Fanon had written before coming to Algeria.

We were a group of young people, fairly close to André Mandouze.[2] We were searching, but we were very ignorant – despite our strong classical educations. What I did know was that I wanted to be a psychiatrist. I was a medical student, a medical intern. And in medicine, the question of 'why' didn't exist. My professors would say, 'Miss, we never ask why. At most, you can ask how.' That wasn't satisfying for me. That wasn't why I wanted to become a doctor or a psychiatrist.

We were also something of a clandestine group. The medical interns in Algiers, for the most part, were in favour of French Algeria and didn't look kindly on those of us who believed Algerian independence was necessary and inevitable. That's how I met Fanon – he offered me an internship. I discovered social therapy through him. In fact, I realise now that this was almost my only true psychiatric training, even later on, when I found myself in France among Tosquelles' students, like Sven Follin. I never practiced the rigid, asylum-based classical psychiatry.

LM: The recent publication of *Alienation and Freedom* [published in English translation in 2018] has significantly changed how we understand Fanon's psychiatric and clinical practices. Many new documents, previously inaccessible to researchers, are now available. They reveal a Fanon deeply engaged in collective work and highlight the role of his collaborators in the institutions where he worked, particularly Jacques Azoulay and Charles Géronimi. From various testimonies, Fanon appeared to have both a strong sense of authority – at least within his own department, despite his young age – and a remarkable ability to work as a team, embedding the caregiving collective in a kind of permanent revolution, perhaps similar to Tosquelles' ideas. I was wondering if you have any memories of these collective dynamics.

AC: Yes, I have many memories of this, both in Blida and at the day hospital – it's undeniable.

In Blida, for instance, he was one of the first to want to establish a nursing school. Georges Daumézon came briefly at that time to help set it up.[3] And despite the war, we, the interns, would meet in the evenings to study texts together. For example, we studied Freud's texts there. The interns had varying levels of interest – personally, I was passionate about it. Charles Geronimi, in his own way, was too. Others, like [François] Sanchez or [Slimane] Asselah, were more reluctant, but they still participated.

That didn't stop us from being called away suddenly during these study sessions because a clandestine fighter needed urgent surgery or something similar. One or two of us would go with Fanon to handle the situation.

Then there are more practical examples, anecdotes that I remember. For example, there was a nurse who took a piece of cheese from a patient's plate. When he saw Fanon approaching, he tried to hide it, but Fanon told him there was no need – that, on the contrary, sharing a meal with a patient was a good thing.

At the day hospital, as Marie-Jeanne Manuellan describes in the documentary she made with Mehdi Lallaoui,[4] Fanon considered that we were all part of a team, whether we were secretaries, interns, or cleaning ladies. If a patient chose a secretary as their main point of reference rather than an intern or the head of the department, he thought that was perfectly fine.

LM: So, a very strong sense of horizontality?

AC: Yes, absolutely. He strongly believed in horizontality, even though he could be somewhat abrupt – it was just part of how he interacted. He always wanted to know who the other person was addressing, how they addressed him, and who they were. It wasn't just with me – he had the same approach with young interns, nurses, or even Manuellan, who was a secretary. He had a strong desire to pass on knowledge, but he needed to feel that the other person truly wanted it too – that there was mutual desire for learning.

LM: But within this desire to pass on knowledge, there was still an element of authority, right?

AC: Of course, he was still the one who knew.

LM: Exactly.

AC: He had a level of training that we simply didn't have. But I never felt the weight of a master's arrogance. On the contrary. When Charles [Geronimi] and I arrived in Tunis, he had already arranged housing for us at La Manouba.[5] I remember one evening when he and Josie [Fanon] took us to eat fish at La Goulette. Although I was born in Algiers, in a family familiar with such outings, it was the first time I saw fish served with an egg – something completely unfamiliar to me. I was surprised, and Fanon jokingly said, 'Oh la la, the country girl!'

LM: The word 'idealist' comes up frequently in your book regarding the criticisms Fanon received. You revisit this idea multiple times, trying to define the nature of Fanon's theoretical discourse – one that is neither purely descriptive nor purely sociological but rather an ensemble in which different types of discourse and writing styles converge.

