Deadline June 30: North Street Book Prize for Self-Published Books

The deadline is June 30 for our second annual North Street Book Prize for self-published books. Three top winners will receive $1,500 each, plus a credit towards the high-quality publishing services at BookBaby, free advertising in the Winning Writers newsletter, and expert marketing advice from Carolyn Howard-Johnson, author of The Frugal Book Promoter. $6,000 will be awarded in all, with free gifts for everyone who enters.

Submit online or by mail. Entry fee: $50 per book. Final judges: Jendi Reiter and Ellen LaFleche. This year’s contest categories include:

- Mainstream/Literary Fiction
- Genre Fiction
- Creative Nonfiction & Memoir

Submit here

Read about the winners of our first contest. Questions? Please email adam@winningwriters.com.
PUB: Letterpress Chapbook Open Call

Wendy’s Subway is pleased to announce our first “mini-manuscript” chapbook competition. Submissions in prose and poetry will be accepted through June 19th and the selected manuscript will be published in late fall 2016. Publications will be produced in a limited edition of 100 numbered chapbooks, printed on our letterpress.

**Specifics**
- Word count: 300 maximum
- Submission fee: $10 USD
- Submission deadline: June 19th, 2016

**SUBMISSIONS THROUGH SUBMITTABLE HERE**

>via: http://www.wendyssubway.com/open-call/
DJ LYNNEE DENISE
The Children of Baldwin
(Live and Direct from Paris)
I woke up in Paris this morning reflective and excited about how I found my way here. I’m in Paris because I’m a DJ and because I fell in love with house music enough to ask questions about its roots. In that asking I studied liner notes, read books, watched documentaries, and travelled globally to learn of house in the African Diaspora. I made my way across dance floors to get a sense of the network of underground club culture that’s existed in the name of house for multiple decades. My work as a DJ led to the development of research skills and I’ve applied those skills to unearthing the stories of hidden black artists and communities—from the areas of dance, film, literature, and music. If we don’t, who will? I’m here in Paris to shift the way people engage and understand the role of a DJ. I’m here to share the sonic stories of people buried beneath the shallow histories that place less value on the cultural contributions of women and gay folks from Black and Brown America. James Baldwin is included in my life work and I was here in Paris to present a paper titled “Don’t Let me be Misunderstood: The Personal Relationship Between James Baldwin, Nina Simone and Lorraine Hansberry,” as
Today I walked into “Café De Flore” the venue where Baldwin made final edits on his first book, “Go Tell it on the Mountain.” I’ve been feeling his energy all up and through these streets. When I walked in the café and read the menu, I searched with pride for Baldwin’s name, somewhere between Truman Capote’s and Tennessee Williams’, especially because this was a café that boasts about its connection to the greatest of literary giants. Baba Baldwin’s name was nowhere to be found and for a second I felt deflated—betrayed even.

Then I thought, France you fancy, but you don’t fool me. Just when I’m taken by the architecture, cheese and fine wine, I get pulled back into a particular kind of remembering. You have an empire and the legacies of French Nobility to protect, which may explain why Baldwin’s house in the South of France is scheduled to be demolished soon. That said, in the spirit of Buggin Out from “Do the Right Thing,” I walked out of the establishment like “Yo Sal, how come you don’t got no brothers [black people] up on the wall?” But let’s build our own walls, create our own spaces to honor the geniuses that are not exceptions to a rule, but in fact representative of the brilliant communities they were shaped by. James Baldwin, we call your name even when the places where traces of you can be found choose not to and we recognize you as one of the ancestors of house music, the children who walk on beat in spirit alongside you…

In 2012, I released my first double mix titled “The Children of Baldwin,” a musical essay about the history and possible future of house. At the core of house music is joy, a rhythmic theory of escape, accentuated by what could be called fatal pleasure—the war on drugs and addiction, coupled with a dangerous freedom marked by a lurking “big disease with a little name.” I’m grateful for the many unnamed house producers, DJs, dancers and promoters whose voices we will never hear because in addition to many of them passing too soon, I’m not sure enough of us care to ask why house music speaks directly to the needs of Black and Brown queer bodies. My curiosity feels like a form of respect, a living altar I can create every time I share house music on a dance floor, in the academy, in my community and here on this platform.

Please accept this offering as a sequel to the “Children of Baldwin” cause we still out here building on the legacy and cramping to understand the answers to unasked questions before we leave this planet…for a new one.

Most of the songs from this mix are early classic house songs. I’ve included a few newer tracks that feel aligned with this era and sound. This mix was produced in Berlin as part of the Berlin Sessions in February 2015, it’s an excellent audio syllabus for the curious person interested in learning about a genre of music that people lose sleep over. House music all night long. Enjoy.

Love Sexy (Blaze) Storm Bryant
Can’t Stop Plez
Carnival 93 Club Ultimate
Feeling Hot Erick Morillo
The Ha Dance Masters at Work
Luv Dancing Underground Solutions
Ticket to Ride Rheji Burell
No Way Back Adonis
Feel This Robbie Rivera
Mine to Give Photek
Makes me Jump Kleva Keys
Boriken Soul Yunurican

—DJ Lynnée Denise
ESSAY + AUDIO: THE SOUND OF FULFILLMENT – NOTES FOR LAIKA FATIEN'S NEBULA

LAIKA FATIEN

THE SOUND OF FULFILLMENT
Laika Fatien is an artist, not a politician, neither a sociologist nor a psychiatrist. As an artist she is some of all the aforementioned and greater than any of those professions because as an artist she offers honest and insightful vision of the here and now without illusions or pretensions, while at the same time providing inspiration to push into unknown, but not unknowable, futures.

The emphasis in this collection is on Laika the lyricist rather than the vocalist. This set is not simply an emotional outpouring of song but also a meditation on contemporary life. The assertive opening selection, “Essence” (based on Howard Brooks’ "Isle of Java" musical composition), sets the tone for a fearless forward march that never retreats into sentimentality or melodrama.

Unlike far too many contemporary offerings, Laika thankfully does not emphasize unrequited love. Constantly bemoaning what was lost does not befit an artist who is striving toward future gains.

Notice, I identified Laika as an artist, not as an entertainer. If she were simply an entertainer, she would only be concerned with the here and now, with the anesthesia of momentary feeling good, or the panacea of temporarily feeling no pain.

If Laika’s goal were merely to make her audience smile and laugh and forget, Laika would not be concerned with the sources of discomfort and disorientation, and she certainly would not be concerned with how to change distressing conditions.

Laika has decided to share her views and values, and thus has created a recording that is both bold (most vocal jazz records stick with the tried and true and seldom fit new lyrics to jazz standards) and reassuring (although it is definitely a break from the ordinary, we can easily hear where Laika goes). This work is firm in its convictions and fluid in its expression. The mark of all meaningful artistry is going beyond common boundaries.

Ms. Fatien has rejected making entertaining, pleasant music. Entertainment is a surrendering to the status quo, an acceptance that since we can not control our lives, we must find ways to painlessly endure our social conditions. Surrendering to the status quo is the central position every true artist refuses to occupy. Artist point outward, away from the center of acceptance and towards the uncertainty of creating one’s destiny.

Fate is what happens to us beyond our control. Destiny is what happens to us as a result of the choices we make. We are fated to be born where and when we are, our destiny is determined by what we do with our fate.

Laika had no maps to tell her how to proceed, how to sort out her sanity amid the confusion of daily disorientation—I know, I know, this does not sound like musical commentary, but what else is music but self-expression?
The most potent music comes from the search for self and the honest reflections of the twists and turns of that journey, as well as the unfettered announcement of what was found on that journey.

The old order is one of binaries (black, white; old world, new world; male, female; native, foreigner; etc.), our new existence rejects easy categories. Today is a disordering of yesterday; where previously there were definite identities within which we attempted to fit ourselves, currently there are no certainties. The new world is one of hybridity.

Is Laika a jazz artist, or a popular artist? To even ask for a specific category based on previous assumptions is to misunderstand. Her music is a recognition of change and contradiction, an embracing of both merger and separation.

Listen, you are not hearing simply one thing but rather a multiplicity of realities, with diverse elements coming to the foreground at different moments, and different textures providing the background as she moves from song to song.

She does not sing in her first language. She speaks a French hybrid and sings an international English.

For some of us, this mixed expression is too chaotic to cope with; we prefer something that comforts us rather than confronts us. But if one is an artist, one’s destiny is found in how one deals with the hand fate has dealt. To fully actualize our futures requires both bravery and imagination. We must be willing to search for the unseen and forge forward even as we might fear we are stepping off into an abyss.

Artistry is flying when the ground of old certainties falls away. Perhaps that is why I love Laika’s interpretation of Jackie McLean’s “Appointment In Ghana.” Laika calls it “Watch Your Back.” There is always some high sheriff sent to arrest us and return us to the restrictions of normalcy. But we have an appointment with the future—and some of us have vowed we will not be late.

—Kalamu ya Salaam
THE NEBULA

Is all the chaos & contradictions
Within which we were spawned
A mother from here, a father from there
Siblings scattered everywhere, are we
Supposed to simply end up where we started
No, our lives are what we make
Despite what others try to shape
When we are sure we don’t have to shout
Our calm will be perceived as a storm
On the wings of our self-directed struggles
We will be borne to worlds leagues away
From where we were born
If we raise our eyes and look high
Above where we are, deep into the depths
Of our existence we will see
ESSAY: WHY DO WE LIE ABOUT TELLING THE TRUTH?
WHY DO WE LIE ABOUT TELLING THE TRUTH?

"I put his head sort of on my lap. I just hoped and prayed he was still alive. It was hard to tell. He was having difficulty breathing. And other people came and they tore open the shirt. I could see that he was hit so many times."
This is a description of the death of El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, bka Malcolm X. Who said these words?

A. — Betty Shabazz, Malcom’s wife who was present with their children when Malcolm was assassinated.

B. — Gene Roberts, an undercover police agent who had infiltrated Malcolm’s organization and was attempting to save Malcolm with mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

C. — Yuri Kochiyama, a Japanese-American member of Malcom’s organization who was present in the Audubon Ballroom on February 21, 1965.

If you have seen Spike Lee’s movie Malcolm X you will be forgiven believing the answer is A – Betty Shabazz. If you have seen the death scene photo of a man leaning over Malcolm desperately trying to revive him, it is understandable that you believe it is B – Gene Roberts. But actually, the correct answer is C – Yuri Kochiyama, a follower and supporter of Malcolm X.

Why did Spike Lee lie?

Yes, I said “lie”! What else would you call it? Photos from the grisly death scene clearly show Malcolm’s head cradled in Ms. Kochiyama’s lap. Spike Lee’s colorful and fictionalized pseudo-biography brazenly liquidates Ms. Kochiyama and replaces the truth with a lie. It’s a lie because Spike Lee knew better and chose to misrepresent the truth. Spike’s lie is particularly troubling when we consider 1. Lee argued a Black director should do the Malcolm X movie because no White director could honestly portray the real story of Malcolm X, and 2. Lee had been active in fanning the flames of Black/Korean clashes and antagonisms in New York.

Spike said Malcolm was a Black man and in the process of zoot suiting and focusing on the Nation of Islam, Spike completely ignored the internationalist that Malcolm became, as a result, one could see the movie and never know that Yuri Kochiyama was a welcomed and active member of Malcolm’s organization, the OAAU. Although Spike Lee is not an elected leader, he is, unquestionably, revered as a major force in the imaging of Black people and has often cast himself (or agreed to be cast) as a spokesperson for a “Black” point of view.

Malcolm died trying to tell us something important, trying to lead us away from a morbid fascination with color and a limited conception of our struggle. Using the camera, the editing booth and deliberate falsification of facts, Spike Lee re-assassinated Malcolm X the internationalist. Why? Who knows. Spike may not know. But I’m willing to bet that a racial focus devoid of progressive politics had a lot to do with Spike doing the wrong thing.

Why do we lie about the truth of our existence? Because, even as we oppose racism, we often end up
believing in racial essentialism.

Black people in America are victims of racism. The majority of us — particularly our “appointed” leaders — manifest a terminal case of internalized oppression. Far too many of us are incapable not only of loving ourselves as “mixed-race” human beings (or, mulattoes) forcibly born out of the crucible of chattel slavery, but also are incapable of relating to other so-called minorities without exhibiting a warped and essentially racist assessment of people of color.

Misled by leaders (most of whom are media created) who don’t proactively lead but who rather pander to mass prejudices and misconceptions, the bulk of us USA Blacks tend toward a twisted and self-destructive color-based antagonism toward other so-called “minorities,” or, in an equally self-destructive manner we advocate a mole-like insistence on color-blindness that liquidates diversity in the name of some idealized humanism. Both self-centered chauvinism and romantic humanism are manifestations of White-supremacy victimization. This skewed perspective of other ethnic groups is particularly troubling in terms of Black/Asian relations.

A graphic illustration of where the “I’m human not Black” system-induced viewpoint leads us is the movie “One Night Stand” starring Wesley Snipes. In the movie, Wesley’s character is a West Coast-based advertising video director who is in New York to see a former best friend who just happens to be White and dying of AIDS. The character has a one night stand with a blonde rocket scientist and returns home to his Asian wife and two lovely mixed-race children (I’m not making this up!). The movie ends with spouse-swapping; yes, Wesley’s character gets the White woman and his Asian wife gets with the cuckolded White husband.

What’s wrong with this picture?

The main thing is that neither the Asian wife nor the African American husband exhibit any cultural self-awareness as people of color. They are portrayed as individuals who are culturally White and who just happen to have been born people of color. Although their race is obvious, they are oblivious to the culture of their people. They go through life neither identifying with other people of color nor advocating Black or Asian culture. This acceptance of racial difference but liquidation of cultural differences and distinctions, and avoidance of active identification with other people of color, is not ethnic diversity. This is white supremacy under the guise of “humanism” and “racial tolerance.”

The deal is that you can approach ethnicity as a racial matter or as a cultural matter. If we focus on race and create a fetish out of color, regardless of what we may think, we are essentially adopting a White supremacist point of view which out-and-out propagandizes that blood is the essential determinant of human existence. Of course, when it comes to Black manifestations of White supremacy’s racial essentialism, there are two approaches. One is that Black is intrinsically good, moral and beautiful because of color and the other is that White is intrinsically good, moral and beautiful because of power.

Those who argue the “scientific” melanin thesis, i.e. essentially people born with melanin are better (more moral and beautiful) than people born without melanin, have simply flipped the racist script, including the pseudo-scientific justifications. Indeed, some even argue that Whites are a separate species from people of color, hence, the Yacub-derived theories that Whites are grafted or manufactured people and not human beings like people of color. Those who are entranced by political (actually, economic and military) power basically believe that, since Whites are at the top, being White is the best one can be. In either case, there is a basic assumption that things are the way things are because of some sort of racial essentialism, some immutable result of racial origins and existence.
I would be the last to argue that melanin does not play some role in the human make up, but a determining and essential role? I think not. In any case, regardless of whether I'm right or wrong, what does this have to do with Black/Asian relations?

I think the basic problem is that we Blacks have become Americanized in our social thought via our formal integration into American society, an integration which earnestly began in the mid-seventies and has accelerated ever since. We have become nearly as jingoistic and racist as the dominant society which shapes and influences our pysches — which may be why “skin creams,” i.e. lye-based cosmetics which purportedly lighten the skin, and “hair relaxers” are reported to sell more today than they have ever sold. In terms of our relationship to other people of color — whether continental African, Asian, Hispanic, or Native Americans, many of us are as racist or as color-blind (and, as I argue above, the willfull ignoring of real differences is also a form of racism) as the average American, if not more so. Indeed, as far as our attitudes towards others go many of us might best be defined as brown-skinned rednecks!

While it is common to hear Blacks argue that we are the most oppressed people in American history — as if that were some sort of badge of honor — nevertheless, what we don’t often do is acknowledge the depth of our wretchedness as the most oppressed. If we are the leading victims of racism, it follows that we and those who create and maintain this barbaric system are the most affected by the system. No one else is as mesmerized by the splendour of the big house as are the master and his most loyal slave; the master out of material self-interest and the slave out of vicarious self-interest, i.e. psychic identification with the master.

This brings us to the recent rise of Black American jingoism — recall the excessive flag waving of the Black atheletes at the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta, particularly it’s sharp contrast to the Black Power salutes of the 1968 Olympics in Los Angeles. Admittedly, 1968 then is not 1998 now. Admittedly there are major differences in the conditions our people live and struggle under. However, what is remarkable is the embracing of America as though Black churches were not being burnt to the ground, multinational corporations were not superexploiting Third World labor, African American males were not being systematically victimized by the criminal justice system, etc. etc. Judging from the mindless rah-rahing of how great America is, one would not know that our communities and neighborhoods have been devastated by drugs, riddled by bullets, sickened by disease, and dumbed-down by educational neglect, and, oh yes, that the best and the brightest have left the least and the darkest to fend for themselves in the concrete jungles of urban America. Can anyone really argue that America is the greatest country in the world if one looks at the living conditions of the majority of people of color in the United States?

We have boarded the bus of mindless patriotism and ride in the front. Regardless of where the stop is, whenever we step off the bus we step off, and proudly so, as full-fledged American patriots with all the racism that such blind patriotism implies. I’m waiting for the melanin experts to explain the ultra patrotism of American Blacks in embracing the twin evils of racism and captialism — is it because being Black we do it better than the Whites who introduced it?

