

Compare and contrast the collective and the individual in the work of Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon.

Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire share many themes in their work, by nature of their shared part in anti-colonial thought and the Négritude movement, as well as their own personal relationship. However, this essay will serve to argue that – at least in the texts that will be focussed upon – their work is marked by a division between respective emphases on the collective and the individual, and the effects of colonialism thereupon, largely shaped by their disciplines of psychiatry and poetry. In addition, Fanon and Césaire’s respective experiences in the Second World War and Algerian war must be considered formative, defining their thoughts on racism as well as violence. Césaire repeatedly returns to the motif of Hitler as the epitome of Europeanism,¹ while in *Peau Noire, Masque Blancs* Fanon emphasises the importance of violence in creating a total decolonisation of self and of the nation.² Césaire’s concept of Négritude is fundamentally a poetic one, defined by a romantic idea of unity in Négritude and colonised peoples. The self that he refers to is representative of his people, and this self stands for and as them as a collective in his poetry, particularly in the *Cahier d’un Retour au Pays Natal*. The *Discours sur le Colonialisme* and *sur la Négritude* further emphasise his collective focus, speaking broadly of civilisation and the ‘personnalité communautaire’.³ In contrast, Fanon – informed by his formation and clinical work as a psychiatrist – tends to focus on the effects of colonialism on the individual, exploring the double-self in *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs*, as well as through psychiatric case studies in *Les*

¹ Aimé Césaire, *Discours sur le colonialisme suivi de Discours sur la Négritude*, (Paris: Présence Africaine, 2004), p. 13; Frantz Fanon, *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs*, (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1952), p. 72.

² Frantz Fanon, *Les Damnés de la Terre*, (Paris: La Découverte, 2002), p.61.

³ Césaire, *Discours sur le colonialisme*, p. 89.

Damnés de la Terre. Thus, this essay will argue that the collective and individual in their work effectively divides the core of their ideas and methods of thinking.

Césaire and Fanon are unified through their experiences of colonialism and their shared *Pays Natal* of Martinique, and the overlap of their formative ideas is clear in their work.

Indeed, Césaire even taught Fanon at lycée in his hometown of Fort-de-France after having returned from Paris.⁴ Césaire developed ideas of Négritude at the Ecole Normale Supérieure with thinkers such as Léopold Senghor and he passed these onto Fanon. Writing in 1955, Fanon described the shock that, 'pour la première fois, on verra un professeur de lycée donc apparemment un homme digne, simplement dire à la société antillaise "qu'il est beau et bon d'être nègre"'.⁵ In addition, Fanon worked for Césaire's political campaign in 1945,⁶ further reinforcing the pair's personal relationship and sharing of ideas.

Their tightly interlinked personal experiences of the violent and dehumanising nature of colonialism are evident in shared themes and references throughout their work. For example, in the *Discours sur le Colonialisme*, Césaire writes: 'Je parle de millions d'hommes à qui on a inculqué savamment la peur, le complexe d'infériorité, le tremblement, l'agenouillement, le désespoir, le larbinisme.' In the *Discours*, he tackles these issues through the lens of the 'inconscient collectif', emphasising the damage of colonialism to 'his' people. Fanon particularly frequently references Césaire across his writing, even opening *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs* with the above quote from the *Discours sur le Colonialisme*.⁷

This prestigious positioning at the very beginning of the book highlights the importance to Fanon of Césaire's influence, as is apparent throughout Fanon's texts. He expands on

⁴ Pierre Bouvier, *Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon : Portraits de décolonisés*, (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2010) p. 78.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid p. 83.

⁷ Fanon, *Peau Noire*, p. 5.

Césaire's theme of the inferiority complex in *Peau Noire*, describing the racial hierarchy created by colonialism:⁸ 'des Antillais [...] se vexent quand on les soupçonne d'être Sénégalais. C'est que l'Antillais est plus « évolué » que le Noir d'Afrique : entendez qu'il est plus près du Blanc'.⁹ In this case, both Fanon and Césaire have taken a focus on the effects on the collective, however Fanon explores this further through a psychiatric – and distinctly individual-focussed – lens. Another such thematic overlap can be seen in their discussion of colonialism's destruction of culture and identity. Césaire emphasises the destruction and reformation of cultural identity, for instance in the *Cahier d'un Retour*, he writes: 'Non, nous n'avons jamais été amazons de roi de Dahomey, ni princes de Ghana avec huit cents chameaux',¹⁰ highlighting the totality of colonialism's destruction of African history, whilst contrasting this destruction with a renaissance in Négritude. This renaissance is seen in his continuing motif of the 'petit matin', which could be seen to represent a new dawn for colonised peoples through Négritude and the construction of a new creolised identity, as evident in his romanticised description of an Antillean Christmas combining French Catholic and Afro-Caribbean elements.¹¹ Fanon, in contrast, offers not a hopeful rebuilding but a violent rejection of colonialism as a solution for the destruction of self – 'Ainsi la réalité humaine en-soi-pour-soi ne parvient à s'accomplir que dans la lutte et par le risque qu'elle implique.'¹² These shared themes highlight the similarity in Césaire and Fanon's bodies of work; while they have different approaches to the collective and the individual, they base them in the same concepts and structures.