AC: I'll tell you something, since we're speaking freely. I recently re-read, or rather fully read for the first time, David Macey's biography of Fanon for reasons I won't go into now, and I must say – Macey didn't understand a thing. Fanon never claimed to be a psychoanalyst – not

at all![6] The way Macey interprets the famous scene where the little boy says, *'Look, Mum, a Negro!'* – his phenomenological interpretation has nothing to do with the actual experience of what it feels like to be suddenly pointed at in that way, even by a child. The physical shock it causes – the speechlessness before something finally emerges. Surely, you've experienced that in some way. Anyone who is a little 'out of the norm' knows this feeling. That moment of stunned silence before you find words. That's what it was about!

Yet Macey constantly criticises Fanon for the wrong reasons. He could have pointed out that Fanon sometimes had a difficult temperament, that he waited to see if the other person would accept him before fully engaging. That would have been fair. But no – I'm sorry, I don't mean to sound biased, but honestly, I think Macey missed the mark completely.

LM: The descriptions of social therapy in Blida given by Fanon, [Jacques] Azoulay,[7] and yourself are detailed, but we don't have many of them. It seems like a lot happened in a relatively short time, given that Fanon arrived in Blida in November 1953 and left Algeria in December 1956. Because of this, we often rely on Fanon and Azoulay's own descriptions of the experience – the newspaper, the café, the construction of the stadium. Do you have any specific or personal memories of patients and treatments where institutional psychotherapy proved successful? Or, conversely, cases where it didn't work? Beyond the now somewhat 'official' discourse about the Blida experience – the one reflected in Azoulay's thesis – do you recall any alternative perspectives?

AC: There is a certain naïveté in the question you are asking me, but I will tell you anyway. Azoulay had already left since he had tried to escape military service and had to accept it without being discharged, etc. So they arrived afterward – Charles Géronimi, and a little later, myself. I knew women at the Women's Pavilion who had improved considerably through

social therapy, in which I actively participated and observed. It is evident that the creation of activities, compared to how things were at the beginning, was an improvement… I didn't know the pavilions in their initial state, only the two wards (because everyone forgets that it was only two wards. It wasn't the whole hospital – it was just those two services).[8] I did not witness men tied to trees, as I have been told, but I did see, in other services, tubercular patients who were kept at the back of caves – there were these kinds of caverns where food was thrown to them because they had tuberculosis. That, I did see.

On the other hand, in the men's service, I saw men who were able to gather at the Moorish café,[9] talk with Abdelaziz, the Chaâbi singer, who himself had become a nurse, engaging in a kind of dialogue, etc. I don't recall anyone leaving the hospital during the year and a half or two years that we stayed there. Maybe some did, but I don't remember. In the women's service, there was also a very active environment. Many people performed plays, wrote for the newspaper, worked in the workshop… But if you ask me to name specific individuals who were hospitalised, I couldn't tell you. I don't remember that.

What I do remember, for example – because it struck me deeply – is that even though the pavilions were extremely compartmentalised, the women from the Muslim pavilion were able, thanks to us and to Fanon (since these were different services), to attend the sewing workshop organised by the European women's pavilion. The transformation of these women, who were completely frozen – many of them suffered from postpartum psychosis – was remarkable. When they arrived, touching fabrics, looking at things, etc., you could sense something familiar about the body being reestablished. From a pseudo-catatonic state, their bodies became animated, their eyes opened. They approached, they touched the fabrics, they timidly tried, and so on. That is what I can recall. But as for telling you who exactly left or who didn't – I don't know.

LM: More generally, it's a real question – how do we understand the success of a method that is experimental, highly experimental, and constantly evolving?

AC: What I can tell you is that the nurses, those who had initially expressed hostility but survived until recent years, did not idealise their time working with Fanon. These are old men now who tell you how much they felt restored in their dignity as human beings. There have been testimonies like that.