No, our skin color is neither the most important part of our oppression nor are color-based proposals the solution to our problems. Moreover, the more important truth is: if we are the most oppressed, we are also the most affected by oppression and, psychologically speaking, that effect has been overwhelmingly negative. Indeed, Black racial chauvanism is simply a manifestation of the pathology of oppression, and is, in the final analysis, nothing more than a variation on the classic white lie of racial superiority.
My first encounters with Asians happened in 1966 when I was in the U.S. Army stationed on a Nike-Hercules nuclear missile base, atop a mountain near the DMZ. The base was remote and the nearest city was a day’s truck ride away. On one peak there were missiles and on a close by peak there was the radar site. In the valley was the garrison area and a small Korean village separated by a dirt road, barbed wired and armed guards. The village’s main function was to supply cheap labor and cheap thrills to the U.S. soldiers stationed there. I wrote a short story which heavily drew on my experiences and the experiences of my fellow soldiers during my army years. At that time the only locations for the Hercules missile were the U.S., Germany and Korea. By general consensus, the “brothers” loved Korea and the Whites loved Germany. The following excerpt from the story illustrates the social education I received in Korea.

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I AIN’T NEVER GOING BACK NO MORE

It was raining by the bucket fulls. The door to Soulville, which is what we called our collectively rented hooch, was open and it was early afternoon. Rain softened daylight streaming in. And warm, a typical summer monsoon day.

Em, which was the only name I knew her by, was near me. She was reading the paper. I had a Korean bootleg Motown record spinning on the cheap portable player plugged into the extension cord that snaked out the window to some generator source that supplied this small village with a modicum of juice. Did I say village? The place was erected for one reason, and one reason only, to service the service men stationed on the other side of the road, to supply the base with cheap labor and even cheaper pussy. I know it sounds crude, but that’s the way occupying armies work.

I had never fucked Em, and, as it turned out, never would. I remember one wrinkled old sergeant, a hold over from World War II, talking on the base one day about Em sucking his dick, but that was not the Em I knew. Somehow, the Em I knew, the woman reading the paper I couldn’t read because I couldn’t read as many languages as she could, somehow, the lady who put down the paper and, as the rain fell, calmly carried on a conversation with me, clearly that Em was not the same Em that the sergeant knew.

It would be many, many years later before I realized that sarge never knew Em. How can one ever really know a person if one buys that person? If you buy someone, the very act of the sale cuts you off from thinking of that someone as a human equal. Sarge simply consumed the pleasure given by a female body to whom he paid money, a body which kneaded his flesh and opened her flesh to him, made him shudder as her thighs pulled him in or as she sucked him. A business transaction. Nobody buys pleasure in order to get to know the prostitute. In fact, the whole purpose of the deal is to remove the need for a human connection while satisfying a desire.

I didn’t think like that at that time, laying in the hooch with my boots off, day dreaming as I gazed out into the rain, my chin on my arm. In Soulville, just like in all the other hooches, which were usually little more than a large room that doubled as both a living room and a bed room, we took our boots off upon entering. Even now I like to take my shoes off inside. At the time it was a new thing to me, a difficult thing to get used to, especially
with combat boots rather than the slip-ons which most of the Koreans wore. But that’s the good thing about going to a foreign country: learning something that you don’t already know, something that you can use for the rest of your life.

It’s funny how stuff can catch up with you years later, and only after rounding a bunch of corners does the full impact of an experience become clear. I mean more than a delayed reaction, more like a delayed enlightenment…

…My reminisce was broken by Em’s hand on my arm. I looked over at her. This wasn’t no sexual thing. We both knew and observed the one rule of Soulville: no fucking in Soulville. Soulville was a place to hang out and cool out. We put our money together and rented Soulville so as anytime day or night when you didn’t feel like being around the white boys, if you was off you could come over to Soulville and just lay. And you didn’t have to worry about interrupting nothing. It didn’t take long for all the girls in the village to know Soulville was like that. So a lot of time was spent in here with Black GIs and Korean women just talking or listening to music. It was the place where we could relate to each other outside of the flesh connection.

From time to time we had parties at Soulville. And of course, some one of us was always hitting on whoever we wanted for the night. But when it came to getting down to business, you had to vacate the premises. We had had some deep conversations in Soulville. One or two of the girls might cook up some rice or something, and we’d bring some beer or Jim Beam — although I personally liked Jack Daniels Black, Jim Beam was the big thing cause it was cheap, cheap, cheap — and, of course, we brought our most prized possessions, our personal collections of favorite music. We’d eat, drink, dance and argue about whether the Impressions or the Temptations was the baddest group. As I remember it, there wasn’t much to argue about among the girl groups, cause none of the others was anywhere near Martha and The Vandellas. Soulville, man, we had some good times there.

Em was getting old. She had been talking about her childhood and stuff. And when she touched my arm and looked over at her, I could see a bunch of lines showing up in her face. Most of the time, when you saw the girls it was at night or they had all kinds of make up on their face. But it was not unusual for some of us to sleep over at Soulville and if we were off duty we’d just loll around there all day. Early in the morning we would hear the village waking up and watch the day unfold. Invariably, one of the girls would stop by to chat for ten or fifteen minutes. Or sometimes, two or three of them would hang out for awhile.

On days like this one, you’d get to see them as people. Talking and doing whatever they do, which is different from seeing them sitting around a table, dolled up with powder and lipstick, acting — or should I say, “trying to act” — coy or sexy, sipping watered down drinks through a straw and almost reeking of the cheap perfume they doused on themselves in an almost futile attempt to cover the pungent fragrance associated with the women of the night.

Just like when we was in Soulville we was off duty, well it was the same way for them. And I guess without the stain and strain of a cash transaction clouding the picture, we all got a chance to see a different side of each other.

I started wondering what it must have felt like to be a prostitute, a middle aged prostitute getting old and knowing you ain’t had much of a future. A prostitute watching soldiers come and go, year after year. What it
must have been like to have sex with all them different men, day in and day out and shit. Especially for somebody like Em who spoke Korean, English, Japanese and Chinese, and could read in Korean, English and Chinese. I mean, from the standpoint of knowing her part of the world, she was more intelligent than damn near all of us put together.

Her touch was soft on my arm. I looked down at her small hand, the unpainted fingernails, the sort of dark cream color of her skin. I looked up into her face. Her eyes were somber but she was half smiling.

“Same-o, same-o.” She said, rubbing first my bare arm and then her bare arm. “Same-o, same-o.”

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Like most of my peers, my first encounter with Asians was a politically unconscious encounter. Although, I may like to think otherwise and understandably was reluctant to publicly admit it, I was an armed agent of imperialism — no matter that I told myself, for example, that I was in Korea to avoid going to Vietnam; no matter that I tried to have more respect for the Korean people than did the White soldiers on the base; no matter that I understood that there was a connection of color between myself and the Koreans. Just like a Japanese-American friend whom it turns out was born in an internment camp during World War II and who served in the U.S. Army at the same time I did, regardless of all the historical and individual contradictions I had with America’s domestic and foreign policies, regardless of my personal beliefs or how I dressed up my involvement, the reality was that I was a soldier in the Army, a collaborator with the dictators of democracy. Although I had my rationalizations, and though my “reasoning” did have some merit, there is a big difference between admitting one’s contradictions and lieing to one’s self about the existence of those contradictions. That’s what Em was telling me — prostitute to soldier, we’re same-o, same-o.

-4-

My second major encounter with Asians was a horse of a different mule. In 1974 I was a delegate to the fifth Pan-African Congress in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. I was an active organizer in my home community of New Orleans and considered myself a Pan-Africanist. Upon arriving in Tanzania one of my first quests was to stand on the TanZam railroad, a vital rail linkage between Zambia and Tanzania which gave land-locked Zambia seaport access for copper shipments. The railroad was built through the lead partnership of the People’s Republic of China. During that time I also had the opportunity to visit Zanzibar and there took a tour of a cigarette factory which was built and transitionally managed by the Chinese. I spoke to none of the Chinese managers or workers, but I watched and wondered.

Our relationship to “foreigners” is inevitably a major barometer of our political consciousness. By 1974, the internal clash among Black radicals between the philosophies of Black Nationalism and Marxism was at an all time high. By then Amiri Baraka, the former chief propagandist of Kawaida-style Black Nationalism had declared himself a marxist. Also, within the Black power movement, the teachings of Chairman Mao were widely studied by nationalists and marxists alike. Moreover, struggles around the Vietnam War had also come to a head. Within this social context, political considerations were primary, and alliances between ethnic groups were forged for purposes of collective struggle against racism and capitalism. This was a high point in inter-ethnic alliances, not because of liberal “we are all humans” sentiments, but because of militant political calls for Third World liberation abroad and Third World self-determination at home. Hence, even though he has never been a marxist, Haki Madhubuti (formerly Don L. Lee) named the press he co-founded “Third World Press.”
Less than two decades ago, we were identifying with people of color rather than antagonistic towards people whom many of us now contemptuously regard as competitors for “our jobs” and replacements for White neighborhood merchants who price gouge us in corner stores where we are charged a nickel to change a dime. What the Third World had in common was not really color, but rather anti-colonial struggle, and we within the United States were equally, if not more so, colonized subjects. Within that context, identification with the Third World was led by a political understanding which in many ways was much more mature than the good old boy “buy American” rhetoric we mindlessly spout today.

This same political concern with the Third World led our nationwide grouping of Black Nationalists, all of whom operated independent Black educational institutions for young Black children, to organize the first all-Black tour to China in 1977. We worked in cooperation with the marxist-led U.S. China Friendship Association. During the course of the year long organizing to arrange the trip and raise money to make the trip we encountered, confronted and attempted to change anti-Asian sentiments in our community without liquidating our basic Black nationalist stance. In fact, at one point there was a concerted efforted by some members of the Friendship Association to force us to exclude Maulana Ron Karenga from our twenty member delegation. We took the stance that the make-up of our delegation was an internal matter not subject to the dictates of outsiders and if it meant that we had to forgo the trip then so be it. After some weeks of high level wrangling, our delegation proceeded as originally planned. We spent 18 days traveling throughout China and happened to be in Beijing (then Peking) when the rehabilitation of Deng Shao Ping was announced.

Although there was a massive demonstration in the city center by literally millions of people supporting Deng, I remained skeptical of Deng’s line. Deng had argued that it doesn’t make a difference what color the cat is as long as the cat catches the mice. Some of us argued that “color” (Deng was referring to ideology) did make a difference because if Black cats never learned to catch mice, Black cats would continue to be dependent on White cats for food. At the same time, I was not inclined to simply dismiss the Chinese view out of hand because by then I realized that there was a lot more to Chinese ideological developments than initially met the eye.

While we were in Beijing some of us met Robert Williams who was recuperating from an operation he had returned to China to have. When Nixon visited China and officially reopened diplomatic relations with the Chinese government, Robert Williams parlayed his knowledge and acceptance within the Chinese government into an opportunity to return to the United States. Williams made the tradeoff after over a decade in exile, being on the FBI’s most wanted list, and on the CIA’s hit list for his international activities which included publishing The Crusader, a militant newspaper, and, while in Cuba, broadcasting an incendiary radio program known as Radio Free Dixie. Indeed, our delegation had a photocopy of the issue of Dan Watts’ Liberator magazine whose cover featured a famous photo of Robert Williams standing with Chairman Mao.

Robert Williams was overjoyed to see us in Beijing — we were the first Blacks he had seen take an organized and direct interest in China, and Williams asserted it was extremely important for Black people to get involved in international affairs separate from America’s foreign policy. Of course there were truckloads of Chinese-influenced Afro marxists back in the states, and of course some of the Panthers had passed through China, but most of these people came as individuals or as marxists in small, clandestine, and racially integrated groups. We were the first Blacks to enter as an organized body representing a broad grassroots constituency from across the United States.
We spent over an hour talking with Brother Rob as he patiently encouraged us to develop an internationalist viewpoint. What I remember most is Robert Williams telling us about his stay in North Vietnam and how at a state dinner he rose to propose a toast to the Vietnamese people. Brother Rob said the Vietnamese made him sit down by responding that it was they who should be toasting him and the valiant struggle of the Afro-American people.

The North Vietnamese told Robert Williams that the Black power struggle greatly helped them understand that the United States could be beaten and that the urban rebellions, particularly in Detroit where the U.S. Army Airborne had to be sent in before “order” could be “restored,” had given the Vietnamese the idea to stage the Tet offensive which was psychologically the major turning point of the Vietnam conflict. The reverberations of the Black Liberation struggle were felt not only internally, but also worldwide. From the Free Speech Movement, emergent Feminism, Vietnam antiwar demonstrations, gay rights and other internal struggles to the international arena, our struggle inspired and encouraged sundry peoples and interest groups who had their own particular battles with oppression and exploitation. These were heady and exciting days of political discussion, analysis and planning.

At our previous stop in Sian, China after over a week of inquiries, our delegation had engaged in a major ideological discussion with political theoreticians of the Chinese Communist Party. I distinctly remember that these particular individuals in their mannerisms, dress and general physical appearance “looked” different from the majority of Chinese we had up to that point encountered. These men may have had “peasant” roots but their current status was cloistered within a circle of folk who “thought” for a living; they were part of the policy-making and implementation apparatus. They frankly stated a line I had never heard before: If the capitalist want to bring on world war three, so be it. Such a war would only hasten capitalism’s demise.

These men with the confident-quiet of an armed but not yet exploded bomb calmly ran down their view of progress: Since the 1950s, America has been engaged in conflict with Asia, and has been steadily losing ground. First came Korea, and there was a stalemate. Then came Vietnam, and America lost. Should America decide to take on China the result would be more than simply another American loss. What would happen would be China’s ascendancy. The Chinese had the atomic bomb, there would be no more one-sided nuking of “yellow peoples” as happened in Japan during World War II. Also, the Chinese had constructed underground cities — literally factories, housing, and shelters for not just a handful of select leaders but for masses of Chinese people. They knew that America was not similarly prepared to withstand nuclear war. They were prepared. They were not afraid. They didn’t want to have a war, but if it came to that, so be it. Needless to say, we had not been prepared to argue world politics at that level.

For the Chinese, the subsequent disentegration of Soviet Russia far from reputeing communism and the Chinese view, actually was just another wrinkle in the fabric of Eurocentric capitalism’s eventual demise. The Chinese had long ago split with the Soviets and saw the Soviets as state capitalists who were hopelessly emotionally immeshed and ideologically interwined with the Western world. For we Black nationalists struggling to conceptualize and actualize some form of a Black nation in America, these discussions were eye-opening developments. When we returned to the United States we organized forums and community meetings to report on our trip to China. The general headline we used was “Black Nationalists in Red China.” That was my second major interface with Asians.

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My third encounter was the development in 1991 of a partnership with Chinese American baritone saxophonist and composer, Fred Ho. We knew of each other’s political work and first met face to face in Houston, Texas. This meeting was arranged by a mutual friend Baraka Sele, who was then a producer with the Houston International Festival. Both of us were booked on the festival and Baraka arranged for us to all go to a dinner together. Fred and I talked. I knew his music from recordings. He had read some of my poetry. We talked that “yeah, let’s get together and do something some time” talk in which one usually engages acquaintances at festivals and conferences. However, we took it further than wishful talk. We stayed in touch and decided to start working as a duo.

We had two denominators in common. First, we both had a long history of political involvement and were active as socially committed cultural workers who elevated our political concerns over the economic concerns of making it commercially within the system. Second, we both have a deep love for music and are heavily influenced by Black music.

When we got together we were able to work as a true duo rather than as one backing up the other. The music was not background for my poems and my poems were not just hooks for Fred to string together saxophone solos. At the same time, Fred and I were not always in total agreement on political and aesthetic matters. We debated each other. Fred remains a marxist and I, more than ever, am an advocate of socially committed, politically progressive Black culture. I no longer consider myself a Black nationalist.

Fred and I work together not because of color, nor because of some trendy concern with multiculturalism or pie in the sky “rainbow coalitionism.” We work together because we are politically attuned to opposing the racist/capitalist/sexiest status quo. We are searching to develop ideas, institutions, and ourselves as individuals who work to establish egalitarian and just social formations at every level of our existence, emphasizing both the personal one-to-one and the ongoing development of multi-generational organizations which work with young people to help uplift and empower our people and each other.

Our duo, the Afro Asians Arts Dialogue, has performed from Atlanta to Wisconsin, California to Maine and a number of places in between. The majority of our performances are sponsored by Asian student groups and by Third World/Minority offices on college campuses. We have yet to be booked by a Black student organization. Fred and I talk about why Black groups shy away from booking us. The answer is simple: the currents of Black struggle are at an all time low. Our heroes are athletes and entertainers, politicians and academic “public intellectuals,” all of whom directly depend on the status quo for their money and status. The bulk of our leadership lives in the big house and dreams of sleeping in the master’s bed.

Nationalism is a bankrupt concept. While we strive to become fully integrated into America, the fact of the matter is that the working class masses of us are more isolated, more exploited, and more hopeless than we have ever been. The nineties wave of drug culture, or what we used to call “biological warfare,” is nothing new. The “opium wars” in China are a precursor of the inner city “crack” epidemic. Whether we talk integration into America or separate development in Black countries such as those in Africa and the Caribbean, as reality has demonstrated neither option in and of itself is the solution for our people here in America.

