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Frantz Fanon and Négritude: How Anti-Racist Ideologies Engage with Strategic Essentialism

Négritude was dedicated to the struggle against colonial and cultural oppression in interwar France; the advocates of this anti-racist platform insisted upon the contributions of African societies to European civilization and positioned universalism in terms of black intellectual liberation.[1] One of the foremost critics of the Négritude movement was the Martinique-born psychiatrist and scholar Frantz Fanon who, writing in the postwar context of decolonization, criticized the fixity of the essentialist categories employed by Négritude intellectuals, as well as their reproduction of primitivist notions of the "essence" of blackness. While Négritude scholars used "blackness" as a homogeneous category in order to foster pan-African unity, Fanon understood "blackness" or the label of "Negro" to be a colonial construction. Fanon conceived of the nation as a precondition for culture, which established national liberation as his principal concern; to that end, he too utilized essentialist notions of national culture in order to articulate a vehicle for black sovereignty and self-determination.

Prior to WWII, French imperialism adopted the policy of assimilation, which was predicated on the assumption that European culture and civilization was superior to that of Africans and other conquered peoples.[2] Europeans also justified their overseas conquests on the inhabitants' supposed racial inferiority and "backwardness," which in the French context,

[1] Azzedine Haddour, "Sartre and Fanon: On Négritude and Political Participation," *Sartre Studies International* 11, no. 1/2 (2005): 287.
[2] Daniel J. Sherman, "Primitive Accumulation: Refashioning the Colonial," in *French Primitivism and the Ends of Empire, 1945-1975* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 87.

produced the notion of a civilizing mission. The idea that the French state had an obligation to civilize "barbarian" peoples not only provided a rationale for their expanding empire, but also exemplified the use of scientific language to describe and legitimize racial hierarchies.[3] Furthermore, the adoption of assimilationist rhetoric in France has historical continuities with both Enlightenment and Republican ideals. The Enlightenment was the period in which universalism and human rights were first articulated in Europe, and the era that scientific racism gained traction.[4] A new emphasis on the human ability to understand the natural world through reason led to the establishment of universal taxonomies, which — in tandem with the rise of new imperialism — possessed clear racial dimensions.[5] The Enlightenment ideals of rationality and individualism also furthered the notion that progress, specifically scientific and intellectual progress, was inextricably connected to European civilization, thereby establishing European superiority in terms of technological advancement. Moreover, French colonial rule was heavily influenced by revolutionary Republicanism. The First Republic was founded on Rousseau's notion of the social contract, which positioned each citizen in direct engagement with the state — theoretically superseding all other forms of group belonging, including racial and religious identifications.[6] This Republican notion that French values were distinctly race-neutral laid the foundation for the "color-blind" rhetoric that was prevalent throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, and remains prominent in France today.[7]

Furthermore, rapid industrialization produced immense social and economic dislocation throughout Europe, which led to widespread anxieties about the potential consequences of

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[3] John P. Jackson, and Nadine M. Weidman, "The Origins of Scientific Racism," *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, no. 50 (Winter 2005): 71.
[4] Jackson and Weidman, "The Origins of Scientific Racism," 70.
[5] Jackon and Weidman, "The Origins of Scientific Racism," 72.
[6] Erik Bleich, "Antiracism Without Races: Politics and Policy in a 'Color-Blind State," *French Politics, Culture, & Society* 18, no. 3 (2000): 53.
[7] Bleich, "Antiracism Without Races," 56.

modernity.[8] Industrial capitalism coincided with the rise of primitivism – the fascination with that which existed prior to the modern world. The black body became fetishized as a form of exotic "otherness" mainly through imperial reenactments of colonial realities.[9] Jennifer Anne Boittin explains that the French fascination with otherness motivated the migration of black performers to Europe, and this growing black presence in European metropoles facilitated new definitions of blackness.[10] Boittin describes that large numbers of colonial migrants, mainly from the West Indies and North Africa, first came to the French metropole during and immediately following WWI – the majority of which were ex-colonial soldiers.[11] Prior to the emergence of Négritude in the 1930s, members of the African diaspora possessed a complex range of nationalistic and anti-imperialist sentiments. Despite the lack of a unified platform, a consistent facet of anti-racism among colonial migrants was the attention to how "blackness" was defined. Boittin explains that "While nègre and noir both signified blackness, nègre was perceived as more derogatory in part because it had a history of being associated first with slavery and later with the rights and privileges linked to race…".[12] The negative connotations associated with "nègre" motivated an effort to reject the imperial monopoly on the production of knowledge on black people and "blackness" itself. Notably, West Indian students in London shared in this desire to establish "Africanness" as distinctly modern and cosmopolitan, and sought to resist the empire from within the empire through pan-Africanist coalitions.[13] This effort to overcome colonialism without state sovereignty directly foregrounds the Négritude movement and its two most prominent advocates — Aimé Césaire and Leopold Senghor.