⁸ Ibid p. 75.

⁹ Ibid p. 20.

¹⁰ Aimé Césaire, *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land*, (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 1993), p.104.

¹¹ Ibid p. 80.

¹² Fanon, *Peau Noire*, p. 177.

As a poet, Césaire overwhelmingly tends towards representations of the collective in his work. Indeed, his Négritude is largely a poetic notion that focuses on black culture forged under colonialism, with universalist aspects. The *Cahier d'un Retour* particularly emphasises this collectivist aspect, as the speaker in the poem overtly seeks to speak for their people: 'je viendrais à ce pays mien et je lui dirais: « Embrassez-moi sans crainte... et si je ne sais que parler, c'est pour vous que je parlerai »'.¹³ While Césaire writes in the first person, he clearly seeks to place his country – in essence his people – above his own needs at every possible step, emphasising the importance of the collective. In the *Cahier* he uses the self as representative of the collective of his people, thus highlighting the inviolable mesh between the individual as the speaker in his poetry and the unity in Négritude. He writes that there is 'pas un bout de ce monde que ne porte mon empreinte digitale'¹⁴ – that his fingerprint is that of the enslaved, the oppressed and the colonised – those that truly built the modern world.

While his use of the collective is full of pride in Négritude, the sense of grief present in his work is palpable in his descriptions of the pain, sickness and hunger of his *Pays Natal* and people – his 'fraternité âpre'.¹⁵ The *Cahier* describes the 'foule à côté de son cri de faim, de misère, de révolte, de haine, cette foule si étrangement bavarde et muette',¹⁶ emphasising the pain and loss present in Antillean society. That they are 'à côté de son cri' highlights the damage and violence of the centuries of colonialism the Antillean people have undergone: their suffering has been so intense and so long that they no longer even have the power to cry out in hunger. Perhaps Césaire is mourning the loss of the Antillean revolutionary spirit,

¹³ Césaire, *Notebook of a Return*, p. 86.

¹⁴ Ibid p. 90.

¹⁵ Ibid p. 134.

¹⁶ Ibid p. 74.

harking back to slave rebellions and the days of Toussaint Louverture and Haiti, which he celebrates as 'où la négritude se mit debout pour la première fois et dit qu'elle croyait à son humanité'.¹⁷ Hunger and sickness are consistent motifs throughout the beginning of the *Cahier*: metaphors for the cultural and economic sickness wrought by colonialism and rooted in Europe. Indeed, this element of societal sickness is highlighted in the *Discours sur le Colonialisme*, in which he denounces the 'gangrène' – the 'poison instillé dans les veines de l'Europe' slowly leading to the 'ensauvagement du continent'.¹⁸ The sickness wrought by capitalism and colonialism destroys everything it touches, leaving the Antilles an 'eschare sur la blessure des eaux; [...] une vieille misère pourrissant sous le soleil, silencieusement',¹⁹ transforming Europe 'en bête'.²⁰ In terms of the individual, while Césaire's Négritude is universalist and designed to create unity with broad definitions that leave its core aspect up to interpretation, it is also clearly very personal, as Césaire emphasises the importance of 'ma négritude'.²¹ Thusly, he claims ownership of his Négritude, pride in what it is and who it makes him, as Fanon would later write that it is the 'assomption de la négritude'²² – the conscious choice to embrace yourself is the rejection of colonialism.

Through the lens of his training and clinical practice as a psychiatrist, Fanon's approach to the problems of colonialism is fundamentally centred on the individual. This can be most clearly seen in *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs*, in which he writes that 'seule une interprétation psychanalytique du problème noir peut révéler les anomalies affectives responsables de l'édifice complexe'.²³ His autotheory analyses the double-self – the *Peau* vs. the *Masque* –

¹⁷ Ibid p. 90.

¹⁸ Césaire, *Discours sur le Colonialisme*, p. 12.

¹⁹ Césaire, *Notebook of a Return*, p. 72.