We can argue about the causes of our oppression and exploitation but the effects are real and deadly.
Moreover, the major issue to deal with is our collusion with capitalism and hence our own resultant racism. Do you think Michael Jordan or Tiger Woods could get away with endorsing Nike if the shoes were manufactured in Haiti or Senegal for ridiculously low wages under neo-slave conditions? Unfortunately, the answer is: Yes — if our leadership continues to be apologists for capitalism and mesmerized by glitz.

The truth is we are doing the same thing that White American workers historically did, we are being bought off by a combination of materialism and isolation. And while we are busy ideologically waving the American flag, capital recognizes no national boundaries. The globalization of economic exploitation by structures such as the multinational corporations, the World Bank, and, the most famous of all maurers, the IMF (officially the International Monetary Fund, unofficially the International Mother Fucker!) is the current form of economic exploitation.

Asia will unavoidably be the dominant battlefield of the 21st century, especially India — the world’s largest English speaking country — and China. Which is not to say that Africa is insignificant or irrelevant, far from it. Africa will remain a major site of ongoing struggle and will remain particularly relevant to the future of Black people worldwide precisely because, as a result of disease (particularly AIDS) and famine, and as a legacy of the slave trade, in the 21st century Africa will be severely underpopulated. That is an important point to keep in mind. the needs of Africa notwithstanding, I believe Asia will be the major arena of future north/south, east/west clashes.

Only those of us who are prepared to relate to the whole world will develop and prosper. Everyone else will be left behind to wallow in their own parochialism. For too many of us “integration” has meant, as James Baldwin so prophetically argued, rushing into “a burning house.” But the future is not White. The sun will set on Europe, and when the new day dawns, global cooperation will be the order of the day. Now is the time to prepare for that future.

Why do we lie about telling these hard truths? Our leaders lie to us for the benefit of short term material gain — a salary, proximity to power, a high ranking career, a lucrative endorsement or consulting contract.

Exploited as both labor and capital, we were money — our physical bodies. If anyone should understand the evils of capitalism, we, the descendants of enslaved Africans, we who were America’s first form of venture capital, we should understand.

Moreover, in contemporary terms, when we advocate “free enterprise zones,” “Black capitalism” under the rhetoric and rubric of small business entrepreneurship, or preparing ourselves for “good jobs” we are merely adding another brick in the wall of our people’s economic and political disenfranchisement. Business per se is not the problem (buying, selling and bartering existed long before capitalism). The elevation of an economic bottom line to the top priority of all our endeavors is the problem.

I do not believe that everything in America is wrong, nor do I believe that there is no hope. I do believe that this society is in the midst of a major meltdown and that in the next millennium we will look back on this stage and wonder why we couldn’t see the problems for what they actually were. America is imploding. While this is certainly the most militarily powerful country of the 20th century, military power is no real measure of social wellbeing.
When we closely examine the social conditions of all people in this society, the conclusion that there are serious problems is obvious. This grand experiment called America was seriously flawed from the beginning, based as it was on the liquidation of Native Americans and the enslavement of Africans, all justified in the name of life, liberty and the pursuit of (material/economic) happiness. The main reason people came to and continue to come to America is because of the perception and the opportunity to make fortunes, but all such fortunes are made at the terrible expense of various peoples (mainly, but not exclusively, people of color) worldwide.

The problem is that the center can no longer hold. The world can not and will not continue to provide over sixty percent of its resources to a country which has far less than 10% of the world’s population. There will be a change. The course and results of this change are what is in question.

In the here and now, the solution is for us to open our eyes, travel the world and begin to find out for ourselves what is going on. The solution is to begin to think and act and live globally. The solution can be found by living harmoniously while putting ethics, and not economics, in the lead; by emphasizing cultural integrity rather than racial purity; by advocating and maintaining alliances with peoples of color and people of good deeds whomever they may be.

Korean shop keepers, Vietnamese merchants, Chinese restauranters, none of these are our real enemies. Multinational corporations, the American government, academic citadels, none of these are our real friends.

For particularly revealing insights on how America actually works, and insight into how minorities in high positions don’t and can’t make a major difference in the economic and political wellbeing of the masses read two books: Diversity in the Power Elite — Have Women and Minorities Reached the Top? by Richard L. Zweigenhaft and G. William Domhoff, and Who Rules America Now: A View for the 80’s by G. William Domhoff. Many of us have never faced the truth about the society into which we are born and a society whose existence we accept as the work of “God” rather than the machinations of classes and interest groups often operating out of pure greed and material self-interest. Without serious study, we are not even prepared to argue our beliefs or make accurate analysis of our problems. For far too many of us, the popular media is the sum total of our education and understanding of both world affairs and the realities of American life.

You can believe the ideals, myths and outright lies if you want to, but I’ll take a hard truth over a soft lie any day of the week. The truth is we are knowingly lied to everyday of the week by those who have a stake in the status quo. What we really need are leaders who will call into question all our beliefs and challenge us to address the pressing, very real and very difficult situations that confront us instead of advocating a mixture of metaphysics and fatalism, a mixture of traditional ‘put it in God’s/Jesus’ hands’ and “there’s no way like the American way.” If those options are the solution, how is it that after nearly five hundred years of “one nation under god” we have the problems we have today?

The bulk of our socalled leaders lie about telling the truth because they are not our leaders but rather hand-picked and specifically groomed judas goats whose main task is to quietly lead us to economic and political slaughter. Regardless of what our leaders believe and what god they pray to, the results of their actions define them for what they are. And that’s the truth!

—kalamu ya salaam
HISTORY + OBIT: Muhammad Ali
Muhammad Ali On How He Wants To Be Remembered:

"I'd like for them to say:
He took a few cups of love.
He took one tablespoon of patience,
One teaspoon of generosity,
One pint of kindness.
He took one quart of laughter,
One pinch of concern.
And then, he mixed willingness
with happiness.
He added lots of faith,
And he stirred it up well.
Then he spread it over a span
of a lifetime,
And he served it to each and
every deserving person he met."

— Ali, 1974 interview with David Frost

Muhammad Ali: The Original Activist-Athlete

BY LINDSAY GIBBS
Heavyweight champion Muhammad Ali stands over fallen challenger Sonny Liston, shouting and gesturing shortly after dropping Liston with a short hard right to the jaw on May 25, 1965, in Lewiston, Maine. The bout lasted only one minute into the first round. / CREDIT: JOHN ROONEY, AP

Heavyweight champion Muhammad Ali stands over fallen challenger Sonny Liston, shouting and gesturing shortly after dropping Liston with a short hard right to the jaw on May 25, 1965, in Lewiston, Maine. The bout lasted only one minute into the first round.

There are a couple nagging questions all successful, high-profile athletes inevitably have to grapple with: What does it mean to have a voice? What does it mean to truly be great?

Muhammad Ali, the legendary boxer who died on Friday at the age of 74, didn’t just redefine both of those concepts; he absolutely shattered them.

Whether it was refusing to be drafted into the U.S. Army to fight in Vietnam 1967, literally talking a suicidal stranger off a ledge in 1981, or speaking out against the Islamophobia of presidential candidates in 2015, Ali’s greatness extended far beyond the ropes of the boxing ring, and his voice was more impactful than his fists.

“What Muhammad Ali did—in a culture that worships sports and violence as well as a culture that idolizes black athletes while criminalizing black skin—was redefine what it meant to be tough and collectivize the very idea of courage,” Dave Zirin wrote at The Nation. “Through the Champ’s words on the streets and deeds in the ring, bravery was not only standing up to Sonny Liston. It was speaking truth to power, no matter the cost.”

Ali was brash, bold, and unapologetically confident in his own greatness. Coming of age in the heart of the civil rights movement, with racial tensions at a breaking point, Ali refused to make himself smaller or meeker just to make others more comfortable.

In 1960, Ali (then Cassius Clay) won a gold medal in light heavyweight boxing at the Rome Olympics at the age of 18. He was so proud that he wore the medal all the time upon his return to the United States — up until the moment he was refused service at a small dinner party because he was black. That night, he threw his medal into the Ohio River.
In 1967, he refused to be drafted to go fight in Vietnam, citing the fact that he had converted to Islam in 1964. He was arrested, and the New York State Athletic Commission suspended his boxing license while the World Boxing Association stripped him of the heavyweight title.

Ali was sentenced to five years in prison, but his case was appealed and went all the way to the Supreme Court, where his conviction was overturned in 1971. In the end, he was banned from boxing for three years during what could have been the prime of his career.

“My conscience won’t let me go shoot my brother, or some darker people, or some poor hungry people in the mud for big powerful America,” he said at the time. “And shoot them for what? They never called me nigger, they never lynched me, they didn’t put no dogs on me, they didn’t rob me of my nationality, rape and kill my mother and father… Shoot them for what? …How can I shoot them poor people? Just take me to jail.”

He was not impressed with other athletes who weren’t willing to speak up on matters of politics or religion out of fear of losing sponsors or fans. Back in 1971, Ali brutally shattered the notion that “not all white people” are racist.

“So now I’m going to forget the 400 years of lynching and killing and raping and depriving my people of freedom and justice and equality, the first fired, the last hired, the lowest of low, last respected, and I’m going to look at the two or three white people who are trying to do right and forget the million who are trying to kill me? I’m not that big of a fool,” he said on the British talk show Parkinson.
Ali was diagnosed with Parkinson’s syndrome in 1984, a disease which is commonly associated with the head trauma that boxers experience on a regular basis. But even with his motor skills slowed and his speech shaky, he never stopped fighting for what he believed was right.

As recently as last December, when the now-presumptive Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump called for a ban on all Muslims entering the United States after a string of ISIS terrorist attacks, Ali released a statement defending his religion.

“I am a Muslim and there is nothing Islamic about killing innocent people in Paris, San Bernardino, or anywhere else in the world,” he said. “True Muslims know that the ruthless violence of so called Islamic Jihadists goes against the very tenets of our religion.”

“Speaking as someone who has never been accused of political correctness, I believe that our political leaders should use their position to bring understanding about the religion of Islam and clarify that these misguided murderers have perverted people’s views on what Islam really is.”

These days, there are endless battles over the greatness of athletes, but Ali is the one that everyone universally agrees takes the title. His name has become synonymous with the conceit. But as brilliant as it was to watch him float like a butterfly and sting like a bee, his most significant legacy has nothing to with boxing gloves.

He wasn’t perfect, but he always remained an activist first, an athlete second. He proved that not only were the two things not mutually exclusive, but they are stronger together than they ever could be apart. Because of his ability to be both, the champ will be remembered exactly the way he hoped he would.
I would like to be remembered as a man who won the heavyweight title three times, who was humorous, and who treated everyone right. As a man who never looked down on those who looked up to him, and who helped as many people as he could. As a man who stood up for his beliefs no matter what. As a man who tried to unite all humankind through faith and love. And if all that’s too much, then I guess I’d settle for being remembered only as a great boxer who became a leader and a champion of his people. And I wouldn’t even mind if folks forgot how pretty I was.

>via: http://thinkprogress.org/sports/2016/06/04/3784751/rest-in-power-muhammad-ali/

As part of my ongoing research on the life, thought, and history of W. E. B. Du Bois, this month I offer a bibliography of recent and forthcoming work on Du Bois just in time for summer reading. Books on the Black
scholar and intellectual continue to pour hot off the press, and a number of important articles add to the conversation. (Readers aware of works not listed below, please post them in the comments section and I’ll update the post.)

**Books**


Murrell, Gary. *“The Most Dangerous Communist in the United States”: A Biography of Herbert Aptheker* University of Massachusetts Press, 2015. (While Murrell’s biography is not about Du Bois as such, his chapters on Herbert Aptheker’s editorial efforts on behalf of Du Bois’s vast archive warrant inclusion in this list, not to mention Aptheker’s work in Black history more generally.)


**Articles**


Several general observations emerge from this list of scholarly resources. With respect to the books and articles that address sociology and literature, diverse fields of inquiry continue to find analytical purchase in the work of W. E. B. Du Bois, including that of environmental studies. This speaks to the breadth of Du Bois’s own interests and intellect and suggests exciting opportunities for future work. Second, Alexander’s work and Mullen’s forthcoming book, aimed at popular audiences and designed for classroom use, document that biography remains a relevant and compelling avenue into Du Bois’s historical significance. Furthermore, Holloway and Chandler’s curation of primary sources along with several stand-alone articles present fresh aspects of the extraordinary documentary record that Du Bois left behind. This should further enliven classrooms with Du Bois’s voice. Finally, the collective range of topics included in the bibliography demonstrate that both the early and late career chapters of Du Bois’s 95 years of life continue to offer rewarding and worthwhile sites of scholarly investigation.
POV: Pitfalls and radical mutations: Frantz Fanon’s revolutionary life

Pitfalls and radical mutations: Frantz Fanon’s revolutionary life
Since his death Frantz Fanon has been appropriated for almost every cause. Five years after his death in 1961 he emerged as the preferred theorist of the emergent Black Power movement in the US, influencing Bobby Seale and Huey P Newton in the Black Panther Party. Dan Watts, editor of the radical newspaper *Liberator*, in 1967 described the extent of Fanon’s influence on the revolt of black America: “You’re going along thinking all the brothers in these riots are old winos. Nothing could be further from the truth. These cats are ready to die for something. And they know why. They all read. Read a lot. Not one of them hasn’t read the Bible… Fanon… You’d better get this book. Every brother on a rooftop can quote Fanon”.1

In the 1960s and 1970s Fanon was the quintessential Third Worldist. He was taken up by movements that looked to guerrilla struggle in the countryside and in the newly independent Third World. His work became a manual to Maoists and the guerrilla intelligentsia predicting an imminent revolutionary wave that would overturn the world from the countryside. The proletariat could not be trusted—these movements would be based on other political forces. In the 1990s Fanon was taken up with renewed vigour by the academy. Cultural critics and postmodernists focused exclusively on his work on identity and presented a largely decontextualised Fanon, shorn of history. Here he was with his revolutionary urgency (and heart) ripped out.

Fanon became the privileged thinker of the "post-colony", and careers were made researching Fanon’s thought by Anglo-American academics. As Fanon’s biographer David Macey has explained:

> In itself there’s nothing wrong with that—better to study Fanon… But I think it is necessary to put Fanon back in his context—stop abstracting from it and start exploring what are the implications today of [Fanon] in a more positive sense…we won’t do that by discussing Fanon in seminars in Yale university…it’s got to go beyond that. And I think that's the problem with post-colonial studies… it doesn’t actually link up with what virtually anybody goes through every day.2

Yet most of Fanon’s life and writing was dedicated to revolutionary change. Soon after he moved to Algeria in 1953 he devoted himself to the Front de Libération Nationale (National Liberation Front, FLN). He wrote about the revolutionary struggle in Algeria and how people were transformed by their involvement in the struggle. Relationships between men and women, families and their children, that had seemed frozen into the fabric of society and traditions, came apart in a process that Fanon described as "radical mutation" as the battle against the French rippled across Algerian society. But he did more than celebrate these changes; he sought to explain how they could be deepened. He saw how national liberation could become a curse, unless it was extended beyond the immediate goal of independence from former colonial powers and linked to regional and international processes of popular transformation. For this to happen Fanon argued for the right type of
organisation to be built and warned against the danger of an absence of ideology.

As North Africa once again becomes the fulcrum of revolutionary change, Fanon’s work is a useful and necessary place to return to. Fanon’s vision of human emancipation through popular and revolutionary struggle continues to tantalise contemporary activists, even if his work is marked by serious pitfalls and contradictions.3

Today’s interest in Fanon coincides with last year’s 50th anniversary of both the publication of *The Wretched of the Earth* and Fanon’s death of leukaemia. I believe that Fanon can still be useful for those seeking to understand (and undertake) social change. His questions are vital for contemporary students of social change. His lifelong concerns are also ours: What are the limitations of revolutionary movements? What political forces usurp revolutionary struggles? What is the role of leadership in political movements? How are nationalist movements, and national consciousness, inherently restrictive of political and social transformation? Despite the scope of Fanon’s work this article will limit itself to a general introduction to the main contours of his life and work. Modestly it aims to provoke further curiosity and investigation.4

**Inside Martinique: racism, war and France**

Fanon was born in 1925 to a middle class family in Martinique. His childhood was comfortable, and relatively unremarkable. But life in Martinique permanently marked his identity. The island “department” was, and still is, a place of extreme racism, in its own composition and its relations to metropolitan France. The island’s communities were, in Fanon’s youth, divided into a small class of white planters and businessmen, the békés, and mulatto and black. Obsessively demarcated by colour, these categories signified a family’s place in the world. On the island pigmentation, and specifically the whiteness of the skin, to a large extent determined your trajectory in life and your own sense of self-worth. Fanon’s family had some white ancestry, and were ambitious and mobile. His mother was a proud shop owner, his father a civil servant in the customs service. Fanon attended Lycée Schoelcher in the capital, Fort-de-France, and gained a reputation for being an avid reader and keen footballer who was confident and insistent. The family considered themselves French, and no one felt this more keenly than their brightest son.