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[8] Sherman, "Primitive Accumulation: Refashioning the Colonial," 58.
[9] Sherman, "Primitive Accumulation: Refashioning the Colonial," 60.
[10] Boittin, "Black in France," 25.
[11] Boittin, "Black in France," 26.
[12] Boittin, "Black in France," 29.
[13] Marc Matera, "Afro-metropolis: Black Political and Cultural Associations in Interwar London," in *Black London: The Imperial Metropolis and Decolonization in the Twentieth Century* (Oakland: University of California Press), 37.

The Négritude movement was developed by Francophone students and intellectuals during the 1930s who aimed to cultivate a distinct black consciousness among members of the African diaspora. This anti-racist platform focused more on philosophy, literature, and representation, rather than militancy.[14] In response to the negative connotations surrounding "blackness," Négritude intellectuals sought to reclaim terms such as nègre and imbue them with new meanings in order to establish a positive African identity.[15] Furthermore, Gary Wilder explains that Négritude scholars were intent on reconfiguring, rather than rejecting, the categories that mediated black subjugation.[16] Aimé Césaire and Leopold Senghor were the two founding members of this movement, and Wilder describes that both of these scholars saw themselves as within the French intellectual tradition.[17] Neither envisioned political independence from France as part of Négritude; rather, they demanded a reformation of France in order to meet the realities of formerly colonized people.[18] To usher in the new era of humanism and universalism that Césaire and Senghor envisioned, these scholars celebrated African history as equally meaningful to that of Europeans.[19] Césaire and Senghor were pan-Africanists in the sense that they aimed to create a broad coalition across the various movements of the African diaspora. In order to achieve that, the Négritude platform utilized strategic essentialism; the terms "black" and "African" were essentialist in that they did not reflect the cultural specificities of Africans or West Indians. Négritude employed these essentialist terms in order to foster pan-African unity, which was reliant on "blackness" as a culturally homogenous category.

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[14] Cynthia R. Nielsen, "Frantz Fanon and the Négritude Movement: How Strategic Essentialism Subverts Manichean Binaries," *Callaloo* 36, no. 2 (2013): 343.
[15] Nielsen, "Frantz Fanon and the Négritude Movement," 347.
[16] Gary Wilder, "Unthinking France, Rethinking Decolonization," in *Freedom Time: Negritude, Decolonization, and the Future of the World* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 8.
[17] Wilder, "Unthinking France, Rethinking Decolonization," 3.
[18] Wilder, "Unthinking France, Rethinking Decolonization," 7.
[19] Wilder, "Unthinking France, Rethinking Decolonization," 11.

In contrast to the philosophy of Négritude, Frantz Fanon unwaveringly conceived of black liberation in terms of decolonization. Fanon was born in the French colony Martinique and used his training in psychiatry to analyze the psychological consequences of colonization.[20] Fanon enlisted in the French army during WWII because he saw this fight against fascism, totalitarianism, and the Nazi racial state as the beginning of a new world order.[21] However, upon migrating to France after WWII, Fanon experienced racism in the metropole and began to develop his own anti-racist consciousness and language.[22] Fanon also fought in the Algerian War of Independence (1954-1962) with the National Liberation Front (FLN), during which time he wrote one of his most famed works of post-colonial theory – *The Wretched of the Earth*.[23] His subsequent critique of Négritude was founded in his conviction that decolonization was the only way through which black autonomy could be realized. Fanon saw Négritude as not critical enough of empire, and completely rejected the notion that assimilation would improve the lives of black expatriates in France.[24] Aimé Césaire mentored Fanon and both had a unique positionality on pan-Africanism being from Martinique. While Césaire saw Négritude as an affirmation of authentic Africanness, Fanon understood this search for the African past as a reproduction of colonial primitivism. In the chapter "On National Culture" in *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon argues that "…[the colonized intellectual] places emphasis on customs, traditions, and costumes, and his painful, forced search seems but a banal quest for the exotic".[25] Notably, the primitivism of the 1920s idealized the African past and celebrated "primitive"

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[20] Max Silverman, "Frantz Fanon: Colonialism and Violence," in *Postcolonial Thought in the French Speaking World*, ed. Charles Forsdick and David Murphy (Liverpool University Press, 2009), 77.
[21] Silverman, "Frantz Fanon: Colonialism and Violence," 77.
[22] Silverman, "Frantz Fanon: Colonialism and Violence," 78.
[23] Silverman, "Frantz Fanon: Colonialism and Violence," 83.
[24] Haddour, "Sartre and Fanon: On Négritude and Political Participation," 293.
[25] Frantz Fanon, "On National Culture," in *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 158.