LM: In your book, you mention several times the influence that Tosquelles had on Fanon and the admiration and esteem that Fanon had for him. Beyond his work on the entanglement of psychiatry and politics, it seems that institutional psychiatry also appealed to Fanon because it combined great openness, broad erudition, frequent engagement with philosophy – sometimes even great abstraction – with the most everyday, simple, and concrete aspects of life with the residents or patients. Above all, it involved reflexivity and a constant questioning of the medical profession itself.

At the time, how did you understand the 'social' aspect of social therapy? What was your conception, vision, or concept of the social?

AC: For one thing, we didn't talk about 'institutional psychotherapy' at the time; we only spoke of 'social therapy'.[10] When did institutional psychotherapy completely overshadow or replace the notion of social therapy? Was it with Oury? Was it with Le Guillant? I don't know if it was a term coined by Tosquelles; I believe it was rather the psychiatrists who worked with

him who used it. But I can't be certain about that.

For us, it was obvious that the human subject was not just about 'mom, dad, my brother, and me' – it was also everything that surrounds you, the world you live in, and the representations that come from that world and shape you.

When I started writing psychoanalytic texts, I held firm to that idea and conceptualised it. It was clear that the formation of the subject was linked to the environment – it was known and acknowledged.

At Fanon's request, Charles [Geronimi] and I tried to remake the TAT (Thematic Apperception Test) plates. Simply because we had seen that the official plates only depicted European settings. You may have heard of these plates – they showed things like staircases in a 19th-century apartment building, someone playing the violin… They meant nothing! How could women relate to these images? Or a cemetery filled with crosses, graves with crosses – that's what the TAT plates showed. Well, they remained silent when confronted with them. Imagine trying to relate to a 19th-century Parisian staircase! Women who came down from the mountains of Kabylia… I'm giving you trivial examples.

Even in personal experiences – take, for instance, how deeply I was marked by being expelled from school at the age of three. Restoring forgotten signifiers, or buried representations – Fanon wrote about this very well at the 1956 Conference of Black Writers and Artists, when he spoke about how culture remains mummified.

In modern terms, we could say that all the traces that could not be processed, represented, or come into being remain like a crypt within the subject. Today, we call this symbolic representation, or different symbolic systems – political, social, cultural… Fanon referred to them as 'the lines of force that order.'[11]

That is the foundation of social therapy – this necessity of recreating, not necessarily to fully identify with and remain there, but to mobilise something that remains blocked in the subject. That's what psychotherapy is – it's what allows one to release ghosts, to emerge from stagnation. Even for schizophrenics, I believe.

LM: So we might say these 'lines of force' lie at the intersection of the cultural and the social, in the sense of social interactions as well?

AC: Yes, and of the person. That is absolutely essential. Fanon and Tosquelles, in their own ways – using the language of their respective times – were very forward-thinking in this regard, even without being psychoanalysts.

LM: Your portrayal of Fanon almost word-for-word echoes certain passages from Tosquelles' 1975 text *Frantz Fanon at Saint Alban*. There is a description of a body that carries and is carried by a poetic, creative language, and also a depiction of Saint-Alban as a theatrical space. The portrait is admiring and affectionate but also critical, particularly concerning what Tosquelles called Fanon's 'normopathy.'

AC: Like everyone else, he wanted Fanon to undergo psychoanalysis. But Fanon was in too much of a hurry. There was no way he was going to do psychoanalysis. Mind you, later, in Tunis, he told us, 'Maybe after, when Algeria gains independence …' He knew he was just passing through. But Fanon never told us anything, huh! He simply said that he adored Tosquelles, but he didn't tell us anything. We had no idea that he had written *Black Skin, White Masks*.

LM: In the way Fanon approached social therapy, he sometimes seems to oscillate between

two conceptions of the subject: one closer to Tosquelles (and Lacan), where the subject is a site of enunciation, where language nests itself, the subject as an in-between … but also, on the opposite side: Sartre's conception of the subject as a site of engagement, fully immersed in speech, an intentional, active subject, and one engaged in a totalising project. I was wondering whether these two characterisations seemed to you to be in tension, or not, and how important existentialist authors and phenomenology were for your conception of psychiatry and the emerging field of psychoanalysis at the time.