In 1944 Fanon fled Martinique and his mother’s orders to join the Free French. He served in Morocco, in Algeria and finally in France. Fanon’s principal biographer explains the effect of the war on Fanon’s identity:

> It is hard to imagine how you’d get through the confusion—you invade from the South of France and they pull back the Senegalese troops who could not be allowed to liberate France and somehow you are reclassified as white. So that on the one hand you’re not a black person, you’re French, but you’re not French, you’re a black infantry soldier, fighting in the snow you have never seen before… so it’s not surprising the confusion about who you are, what you are and what on earth France is…a terrible sense of betrayal.5

Fanon had been taught to believe that he was French and schooled in the French Revolution and the Enlightenment, the values of fraternity and equality. The war brought these illusions crashing down. Writing to his parents in April 1945, the 19 year old Fanon explained, “If I don’t come back, and if one day you should hear that I died facing the enemy, console each other, but never say: he died for the good cause… This false ideology that shields the secularists and the idiot politicians must not delude us any longer. I was wrong!”6

Decorated for bravery Fanon returned briefly to Martinique to complete his studies. He met Aimé Césaire—later the most famous radical Caribbean poet—who, for a time taught him. The contact with the poet’s work marked him for the rest of his life. Césaire was a teacher, recently returned from France, of brilliant and precocious intelligence. Fanon memorised large sections of Césaire’s celebrated poem *Cahier d’un Retour au Pays Natal* and was struck by the poems forthright pride and courage: “no race has a monopoly on beauty, or intelligence, or strength, and there will be a place for all at the rendezvous of victory”.7

Césaire was a proponent of Négritude, a movement of black renaissance which he, Leopold Senghor and Léon Damas founded in Paris in the 1930s. It was a confident assertion of the vitality and pride in being black, and of African society and culture. Fanon was influenced by the movement but questioned the way Négritude contrasted a contrived African emotionality with European rationality and science. Fanon praised Négritude’s important celebration of being black in a world of overwhelming racism.8

Fanon graduated from his Fort-de-France lycée and moved to Paris to study dentistry. His decision was no longer based on a romance of the motherland, but a pragmatic recognition that Martinique was too small to contain his plans and ambitions. He abandoned dentistry and Paris for medicine and Lyon. In Lyon he
specialised in psychiatry and became active on the periphery of the Communist Party (PCF). The PCF was unavoidable and Fanon oriented to the party’s activities. As Ian Birchall has written, “The Communist Party was at the peak of its influence, with five million voters and hegemony over a trade union federation with some five million members”.

Fanon also launched a student magazine called Tam–tam, which survived for several issues. He plunged himself into a phenomenal and extensive reading programme—consuming literature, medicine and philosophy. He had already worked through the poorly stocked library in Fort-de-France, where he had read the classics of French literature and philosophy, but now his hunger could be properly satisfied. He attended the guest lectures of the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and was attracted by Merleau-Ponty’s emphasis on lived experience and how it could be used to explain black people’s lives in France. He read Jean-Paul Sartre with fascination and critical passion—an engagement with the philosopher that he maintained for the rest of his life.

**Black Skin, White Masks**

Fanon started to write his first book, still a student of medicine, *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs* (*Black Skin, White Masks*). The book is an attempt to describe the “lived experience of a black person”. It was not published until 1952. To some extent it is autobiographical as well as a call for “mutual recognition” and an end to racism. Employing Sartre’s work on anti-Semitism Fanon explains that being black is made in confrontation with others and created by the racist’s gaze. Race and racism, Fanon argues in the book, are relationships of intersubjectivity that orbit around a superiority and inferiority complex, with whiteness at the centre of a supposed superiority.

Fanon argues that he is cast into his blackness by racism, and becomes the categories, the insults and the stereotypes of the racist. When black people are confronted with racism they are broken apart: “I was responsible for my body, responsible for my race, responsible for my ancestors… He is all the clichés of anti-black racism: ‘the negro is stupid, the negro is bad, the negro is wicked, the negro is ugly’.” But as Fanon is confined to his blackness by the racist gaze and insult, so the white person is trapped by his whiteness. There is a tension in the book between Fanon’s need to declare, “*Je suis mon propre fondement*” (“I am my own foundation”), to assert himself individually, and the realisation that such a foundation can only be established collectively.

Following Hegel, the book concludes with an appeal for humanism that Fanon maintains throughout his work. This universality and humanism can only be acquired with recognition by others—the acknowledgement of the humanity of black (and colonised) peoples in Europe. Yet this recognition is not a benevolent gesture, bestowed on black people, but one that must be seized and reached for in struggle and collective action. Recognition and humanity cannot be granted.

Fanon writes, “There is no Negro mission; there is no white burden. I find myself suddenly in a world…in which I am summoned into battle… There is no white world; there is no white ethic, any more than there is a white intelligence. There are in every part of the world men who search”. Fanon was still not clear what this struggle would entail, or practically how recognition could be sought. Algeria helped to actualise Fanon’s philosophy.

Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* developed a style that was distinct and powerful. His prose is full of poetry and rhythm and demands to be read aloud. He was not satisfied with academic language but craved to reach his readers emotionally. This desire never left him. “The situation that I have examined…is not a classic one. Scientific objectivity was barred to me, for the alienated, the neurotic, was my brother, my sister, my father”. In Fanon’s writing in general, but particularly his first book, he is telling a story about race relations as a prose-poet. He does not give the reader an analysis of categories that are distanced and sociological. Rather the book tries to invoke in the reader an experience of what race and racism really mean and how they are felt. This is a phenomenological approach that attempted to penetrate how people experience the world. Fanon had learnt his style, politics and philosophy from the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty and Sartre. So he provided an account of the structures of experience through which racism is lived. Nothing like this had been published before.

Fanon tried to submit the manuscript as a dissertation in his final medical degree but, not unfairly, it was rejected. When the book was published it gave Fanon little exposure to Parisian literary circles; there are few readers and fewer reviews. But the book was a marker for Fanon, identifying him as a serious thinker, a young black intellectual whose language and arguments demanded a response.
After graduation he took up his first major post at Saint Albans, the famous psychiatric hospital in France, then headed by Francois Tosquelles. Tosquelles became an important influence on Fanon. He was a proponent of institutional psychiatry which involved the revolutionising of the hospital, introducing, long before it became fashionable, group therapy and social activities in an attempt to create a “neo-society” that would help the patient readjust. Tosquelles was a militant anti-Stalinist who had been a senior member of the far-left POUM in the Spanish Civil War. He was a central intellectual figure in Fanon’s life, and his only mentor.

Algeria: resistance and repression

At the end of 1953 Fanon took up a job in Blida-Joinville, a town a short distance from Algiers. Algeria was then a territory of metropolitan France firmly under the boot of French authority, as it had been since 1848. Invaded by France in 1830, Algeria was not fully integrated for another 18 years, as the French struggled to pacify “native” resistance. When “integration” finally took place the Arab-Berber population (or indigènes) were not accorded French citizenship, and remained subjects with few rights. Fanon, writing to his brother to tell him of the move, explained, “I’m going to Algeria. You understand: the French have enough psychiatrists to take care of their madmen. I’d rather go to a country where they need me”.

The decision to go to Algeria was not because Fanon had a vision of the future publishing success of Les Damnés de la Terre (The Wretched of the Earth). Fanon was militant and angry maybe, but he was an ambitious doctor who had little chance of finding a post in France. He would have stayed if there were these opportunities.

Algeria was eventually legally constituted as an administrative department within France. The processes of this incorporation were brutal. They involved driving pre-colonial Algerian society further back, so trade, schooling and human development were systematically underdeveloped by French colonialism. Mostefa Lacheraf in an important historical account explains these developments powerfully:

Algeria was no barbarian country inhabited by illiterate people with anarchic or sterile institutions. Its human and economic values attained a high level... Patriarchal, agricultural and civic lifestyles coexisted...throughout there was a marked sense of energy and industry: in maritime and artisanal techniques, in para-industrial methods, in city organisation, in the commerce with Africa and across the Mediterranean, in a system of intellectual values which was strongly impregnated with legal traditions, formal logic, more or less rationalist theology, with Arabic and Maghrebine folk traditions...a widely diffused culture, generalised through its written and oral expression... Algeria in the earlier 19th century displayed far fewer deficiencies, far more chance of progress in relation to the civilisation of the period and the general movement of free peoples than it did by the end of the century, stripped of its millions of hectares of forest, robbed of its mines, of its liberty, of its institutions and thus of the essential prop and motor of any collective progress.

Schooling, which had been relatively widespread when the French arrived in 1830, was almost completely wiped out. By 1950 Unesco reported 90 percent illiteracy among the “native” population. Under the impact of the invasion millions of Algerians lost their lives, by direct killings, displacement and the collapse of food security. Communities were forced off the land and fertile agricultural regions taken over for the cultivation of vines for the export of wine to Europe. Algeria’s population fell to approximately 3.5 million in 1852, from 6 million in 1830. But the French did not have an easy time. Pacification of “native” resistance was never guaranteed. From 1830 to 1871 there were only a few years without fighting. Though new social forces were beginning to emerge from the dramatic mutation of Algerian society under French occupation, these were inherently contradictory—involving neither the total liquidation of the past, nor a clear project for the future.

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. One of the most important figures of the period, Messali Hadji, whose Parti Populaire Algérien (PPA) was formed in 1937 and saw its main constituency in the cities and towns with the growing influence of a largely coastal working class in docks, and among agricultural workers and junior civil servants. Throughout the war there was a wave of working class militancy escalating until 1945. In many ways these strikes and demonstrations infused with a combination of nationalist ideas and bread and butter demands were the first phase of a regional explosion of labour activism.

The extent of radicalisation can barely be exaggerated. Roger Murray and Tom Wengraf wrote about this period:
By early 1945 a revolutionary situation existed in Algeria: the political agitation generated by the AML [an organisation bringing together a variety of nationalist parties] was escaping its control. An acute economic crisis, detonated by the notably bad harvest of the previous year, had developed out of the departure of large numbers of troops at a time when the effects of long-term inflation were making themselves felt... Large-scale demonstrations of unemployed and starving men took place in many parts of the country; fights with the police were frequent and anti-French feeling was at a peak...the progressive elus [conservative nationalists] grew increasingly apprehensive as the social situation became more volatile and inflammatory. In May Algeria was shaken by an uprising whose dimensions and violence were unparalleled since 1871.

With massive CGT demos in Oran, Algiers and other cities across Algeria for two days after armistice celebrations, the same account explains that “the whole area was out of military and administrative control”.19

The French were determined to gain the upper hand. On 8 May 1945—as Europe was celebrating victory against the Nazis—in the town of Setif, 250 kilometres from Algiers, there was a crackdown. After a series of pro-independence demonstrations between 20,000 and 30,000 Algerians were massacred by the French authorities in the surrounding areas in the east of the country.20 As one war ended another started. The massacre hardened anger inside the Algerian nationalist movement that had been dominated by several organisations, the Mouvement pour le Triomphe des Libertés Démocratiques (Movement for the Triumph of Democratic Freedoms) and Ferhat Abbas's Union Démocratique du Manifeste Algérien (Democratic Union of the Algerian Manifesto).

For France there was never a war. Since Algeria was part of France, it could not launch or fight a war on its own territory. Only in 1999 did the French government accept that a war had taken place. At the time—and for years afterwards—the government in France used linguistic devices to hide the conflict.21 So there were “events” and “terrorist action” but not war. Like the Vichy period of Nazi collaboration, Algeria remains un passé qui ne passe pas (“a past which does not pass”).22

The FLN, activism and psychiatry

In 1954 the FLN was born. The timing of the FLN “insurrection” on 1 November 1954 was carefully chosen. Earlier in the year the French had suffered a humiliating defeat in Vietnam at Diên Biên Phu, which signalled the end of the French colonial presences in South East Asia. The FLN were determined to strike hard on the back of this defeat. The strategy pursued by the old nationalist organisation had reached an impasse. The insurrection was initially led by a group of nine Algerians, who have now become lionised as the forefathers of Algeria’s independence. The FLN was initially a small minority of Algerian nationalists committed to violent and armed confrontation with France. However, it was not until 1955 that there was a fuller regroupment of nationalist forces around the strategy that the FLN had started to develop. Abane Ramdane was the principal force behind these initiatives.23

From early in its life the FLN was a fairly hard-nosed organisation. A low-intensity war was fought on the streets of France and Algeria against supporters of Messali’s party, now called the Mouvement National Algérien (Algerian National Movement, MNA).24 Much of this fighting was to ensure access to Algerian workers in France who paid “taxes” to nationalist organisations. The FLN was dependent on this solidarity to fund the war, but the MNA had deeper roots in many Algerian communities. The FLN sought to maintain hegemony over its own forces and pacify potential competitors.25

Despite attempts to present itself as a monolithic organisation the FLN was divided by important political differences. The Soummam Congress, held in August 1956 in occupied Algeria, was the radical assertion of the importance of an internal leadership over an exiled one and of political supremacy over military decision makers. Organised by the radical nationalist Abane Ramdane, the Soummam declaration established a militant agenda for the Algerian Revolution. The fight, Ramdane argued, would be taken to the cities and towns. The famous film by Gillo Pontecorvo The Battle of Algiers is set in 1956-7 and tells this story. The Battle of Algiers took place at the high point of the urban, Abane-influenced FLN. The combination of terrorist attacks against French settlers in the capital and strike action was finally defeated by the French in 1957. Abane was forced into exile. The Soummam Congress had argued that a “social” republic would follow independence.

Fanon threw himself into the frenzy. If he had arrived a radical in 1953 with notions of political action, he left Algeria three years later a revolutionary determined to dedicate his life to the Algerian cause. Soon after 1955 Fanon helped, with colleagues, to turn Blida-Joinville’s hospital into a place where wounded and traumatised FLN fighters could be treated (and hidden). Fanon ended up treating both war damaged French policemen—
who wanted to see “nerve” specialists, so they could continue to torture “terrorist” suspects—and Algerian fighters. For a man widely and inaccurately regarded as the apostle of violence, he treated both with equal concern and in most cases kept their identities and confidences secret.

Fanon was still a student of Tosquelles and continued to experiment in institutional psychiatry with the democratisation of the hospital. His close friend and fellow doctor Pierre Chaulet recalls, “At Blida Fanon not only removed the chains from some of the sick, but he abolished the use of straitjackets, and most importantly he organised social and leisure activities (the Moorish café, football games, Algerian music concerts, Muslim religious festivals and a printer for a hospital newspaper)”.26

There is a degree of historical mythology about Fanon as the hospital’s liberator, casting off chains, freeing patients from their straitjackets. Colleagues at Blida have explained that chains were not used at the hospital and Fanon was a psychiatrist, with radical notions of “democratisation” and “institutional psychiatry”, but also a pragmatic willingness, even enthusiasm, to employ the full panoply of psychiatric methods: strong anti-psychotic drugs, electric shock treatment, narco-therapy. Removing straitjackets was an important part of Fanon’s treatment but, he argued, traumatised and alienated patients might also need medical restraints and aggressive drug therapy.

Conditions eventually became impossible at the hospital as the war and Fanon’s involvement in it escalated. Towards the end of 1956 Fanon decided he could no longer stay—for his family’s safety but also because he could not practise his profession. He resigned, stating in a letter to Algeria’s Resident-Minister (governor): “If psychiatry is a medical technique which aspires to allow man to cease being alienated from his environment, I owe it to myself to assert that the Arab, who is permanently alienated in his own country, lives in a state of absolute depersonalisation”.27 His last days were not a calm settling of accounts at the hospital. Fanon had now identified himself openly with the enemy. He and his family left for France.

**Exile in Tunisia**

Fanon’s trajectory was still not entirely clear—he knew was not going to stay in France and although he was now committed to the Algerian struggle he did not leave immediately for Tunisia. In France he spent a prolonged period staying with the French Trotskyist Jean Ayme. Alice Cherki records that Fanon seemed in no particular rush to leave: “He continued to sleep three hours per night and to devour books. Among the documents that Ayme gave him to read, he was fascinated to discover the transcripts of the first four congresses of the Communist International... Fanon spent entire nights in their company”.28 Ayme also observed that although Fanon was incredibly smart, with an impressive knowledge of philosophy and psychiatry, he had little “political training”. He had not been an activist and did not have a thorough knowledge of revolutionary history. He underwent a rapid education.

Eventually the family left for Tunisia. Tunisia had become independent the previous year and was rapidly becoming the principal base for the FLN’s exiled leadership and a large community of Algerians forced out of their country. Fanon lived in Tunis for the rest of his life. He helped write and edit the organisation’s newspaper *El Moudjahid*. Pierre and Claudine Chaulet, who were close friends and fellow militants of the FLN in Algeria, had also been forced to move to Tunis after Pierre’s release from prison in mid-1957. They were among the few Algerians of French origin who committed themselves to the liberation war. The couple had introduced Fanon to the FLN in Algiers. They vividly describe Fanon during his years in Tunis: “Brilliant talker, charmer, adored using words from the medical and psychiatric lexicon to express a core meaning; he seemed to have read everything, sometimes in a spin of words, taking lyrical flight, attentive to the reactions of his listeners, pushing sometimes reason to the point of paradox to provoke discussion and at the same time a disciplined militant, modest and accepting criticism of certain improper expressions or exaggerations”.29

Fanon continued to work as a psychiatrist, publishing papers on his experiments and attempting to reform the hospital regime in the two psychiatric units where he worked. He also wrote regularly for the newspaper, and devoted himself to the work of the FLN and the propaganda necessary for the war. The paper was a strange beast, produced fortnightly, made up of reports and appeals but with little actual reporting. It was sold widely in France and smuggled into Algeria. Fanon was not a natural journalist. He did not type and instead he would dictate his articles to secretaries and he rarely used interviews or carried out original research. But he had an extraordinary gift for polemical and passionate prose that expressed the spirit of the revolution. Chaulet explains how a collective spirit prevailed on the paper: “Freedom of discussion was total within the editorial board. Each person took turns to speak on the proposed themes… The reciprocal influence of one on another makes it difficult to discern a single influence: we shared the same analysis and we had the same objectives within the editorial board. Fanon was one of us, not more, and what we wrote was the result of a collective
Year Five of the Algerian Revolution

Fanon wrote *L’An V de la Revolution Algérienne* (*Year Five of the Algerian Revolution*), published in English with the title *Studies in a Dying Colonialism* in 1959. The book was an attempt to garner support for the FLN and engage with the French left. It was a publication of pro-Algerian and FLN propaganda that celebrated the popular involvement in the war of liberation. The French left had equivocated and failed to support the FLN and the war. The PCF was the largest extra-parliamentary force on the left and though individual members supported the war, the party’s pronouncements were scandalous. They argued that the revolution would take place, not in Algeria, but in France, and Algerian nationalists must follow the political lead of the French proletariat. Algeria was not ready for independence. The greatest threat, the PCF stated, was that an independent Algeria could fall into the clutches of US imperialism. In this respect, the party did not demur from the anti-American justification for the war offered by Charles de Gaulle, who after he returned to power in 1958 continued the war, though he eventually conceded defeat. However, there were important anti-Stalinists, including *les porteurs de valises* (literally the “carriers of suitcases”) who supported and smuggled out money for the FLN and refused to take the side of the French republic. Though the achievements of these militants should not be exaggerated, these were courageous and inspiring acts of solidarity.