African peoples as representative of what had been lost in the process of modernization.[26] Fanon believed that Négritude reproduced these same notions, which made their anti-platform ideologically unsound and therefore ineffective. Furthermore, Fanon believed that "It is not enough to reunite with the people in a past where they no longer exist".[27] Azzedine Haddour explains that Négritude advocates were searching to rediscover an African past that they had been completely removed from, and had been rendered lifeless by centuries of colonial rule.[28]

Fanon not only criticized the primitivism embedded within Négritude, but also condemned the intellectuals themselves for their engagement within bourgeois circles, and their culturally essentialist rhetoric. Despite their efforts to articulate a vision of blackness that transcended locality and class, Fanon described Négritude as a movement curated by intellectuals for intellectuals. Fanon explained that "When the colonized intellectual writing for his people uses the past he must do so with the intention of opening up the future, of spurring them into action and fostering hope," implying that Négritude scholars failed to use historical significance in a way that enabled social, political, and cultural reimagining.[29] Fanon further explained that "Support for 'Negro-African' culture and cultural unity of Africa is first contingent on an unconditional support for the people's liberation struggle. One cannot expect African culture to advance unless one contributes realistically to the creation of the conditions necessary for this culture, i.e., the liberation of the continent".[30] This Marxist assertion removes cultural intellectualism from bourgeois and elitist circles and places it into the hands of those in the physical fight for liberation. Moreover, Fanon criticized the fixity of essentialist categories employed by the Négritude movement, especially those regarding culture. Négritude emphasized

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[26] Sherman, "Primitive Accumulation: Refashioning the Colonial," 76.
[27] Fanon, "On National Culture," 163.
[28] Haddour, "Sartre and Fanon: On Négritude and Political Participation," 295.
[29] Fanon, "On National Culture," 167.
[30] Fanon, "On National Culture," 170.

the need for a positive African identity and a distinct pan-African culture, but neglected to take into consideration "…that the problems for which Richard Wright or Langston Hughes had to be on the alert were fundamentally different from those faced by Leopold Senghor or Jomo Kenyatta".[31] Fanon not only rejected the cultural essentialism that characterized the Négritude movement, but also asserted that pan-Africanism was limited insofar as it assumed that all black people had experienced colonial rule and imperial subjugation the same way. Fanon's upbringing in Martinique — where many people supported assimilation into the French state — influenced his understanding of the problematics of cultural essentialism.[32]

The chapter "The Negro and Language" in Fanon's work *Black Skin, White Masks* closely examines how anti-racist ideologies can be effectively communicated in the language of the colonizer. Fanon explains that "the language of the civilizing nation" imposes archetypes of blackness and cultural inferiority onto the colonized individual, which they must then unlearn.[33] Fanon also distinguishes between elitist intellectualism and the philosophy of decolonization to showcase Négritude as a bourgeois undertaking. Fanon explains that "…outside university circles there is an army of fools: What is important is not to educate them, but to teach the Negro not to be the slave of their archetypes".[34] Fanon emphasized education as an institution and because that institution was a product of the colonial environment, education did not serve black people in the way that Fanon saw as necessary to their liberation. Teaching black people to unlearn the racial hierarchies they had been taught would enable self-determination, which was vital to the project of decolonization. Fanon also states that "When some-one else strives and strains to prove to me that black men are as intelligent as white men, I say that intelligence has

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[31] Fanon, "On National Culture," 154.
[32] Silverman, "Frantz Fanon: Colonialism and Violence," 84.
[33] Frantz Fanon, "The Negro and Language," in *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 18.
[34] Fanon, "The Negro and Language," 35.

never saved anyone…", which positions the Fanonian theory of decolonization as separate from European education.[35] Aimé Césaire and Leopold Senghor both remained within the French historical and intellectual tradition, which Fanon understood to indicate their insufficient commitment to anti-colonialism. Philosophy could be used to assert human equality, but it had also been used to justify genocide and slavery; thus, philosophical rumination on anti-racism would not enable black people to free themselves from colonialism and imperialism.[36]

