

Unthinking Mastery with Suzanne Césaire

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Abstract

This paper aims to read together Julietta Singh's *Unthinking Mastery* and Suzanne Césaire's *The Great Camouflage* in order to uncover the narrative spaces in Césaire's work that can be fruitful for unthinking mastery. I identify four connected themes in Césaire's work. Surrealism, rejection of doudou-ism and the natural disaster explicitly reject the construction of the Caribbean as one exoticized place and mechanisms of categorization. The only stable identity of the Caribbean is its instability. The figure of the plant-human adds to this and transcends the human/non-human dichotomy in a way that dismantles this central dichotomy altogether.

Keywords

Suzanne Césaire; Mastery; Decolonial Theory; Caribbean Thought; Dehumanism; Martinique.

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In her highly influential text, *Toward a Decolonial Feminism*, María Lugones (2010) argues that “Modernity organizes the world ontologically, in terms of atomic, homogenous, separable categories” (2010, 742). Later on in the text, she argues that she “understand[s] the dichotomous hierarchy between the human and the non-human as the central dichotomy of colonial modernity” (2010, 743). Human and non-human, then, are two such homogenous, separable categories. The category of non-human has been applied within the framework of colonization in order to justify the enslavement and exploitation of the colonized—the enslavement of Africans and the genocide enacted upon Indigenous peoples of the Americas, for example (2010, 742). These acts were justified by categorizing the non-white, “uncivilized” as non-human, “as animals, uncontrollably sexual and wild” (2010, 743).

The fight against dehumanization has been the focus of many anticolonial struggles (Singh 2018, 2).¹ This is especially visible in the work of Martinican philosopher and psychiatrist Frantz Fanon, who was at the forefront of the 20th-century anticolonial struggle. The struggle against dehumanization is central to both of his most influential works: *Black Skin, White Masks* and *The Wretched of the Earth*. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon focuses on the experience of the Black man, starting from the statement that, according to Fanon “a Black is not a man” (Fanon [1952] 2021, viii). Fanon further explores this statement from a psychoanalytical perspective and argues for a restructuring of society which will allow a Black man to be a man and to be a master in this world. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon argues that there are people who are outside of the Hegelian master-slave dialectic because this dialectic presupposes a shared humanity. The *wretched* are the ones that do not even figure as human. He argues that it is “when he [the native] realizes his humanity that he begins to sharpen the weapons with which he will secure his victory” (Fanon [1961] 2001, 33).

The fight for humanization has been the foundation of many successful anticolonial struggles around the world (Singh 2018, 3). However, the focus of this article is to look beyond seeking humanization. If the categorization of beings into human and non-human can be seen, following Lugones, as *the central dichotomy of colonial modernity*, should the focus not be on upending this dichotomy altogether? What will come out of a struggle for humanization if the category of human is entirely constituted by the existence of a non-human category, which has been used to justify widespread oppression and imperialism? If the category—that of the human—that you want to belong to in order to be freed from the system of domination that determines your position is part of this system and was constituted for the purpose of justifying *your* domination, will you ever be able to truly get out of it? Should we, instead of aiming for the humanization of the colonized, not aim for the abolition of the entire category of the human?² In this paper, I aim to examine these questions with the help of Julietta Singh’s 2018 book *Unthinking Mastery*.

In the first two chapters of *Unthinking Mastery*, Singh examines the anticolonial struggles of the 20th century, focusing on Mahatma Gandhi and Frantz Fanon, analyzing the role that mastery—a concept that Singh does not want to define in order to not replicate

it—plays in their politics. Singh states that “across anticolonial discourse the mastery of the colonizer over the colonies was a practice that was explicitly disavowed, and yet, in their effort to decolonize, anticolonial thinkers in turn advocated practices of mastery—corporeal, linguistic, and intellectual—toward their own liberation” (Singh 2018, 2). The focus in these movements was on the humanization of the colonized, on restoring a full sense of humanity. However, despite this focus, Singh argues, there is still room for unthinking mastery. Singh reads these accounts in order to find the ways that the works of Gandhi and Fanon “also urge us—through their messy narrative play—toward mastery’s undoing” (Singh 2018, 3).