By contrast, when the French Socialist Party (SFIO) came to office in 1956, there was jubilation among progressive forces in France and Algeria at the prospect that the new Socialist prime minister Guy Mollet would end the war and lead negotiations towards Algeria’s independence. Instead Mollet capitulated to pressure from the white settlers in Algeria and escalated the war, forcing ever more French conscripts into the bloodbath. He also appointed the odious Robert Lacoste resident-minister. Those who had resisted the FLN—reluctant not because of conservatism but due to genuine doubts about the Front’s politics and strategy—now felt they had no alternative. The FLN, more or less, was the only show on the road. Fanon’s longstanding colleague and collaborator Charles Geromini described how political choice closed down after Mollet’s betrayal: “There was no longer any choice other than between Lacoste and the Front. A third force could have had meaning only if it had been supported by the French left. Since the French left were playing the game of Algerian fascism, any attempt to organise liberal action in Algiers was doomed to failure.” Across the spectrum the forces on the left were without a socialist alternative. On the radical left this had been closed off by the PCF while the parliamentary and socialist left were now discredited by their terrible and tragic confrontation with the FLN.

The title of Fanon’s book was a reference to the French Revolution and an indication that Fanon, like leading members of the FLN, saw 1954 as signalling a new epoch of liberation and that all before it could be ignored or, in the case of Messali’s MNA, erased. But Fanon’s arguments, though loyal to the FLN, were more nuanced. The popular mobilisation of the war after 1954 marked a new Algeria. The revolution had seen the extraordinary flowering of human capacity that overturned old attitudes, habits and the deeply embedded sense of colonial and racial inferiority. Algerians were beginning to stand up for themselves and to resist and be proud of themselves.

The book starts with a sense of disbelief that the war, fought so bitterly for five years, for a cause almost universally supported, is still going on: “Five years of struggle have bought no political change.” Fanon speaks in an autobiographical tone when he refers to the devastating betrayal of those who fought with the French in the Second World War and are now outraged by the role of the French army in Algeria.

But Fanon holds back his greatest condemnation for the hypocrisy of French supporters of the war for independence, lampooning their position: “In a war of liberation, the colonised people must win, but they must do so...without barbarity.” When a European nation, he continues, indulges in torture and barbarity it is a blight on their civilisation and history. Yet when the colonised respond it is the fulfilment of their “underdeveloped” nature. So an “underdeveloped nation is obliged to practise fair play, even while its adversary ventures, with a clear conscience, into unlimited...terror.” Therefore the colonised are imprisoned again when they fight back because they are merely confirming their primitive essence. They will only be given European support if they fight and resist as “we” dictate.

Fanon presents an argument for revolutionary terror, based on a pragmatic assessment of the violence of the oppressed. “Because we want a democratic...Algeria, because we believe one cannot rise and liberate oneself in one area and sink in another, we condemn, with pain in our hearts, those brothers who have flung themselves into revolutionary action with...brutality that centuries of oppression give rise to and feed.” Violence emerges because of the horrors of colonisation and occupation, and the expression of this initial violence, of “revolutionary action”, contains elements of brutality, pride, freedom from humiliation and a
The rest of the decolonised/ing world—about how the national bourgeoisie decays into “a sort of little greedy
national freedom and independence they were fighting for. The book can be read as a warning to Algeria—and
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(1) The “profiteering caste”: Even though Fanon was intimately involved in the FLN and the national liberation
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But full support for the war is important for another reason. Fanon argues that a colonising nation cannot free
itself while holding down another. The colonial state is caught in a racist world, as the colonised are caught in a
web of repression and violence. Real transcendence will come when the humanity and transformation of the
oppressed are recognised, and the European working class throws off racist myths. This change in
consciousness is only possible by breaking with one’s past—a break that can only be made through struggle.

Struggle—the real struggle—was the key for Fanon. This involved the popular participation of ordinary
Algerians in the revolution. The book is in part a declaration of this popular ownership of revolutionary struggle,
and of the liberating wind sweeping through Algerian society. It is also, in part, a lyrical and poetic celebration of
how people are, in Fanon’s medical lexicon, “re-cerebrised” by revolution often in their most private and
intimate relationships. Describing the transformation taking place between men and women, Fanon writes, “The
couple is no longer shut in upon itself. It no longer finds its end in itself. It is no longer the result of the natural
instinct of perpetuation of the species, nor the institutionalised means of satisfying one’s sexuality… The
Algerian couple, in becoming a link in the revolutionary organisation, is transformed into a unit of existence”.

Contrary to the accusations made against him, Fanon was not exaggerating Algeria during this period was
undergoing profound changes. The years 1956 to 1960 showed all the signs of radical transformation. The
struggle that had been launched in 1954 by a small group of men had become a mass movement that pulled in
urban and rural areas, men and women, the armed struggles and city demonstrations, riots and strikes. Political
discussions became widespread, and the radio, previously an object treated with suspicion, was
commanderied by the population as an alternative source of information. There was a wide sense of
expectation and hope and the collapse of old servile relationships. Cultural habits and traditions changed as
women became active in the war. The French could be resisted, and their power broken. These changes were
not limited to narrow groups of fighters but tens of thousands of ordinary Algerians began to contemplate
independence and freedom for the first time. These were the years of Algeria’s revolution.

The brilliance of Fanon’s 1959 book is that it captured the nature of Algeria’s popular revolution. As the Fanon
scholar and activist Nigel Gibson explained, “L’An V really speaks of this experience of revolution. It is
interesting that many criticised Fanon as a ‘romantic’ or ‘utopian’ but…the revolution, as revolutions do, turned
things upside down, upset the old social relations. That these changes did not remain, that they were turned
back does not mean that they didn’t happen. I think Fanon also understood the fragility of new social relations,
not only from outside but also from inside the revolution, and that is a reason why he remains relevant
today”. Fanon’s involvement in the FLN grew and he assumed more responsibilities, writing and now
speaking on behalf of the FLN in press conferences and attending international conferences.

The Wretched of the Earth

Fanon was diagnosed with leukaemia at the end of 1960 and knew immediately that he was dying, and that he
had, at best, only a year or two to live. His life bunched up. A man not used to living in reserve, he pushed
himself to almost inhuman lengths to write and influence a movement about which he had begun to have
serious misgivings and fears. He had recently been made ambassador of the Algerian provisional government
to Ghana, where he met leaders of the nationalist movement from the continent. Initially he refused treatment in
the US, a country of “racists and lynch mobs”. Instead he went to Moscow. The death sentence drove Fanon
on and he became possessed with the need to assist the FLN and its armed wing, the ALN. In 1961, months
before his death, he completed his final work, The Wretched of the Earth, which shows Fanon as a
revolutionary thinker in continual development. The book is extremely rich and complex (it even includes a
discussion on pottery and sculpture). I will limit my observations to a few key themes:

(1) The “profiteering caste”: Even though Fanon was intimately involved in the FLN and the national liberation
movement, he was drawing, almost uniquely in his generation, critical lessons about the limitations of the very
national freedom and independence they were fighting for. The book can be read as a warning to Algeria—and
the rest of the decolonised/ing world—about how the national bourgeoisie decays into “a sort of little greedy
Fanon was able to describe, with extraordinary power, how national freedom often became its opposite, the “curse of independence”. How could he recognise, with such shearing accuracy, developments that had hardly started to emerge? There are several indications. Abane Ramdane, associated with the radical wing of the FLN, was assassinated in 1958. Some elements of the FLN would “deal with” internal opponents they disagreed with. Fanon carefully noted what was happening within the FLN. He also saw, and attempted to analyse, the parties of national independence in Ghana and Senegal. The contrast was great in Ghana. The radical rhetoric of the country’s first independent leader, Kwame Nkrumah, contrasted with the continuity of colonial power after independence in 1957. Fanon’s personal disappointment can also be felt in the pages of his classic. Césaire, for a short time his school teacher and hero, turned his back on independence and accepted continued incorporation into France under a deal set out by de Gaulle in 1958. This was not all. The great poet of Négritude and new president of Senegal, Leopold Senghor, betrayed the Algerian Revolution—voting in the French assembly for an extension of emergency powers to prosecute the war. Senghor also accepted de Gaulle’s compromise of a French community of African states.

But there were two events, one contemporary and the other historical, that pulled back the curtains on independence. Fanon saw the Congo crisis unfold before him. A nationalist party was elected to power in 1960 in democratic and transparent elections and to the jubilations of the Congolese. But days after the ceremony of independence the country ruptured. Two mineral-rich provinces, Katanga and Kasai, broke away, backed and armed by Belgium, the former colonial power. Seven months after his election, in January 1961, the leader of the nationalist MDC and the elected prime minister, Patrice Lumumba—who Fanon had met in Ghana and the Congo—was murdered by the Belgians and their Congolese “puppets”. Real economic and political independence would not be countenanced by the parting colonial powers. The conclusion that Fanon drew was that Africa must craft its own tools and wage a relentless battle against imperial invasion and the “pseudo-bourgeoisie” who usurp the forces of national liberation.

Secondly, as a voracious reader Fanon studied history and philosophy with a gusto that left his contemporaries astonished; he “seemed to have read everything”. Latin America had experienced independence generations before Africa. Independence, he noted, had been keenly fought for, but hopelessly compromised. He concurred with Aimé Césaire that in Haiti—the country that had won independence from France after a slave revolution in the 1790s—the “colonial problem” had first been posed in its great contradictions, as the country fought for, won and then saw the impotence of this “freedom” in a world dominated by several imperialist states. Fanon writes despairingly in The Wretched of the Earth, “The African bourgeoisie of certain under-developed countries have learnt nothing from books. If they had looked closer at the Latin American countries they doubtless would have recognised the dangers which threatened them”. Fanon was a figure of the black Atlantic. His life, experiences and thinking criss-crossed the Atlantic, picking up and developing insights from the Caribbean and the Americas, which then enriched and expanded his analysis of the struggles being fought for in Africa.

The Wretched of the Earth sounded the emergency alarm. He saw how the FLN itself was developing in a similar way to these other nationalist formations. The book was an attempt to pull back the FLN—as much as he could in a single volume—and prevent the development of the “caste of profiteers”. Fanon has been criticised for his “sweeping generalisations” in the book, but on preventing the growth of a national bourgeoisie, he is quite specific about what needs to be done. But Fanon also attempted to address how this degeneration could be avoided.

The Wretched of the Earth grasped the predicament that independence presented to the movements and leadership of national liberation. Post-colonial power was caught between an enfeebled national bourgeoisie and the global limitations imposed on any newly developing nation in the modern world. In this context, it was inevitable that these new national bourgeoisies would act to suppress those among their own people whose demands could not be met within the existing economic and political system. The pseudo-bourgeoisie—described in a variety of terms, often as a “profiteering caste”—are not a real bourgeoisie. They own nothing, Fanon tells us, and they will bring nothing. They have no national programme of development, seeking simply to become the favoured middlemen for metropolitan capital.

(2) The peasantry or workers? Fanon, like many thinkers of his time, was influenced by Maoist interpretations of socialism, which emphasised the central role of the peasantry in revolutionary struggle while holding a deep suspicion towards the proletariat. Fanon wrote, “The proletariat is the nucleus of the colonised population which...
has been most pampered by the colonial regime. The embryonic proletariat of the towns is in a comparatively privileged position. In capitalist countries the working class has nothing to lose; it is they who in the long run have everything to gain. In the colonial countries the working class has everything to lose; in reality it represents that fraction of the colonised nation which is necessary and irreplaceable if the colonial machine is to run smoothly: it includes tram conductors, taxi-drivers, miners, dockers, interpreters, nurses and so on. Fanon accepted the widespread argument that the organised working class had been effectively “bought off” with the profits of imperialist exploitation, and that revolutionary action against the new African ruling classes would only come from the poorest rural masses and the lumpenproletariat of unemployed and semi-employed in urban areas.

It was to the peasantry that Fanon turned for his revolutionary agents: “It is clear that in the colonial countries the peasants alone are revolutionary, for they have nothing to lose and everything to gain. The starving peasant, outside the class system, is the first among the exploited to discover that only violence pays. For him there is no compromise, no possible coming to terms; colonisation and decolonisation are simply a question of relative strength.” There is a real sense in The Wretched of the Earth that the role Marx gave to the working class could be taken over by the peasantry. This displays a failure to understand what Marx meant by the pivotal role of the working class and its relationship to the oppressed.

The actual history of decolonisation in Africa reveals a boisterous working class, often leading the struggle for national liberation. This group was able to paralyse the colonial machine by its position at the heart of the system’s profit-making in factories, mines and docks. This is true for these forces in many parts of late colonial sub-Saharan Africa and even more so in North Africa and the Middle East. For example, there was a widening and radicalising wave of working class militancy after 1945 in Egypt, Syria and Iraq. Arguably it was the working class demonstrations in the cities and towns across Algeria in December 1960 that forced the French to accept that they would have to leave—this was a movement that was not controlled or organised by the FLN.

But there were also important weaknesses—which Fanon’s own analysis of the petty bourgeois intelligentsia points to. There was an absence of working class leadership within these strikes and protests that could have made an argument for an urban and worker-led movement of national and socialist revolution in a single and ongoing process of revolutionary change linked to the countryside. There were, of course, many reasons why these politics could not emerge, not least the role of Stalinised Communist parties who sought to either limit these revolts to nationhood, or argue, in the case of Algeria, the need to follow the lead of the European working class. There were also serious weaknesses in working class politics. Faced with these problems the leadership of these movements fell into other hands—quite distinct from the working class and the poor. A nationalist intelligentsia assumed control of diverse movements for national liberation. The intelligentsia were often educated in the West, with a strong sense of the humiliation at “their” national backwardness. In Egypt in 1952 it was a class of nationalist “Free Officers” who led the “revolution” in deposing King Farouk’s regime.

In addition many labour movements on the continent were able to resist their total incorporation into the nationalist project and maintain their own autonomy from hegemonic nationalist parties, but their biggest problem was their inability to generate intellectual or ideological alternatives to the focus on national economic development dominant among both Stalinists and nationalists. As a consequence, trade unions sometimes adopted syndicalist or economistic approaches, rejecting nationalist or new state ideologies in arguing that their role was “non-political”. This unfortunately dovetailed and seemed to confirm the accusation, present in The Wretched of the Earth, that organised workers represented, in an African context, a labour aristocracy whose selfish defence of their privileges was at the expense of other, particularly rural sections of society.

The idea of combining national democratic and social transformation into a permanent regional and global revolution was lost with the degeneration of the Russian Revolution after 1917. Yet Fanon tantalises us with insights into the role of the national bourgeoisie in a colonised and Third World setting—he also recognised the need in his last book to “enrich” the revolution with social transformation, and that the project for a “new humanism” could only be achieved on a global scale.

(3) On violence: It is for the chapter dedicated to violence in The Wretched of the Earth that Fanon has suffered his greatest misreadings and denunciations. Fanon writes clearly that “at the level of individuals, violence is a cleansing force. It frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect”. Shorn of its context, statements such as this seem to extol violence, against overwhelming odds. The experience of colonialism, he explains, has been of unremitting violence and its overthrow will require force. The violence of the oppressed, he argues, is a necessary and inevitable part of
decolonisation. Liberation without it is impossible—a cruel dream shimmering beautifully in the distance, always out of reach.

But there was a further element to his argument. The violence of the oppressed has the therapeutic effect of ridding the colonialised of their deeply held feelings of inferiority. The colonisers can be hurt, their violence countered and broken. The result will be, as it is with all popular upheavals, a sense of strength and pride in the oppressed’s own value and self-worth—a collective struggle, involving violence, maybe, but an inherently personal transformation from inferiority to self-assertion and self-recognition. Therefore any real struggle of the oppressed will require counter-violence. Non-violence, Fanon writes, is an invention of the colonial intelligentsia. “Violence alone, violence committed by the people, violence organised and educated by its leaders, makes it possible for the masses to understand social truths and gives the key to them. Without that struggle, without that knowledge of the practice of action, there’s nothing but a fancy-dress parade and the blare of trumpets. There’s nothing save a minimum of re-adaptation, a few reforms at the top, a flag waving: and down there at the bottom an undivided mass, still living in the Middle Ages, endlessly marking time”. Fanon was not the apostle of violence, but its subtle and pragmatic analyst.