Moreover, Fanon, among other scholars, have highlighted Négritude as reactionary in that was reliant on whiteness to define blackness.[37] The term "Négritude" was coined by Aimé Césaire, who conceived of this word and the movement that followed it as an affirmation of a negation – the negation of African history and its contributions from the global stage.[38] Fanon describes that "This may be the reason for the strivings of contemporary Negroes: to prove the existence of a black civilization to the white world at all costs".[39] This desire showcases the prevalence of an inferiority complex among educated, black expatriates – resulting in the reinstatement of racial power dynamics through their attempt to win the approval of Europeans. Fanon contended that black assimilation to France was predicated on this same inferiority complex and the aspiration to earn the approval of the white man.[40] Moreover, the black man had been emasculated and dehumanized by the European colonial system, and he paradoxically and ineffectively attempted to reassert his dignity through that very same system.[41]

It is important to note that all conceptions of race or nation are essentializing to some extent, which warrants an analysis of Frantz Fanon's own use of strategic essentialism. While

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[35] Fanon, "The Negro and Language," 29.
[36] Fanon, "The Negro and Language," 30.
[37] Benetta Jules-Rosette, "Revolutionary Writing: Challenges to Négritude," in *Black Paris: The African Writers' Landscape* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 88.
[38] Jules-Rosette, "Revolutionary Writing: Challenges to Négritude," 87.
[39] Fanon, "The Negro and Language," 34.
[40] Fanon, "The Negro and Language," 26.
[41] Jules-Rosette, "Revolutionary Writing: Challenges to Négritude," 91.

Fanon did share in Négritude's hope for a new universalism, he conceived of culture in terms of the national body. Fanon maintained that "The nation is not only a precondition for culture, its ebullition, its perpetual renewal and maturation. It is a necessity".[42] In other words, culture could not exist without national sovereignty. Moreover, Fanon argued that "National culture under colonial domination is a culture under interrogation whose destruction is sought systematically".[43] For culture to be articulated and successfully realized, national liberation must first be achieved. Fanon located culture in relation to the nation so as to provide a vehicle for black sovereignty that did not rely on a specific definition of "blackness". Fanonian theory of decolonization applied to Algerians, who were not black, but had experienced colonization by the French, thus indicating his view of "blackness" as more of a political category. "Blackness" for Fanon was defined based on historical and contemporary relations of power and had less to do with racial phenotypes or skin color. For instance, the opening chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth* — "On Violence" — was written during the Algerian War and was intended to encourage participation in the fight against colonialism.[44] Although Fanon heavily engaged with anti-racist philosophy, he used theoretical concepts in functional ways given present circumstances. His assertion that "…decolonization is always a violent event" directly corresponded to the violence taking place in Algeria.[45] Due to the French use of guerrilla warfare tactics in Algeria, Fanon sought to legitimize the use of violence for decolonization efforts.[46] Furthermore, Fanon focused on "blackness" as a racial label that had political and economic consequences, and less on this label as a marker of identity. Fanon understood the colonized individual's identity as a process

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[42] Fanon, "On National Culture," 177.
[43] Fanon, "On National Culture," 171.
[44] Silverman, "Frantz Fanon: Colonialism and Violence," 83.
[45] Frantz Fanon, "On Violence," in *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004) 1
[46] Silverman, "Frantz Fanon: Colonialism and Violence," 83.

that required continual construction and reconstruction; this ever-changing process applied to the nation and to national culture as well.[47]

Throughout the early interwar years, black colonial migrants in France expressed frustration with the negative stereotypes associated with "blackness," and thus began to articulate a new identity as positively and distinctly African. The founders of the Négritude movement — Aimé Césaire and Leopold Senghor — shared in this rejection of imperial knowledge on Africa and Africans. Négritude emphasized the importance of representation in anti-racist platforms and fought to deconstruct white narratives about blackness. Frantz Fanon, however, understood the project of anti-colonialism and black liberation in less philosophical terms; he rejected the reliance on "blackness" as a homogenous category because it remained within the framework of European imperialism. Fanon's belief that decolonization was the only way to dismantle systems of oppression led to his condemnation of Négritude as an overly totalizing and essentialist rhetoric that enacted little change outside of educated circles. Despite this critique of strategic essentialism, Fanon also understood the value and utility of essentialist categories; his idea of the national body as a precondition for culture is an essentialist statement, but Fanon uses essentialist terms to articulate a theoretical basis from which activism could develop. Moreover, Fanon conceived of racial identity as a social construction, and although that construction could foster group pride, "blackness" and "Negro" had been used as derogatory racial labels. Fanonian anti-racist theory does highlight the importance of language in black identity formation, but maintains that intellectualism without decolonization is futile.

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[47] Nielsen, "Frantz Fanon and the Négritude Movement," 350.

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