While starting from Fanon and Gandhi and finding the traces of mastery’s undoing in their work is a worthwhile project, I propose that there is another, often ignored, anticolonial thinker whose work is full of this “messy narrative play”: Suzanne Césaire. In this article, I aim to read the work of Suzanne Césaire with Julietta Singh, showing Césaire’s (implicit) commitment to unthinking mastery—to unravelling its logic. Césaire’s work, I aim to show, can provide an important space for unthinking mastery and coming to a dehumanist decolonialism as Singh proposes. As a decolonial thinker, I think Césaire has been gravely underappreciated. Her work is so rich, poetic, and exceptional in not only her negotiations of mastery, but also her dehumanist thinking and, in general, in her acceptance and support of the uncertain, the unclear, the opaque, an attitude has been credited to thinkers who come along after her.³ In the following paper, I first focus on Singh’s exploration of mastery and its undoing and I then read Césaire’s work with this in mind.

Unthinking Mastery

Julietta Singh’s 2018 book *Unthinking Mastery* traces mastery’s “qualities, drives, corollaries, and repetitions across two crucially entangled moments of decolonization: the anticolonial and the postcolonial” (Singh 2018, 1–2). Since mastery has to do with understanding, defining, and categorizing, Singh moves away from exactly this in order not to reproduce masterful practices. However, Singh does outline qualities of mastery that can be used in order to better trace its development. Mastery, according to her, always reaches for control. It demands the full submission of an object or something that has been objectified (Singh 2018, 9–10). It, therefore “requires a rupturing of the object being mastered, because to be mastered means to be weakened to a point of fracture” (Singh 2018, 9–10). There is an element of estrangement to this: mastery is splitting an object that is mastered, away from itself, away from its previous state of being. Examples of this can be easily found in colonial practices: the dehumanization of colonial subjects makes them into objects and estranges them from their own culture.

Singh traces three qualities of mastery that further elucidate this point. Firstly, mastery involves splitting, either in the form of “carving a boundary” or “an infliction of mutilation,” or both at the same time (Singh 2018, 12). Following this, the second quality Singh outlines is the fact that mastery then involves the subordination of what is on this boundary to the other. Lastly, this hierarchized relation has to be extended over time (Singh 2018, 12). Within anticolonial struggles, resistance to mastery in the human-dehumanized sense has been a focal point. The starting point of this struggle is that, following Aimé Césaire, colonization is the “thingification” of colonized peoples (Césaire [1955] 2000). He takes issue with dehumanization, where people are relegated as things or non-humans in order to justify their oppression. However, Singh argues that this “vitality names a limit to our dialectical thinking

of life itself: to be rendered a thing is to be placed into a whole world of other things that are not designated as valued life forms” (Singh 2018, 18). If what we value and struggle for is humanity, everything needs to be defined in relation to it—colonized peoples have to be humanized, ecosystems have to have material benefits for us to care about them.

This kind of thinking will not allow us to see the non-human world “as one invested with meaningful, dynamic life” (Singh 2018, 18). Singh therefore argues for not humanization, but *dehumanism*. She states this is “a practice of recuperation, of stripping away the violent foundations (always structural and ideological) of colonial and neocolonial mastery that continue to render some beings more human than others” (Singh 2018, 4). The goal of dehumanism is not dehumanization or the rejection of it, but rather staying with and in dehumanization, finding possible spaces and forms of political alliance, and working through it. In order to demonstrate the problems with humanism in anticolonial thinking but also the spaces this provides to unthink mastery, one might look to the work of Frantz Fanon.

Singh explicates the logic of mastery that prevails in the work of Fanon, arguing that “within Gandhian and Fanonian narrative accounts of decolonization, there is a continuous way in which particular figures—colonized women, indigenous peoples, the ‘un-civilized’ groups of the emergent nation-state, the animal, the cripple, and nature itself—must be subjected by the emergent master who is himself the embodiment of the new nation-state and who maneuvers away from colonial domination toward freedom” (Singh 2018, 31). Fanon, furthermore, shows humanist commitments: as the quote from *The Wretched of the Earth* in the first section demonstrated, he thought that the colonized, the wretched, were stripped of their humanity by their colonizers. Fanon thought of himself as a “master” who had been “crippled” through this colonial relation (Singh 2018, 32). The task at hand was, then, to reclaim this masterful humanity.

The fact that mastery seems to be a theme in Fanon’s work, however, does not mean that he leaves no space to question it. There is, in his work, a real focus on vulnerability and radical love that leaves some room for the reshaping of subjectivities and political aspirations (Singh 2018, 63). By being vulnerable and allowing a sense of open-endedness we might be able to get out of the strict master-mastered dichotomy—by questioning our own positions and those of others, we question the fact of categorization all together. This is the way that Singh reads his work: restoratively, looking for spaces to unthink mastery.