Endgame

After a brief respite in the sickness, knowing that he had only a short time to live, Fanon insisted on lecturing ALN troops in Ghaudimaou on the Tunisian/Algerian border, on the famous chapter in “Mésaventures de la conscience nationale” (“Pitfalls of national consciousness”). But he was also inspired to speak to them on the lessons from Sartre’s Critique of Dialectical Reason which he had recently and enthusiastically read. As important as their cause was it had to be extended and deepened into the social and economic life of the new nation. Independence was no panacea and unless the transformation that these ALN troops were committed to was enriched and spread inside Algerian society, but also regionally and globally, the national liberation they sought was in danger of becoming its opposite—a “curse” that would solve few of the problems that Algerians had given their lives for. Returning to Tunis, Fanon dictated the last chapters of his book, in a period of intense activity and tragedy captured by Pierre Chaulet: “The Wretched of the Earth is to be read like an urgent message, delivered in a raw state, uncorrected—we did not dare question certain passages in front of a man who was reading his text to the close friends that we were, while pacing up and down his room in Tunis, sick and aware that he was condemned, desiring with all his force, in a superb language, to say what he had to say”. As night spread quickly across the sky, Fanon’s life did not wane but seemed to become focused more sharply. But there is a limit to what one book (and one extraordinary life-force) as brilliant and problematic as Fanon’s could do. Finally accepting that treatment in the US might prolong his life, Fanon left for Washington in early October 1961. Eight weeks later he died at the National Institute of Health in Maryland. His last request was that his body be buried in liberated Algeria. Before he left for the US, he lamented to his brothers and sisters in the FLN, “You are lucky; you will see the independence of Algeria, but I will not”.

Legacy

Among the most effective oppositional organisations in contemporary Pakistan is the Baloch Student Federation (BSO)—which is not strictly a student opposition, but more a secular nationalist organisation. Its membership is found among rural youth who have fled to Pakistan’s growing cities looking for work. Its manifesto is the Urdu translation of The Wretched of the Earth. It has an armed wing, the Baloch Liberation Army. The BSO’s ideological orientation is characterised by a degree of confusion, as the Pakistani socialist Sartaj Khan has explained: “The BSO was inspired by the guerrilla struggle of Che Guevara, and in the past was influenced by both Maoism and Stalinism. Many of its leaders, like Dr Allah Nazar Baloch, claim to be Marxists. But, like others, the Baluchi nationalist movement suffered serious political disorientation in the wake of the collapse of the Berlin Wall.”

It would be unfair to leave Fanon’s legacy here. His influence was far greater, and more difficult to chart. But the confusing combination of Marxism, Maoism and guerrilla war does point to an uncomfortable reality. Fanon was the brilliant and angry champion of national liberation and revolution, but his refusal to see how a movement could be centred on the power of the organised working class and independent working class politics limited the positive reach of his ideas. Instead Fanon’s orientation on the countryside and the lumpenproletariat won him many supporters in the 1960s and 1970s but tied up his alternatives into a delimiting prison. The real history of working class action in the “Third World” has often been concealed. Fanon’s role in
helping to conceal this reality makes his legacy decidedly ambiguous for those of us who seek to develop (and recover) such a politics today.

However, the removal of the working class from Fanon’s paradigm can be contextualised. The setback of the urban movement after the Battle of Algiers led to a withdrawal of the FLN from the towns. Increasingly union members and urban FLN sympathisers and members were encouraged to leave the cities and workplaces and move to the countryside to work in wilayas (FLN-organised districts). The war had shifted to the countryside, the military campaign and the exiled leadership. What became known as Fanonist revolutionary strategy spoke, in large part, of the failures and divisions of the Algerian war and the political choices made by the FLN.

Fanon also tended to fetishise the armed struggle as the real struggle. He was right to confront the hypocrisy of the European left, who frequently refused to support and defend Algeria’s right to violent resistance against the French. But his championing of the Algerian method of “insurrection” was deeply problematic. At times he presented this model to countries that were ill-suited to such a tactic, condemning Angola’s nationalists for refusing to launch their own “insurrection” regardless of timing or local circumstances.

Yet Fanon’s writing and life offer us so much to celebrate and study. Fanon belongs to the radical tradition of decolonisation. Modestly he helped to promote and influence the FLN, but Studies in a Dying Colonialism and especially The Wretched of the Earth—with its capacity to capture the anger of the world’s oppressed—had an important impact on national liberation movements around the world. He was perhaps the most important figure in the ideological struggle against colonialism in the 20th century.

But there is much more to celebrate in Fanon’s life than his relatively limited literary output. He was a reluctant writer. He dictated all his books and articles. He needed to pace around the room when he was dictating, his arms flying, his mind searching for another metaphor or expression that would encapsulate the passion and anger he felt, or synthesise the philosophy of praxis that the revolution needed.

Fanon’s activism, the need to practically do something, lived in him deeply. In 1955 he wanted actively to fight—take up arms—for the FLN; the organisation was forced to tell him in no uncertain terms that it had enough volunteers. In the late 1950s he tried to argue and lobby for an “African legion”—an all-African military force—to counter Western imperialism. In 1960 he tried to establish a southern front in the Algerian war, leading an expeditionary force on a clandestine 2,000-mile mission through West Africa, to assess possible supply routes for an eventual rearguard force that could liberate Algeria from sub-Saharan Africa.

Fanon only dictated his books when there was a force beyond his control that ground him to a halt, after his accident in Morocco in 1959 or when he was dying of leukaemia in 1961 and he wrote The Wretched of the Earth: desperate to make a contribution that he thought might prevent the revolution from possible degeneration and decay. In his final months of life, knowing he was probably not going to see the year out, Fanon rushed to the Algerian/Tunisian border to tell those fighting for independence the message (we can guess): “Don’t be betrayed”, “Fight on” and “There can be no restructuring of Algerian society unless there is a pitiless struggle against the national bourgeoisie and this will require continued mobilisation”. Fanon was a bristling and ferocious revolutionary in constant movement.

In his commitment to the FLN, as a propagandist and with militant discipline, Fanon was the champion of the Algerian Revolution and African liberation. He also provided us with a warning, even if he could not adequately pose an alternative, of the limitations threatening the very freedom that he devoted himself to. This is the tantalising failure in Fanon’s work. Unique among his contemporaries he examined the dangers of post-colonial power. So he wrote how after independence the aspirations of real independence are jettisoned. For much of Africa the seemingly radical structures of the nationalist revolution hardened into the quasi-Stalinist mould of the one-party state. Fanon diagnosed the snare of national liberation but his conception of a nation as the dynamic creation of popular action did not provide a solution to the prison of independence that he described. Still, his monumental contribution was posing questions and explaining the “curse” which national liberation would become for the newly decolonised nations. It was for other movements and leaders, influenced by Fanon’s work, to propose alternatives to the failures and imprisonment of independence.

Fanon also understood that transforming the world, creating a new and socialist humanity, would ultimately necessitate unity between the North and South, but that this could only happen once the European working class stopped playing the game of “sleeping beauty”. Today, in the context of the struggles taking place across North Africa and the Middle East—and the possibility of these spreading elsewhere—we need to revisit Fanon for his extraordinary insights into revolutionary processes and his warnings of the pitfalls of national consciousness and the national bourgeoisie.
Notes

2: Macey, interview in Leeds, England (14 October 2010). Sadly Macey died in October 2011. I am indebted to his impressive work on Fanon but particularly the patience and generosity he showed me.

3: There been no shortage of excellent biographies, memoirs and serious studies. Among the long list are several that stand out: Macey, 2000; Gibson, 1999, 2003; Cherki, 2000 (perhaps the best account); Gendzier, 1976. But in some studies there is an emphasis on his writing and philosophy at the sacrifice of context or the opposite, context and a frustrating inability to integrate his thought.

4: This article is part of ongoing research into the life and thought of Fanon and some material has appeared earlier-Zeilig, 2011. The study is based on interviews with those who knew Fanon, or were involved in the same struggles. Many ideas in the article have benefited immensely from suggestions and conversations with Ian Birchall. I have also benefited from comments by Alex Callinicos and Pierre Chaulet’s severe but justified criticism of an earlier version.

5: Macey, interview, 2010.

6: Quoted in Macey, 2000, pp103-104.


8: Fanon, 1952.


10: Macey, 2011, p41.


12: Fanon, 1952, p220.


14: I am grateful to Kim Wale for this insight.

15: Quoted in Macey, 2000, p203.


17: Jeanson, 1962, p29.


21: The war, lasting until 1962, cost an estimated 1 million Algerian lives.


23: I am grateful to Pierre Chaulet for these insights-interview, Algiers, Algeria (28 September 2011).

24: The "war" within a war is brilliantly captured in Rachid Bouchareb’s film Outside the Law.


31: The PCF did have a point. The US was determined to break the power of European imperialisms, in order to extend its own global hegemony. The Suez Crisis illustrated this point. It was also the reason why the Soviet Union was reluctant to give the FLN full support.


33: Geromini, 2001, p174. However, the Algerian Communist Party played a much more positive role supporting the armed struggle.

34: Fanon, 2001, p5.


37: This argument neatly reflects the hypocritical support of European and American politicians and commentators for the recent revolutions in Egypt, Libya and Tunisia. The “masses” on the streets of North Africa can be celebrated as long as they are “non-violent” and “peace-loving”.


40: Macey, 2000, p402.

41: Gibson, personal communication, 3 November, 2010.


44: Fanon, 1961, p130.


46: Fanon, 1961, p84.


49: But it is hard to escape the feeling that Fanon’s approach reflected Abane Ramdane’s failure to turn the Algerian Revolution to the cities and urban areas, rather than a serious consideration and critique of the role of the working class in the developing world.

50: Fanon, 1961, p70.

51: Fanon, 1961, p110.

52: Bernasconi, 2010.


56: Chaulet highlights another weakness, which he argues comes from Fanon’s celebrated strengths: “Fanon’s vivid style—of a psychiatrist, philosopher and poet, more than a political thinker—gives a particular power to his flashes of prophetic brilliance and even to his errors”—interview, 2010. Fanon’s general and unspecific statements give them an enormous power but also a tendency to broad and problematic interpretation.

57: It should be clear that Fanon was not trying to develop such a “strategy”, whatever subsequent writers and activists have said. His last book was a work in progress. It is also important not to present a Manichean version of the Algerian Revolution—divided neatly between city and countryside phases.

58: For a discussion on Fanon as a “voluntarist”, see Hallward, 2011.


61: Molyneux, 1983.

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#Kalamu ya Salaam #neo-grio #neogrio

June 5th  in Neo-
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INTERVIEW: Tyehimba Jess

LITERARY HUB

May 5, 2016
In Tyehimba Jess’s Olio, a new book length performance of poetry, song, collage and art object, musical knowledge is channeled back to its source—before the wax cylinders of antiquated recording technology, before Alan Lomax and W.C. Handy, to the 19th century of black musicians. Jess’s poetic concentration is so absolute, dithyrambic, multimodal, encyclopedic, that it defies categorization as much as the early music of gospel singers and jazz pioneers, blues artists and vaudeville performers he describes and celebrates. History as song; as expression; as freedom. That is, a living history that follows the great migration of African-Americans between the Civil War and World War I who undertook journeys across thousands of miles as well as musical history. The result is one of the most profound portraits I know of how artists have redefined their very being in the world. I was lucky to sit down with Jess in a favorite restaurant of his last month, and talk to him about the origins and labor involved in this decade-long project.
Adam Fitzgerald: Olio is a magnum opus. I’ve been trying to think of the right handle for it, because I want to say epic, and I want to say opera, and I want to say Broadway, and vaudeville—all the things that the book brings into conversation. But it’s such a sustained multi-layer performance. How long did you spend working on this?

Tyehimba Jess: About eight years. It took a while. But thank you. I started writing Olio the summer just before I left teaching in Illinois—that’s when I wrote the first thing that would look like it would appear in this book. So that was in late ’08. Maybe the spring of 09, more or less. Then, I think the only part that was really written was the interview with the nurse who was the last person to really see Scott Joplin play. I think that was the only thing. I think a section of it might’ve been written.

AF: And you soon sensed that this would be part of a larger tapestry?

TJ: You know what? I didn’t know what it was going to be. Because it was so prosaic. So, it was really not in the direction that I’m used to going. And I didn’t know, really, why I was writing it. And, really, there was another thing I wrote that was gonna be in this book, but it was Blind Boone talking about the day they found out that Scott Joplin had died. And that was really the first pathway. And then that didn’t really work out; it just wasn’t happening the right way. But then when I came here to New York… I felt really behind. It’d been four years since Leadbelly had come out—and I didn’t have a book. You know what I’m saying? So, basically, I was up against the wall. Everybody around me has been movin’ and groovin’.

AF: Sure hasn’t been a quiet time for poetry.

TJ: No, it really hasn’t! So I felt, like, “Ok, Jess. It’s time to make it happen.” And, really, the one thing that had been blocking me was that when I wrote Lead, I was deep in that Leadbelly voice. And so everything I was trying to write sounded like Leadbelly.

AF: How does a poet—I’m sure every writer in the world wants to know—turn off a voice they had channeled so intensely?

TJ: Well, you know what, I think I have to get my discipline tighter, because, really, if I’d been writing everyday I would have found a way out of it quicker. Probably. But what happened was—the one thing that I came up with was to write in form. So I decide, “OK,” because if I write in form and I follow a sonnet, then the whole rhyming situation is gonna get me out of the Leadbelly voice. And it worked. I had to break it up, because I was thinking, “I can’t do the exact same thing.” And I was a little scared because I didn’t really want to go back and do a musician again. I was thinking, “Oh, I’m gonna get pigeonholed as doing this one thing.” But, then I wrote this… in order to get out of the voice, I was like “I need to do something.” So I reached for what was my obsession, what was familiar—I never had read about Blind Tom—and the first poems in the book were the series, the crown of sonnets about him. And that made me get a little bit out of the voice.

AF: Tell me about the discovery and imaginative time you spent with that voice.

TJ: He’s an interesting character that not a lot of people talk about. And he was such a contradiction, because he was a slave in the time after emancipation. By misfortune of his autism he had been relegated to the ownership of these slave owners. And he lived like that for the rest of his life. And, I mean, that's such a conundrum; I wanted to investigate his life. I'm pretty much a one-thing-at-a-time person, so I was working on them continuously for probably a couple weeks, three weeks, maybe. And I looked at them when I was done and I thought to myself: “These are OK.” And I put them away and I looked at them again, and I felt like: “This really isn’t happening. I mean I like it…” I think it was doing something—but it wasn’t doing the thing I wanted it to do. And that’s when I thought: “You know what? Why don’t I just try and double em’ up?” And that was a challenge because I had done contrapuntals in Lead. But this was a bigger challenge. I said to myself: “OK, if I’m gonna double it up then I have to increase the stakes. I can’t just do what I did in the other one.”

AF: “Doubling up” seems very, very central to your vision of this book about the simultaneity of black life in American history, music and song. What’s very unique about this book is that song is not simply an expressive agent. Song is not simply this great cultural artifact. Song is the historical path towards freedom and reinvention of blackness in a way. You use “blues” as a verb, as in to blues blackface of the Berryman sonnets. Not “dream songs.” But Freedom Songs. Can you talk to me about simultaneity and music as a sense of freedom.

TJ: Yeah, I think that’s part of the dynamic: to be able to fully express oneself—and singing is such a full
and total expression of the soul—to be able to do that and then to really have that sustain you, through the
darkest times of slavery. And the two are inseparable. To be able to sing under that kind of oppression I think,
in a lot of ways, is the very essence of survival, of a people, of the ability to have to the hope to make something
beautiful amongst so much wretchedness. That’s critical to the concept of human survival. And in this particular
context, of African Americans working through slavery… that’s what we had. I was trying to make a line like that
with the Fisk Jubilee Singers: “often, we owned the song more than we owned ourselves.”

To be able to sing under that kind of oppression I think, in a lot of ways, is the essence of survival, of a people, of the ability to have to the hope to make something beautiful amongst so much wretchedness.

AF: Not a metaphor.

TJ: No, it’s not a metaphor! To carry that essence into these various artistic endeavors—from comedy to the
instruments to the sculpture—is trying to think about what it means to imagine oneself free enough to imagine,
through the context of brutal slavery. It is signifying that you are still alive and you still have some human
potential. And as far as the doubling went, what happened was I started to do the sonnets. And that was hard
... I struggled to get the first two lines and then the next two, and so on. I just played around with it. And
eventually I got through the very first syncopated sonnets. You can see the development of it in the book,
because they start off with each voice relegated only to the left or right side—and then they start to meld more
and more with each sonnet. I got the first one done and then I thought, “Well, if I can do one then I think I can
do another.” The first one that I did that was contrapuntal, and reversible, was the one about Blind Tom being
buried in two places (a true story, kind of...).

