



FREEDOM, I'LL HAVE LIVED YOUR DREAM UNTIL THE VERY LAST DAY

INTERVIEW WITH FELWINE SARR

René Char and Frantz Fanon never met. One was a poet, the other a psychiatrist. Their writing styles are very different. What connects them?

Felwine Sarr: Many people see René Char as an erudite poet, one that can be hard to grasp. His style is at once poetic and philosophical. I see him as a musician who tried to be in synch with who he really was. I like his deep attachment to his roots, L'Isle-sur-la-Sorgue, the way he went through all the intellectual fads of his time—such as surrealism—all while keeping his inner fire, always on a quest for beauty, for truth, and for the absolute. As for Frantz Fanon, he isn't seen as a poet, but there is something of a poetic verve in his writing. They both burn with their words. They're like blacksmiths of language. For Frantz Fanon, that means abandoning the cry, the great negro cry Aimé Césaire said would rattle the foundations of the world. He abandoned the cry in favour of a word that would be the result of a long reflection about language, life, and meaning. René Char and Frantz Fanon didn't know each other, but they both lived through a time that asked them to make the personal and decisive choice of acting according to their words. They were moved by the same desire to create a more just, harmonious, and habitable present. They wanted to put their words into practice, to be on the side of those who create the real. They were both great defenders of freedom. That's what led them to stand against the inconceivable. Both chose to stay true to themselves in a rather radical way when faced with the violence of the world. Frantz Fanon, born in Martinique, was 19 when he took up arms against the Nazi occupation of France. He joined the famous Bataillon 5 in northern Africa, in Algeria (Bougie, Oran), then took part in the Battle of Alsace in 1945. For his courage, he would receive the Croix de guerre. He believed in the Republic that abolished slavery and identified with its ideals of Freedom. In September 1939, René Char was mobilised in Nîmes and left for Alsace, where he remained until May 1940. After being demobilised and crossing the demarcation line, he refused to remain in the abstraction of books and words and joined the resistance under the name of Capitaine Alexandre. In 1941, in a letter to Francis Curel, he explained his choice thus: “Yes, we do have to write poems, to write in silent ink the fury and cries of our mortal spirit, but it can't end there. It would be laughably insufficient...” because “faced with the blood of the victims,” literature is laughably insufficient. For both of them, it is urgent to act at a very specific historic time, facing an implacable and bold oppression no longer hiding behind the mantle of civilisation. So they take up arms. René Char sees violence as a legitimate answer to barbarism. It's a praxis of emancipation. Frantz Fanon also tackled the question in *The Wretched of the Earth*. He argues that violence can be salutary and purifying. It can rebuild an alienated subject. They both fought Nazism and occupation, but once the war was over, René Char went back to being a full and free French citizen, while Frantz Fanon was subjected to racism within the French army. Although a French soldier, he was set apart from the other. His was a situation on the margins: he was seen as a colonial subject in the Republic. That's probably why he chose so early to side with the oppressed. Frantz Fanon had to deal with inner colonialism. René Char fought against the organisation of colonial exhibitions in France, and few did back then. But René Char wasn't a colonial subject. After the war, he continued his active struggle with words, with poetry, to create bright worlds. As for Frantz Fanon, he dove headfirst into the anticolonial struggle, wanting to create a world rid of oppression to bring humanity to another level. That of freedom. That question is all the more central for Frantz Fanon, who refuses to be defined by the colour of his skin. He rejects the prison of nationality and history. He thinks that history doesn't determine who he is, that his role isn't to restore the glory of his elders, of a lost African society. He rejects all forms of determinism. Likewise, Char would reject social determinism throughout his life. For instance, he refused to let moral conventions dictate his behaviour in matters of love. But Frantz Fanon goes further: in a heroic gesture, he affirms that he is his own *foundations*, even though I think it's hard to completely get behind because we all carry within ourselves a history, a memory, which is bigger than us, which precedes and exceeds us.

We live in a world more and more polarised, in which language is no longer a tool for unity, where universalism has been weakened. Is that why the question of those habitable worlds René Char and Frantz Fanon wrote about is central to your creations?

Like them, I don't think in binary, oppositional terms. We live today in a delicate time where we have yet to solve the question of our multiple pasts and aren't yet able to articulate an open story that will be the foundation for our future. We forget that universalism is pluriversal, that we all live through the same human experience but that the human experience has a different face for each of us. I see universalism as fundamentally multifaceted, in the way Césaire or Merleau-Ponty would: it's a pluriversalism we come to know through experience, the constant testing and challenging of self by the other, and vice versa. The question of the future is also closely connected to that question of memory. A community is founded on history, on memory and forgetting. But like Janus, it has two faces. If I turn to the past, the question I'm essentially asking myself is who I shared that past with. If I turn to the future, the question I'll ask myself is what world I want to create with the people who are here now. I think this play shows us the kind of community of destiny we have and towards which we should strive.

What is the topic of this show you wrote, inspired by *Fury and Mystery*, *Black Skin, White Masks*, *The Wretched of the Earth*, and *The Formal Share*. Who is Dorcy Rugamba, who you asked to direct the play? And tell us something about the place of video and musical creation in the play.

Putting René Char and Frantz Fanon in conversation allowed me both to delve into their work anew and to universalise their quest for a brighter world. This show isn't an homage, nor is it a patrimonial project. There's no story, but allegorical situations. There are no characters but performers who are voices, consciences. The acting and direction aim to connect the text to our time, and to defend this freedom imperative. Dorcy Rugamba is a Rwandan playwright, director, and actor who moved to Belgium after the genocide against the Tutsi in 1994. He was trained in the performing arts in part by his father, writer, choreographer, and composer Cyprien Rugamba. In 2012, he created the Rwanda Arts Initiative, an art centre in Kigali which opened in 2019 a publishing house to publish texts in African languages. I really like his work, which asks the question of reconstruction through the production of theatre. With him, we tried to give the show a form of sensuality. Part of it comes from the wide range of material—texts, sounds, visuals—we used for this multidisciplinary show. Music is a full member of the cast. We adapted the texts so that a large part of them could be put to music to create a polyphonic form, to have individual voices interacting with collective responses. Two musicians are onstage alongside actress Marie-Laure Crochant, with her exceptional ability to embody the text. Gnima Sarr's style is very poetic. Her music is a fusion, a mixture of styles; spoken word, taassu, West African chants with a hint of punk. Majnun drew inspiration from music from all over the world to create his hybrid groove, halfway between afrobeat and funk. He has a powerful, unique, and sharp imagination and can draw you into his world. Their creations accompany the songs and other lyrical forms the text takes, but they also carry large parts of the narrative. The musical narrative is a call-and-response with a choir, which allowed us to create a dialogue between story and History, between individual conscience and collective destinies.

Interview conducted by Francis Cossu in March 2021 and translated by Gaël Schmidt-Cleach