These spaces, in which there is room to unthink mastery, abound in the work of Suzanne Césaire, who is the focus of this article. In the previous section, I discussed the fact that Césaire has been relatively underappreciated, as the focus is often on her contemporaries.⁴ Because of this, I choose to focus explicitly on Césaire and less on her contemporaries and successors, who, of course, have contributed greatly to this specific field of philosophy. Sentiments that can be found in the work of Césaire, such as a questioning of the category of the human and an acknowledgement of the Caribbean’s fragmented identity, can also be found in the work of her successors, albeit in different ways (Wynter 2003; Glissant 1997; Benítez-Rojo 1996). However, because she has received relatively little attention in the past, the focus of this article is mostly on Césaire.

Returning to Singh’s commitment to unthinking mastery, we might say that looking to the future, in order to survive, to live, we must live together not as humans and animals, as masters and mastered, but as new collectives, in new collectivities. I propose then that we

look at the work of Suzanne Césaire in order to find a narrative space in which this kind of living can be imagined—a space that has been grievously understudied—one that allows for a feeling questioning, for feeling uncomfortable, for unthinking mastery in this narrative sense.

Suzanne Césaire and The Great Camouflage

In the 1940s, Martinican scholar Suzanne Césaire founded the review *Tropiques* together with her husband Aimé Césaire (Rabbitt 2013). *Tropiques* was an influential journal in its time, and it is known for being a place where the *négritude* movement proliferated. This movement offered a sense of African identity for the Black inhabitants of the Caribbean, disavowing Eurocentrism, colonialism and raising a sense of Black consciousness (Ormerod and Glissant 1974). In the following decades, however, the *négritude* movement lost popularity among intellectuals. The identity of people in the Caribbean was, according to them, not as easily defined as orienting them towards Africa—there is a sense of ethnic and racial diversity in the Caribbean that is not all African. Although Césaire was an editor for *Tropiques*, her thinking never really fit entirely in with the *négritude* movement. Whereas in the work of her contemporaries, there was a focus on and an orientation towards Africa, Césaire never really shared this preoccupation in the same way (Rabbitt 2008). She refused the binary thinking that was implicit in *négritude* (positioning Europe in opposition to Africa) and instead wrote about what we could see now as a version of *créolité*: a focus on the intermixing of cultures in the Caribbean that comes with a sense of instability (Rabbitt 2013). Suzanne Césaire published seven essays in *Tropiques* from 1941 until 1945, after which she stopped publishing.

Although Césaire published little in the way of written work, the essays that she did publish are forward-thinking and unique. The way she wrote was vastly different to her contemporaries and even some of her successors, moving outside of strict hierarchies and binaries that were more prevalent in the work of her colleagues. In reading Césaire's work with Singh's framework in mind, I see at least four themes in her essays that provide space for resisting masterful ways of thinking and writing: an allegiance to Surrealism, a rejection of *doudouisme*, the notion of the Paideuma and prevalence of natural disasters and lastly, the plant-human. The first three all provide a sense of subverting mechanisms of categorization, and the last, the figure of the plant-human, subverts the dichotomy between the human and the non-human. All four aspects are vital to Césaire's project of constructing a Caribbean self. Her work is inextricably tied to the Caribbean itself, specifically to the island of Martinique. She consistently, in her work, questions Martinican identity, depicting an identity that is inherently unstable and undefinable. Because of this instability, the themes I have identified cannot be fully separated from each other or from the space of the Caribbean.⁵ In the following, I discuss these four themes, how they relate to each other, to Caribbean identity, and to Singh's project of unthinking mastery.

Allegiance to Surrealism

Surrealism is a literary, philosophical, and artistic movement. Surrealism champions the irrational, the poetic, and the revolutionary (Breton 1978). In a sense, it is a movement that is in contradiction with Western reason, favoring irrationality over rationality. However, it also originated in the West, illustrating one of the many ways in which spaces for subversion can arise within masterful contexts. In many anticolonial movements of the first half of the 20th

century, there existed a certain allegiance to Surrealism (Antle and Conley 2015). Césaire's husband, Aimé Césaire, wrote his *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* on the intersection between Surrealist poetry and anticolonialism. Surrealism is also especially important in Césaire's work, with her writing two essays focused on the topic: *André Breton, Poet and 1943: Surrealism and Us*.