AC: I never thought there was a contradiction. It's true that Sartre was very important at the time. I remember that what interested us when Fanon came to give his lecture was that, as young people, we were stuck between two ideological poles: either the ideology of the Communist Party – 'once things are settled, the rest will follow', like the superstructure – which didn't satisfy us, or phenomenology, which recognised a subject but didn't take into account the very constitution of the subject. That's why, for us, social therapy stood between the two.

Fanon had a great admiration for Sartre, especially for his early writings, and this lasted until the end of his life. The last book by Sartre that he was determined to read was *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. But Sartre was not omnipresent in the work we were doing. If I may answer so trivially.

LM: You also emphasise dramaturgy as a way to think about action. Fanon's reflections on personal, individual acts don't seem to be at odds with a conception of collective action – just as in Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. Some, like Robert Bernasconi, even believe that Fanon anticipated some of Sartre's theses.

AC: That's not impossible. But personally, I realise that I developed my own way of thinking about this: it is only when one reaches a subjective freedom that one can truly participate in society. That is why I am against the current exacerbation of identity politics, the 'either-or' logic, which, to me, is rooted in resentment. The articulation between the subject's development – the ability to feel oneself as a gendered, mortal being, able to separate from one's origins without renouncing them, not locked in resentment or rejection of the other – this is what allows things to come together. There is no such thing as a purely social being, except in the case of a *false self*, nor a purely individual subject.

LM: This is precisely what is interesting about that moment in time. The philosophy of the 1960s and 1970s was extremely polarised on the question of the subject and language. On the one hand, there was the subject *in* language, the Lacanian-Tosquellian view, and on the other hand, there was the subject who assumes language, the subject who commands, who gains consciousness.

AC: I don't think Fanon would have agreed with Lacan's later developments. I don't think he would have followed that path at all.

LM: In your portrait, you align with Tosquelles by emphasising Fanon's body and voice, his incarnation, and his relationship with the poetic or creative verb – a dimension that runs throughout your book. You write:

> The intense presence of his voice and body, the sustained and demanding attention he showed others, the heightened sensibility he brought to language – the way he worked it and allowed it to

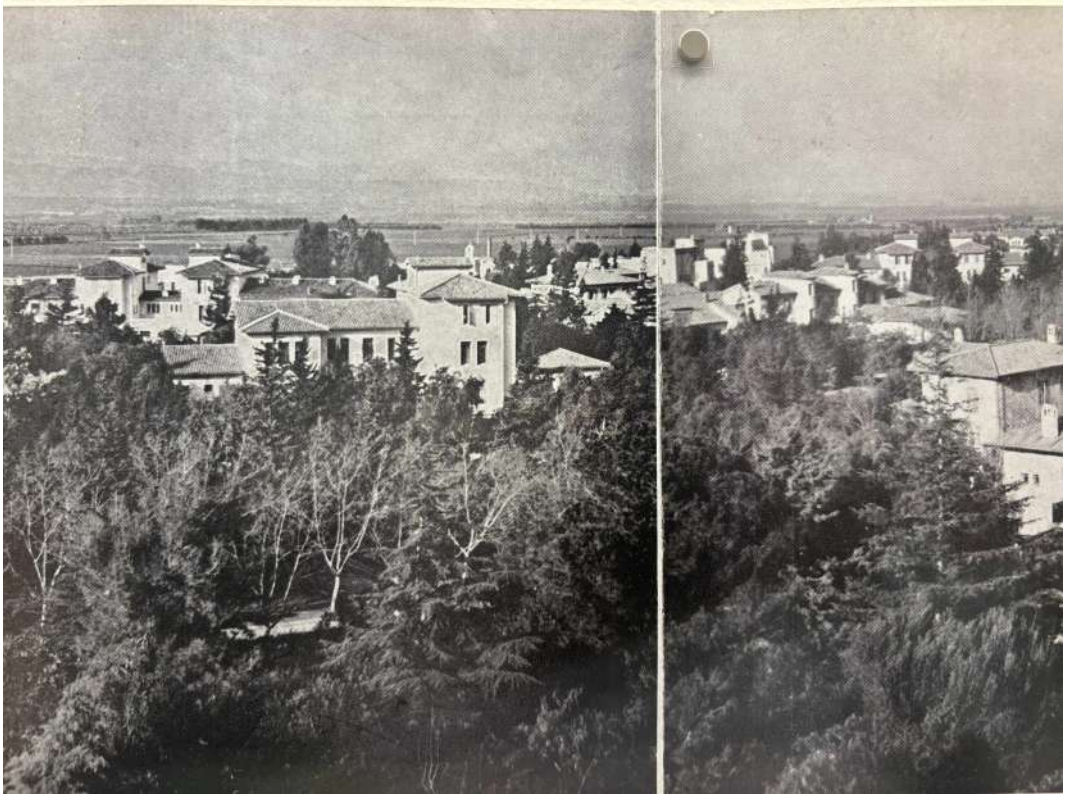
> work him, to draw him into the most far-fetched fictions and to draw him out and onto new ground that held the promise of less improbable ends: these were ever-present traits, recognisable to all those who had known Fanon. Later, when it was my turn to know him, these traits were still glaringly intact.[12]