²⁰ Césaire, *Discours sur le Colonialisme*, p. 21.

²¹ Césaire, *Notebook of a Return*, p. 114.

²² Fanon, *Peau Noire*, p.125.

²³ Ibid pp. 7-8.

created by colonial society. In contrast to the destruction of history and culture emphasised by Césaire, Fanon centres his work on the destruction of *self*. This is most clearly and violently highlighted in the black child's identification with the heroes of white media in which 'le Loup, le Diable, le Mauvais Génie, le Mal, le Sauvage sont toujours représentés par un nègre ou un Indien.'²⁴ Further, as the black child 's'identifie à l'explorateur, au civilisateur, au Blanc qui apporte la vérité aux sauvages,'²⁵ they effectively launch into an attack on themselves. This vilification of blackness creates self-hatred and self-destruction to the point where the black self does not exist. In the same vein as Césaire's equation of 'colonisation = chosification',²⁶ Fanon draws attention to the separation of the black body from the self. He writes that he became aware 'de [son] corps en troisième personne, mais en triple personne',²⁷ a body that occupies space and that he is responsible for – for the preconceptions of 'les regards blancs, les seuls vrais'.²⁸ Thus, through the homogenisation of perception in the white perspective, the ability to define oneself is taken by force.

In its focus on nation and the anti-colonial struggle, *Les Damnés de la Terre* takes a notably more collective emphasis that cannot be ignored, as Fanon points out the importance of mass mobilisation for successful revolution in rejection of colonialism. Clearly influenced by his experience in the Algerian War, Fanon highlights the importance of violence in the creation of true freedom: in the face of violent repression on the part of the colonial government, 'violence représente la praxis absolue.'²⁹ However, this violence is not constrained to armed struggle with the occupier. Even more significant is the 'revolution of

²⁴ Ibid p. 120.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Césaire, *Discours sur le Colonialisme*, p. 23.

²⁷ Fanon, *Peau Noire*, p. 90.

²⁸ Ibid p. 93.

²⁹ Fanon, *Les Damnés de la Terre*, p. 82.

mind'³⁰ – the total rejection of the colonial mindset and the 'assomption de la négritude'.³¹ Indeed, without this destruction of the colonial mindset and the conscious choice to resist its dehumanisation – to find solidarity and 'm'humanisais'³² – there can be no decolonisation. Fanon points out the importance of interconnectedness between the individual and the collective, and their parallel revolutions. He writes that 'la conscience de soi n'est pas fermeture à la communication. La réflexion philosophique nous enseigne au contraire qu'elle en est la garantie.'³³ Without the liberation of the self, any war of national liberation is doomed to fail or find itself in the grips of a new ruling class with the interests of the people just as little at heart as the colonisers before them.³⁴ While Fanon certainly engages with the collective, he makes the key connection that the collective is inherently underpinned by the individual. His psychiatric focus has led to analyses overwhelmingly centred on the struggles of the mind and the embodied self, creating for himself a more scientific and personal definition of Négritude.

Césaire and Fanon, through their shared history and experiences, seek to tackle highly similar and overlapping themes. However, their work is quite clearly separated by their respective focuses on, and approaches towards, the individual and the collective. This contrast is defined by their ways of thinking – the poet and the psychiatrist have clear and distinctly different modes of looking at the world, at colonialism and at violence that are reflected in their work. Césaire primarily uses the self as a metaphor for and reflection of his people, as seen in the *Cahier d'un Retour au Pays Natal*. He emphasises the importance of unity and universalism in Négritude – when he writes that there is 'pas un bout de ce

³⁰ Louisa Roach, *Revolution of Mind*, She Drew The Gun (Liverpool: Skeleton Key Records, 2018).

³¹ Fanon, *Peau Noire*, p.125.

³² Ibid p. 98.

³³ Fanon, *Les Damnés de la Terre*, p. 235

³⁴ Ibid, p. 138.

monde qui ne porte pas mon empreinte digitale',³⁵ *he* is every black person and every colonised person. As a people, they are those who built the world. Fanon, in contrast, points to the underpinning of the collective by the individual: the collective is by definition made up of many such individuals. His critique of colonialism highlights the damage it deals through the destruction of the self, and its inherent dehumanisation. While both hold a Négritude of liberation, Fanon seeks to liberate the mind, and 'humanise'³⁶ the self. Thus, despite the similarities in their work, Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon are divided by their respective interpretations of the individual and the collective, bringing distinct yet complementary approaches to the field of anti-colonial literature.

³⁵ Césaire, *Notebook of a Return*, p. 86.

³⁶ Fanon, *Peau Noire*, p. 98.

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