For Aimé Césaire, Surrealism was a tool for developing new forms of expression. Surrealism allowed him to find a fundamentally Black character in the French language (Singh 2018, 83). This allowed him to wield Surrealism as an anticolonial weapon. Surrealism was then instrumentalized for the Caribbean *négritude* movement that Aimé Césaire belonged to. Suzanne Césaire also seemed to view Surrealism as something that could be instrumentalized. This is implied in the title of her essay *1943: Surrealism and Us*, placing Surrealism outside of the Caribbean as something that has been chosen and used.⁶ Surrealism, for Césaire, was uniquely valuable for the Caribbean and especially for her home of Martinique. In *The Malaise of a Civilization*, Césaire states that "Surrealism has given us some of our possibilities", arguing that the Martinican truly knows himself as someone who falls outside of Western reason (Césaire 2012, 33).⁷

Surrealism is irrational and according to Césaire in *1943: Surrealism and Us*, its "most urgent task" is "to free the mind from the shackles of absurd logic and so-called Western reason" (Césaire 2012, 35). The reason that Surrealism is fruitful, according to Césaire, is "the intransigence ... of freedom," the fact that there is no real agreement within the movement about what freedom even is (Césaire 2012, 36). At the end of the essay, Césaire, after she pulls the focus of the essay back to Martinique—she makes no pretensions to universalism—states that, with use of Surrealism "[i]t will be time finally to transcend the sordid contemporary antinomies: Whites-Blacks, Europeans-Africans, civilized-savage: the powerful magic of the mahoulis will be recovered, drawn from the very wellsprings of life" (Césaire 2012, 38).

In this last sentence, Césaire rejects the dichotomy that defines Western (colonial) reason. All of these antinomies can be argued to reflect the central dichotomy of Western colonialism: the human/non-human dichotomy. Black people, Africans, and "savages"—to the extent that the terms are not used for the same groups—have all been defined as non-human in order to justify their oppression. But instead of aiming for humanizing the dehumanized, Césaire explicitly calls on her reader to transcend these dichotomies, acknowledging their futility. Furthermore, by embracing Surrealism and rejecting Western reason, Césaire rejects the mechanisms of categorization that are so inherent in mastery. In order for something to be mastered, a boundary has to be drawn, but Césaire explicitly chooses to utilize Surrealism to make sure that boundaries cannot be drawn, because irrationality does not lend itself to categorization. Furthermore, irrationality lends itself to the discomfort and ambivalence that Singh argues is necessary in order to unravel mastery. Césaire's allegiance to Surrealism in her work opens up space for subverting the logic of categorization in mastery.

The Rejection of Doudouisme and the Role of the Poet

As mentioned, Césaire always pulls the focus back to the locality of the Caribbean in her work. In her essays, she constructs multiple versions of the Caribbean self and the Martinican self. The one common denominator for all these constructed identities seems to be their instability, their impermanence (Rabbitt 2008, 124). Césaire does not argue for one Caribbean identity,

focused on Africa, moving away from France, as was the case in the *négritude* movement. In *The Malaise of a Civilization*, she speaks of “the mobilization of every living strength brought together upon this earth where race is the result of the most unremitting intermixing” (Césaire 2012, 33). In *The Grand Camouflage*, she speaks of “the hummingbird-women, tropical flower-women, the women of four races and dozens of bloodlines” (Césaire 2012, 40). Even though Césaire rejects the construction of the Caribbean self as proposed by *négritude*, she more explicitly focuses on the categorization of the Caribbean by the colonizers who seem to have a propensity to look at Martinique and the other Caribbean islands as if they were some sort of magical tropical paradise. In this section, I focus on Césaire’s subversion of *doudouisme* and the role of poetry and the poet in her work.

When Césaire speaks about *doudouisme*, she speaks of a very specific form of poetry written about the Caribbean, specifically about the French Antilles. This poetry can be described as exoticizing, as representing the Caribbean in a very specific way: as a tropical, exotic, erotic, magical paradise. This kind of poetry was often written by the French about the Caribbean. The term *doudou* originates from the French word *doux*, meaning sweet (Couti 2021, 65). However, there is also a sexual element to the use of this term, as *doudouiste* poetry often sexualized the Caribbean and its women (Couti 2021, 63). Césaire vehemently criticizes this kind of poetry, focusing specifically on the way in which it depicts the Caribbean in an essentializing, exoticizing, single way.