Do you remember making this statement? You also say that, with this speech, he could evoke the most excessive fictions and distance himself from them in order to land in new, more realisable actions. I was wondering about the relationship between words, actions, and reality here.

AC: It's very simple. Something that arises from the body must necessarily be organised into representations, words, language. Fanon could immerse himself in the imaginary, envision all sorts of fictions, etc., but he would always return to reality – that is, to action. That is to say, one abandons the entirety of the fictions. Perhaps one retains certain elements of the imaginary to realise an action. But I can only articulate this now, in hindsight. At the time, what struck me was his omnipresence, his way of moving, of coming and going, of dictating things … but yes, it's true that several scenarios would play out in his mind before leading to real action.

LM: I'm also curious about Fanon's relationship with play (*le jeu*). People describe him as someone who was immersed in the play and games of speech …

AC: Oh yes, absolutely, he loved controversy. He was fully engaged in the play of speech … but with a certain suffering nonetheless. I remember when he told me, 'I am too far ahead, I move too fast.' That touched me deeply because he never spoke about himself. But this relationship between body, speech, and action allowed him to understand – not justify – the mechanism of violence.



LM: Could you say more about that? How do you move from one to the other?

AC: Let's take an example: the gaze of the Other. When the gaze of the Other strips you of your humanity, what happens? This is a very contemporary issue. When young people from the suburbs, under the gaze of a police officer, hear, instead of recognition, 'You are not French' or 'Show me your passport', there is a moment of shock. And after that, what emerges in the psyche? An immense violence. And what do you do with that violence? Either you turn away, withdraw, or you act. This violence compels action – unless it allows you to formulate something. But the transition from violence to the formulation of speech … It affects the body; the body is stunned. Even Freud described this phenomenon – it's nothing new.

LM: And do you think that Fanon's play with speech, his poetics, allowed him to work through this relationship?

AC: Yes. Besides, it was all about speech. He didn't write; he dictated. And while walking, no less. His body accompanied this movement of speech. What I understand … When I was writing about Fanon and other things from that time, I would listen to music – Kurtág, for instance. No words, just sounds, accords … and from there, the words and writing would take shape for me. I don't do that anymore, and I regret it.

LM: Tosquelles talks about this a lot, too – accent, speech within silence, speech within syncopation, within rhythm … He speaks about it beautifully.

Under what circumstances did you leave hospital psychiatry to immerse yourself in psychoanalysis? Did it coincide with your arrival in France in the mid-1960s?

AC: I came to France to undergo psychoanalysis, first of all because I saw where things were headed. I won't go into detail now, but for me, Algerian independence happened through a coup d'état. I was well aware of the internal conflicts. When I arrived in Algiers before independence, even the most enlightened people were unaware of the fierce struggle between Boumédiène's army and the Provisional Government of the Algerian Republic (GPRA). When Boumédiène came to power in 1965, I decided not to return.