And really, part of the motivation behind those syncopated sonnets, behind the creation of them, was the fact
that when I moved back to New York, Taylor Mali set me up for one of his Page-Meets-Stage events with Yusef
Komunyakaa. I think it was gonna happen in February; and I got here in August, or whatever. And all (the
while) in my head it was looming over me: “Oh shit, I’m gonna have to do a Page-Meets-Stage with
Komunyakaa! I can’t read the same poems!” So, all this pressure was being applied while I was writing. Really,
I was like, “I have to have something to present that’s new at this GIG!!” I was scared shitless. So I started
going making the syncopated sonnets, and was going through them, when at the very last poem I tried to make
a middle column—and that’s when I discovered how to get them to read them up, down, diagonally and
interstitially.

AF: What allowed that inspiration to go multi-directional? It’s awesome to behold.

TJ: You know what? It was early in the morning, half haze, sleep and all that stuff you have on your mind. And
you’re looking it over and looking it over. And then it started to connect—if I made this change there, and that.
It really started to connect. So I started trying to write them with an eye towards multidirectional
comprehension. And that’s when I decided that one of the themes of the book was going to be the contrapuntal
poem. And I said to myself, “Well, since I’m in the neighborhood, I must as well just try and see how far I can
stretch this.” And from there came “The McKoy Twins.” And then came the “Williams/Walker Paradox.” And
then from there came the Dunbar/Booker Double Shovel.

AF: I love how these poems reframe whiteness. There’s encounters throughout with famous white
artists who have had a dominating influence on the narrative of American cultural history. Twain, this
great satirist, conflicted and drawn to abolitionism. Berryman, one of the few white mid-century poets to
confront race but only to re-inscribe a very racist minstrel tradition. And then Berlin, a tremendously
popular song-maker who thought nothing of dismissing black artistry and ownership.

TJ: With Twain and Berlin—I discovered this from working with Lomax’s legacy in leadbelly—they’re so highly
esteemed! The only way you can really convince the audience of their disposition or attitude is if you use their
own words. Really, I can say it until I’m blue in the face, but if I have their own words in front of them, then hey,
they can speak for themselves! Using primary documents really helps tell a story in a better way than I could
imagine. So I tend to comb through these records and historical documents and start to see a side of the history
that needs to have an alternating voice, a callback. As one would say, a “clapback.” Or, you know, call and
response. That was the intention with all those people, with Berryman too. I’d encountered his Dream Songs
before; and, I’m just gonna say, I’m not the biggest fan. OK? And I felt that the kind of use of minstrelsy that he employed in the Dream Songs was something that needed to be responded to. I’ve tried to find as much literature as I could about him and his perspective; and I never found anything that really convinced me that his uses of minstrelsy were... much more than a prop. A very convenient, well-worn prop. And I’m just not as convinced that his uses of this cultural prop, that’s been used to the detriment of my people, was worth what he was doing.

AF: And it’s still being used.

TJ: Yeah, and it’s still being used. And it still hasn’t really been... I guess I’ll put it like this: I wanted to add a new way to understand, to add a new prism for his work. And I wanted to add it in such a way as to directly engage its use of minstrelsy, so to speak.

AF: We’re back to white appropriation; the black body as an object or tool, a performance for the white artist’s hands. Did recent instances of blackface put a fire underneath some of this work?

TJ: Oh hell yeah! But the thing is, Berryman’s been on my mind for so long. The whole Berryman mystique. The bottom line for me is: the best way to address Berryman’s use of minstrelsy is to do so using the craft. So I decided to make something that employs his voice, that turns the voice back around on him. How about using that mask/voice with someone who really was a slave and really worked as an entertainer in the era of minstrelsy, and had freed himself? And now he’s smuggling himself out of the crate of that really is the mask that John Berryman wears in his blackface. All to tell the real story behind the woe of the blackface.

AF: Was there a single instance where you could hear the voices of any of these 19th-century black musicians?

TJ: No. Except Bert Williams, he’s the only one.

AF: I love the idea that this book is a reclamation; an excavation project. Unapologetically 19th-century. To go back to the origins of popular music as we know it, was that important to you from the very beginning?

TJ: Well that’s what happened. I had done leadbelly. And there were a lot of stories I wanted to put in that, but I couldn’t fit them in. There’s a lot of primary source material, you just have to figure out a way to do it, you know? I just started becoming curious... Lead is at the very beginning of the recording industry, and he was recorded in prison by John Lomax. But those weren’t the things he was gonna get paid for. He really started getting recorded professionally around the late 30s. But the thing with Lead is he’s at the edge of public consciousness. He exists in this kind of mythical zone that’s—you know Buddy Bolden? There’s a great book by Michael Ondaatje, Coming Through Slaughter, about him. It’s a beautiful book. He’s writing about a legendary horn player that most people at the time had never heard. And it made me think about people that were playing around the time that Leadbelly was growing up—who were they? Where did they fit in the landscape of our collective consciousness? And that led me, first, to Blind Tom and then the McKoy Twins. Then it was the first crew of Fisk Jubilee Singers and then Bert Williams, George Walker. And it just started flowing from there. The thing that frustrated me is I thought I knew about Black music. I slowly realized that I knew about recorded black music. That’s what I really knew about.

AF: As you say, so many of these figures in Olio are pre-W.C. Handy. To realize that most of this book is before that commercialized, shareable, documentable year zero. And so much of the book is written as much documentary as live performance. Including this really gorgeous lyric towards the end of the book that I’m obsessed with, “O Patra Mia.” Gorgeous, gorgeous poem. But you also put in: interviews, essays, letters throughout it. That seemed to me like such a compelling mystery that you wanted to capture music/performance that is lost to us.

TJ: And then there’s Scott Joplin! We talk about Scott Joplin now as the King of Ragtime—but he faded in popularity for fifty, sixty years until his music was played in The Sting. He had a fascinating story and a compelling life. Like Blind Boone. Blind Boone had his eyeballs removed from his head at six months. If you played a song he could play it back immediately, on a thousand dollar bet. Black folks were doing amazing, amazing things in the interest of self-preservation, and self-expression as well. And that’s the way I think of it. They were not, the first two generations out of slavery, just thinking about self-preservation but self-expression as a means towards self-preservation. In other words making the arts a career. Having the ability to do that.
Black folks were doing amazing, amazing things in the interest of self-preservation, and self-expression as well. And that’s the way I think of it. They were not, the first two generations out of slavery, just thinking about self-preservation but self-expression as a means towards self-preservation.

AF: Talk to me about your choice to treat this historical material without overt gesturing towards the contemporary present.

TJ: I think that that was easier to do for leadbelly. I could draw the parallels more directly. But Olio takes place further back in time and it would have been stretching the credibility too much to directly reference the 21st century. Well, the thing that deterred me from doing that was that it was against the rules of the book. It just doesn’t work. Well, the closest I come to it is—I will say this—I do, in the parlance, tip my hat to a little bit of hip-hop. You know what I’m saying? I’m on the edge of it. But I don’t want to stretch it too far. I felt like the people that would be reading it would get that… I mean, I use the word “coon” in the manuscript to talk about the genre of music called coon songs… What are the parallels in the 21st century? I think they’re obvious. And the idea of Sissieretta Jones being called “Black Patti” and considered a mere copy of the original (opera singer Adelina Patti), that still happens today. Or, say, Williams and Walker trying to work through minstrelsy and create something beyond minstrelsy; I mean those are a lot of the same issues we have today. So, the parallels are there, if you have half an imagination.

Also, there’s a circular structure to the book that speaks to the circular, connected nature of history. Basically, the spine is a circle: the double crown of sonnets that circle back on each other. Accompanying the sonnets are the interviews, which have their own circularities of plot. So you have these two continuous threads running all the way through, and then in between both you have the individual artists. I meant to speak to a circular nature of history. For instance, the book contains what might be the longest, most comprehensive list of actual Black congregations whose churches were burned down: the first church listed is the Mother Emanuel AME, in 1822. And then, tragically, the very last church on the list is that same church in 2015, when those innocent people were shot. So I’m trying to acknowledge that idea of a circle, and then around it are these stories. And I also wanted it to seem like the reader is entering the program of an olio—you have the introduction and all of that…

AF: Oh I love how it felt like I was looking at a playbill when I opened it to the introduction, the cast of characters listed. And to see a word like “Owners” was very moving and powerful.

TJ: Well I wanted them to, as much as they can, own themselves. And that’s what they did in real life! Even Blind Tom owned his music. Even if his label was taken from him, he still owned it. You know what I’m saying?

AF: And it was coming out of him.

TJ: It was coming out of him, right! It was his, just like it’s their stories. So, I wanted that to happen, and I played with a lot of different ideas that were kind of half making it work, not exactly making it. I needed an emcee—an interlocutor—and that became me, really.

AF: When you’re doing a book length project that’s so extensive and sustained, how do you balance the informational with the performative, the dramatization with the lyrical?

TJ: Seven. That’s the key to this thing. There’s seven spaces that I had to fill between the double crown. Seven is a sacred number. It’s a spiritual number. There are seven sonnets in a crown. So, there’s seven spaces between pairs of the double crown.

Also, 7x7 is 49. And the year of Jubilee, when slaves are freed and debts are forgiven is the 49th (or 50th) year. The year of emancipation, whether it occurred at the end the Civil War or at the signing of Emancipation Proclamation, was often referred to as the year of Jubilee for American slaves—and especially by the Fisk Jubilee Singers. Incidentally, the book was finished in my 49th year and published in my 50th. Oh, and last year was the third Jubilee year (in the span of 150 years) since the end of the Civil War.

AF: That’s amazing. Was that structuring of the project there early on?
TJ: Well, I don’t think I realized this about the structure or what the structure was going to be, until 2012, when I was halfway through. [laughs] It was a lot of “I don’t know what the hell I’m doing… but I know how it’s gonna look.” I had diagrams and all kinds of stuff.

AF: At some point the book become material object, foldouts and cutouts.

TJ: I originally didn’t intend for the book to be that way; but I looked up one day and the book was over 130 pages. I had done these things that would need extraordinary amounts of page space, and I thought about how I’d do them electronically, how to do them on the internet or whatever. And that isn’t necessarily that hard to do, or to get it done if I wanted to hire somebody to make that happen; but, once again, I have to say that being assigned Verse/Wave Press, in 2005 with leadbelly, one thing I got from them is that they are way chill. They waited almost a year for me to put revisions on the end of that book. They were real chill about the way they designed it. It had to fit; those poems weren’t gonna fit an ordinary book layout. And when I had the idea for the McCoy Sisters I was like, “Man, I need a press that’s gonna do that.” So, basically, at around ’12 going into ’13 I mailed it to them. I’d asked if they’d be interested in this book, and they said, “Yeah, why don’t you email it to us?” And I said, “Well, I can’t really email it to you.” [laughs] So, I bound it up—I made models of the actual way the 3D poems look when you follow the directions—and I mailed it to them; and they were like, “Yeah, we’re down.” I can’t really think of too many presses that would do that; but they put out beautiful books! They have the will to do that. And I think that became another mission of the book: to say “These are the fantastic things that a real bound book can do.” It’s not a computer experience; it’s a tactile experience. You can take the book, and take a page out, fold it into different shapes, and it’ll still mean the same thing. You can have fun with it. And in the midst of this is this very difficult subject matter. You can take this subject matter and experiment—read any way you want to read. You don’t have to go just from left to right and down—you can go sideways—and that, I think, is like a celebration.

You become part of the performance. When you’re going through the McKoy Sisters—the idea was to give the kind of attention to a story that was contained by their bodies, so that you’re looking at their concrete form and absorbing their story at the same time. You can inspect it closely, “read” their form up and down in the same way that an audience might; but their story is there to replace their bodies, to replace that experience they must have felt when they were two or three or four years old and sold to a freak show. In that way, I think you are involved in a real conversation with the 19th and 21st century.

AF: Absolutely. The construction of the book could only exist now, which is a beautiful and exciting thing. Had you done work like that before?

TJ: No, not like this.

AF: So, what was it like to try using another muscle?

TJ: Well yeah, that was the idea. Honestly, the idea was to stretch contrapuntal to the absolute limits that I knew how to stretch it. Never to break, but to bend. So that you literally bend the pages, and create new meaning out of that two-dimensional surface, and make it three dimensional. That’s what Williams and Walker were doing with minstrelsy: taking a two-dimensional surface and adding dimension and paradox to it through the depth of their performance. That’s what was trying to happen with those poems, and same with the McKoys.

AF: Who were the guardian angels you could return to while writing this book, whether it’s rereading specific works or just admiring the architectonics of how a project can hang together.

TJ: A lasting influence on me was my very first poetry mentor Sterling Plumpp—who, in my opinion, doesn’t get the recognition he deserves. I stumbled into his class when I was twenty two and he really showed me the synthesis between the music and the people and the politics, the history—how they all flow together. So, to me, the number one would be Sterling—and also: Sterling Brown. I’m thinking about the way Sterling rhymes; he just has it down. You have this kind of syncopated rhyme that he brings, and his characters are so vivid and alive, and they’re so funny at the same time, and biting. His wit is so sharp and slashing, and he makes you laugh and cry at the same time. That was a big influence for me, in this particular project. And Ernest Gaines, the way he goes into history and just pulls it out of the marrow of the land. Toni Morrison. Reading Toni is like reading poetry, it’s just so sustained: it’s one poetic paragraph after another. I mean, Jean Toomer. Zora, I love Zora. Also Marilyn Nelson, who does such important historical work. Frank X Walker. Komunyakaa, Jayne Cortez, Patricia Smith’s mastery of voice in her persona poems. Phil Levine. Wanda Coleman. Ondaatje. Gayle Jones. Jean Toomer. Charles Chestnut. Such a genius, to do the work he did at the time that he did it, right on the edge of minstrelsy and in the pit of its heyday. He reclaimed this vernacular voice and made it cut in an
entirely different way.

AF: Do you see this book as a way of taking back minstrelsy?

TJ: I wouldn’t say “take back minstrelsy.” What I would say is I want us to have an understanding… I think that George Walker and Bert Williams were in the act of really saying, “I will reclaim minstrelsy.” They really were about that, even the name of their act, “Two Real Coons,” was a kind of taunt at the white supremacy at the core of the concept. Instead of seeing these fake white “coons” dressed in blackface, you’d see some real “coons.” You know what I’m saying? This sly, late 19th-century wink was happening all the time between them and their audience. They were laughing wryly through this construction that they were performing. My task is to recognize their task. Because the same issues they were dealing with are the ones that we are really dealing with, in different ways, today. We have an issue about blackface (Zoe Saldana) in cinema, right now! Right this moment! We were talking about Bert Williams… it’s not that long ago. Only a hundred years.

AF: Last semester, Douglas Kearney skyped into one of my poetry classes and he was reading a minstrel poem from _Patter_, a bone-shaking poem. And Doug, of course, is this amazing performer, and then suddenly—and the class is about half white, half people of color—we’re watching Doug perform (live) his minstrel poem (about miscarriage, no less) on the screen in 2015. It was a deeply perplexing moment. Afterwards, we talked about that as a class, engaging our collective ambivalences and insecurities of being voyeur. Is that part, or one of, the big risks of _Olio_?

TJ: I think it’s a risk. I mean, one of the characters—I think it’s Blind Boone; I love Blind Boone: the most Zen-like of all these people—says, there’s way to “tell the story straight and true, so that the joke’s not on you, but all around you.” With any black person that tries to tell their stories, there’s that risk of vulnerability, of being perceived as part of the minstrel show; but it depends on how you tell it that as to whether you’ll be part of it, or just watch it around you. You know what I’m saying? And I think that was part of the task of what was happening; and part of what I was thinking about was: How do you talk about minstrelsy and acknowledge the ways in which we constantly struggle against being minstrelized? How do we do that and escape…? To be honest, doing those contrapuntals is an effort towards belying the minstrel myth. It’s a daunting exercise in transforming form that we’ve been following for hundreds of years, taking that form—just like the minstrel form—and transforming it into something else.

AF: Framing is so important for this performance, the book is filled with historical accounts, details, facts, timelines, actual documentation.

TJ: I don’t generally make up history—I make up a little bit—but the thing is, if I don’t have those notes in there, no one’s gonna take it seriously. That’s just a fact. That’s why the timeline is in the back. With the timeline, I wanted people to see the flow of the characters against the flow of American history.

AF: I’m curious about your decision to put the timeline at the back rather than front of the book.

TJ: You have to let the audience enter the show, and see it for what it is, before they see all the rigging in the back of the stage. That’s the way I see it. But without those facts—and, for instance, I had a lot of newspaper documents, from which I got the church burnings—if I don’t put all that in there, people are not gonna take it as seriously. That’s just the way I see it. And that’s partially because I got my BA in public policy, and that’s about chasing down facts.

AF: What libraries were you accessing for this book?

TJ: I’d just buy the books, for the most part. Because I’m gonna return them late if I don’t.

AF: And what about certain historical documents?

TJ: JSTOR, LexisNexis, all the electronic resources I could find at my disposal—searches of Crisis Magazine, the Chicago Defendant, Indianapolis Freeman, The Center for Black Music Research in Chicago, the Schomburg. All of those resources were very instrumental in making this thing happen. And, just, as many books as I could find about all of these people. I’ll show you two of them—_Ragged but Right: Black Traveling Shows, “coon Songs” and the Dark Pathway to Blues and Jazz_ and _Out of Sight: The Rise of African American Popular Music, 1889-1895_.

AF: How important were these two?
TJ: They were very important, they provided a setting, so to speak. The books contain actual newspaper and magazine articles and photographs from the era. You can see the way people wrote and how they wrote about the music. Yeah, those are two gorgeous books.

AF: Who are the people you bounced ideas off of?