LM: I was wondering whether your experience of social therapy with Fanon later influenced your approach to psychoanalysis.

AC: I'm not even aware of it. What I probably retained from social therapy is teamwork. Whether you're a nurse, a social worker, a psychiatry intern, or a psychiatrist, there was a certain horizontality in the work, even though it wasn't obvious to my French colleagues, who hadn't had that experience. For me, it was completely natural; I've always functioned that way in teams – even when I was the psychiatrist. This might not be a sufficient answer for you… Yes, for example, I know that at the time, in the 18th arrondissement, there were many immigrant families with young children, and I fought to create intermediate classes between kindergarten and primary school for those children. It lasted several years. It was important to me that these children had a transitional space between their native language and the host language.

I'm not sure what other example I could give you: the horizontality of work, regardless of rank or title, or the necessity of moving from inherited traces to the signifiers or representations in which we are meant to inscribe ourselves…

LM: Would you say that this gave you, from the outset, a critical perspective on psychoanalysis?

AC: I can't say from the outset because when you undergo psychoanalysis, you undergo psychoanalysis, and then you discover… But very early on, I was critical of what I call 'Daddy, Mommy, the maid, and me', with its inside and outside. As early as the 1980s, I wasn't convinced… That's why I later wrote *The Invisible Border*. No, very early on, I noticed – at first with great curiosity – things with descendants of the Shoah: children, grandchildren, whose grandparents, uncles, or aunts never talked about it. Nothing was said because they had to let the grandmother believe he would still come back – things like that. It took me time to process all that. But very early on, I was very sensitive to, and strongly against, the confinement of psychoanalysis within a narrow field, as if politics, society – all of that – had no relevance to the treatment process.

LM: In *The Invisible Border*, which was published in 2005 – the same time as the so-called uprisings in the French suburbs,[13] a particularly significant period that saw the emergence of postcolonial discourse in France – you write about the violence of immigration as a violence produced, among other things, by silence. Denial, the silencing of the past and of history, leading to an inability for those who lived through it to represent their own history and suffering. This, in turn, produces, in the following generation, wandering or erratic subjects whose origins and identities remain unrepresentable – blocked, suspended before language – even though these subjects are often monolingual, speaking only French.

In your work, the question of scene – again, of staging – seems crucial. It refers to the ability to represent through language but also to the metaphorisation of an absent origin. You write:

> To break free from wandering is to restore enunciation, to find a place of metaphorisation. That wandering subject is a call – but one to be heard not as the satisfaction of an immediate need but as the construction of a space for a singular request, a possibility to stage traces of suffering.[14]

How did you come to psychoanalysis? Or what interested you in it?

AC: At first, my own psychoanalysis interested me!

LM: It's possible that when one is a philosopher, they have a very theoretical approach to things.

AC: I could have been a philosopher, but I'm not. I'm not a philosopher.

LM: But in a way, you are …

AC: No, I'm a thinking being.

LM: Like Fanon, perhaps?

AC: Yes, like others… There are many people like that. Many writers, many psychologists, actors, cultural figures – they are thinking beings.

LM: But I was wondering if you could say more about this question of staging in your clinical practice – meaning in therapy?

AC: I listen to silences as much as words. I believe silences are very significant. That doesn't mean I interpret them, but I pay close attention to them. It doesn't mean I impose an

interpretation on silence, but I find the rhythm of silences extremely important. On the contrary, I am wary of those who try too hard, drowning in a kind of logorrhea.

Also, I feel very close to people like Maria Torok and Sandor Ferenczi. Maria Torok had a definition I love, one with great humour. She said, essentially: 'What is transference? It's diving in with the patient – but coming up just a little faster than they do.'

LM: This brings up a lingering question regarding Fanon's experience with social therapy in Algeria and Tunisia – specifically, the issue of transference. Several people, at least, have spoken about a certain unease or ambiguity regarding how transference operated in Fanon's time.

AC: Fanon never used that word. I don't think he was aware of it. He wasn't conscious of the transference that some nurses projected onto him … It was a word that didn't exist for him.

LM: What did therapy consist of? What was the core mechanism of the therapeutic encounter?

AC: The relational aspect. Recognising the other. The other, presumed to hear you, whom you wanted to listen to as well. It wasn't called transference. It was about the encounter – an encounter between subjects. That was also the goal of organising the *café maure*, of incorporating music, things like that. No, no, indeed, I can really help you say something: transfer, no. It was the relational.

LM: Do you identify with Fanon?

AC: I can't say that I identified with Fanon. What I can say is that there was a connivance between us. First of all, this may sound silly, but there is nevertheless a difference between the sexes. Which meant that I was – and still am – extremely feminine, and therefore my experience as a woman was somewhat different from Fanon's. So I couldn't fully identify with him. But it was an encounter, honestly, a rare encounter.

But identifying with him – because identifying with someone really means resembling them – no, no. I don't think Fanon was very interested in children. His little boy, Olivier, was what –five years old when his father died, and his father was already very ill. I don't know what Fanon's relationship with children was like, for example. I don't know – I never had the opportunity to see Fanon with children. I think he worried a great deal about his wife and his son when he knew he was going to die, but it was rather abstract. I never saw Fanon with children. I, on the other hand, have a strong personal history with children – both with my own children and with my grandchildren. That's important.

Where I *can* identify, if you like, is in the understanding of how one gets out of alienation – *that*, yes. That may also be shaped by my childhood history. I don't know why, but a memory from when I was three years old stayed with me – a memory that I later worked through; I don't know whether it was when I was ten or fifteen that I really processed it – of this nursery-school teacher who sends you away from the school where you feel good, who tells you that you won't be coming back, and you don't know why. And who gives you a description rooted in biological racism – things like big eyes, a big mouth, and then big ears – big ears, of all things. My mother always cut my hair very short, like a boy's, with my hair covered. Perhaps that too. And the atmosphere as well … We lived in a world very sharply divided by communities. … No – what you're saying is interesting. But I wouldn't speak of identifying with Fanon.

LM: When reading your book I was struck by the omnipresence of the political dimension. That isn't always the case in a biography of Fanon, and it's certainly not always the case for most people who practice medicine, psychiatry, or psychoanalysis – that is, the two dimensions really collide constantly.

AC: But we were immersed in it!

LM: And it's true that in this respect, Fanon is quite special, quite unique.

AC: There were very few of us. There was Pierre Chaulet, who was a very close friend; there was Daniel Timsit[15] – but we were really very few, you know – Europeans or Jews who understood what was happening in Algeria, who hoped, for example in 1956, that it would stop, and then realised that it wasn't going to stop. And we were truly hunted and persecuted – well, we were in danger I mean. And the political omnipresence – don't forget that the war had already begun in 1954. We lived, but it was war, I would say. I was only twenty years old. … I remember when the special powers were granted: people we knew, from my generation, my age, students who were thrown into prison and tortured, ultimately. And at the same time, there was this work on the human being. It's true, for example, that Charles [Geronimi] withdrew from all of this … even when he was in Algeria, he remained in his role as a professor; he took refuge in music.

LM: That's it; even when we live through situations that are very political, that are violent, we still filter, in a way, what will pass into our own discourse, or into our own production.

AC: No, but what I mean is that I wasn't a political activist afterward … I had the life of a young woman who managed to get a nice apartment, you see, things like that, who raised her son in the Fifth Arrondissement. But still, I did pass things on.

LM: For example, one possible contrast might be with Derrida, because you yourself mention your sense of affinity with Derrida in certain respects.

AC: Unlike Fanon, for me he was always the great authority, the one who knew. Derrida intimidated me a great deal, his philosophical knowledge and all that, when I met him again here. And he didn't understand it, but he intimidated me a lot.

LM: Typically with Derrida, there are many things from the political realm that filter into his writing, into his philosophy, but that remain veiled.

AC: Yes, he took a very, very long time to write about his history with Algeria …

LM: In your book, *The Invisible Border*, you speak about *Monolingualism of the Other* and the way that text speaks to you.[16] I wonder whether you think it would have spoken to Fanon? I wonder to what extent Fanon's relationship to French was itself a complex relationship, one that hid something else, that was frustrated? Or not?