AF: There is so much learning in this book. The idea that I could go through any education without learning about Henry Box is like, just, Jesus Christ.

TJ: I felt the same way man! It's like, "How come I don't know about the McKoy Sisters?" There's people I left out of the book, man, that were just amazing! There's some stories I wanted to tell, but I just couldn't make it happen. Really, there could be five Olios—ten, twelve—going in different directions, doing different things. I don't know if that would be my calling. But, what I'm saying is that's a very underappreciated period in our history, between the Civil War and World War 1. There's all kinds of amazingness happening in that span of, what, sixty-odd years.

AF: Talk to me about the beautiful line drawings in Olio.

TJ: Jessica Lynn Brown. I found her on Facebook; two friends of mine, Joel Dias Porter and Krista Franklin, hipped me to her. And the thing is she has a unique talent: she has the ability to write with both hands, the same thing, simultaneously, in different direction. It's crazy, to see. You can dictate to her... It's a real kind of split brain thing. She's doing this contrapuntal writing and it just intrigued me. And then I saw her art, which are these stark, haunting line drawings. She lives in St. Louis. Her drawings bring this space into the book, that just lets it breathe in a different kinda way. I was real glad—because I sprung that on Wave at the very last minute, and they rolled with it. They do beautiful books, man. I was really glad that we were able to get those drawings in. It just brings it to a whole other level. I think she's gonna be a really successful artist.

AF: What was the hardest part about the book?

TJ: Man, there were so many hard parts. One, the hardest part, was figuring out who was gonna be in the book, and what the structure was gonna be. There are some people, like James Reese Europe, who’s in but book, who really deserves a book of his own. One of the most important musical personalities of the 20th century, who nobody talks about. James. Reese. Europe. He’s in the book, but he plays kind of a side role. He's part the reason why Julius Monroe Trotter’s going around trying to interview people. Do you know who he was?

AF: No, sadly.

TJ: He was the leader of the Hellfighters Band for the 369th. Europe had started something called the Clef Club, which was basically a black musicians’ union. He started this around the early ‘teens, went to WWI, fought in WWI, had rank, and played jazz in France. He would play for the crowds in France. One of the first melodies they recorded was about being in WWI—"On Patrol in No Man’s Land." But, anyway, he comes back to the United States right after the war, and within a year his drummer cut his throat. He had the biggest parade that had ever been launched for a black person for his funeral—it happened in 1919, on 125th street. Gigantic. Duke Ellington before Duke Ellington. But yeah, like I said, James Reese Europe can be his own book. His legacy was so deep, I couldn’t quite fit him into Olio.

AF: And, finally, when did you finish Olio?

TJ: Last revisions were probably in October. There were a lot of revisions at the very end. I mean a lot. And that happened all within the last year. The last sections were finished up... and I was just tired. Going back and forth with the proofreader and blah blah blah. But it was all worth it because, picking up the book, it was like everything that had been in my head was right there.

>via: http://lithub.com/tyehimba-jess-on-excavating-popular-music-through-poetry/
POV + VIDEO: The 20 best moments that made Muhammad Ali The Greatest
The 20 best moments that made Muhammad Ali The Greatest

By Sean Ingle – @seaningle

1) Takes up boxing after his bike is stolen (1954)

If it wasn’t for the lure of free food, Muhammad Ali may never have boxed. As the 12-year-old Cassius Clay he pedalled on his red and white Schwinn bike to the Louisville Home Show, an exhibition for black businesses, for the free popcorn, hot dogs and candy. But when he left, his bike was gone. A stranger suggested he speak to a policeman, Joe Martin, at the nearby Columbia gym. As Ali later related in his autobiography, The
Greatest: “I ran downstairs crying but the sights and sounds and smell of boxing excited me so much that I almost forgot about the bike.” As Clay left, Martin tapped him on the shoulder. “By the way, we got boxing every night, Monday through Friday, from six to eight. Here’s an application in case you want to join.”

2) Wins his first bout – and is hailed a future world champion (1954)

Clay was no out-of-the blocks natural. The first time he stepped into the ring, against an older fighter, he flailed wildly and within a minute his nose was bloodied and he had to be pulled out. As Martin put it, he “didn’t know a left hook from a kick in the ass”. But six weeks later the 6st 9lb Clay won his first bout by split-decision against another novice, Ronny O’Keefe, on Martin’s TV show Tomorrow’s Champions, which was shown all over Kentucky. Afterwards his father Cassius Clay Snr proclaimed: “My son is going to be another Joe Louis. The World Heavyweight Champion, Cassius Clay!”

3) Gold at the Rome Olympics (1960)

Clay nearly didn’t travel to the Olympics because he was so afraid of flying, and he even bought a parachute from an army surplus store to wear on the plane. After comfortable victories in his opening three bouts, Clay found the 1956 bronze medallist Zbigniew Pietrzykowski harder to fathom in the final, struggling with his opponent’s southpaw stance before winning a unanimous verdict. Later, in his autobiography, he claimed to have thrown his gold medal into the Ohio River, saying: “A few minutes earlier I had fought a man almost to death because he had wanted to take it from me … now I had thrown it in the river. And I felt no pain and regret. Only relief, and a new strength.” It was fiction. The truth was more mundane: he lost the medal.

4) Clay meets the wrestler Gorgeous George (1961)

After turning professional, Clay won six fights in six months. Then, on a Las Vegas radio show to promote his seventh contest, he met the wrestler ‘Gorgeous’ George Wagner, whose promotional skills got audiences coming to watch. As Ali later told his biographer Thomas Hauser: “[George] started shouting: ‘If this bum beats me I’ll crawl across the ring and cut off my hair, but it’s not gonna happen because I’m the greatest fighter in the world.’ And all the time, I was saying to myself: ‘Man. I want to see this fight’ And the whole place was sold out when Gorgeous George wrestled … including me … and that’s when I decided if I talked more, there was no telling how much people would pay to see me.”

5) Clay becomes a boxing Nostradamus (1962)

Ali soon started correctly predicting the round of victory – there was a run of seven times out of eight where he got it right – and when, in February 1962, he stopped Don Warner in four rather than the five forecast, he claimed he had finished the fight early because Warner had not shaken hands. Such promotional skills were paying off. When the boxing writer AJ Liebling arrived at Madison Square Garden 30 minutes before the first preliminary bout to Clay’s fight with Doug Jones he was shocked to find sold out signs and people being turned away.

6) Shows his heart against Henry Cooper (1963)
Clay sauntered into Wembley like a monarch, with a gown emblazoned with ‘Cassius the Great’ and a crown encrusted with imitation diamonds. And, having predicted Cooper would fall in five, Ali preferred slow death by a thousand cuts. But with five seconds remaining of the fourth round, Cooper swung a left hook – Henry’s Hammer – that smashed Clay flush. Clay was down and up as the bell sounded. But he was still groggy as Angelo Dundee, his trainer, alerted the referee to a tear in his glove and a cornerman poured ice over Clay’s lower extremities. No spare gloves were available, but the delay gave Ali had a few extra seconds to recover. A brutal attack ripped Cooper’s face to shreds and the fight stopped in the fifth – as forecast.

7) Earns himself a fight with Sonny Liston (1964)

Clay was fast, handsome and quick-tongued but he was also brave. Just before the second Sonny Liston v Floyd Patterson fight in 1963, Clay followed Liston to Vegas and, after watching him lose at craps, shouted to him: “Look at that big ugly bear, he can’t do anything right.” The promoter Harold Conrad told Thomas Hauser what happened next: “So Liston throws the dice down, walks over to Clay, and says: ‘Listen here you nigger faggot. If you don’t get out of here in 10 seconds I’m gonna pull that big tongue out of your mouth and stick it up your ass.’” Clay was scared. He walked. But later he drove to Liston’s house in Denver to holler at him from his driveway. Shortly afterwards the fight was signed. Ali had his world title shot.

8) “I shook up the world” – Clay wins world heavyweight title (1964)

Liston was a boxing dementor, those soulless eyes draining hope from opponents’ before his fists stole their consciousness. In 36 fights he had lost just once – and even then, after having his jaw broken, he didn’t quit. At the weigh-in, Clay’s pulse was double his normal rate. People thought he was scared. But as he explained to his doctor Ferdie Pacheco he had a plan: “Liston is scared of no man, but he is scared of a nut because he doesn’t know what I am going to do.” He soon found out. Clay was slicker and sharper and, after surviving a torrid fifth when some oil of wintergreen on Liston’s gloves set his eyes on fire, forced his opponent to quit at the end of the sixth. Afterwards Clay told reporters he had “shook up the world … I am the greatest! … I am the prettiest thing that ever lived!” He was 22.

9) Cassius Clay becomes Muhammad Ali (1964)

After the earthquake, the aftershock. Clay’s interest in the Black Muslims began in 1959 when he saw a man in Louisville selling newspapers shouting: “Muhammad speaks! Read it!” But it was only in March 1961 that he visited a temple and became deeply immersed in the religion. As Pacheco put it: “Until Ali came into camp the Black Muslims were considered a fringe lunatic group … [but] Ali understood you did not fuck with the Muslims.
He liked their strength.” Clay held off announcing his conversion because he didn’t want to jeopardise his fight with Liston. But days beforehand his angry father, Cassius Clay Snr (who claimed the Black Muslims had threatened to kill him) confirmed that his son – later to be Cassius X, then Muhammad Ali – had indeed joined the Nation of Islam.

10) Ali shows his nasty side (1965 and 1967)

After knocking out Liston in the first round of their rematch – a robust discussion continues over whether Liston, a mob fighter, took a dive – Ali faced Patterson, who had told Sports Illustrated: “The image of a Black Muslim as the world heavyweight champion disgraces the sport and nation.” Ali responded, first with his tongue – Patterson was “nothing but an Uncle Tom Negro” – and then by torturing him for 12 rounds. In 1967, when Ali fought Ernie Terrell – who had referred to him Cassius Clay – he was just as vicious, demanding “What’s my name?” when he hit him on the way to a decision. In 1967, when Ali fought Ernie Terrell – who had referred to him Cassius Clay – he was just as vicious, demanding “What’s my name?” when he hit him on the way to a decision. The writer Jimmy Cannon claimed: “It was a bad fight, nasty with the evil of religious fanaticism. This wasn’t an athletic contest. It was a kind of lynching.”

11) “I ain’t got no quarrel with them Vietcong” (1966)

Ali had twice sat and failed a military exam in 1964 – his army IQ score of 78 was well below the level required to be drafted. “I said I was the greatest not the smartest,” a stung Ali retorted. But in early 1966 the army relaxed their standards, leaving him eligible for the draft. After hours of questions from reporters, asking him where he stood on the Vietnam War, Ali erupted: “Man, I ain’t got no quarrel with them Vietcong.” White America, who already hated him for being a Black Muslim, now accused him of being a draft dodger too.

12) Ali takes the heavyweight belt out of America (1966)

In five decades, from when Jack Johnson had lost his title to Jess Willard in Havana in 1915 to 1966, the heavyweight title had been contested only twice outside America. Yet with Ali finding it hard to fight in the US, he took his belt on the road: travelling to Canada to beat George Chuvalo, then to England to dispose of Henry Cooper – again – and Brian London, before hopping to Germany to beat Karl Mildenberger. As Boxing Illustrated acknowledged: “He is a fine goodwill ambassador in foreign lands, well loved by the boxing public, who care nothing for his private beliefs.”

13) The Ali shuffle is unveiled (1966)

When Ali returned to America, he produced one of the great visual performances of his career, stopping Cleveland ‘Big Cat’ Williams in three rounds – although Williams, who had lost a kidney and needed four operations after being shot in 1964, was an already broken shell. Ali knocked him over four times and debuted a series of blurring foot moves – the Ali shuffle – which he claimed was the hottest dance sensation since The Twist. Few now doubted his dominance. As Boxing Illustrated put it: “Many members of the press corps have found ways and means to find fault with Ali – he can’t punch, he can’t take a punch, he is too flashy, he makes a lot of amateurish mistakes. Anything to keep from giving his due … few doubters remain.”
14) Banned from boxing and thrown into jail (1967-68)

“How can I kill somebody when I pray five times a day for peace,” asked Ali, as over a few feverish months in 1967, he was stripped of his heavyweight title and banned from boxing for refusing to join the US Army. A year later he had a 10-day spell in the Miami Dade County Jail, for driving without a valid license, where he served food to death row inmates. “The odour of urine and faeces is so strong I want to hold my nose,” he wrote. “The first man recognises me: ‘Well, I’ll be goddamned! They got the world heavyweight champion coming for dinner. The world must be ready to come to an end!’” The philosopher Bertrand Russell wrote to tell him: ‘The air will change. I sense it.” And it did. But it took until June 1970 before the supreme court ruled Ali could fight again.

15) The Fight of the Century (1971)

Muhammad Ali steps away from a punch thrown by boxer Joe Frazier during their heavyweight title fight at Madison Square Garden in 1971. Photograph: Bettmann/CORBIS

By the time Ali came out of exile the public’s mood had shifted. As the boxing historian Jim Jacobs put it: “The exile … showed people that Ali was sincere. It made him an underdog. He became a symbol to people who had never been interested in boxing.” But it had eroded his skills. At Madison Square Garden, Ali and the new champion Joe Frazier threw everything at each other. But Ali was not quite as elusive or sharp, and increasingly Frazier caught up with him, before a left hook putting Ali on his pants in 15th round. It was the moment, as Norman Mailer put it, that Ali was “dumped into 50,000 newspaper photographs … singing to the siren in the mistiest fogs of Queer Street.” He got up but lost a unanimous decision.


Muhammad Ali watches as defending world champion George Foreman goes down on the canvas in the eighth round of the Rumble in the Jungle. Photograph: Red/AP

Even Ali’s extended family of hangers-on didn’t expect him beat George Foreman. Sensing the mood in his dressing room he asked: “What’s wrong around here? Everybody scared? Scared? A little thing like this? This is like another day in the gym.” Foreman had destroyed Frazier in two rounds, and set out to dismantle the 32-year-old Ali in much the same way. But Ali sat back on the slack ropes – the famous ‘rope-a-dope’ – inviting Foreman to expend his energy before picking him off. By the sixth Foreman was exhausted with, as Mailer put it, “lumps and swellings all over his face, his skin equal to tar that has baked in the sun.” With 20 seconds remaining of the eighth, Ali unfurled a chain of punches and Foreman twirled and flopped and fell. On commentary David Frost announced: “The great man has done it! This is the most joyous scene ever seen in
17) **Thrilla in Manilla (1975)**

Before their first fight, Ali had called Frazier “The wrong kind of Negro. He’s not like me, ‘cause he’s the Uncle Tom. He works for the enemy.” Before their third fight, he was just as spiteful, calling Frazier “a dumb ugly gorilla”. The fight, held in the broiling 10am heat, was – depending on your view – *either a brutal classic or, given what became of both men later, painful to watch* as they slugged each other to a standstill. Ali was on top early, Frazier rallied but with his eye closed, he took a beating in the 13th. At the end of the 14th, Frazier’s trainer Eddie Futch stopped the fight, telling him: “No one will forget what you did here today”. Ali later claimed that this was the closest to dying he had ever been.

18) **Ali becomes a three-time heavyweight champion (1978)**

By now Ali was 36, but in fighting years he was even older. In one of the more unmotivated performances of his career, he had lost his title to Leon Spinks, a seven-fight novice. But a few months later he was a little less plodding as he won the rematch to become the first man to hold the heavyweight belt for a third time. Afterwards Ali promised he would retire, adding: “I suffered and sacrificed more than I ever did. There’s nothing left for me to gain by fighting.”

19) **A horrible night against Larry Holmes (1980)**

But like so many fighters, Ali couldn’t keep away. He signed up to fight Holmes, his former sparring partner and now the new champion, and having taken huge quantities of diuretics he looked the part entering the ring. But as Ali admitted afterwards, the drugs had drained him: “In the last two days I couldn’t jog a mile. I was dead tired after one round and there were 14 more to come.” At the end of the tenth, his trainer Angelo Dundee wanted the fight stopped, but Ali’s chief hanger-on Drew ‘Bundini’ Brown, fought for it continue. Dundee won out. Ali, head bowed, didn’t have the energy to protest. He had not won a single round on the judges’ cards.

20) **Atlanta – and reappraisal (1996-present day)**

Not everyone has bought into the Ali-as-saint narrative: in his book Ghosts of Manilla, the acclaimed writer Mark Kram claimed: “Ali was no more a social force than Frank Sinatra. The politically fashionable clung to his racial invective as if it were the wisdom of a seer. Today, such are the times, he would be looked upon as a contaminant, a chronic user of hate language and a sexual profligate.” *Yet when Ali was revealed as the person lighting the Olympic flame in Atlanta*, his left hand involuntarily shaking because of Parkinson’s disease, the crowd reaction – sustained noise, tears, and a huge outpouring of love – showed just how much Ali was now revered.

Frantz Fanon could not help himself. This intense, direct, Caribbean-born doctor and revolutionary would soon have a reputation for capturing the world's anger. When he mounted the podium to speak, most delegates did not know who he was, nor had they read any of his writings. His eyes, fixed on his text, shone with urgency and intensity. Fanon's final act was to encourage—and yet subvert—the revolutionary movement to which he had devoted the last and most important years of his life. He had stubbornly refused to accept treatment in the United States, which he condemned for its racism. The academy's adoption of radical thinkers is always a sanitising process, turning revolutionary action into passive reflection, analysis into academic pontification.