AC: What you're saying isn't uninteresting, because the only time I realised that Fanon spoke Creole was at the day hospital. The phone rang, someone asked to speak to Fanon …. I wasn't alone – Marie-Jeanne was there too, we were a whole group – and all of a sudden we heard Fanon speaking Creole. It was a revelation.

Notes

1. Pierre Chaulet (1930-2012), a doctor, and his wife Claudine Chaulet (1931-2015), unionist, sociologist, were both militants for independence, engaging themselves with the FLN from early on. They helped Abane Ramdane evacuate in 1957, before fleeing to Tunis.
2. André Mandouze (1916-2006), a Latinist and historian specialist of Saint Augustin born in Bordeaux, important intellectual of the Christian Left, became a Lecturer at the University of Algiers in 1946. Active in the French resistance during the second World War, he would immediately take the party of Algerian independence, and engage himself with the FLN.
3. For further details about the nurse training set up by Daumézon, see Alice Cherki, *Frantz Fanon: A Portrait*, trans. Nadia Benabid (Ithaca and London : Cornell University Press, 2006), 76.
4. *Sur les traces de Frantz Fanon*, directed by Medhi Lallaoui (Mémoires Vives Productions, 2021).
5. Alice Cherki and Charles Geronimi, who had recently married, both fled French repression in January 1957, leaving for Paris, where they passed the exam of psychiatric hospital (concours des hopitaux psychiatriques). After Charles Geronimi was suddently drafted into the army, they left for Tunis in 1958 (via Switzerland and Italy) where Frantz and Josie Fanon had recently moved.
6. It might be added that this idea doesn't appear in Macey's biography, who instead states : 'Although Fanon is often described as a "psychoanalyst", he was not and his relationship with psychoanalysis was always fraught.' (David Macey, *Frantz Fanon : A Biography* (London and New York : Verso, 2000), 251.)
7. Jacques Azoulay (1927-2011) wrote his medical thesis under Fanon's supervision, under the title 'Contribution à l'étude de la socialthérapie dans un service d'aliénés musulmans' ('Contribution to the study of socialtherapy in a service of Muslim patients' (1954) and co-authored a synthetic article with Fanon for *l'Information psychiatrique* 30 :9 (1954), translated into English : 'Social therapy in a ward of Muslim men : Methodological difficulties', in Frantz Fanon, *Alienation and Freedom*, eds. Jean Khalfa and Robert J.C. Young, trans. Steve Corcoran (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 353–371.
8. Award of European women and a ward of Algerian men.
9. On the setting up and evolution of the Moorish Café in the hospital of Blida-Joinville, see Frantz Fanon and Jacques Azoulay, 'Social therapy in a ward of Muslim men : Methodological difficulties', 369–371.
10. For the finer grained distinctions between social therapy and institutional psychotherapy, see Lucie Mercier, 'Saint-Alban's Contested Legacy: Fanon, Tosquelles and the Politics of Psychiatry in Postwar France', *Radical Philosophy* 2.20 (2026), 36–52.
11. This expression is to be found in Frantz Fanon, 'Racism and Culture', in *Toward the African Revolution. Political essays*, trans. Haakon Chevalier (New York : Grove Press, 1988), 33.
12. Cherki, *Frantz Fanon*, 20.
13. In 2005, an unprecedented sequence of riots against police violence across France after the death of Zyed Benna and Bouna Traoré by ectrocution in a substation of Clichy-sous-Bois, in the Paris' suburbs on October 27th, 2005, as they were fleeing the police. For a theoretical analysis of these events, see: Étienne Balibar, '*Uprisings in the Banlieues*', in *Constellations* 14 :1 (2007), 47–71.
14. Alice Cherki, *La frontière invisible. Violences de l'immigration* (Paris : Éditions des Crépuscules, 2013), 73.
15. Daniel Timsit (1928-2002) was a Berbero-Jewish doctor, communist and FLN militant.
16. Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other, or, The Prosthesis of Origin*, trans. Patrick Mensah (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).