Césaire’s aversion to *doudouisme* is most apparent in her essay *Poetic Destitution*. In this essay, she criticizes what she calls “hammock literature,” “literature made of sugar and vanilla,” and “tourist literature” (Césaire 2012, 26–27). “Literature made of sugar and vanilla” refers to both the meaning of *doudou* (sweet) and the fact that sugar and vanilla are both grown on the island. Césaire here refers to stereotypical depictions of Martinique that do not cover—although they do *cover* them over—any of the complexities of the island. Césaire makes a scathing assessment of this so-called hammock literature, stating that “it will delight imbeciles” (Césaire 2012, 25). The poet who writes this kind of literature is not properly doing his job, she argues. He “misses the point,” he “looks but has not seen” and he “manages to ‘pity’ the Black,” but he has not “experienced the black soul” (Césaire 2012, 26). In this, she seems to argue that the way *doudouiste* poetry portrays Martinique is reductive, as it does not allow for complexity and instability, and it betrays the role of the poet, as the poet is supposed to see and show the Caribbean as it is.

The poet is an important figure for Césaire, with a revolutionary purpose. The *doudouiste* poet, the poet who writes tourist literature, is not a poet to Césaire and actively harms the islands because he reduces them to one thing. As an example, at the end of *Poetic Destitution*, Césaire states the following: “Come on now, real poetry lies elsewhere. Far from rhymes, laments, sea breezes, parrots. Stiff and stout bamboos changing direction, we decree the death of sappy, sentimental, folkloric literature. And to hell with hibiscus, frangipani, and bougainvillea. Martinican poetry will be cannibal or it will not be” (Césaire 2012, 27). In this, she refers to stereotypes about the Caribbean, the idea that it is a tropical paradise filled with flowers and exotic animals. This is a depiction that she vehemently detests, and a depiction that betrays the role of poetry.

With this, Césaire points to what she thinks the role of the poet and poetry should be: it should be cannibal. Keith L. Walker, in the introduction to the English edition of *The Great*

Camouflage, states that this cannibalism implies selective eating of the Other as a tool against discursive reason (Walker in Césaire 2012, x). It implies an “eating” of the Other in the sense that there is an element of reappropriation involved (even in the term, reappropriating the racist stereotype of the Caribbean “cannibal”), but also a subversion, a changing of the idea of the Other as part of a binary separation. Cannibalism is an important theme in the work of Césaire, as it shows a commitment to the breaking down of categories and separations. The only way out is through, and in this sense, the Other does not remain other to the cannibal: the Other is eaten; they are, in a sense, unified. Cannibal poetry, then, eats *doudouiste* poetry, it takes it, eats it, becomes one with it and leaves it unrecognizable. This is the role of the poet: to see the real Caribbean and to cannibalize its *doudouiste* depictions.⁸

What the poet should see is the contradiction within the Caribbean, the sense of instability that is inherent in the Caribbean self, and the way that this has been camouflaged by a simplistic depiction in the hammock literature. In this way, the Caribbean poet can resist colonial reason and mastery; cannibalize it. In *The Great Camouflage* Césaire subverts the trope of *doudouiste* poetry that she has laid out in *Poetic Destitution*. The poem starts with the following passage: “There are, melded into the isles, beautiful green waves of water and of silence. There is the purity of sea salt all around the Caribbean. There is before my eyes, the pretty square in Pétionville, planted with pines and hibiscus” (Césaire 2012, 39).

This, on first glance, seems to fit with the hammock literature that Césaire so vehemently criticizes. Note the mention of the hibiscus in both the end of *Poetic Destitution* and in this passage. Hibiscus is often mentioned in the exoticizing poetry that Césaire criticizes, and at the end of *Poetic Destitution* she tells it to go to hell. However, in *The Great Camouflage*, Césaire seems to endorse this kind of narrative about the Caribbean, until she subverts it—cannibalizes it—in the same paragraph, offsetting it with the death of a horse, “where a horse dies, lightning-struck,” and the presence of natural disaster: “the age-old killer storm at Hinche” (Césaire 2012, 39). Here, Césaire once again highlights the fact that the Caribbean is not *one* thing, and it is definitely not the thing that it is made out to be in colonialist literature.

At the end of the text, Césaire speaks about the role of the poets again, depicting a moment when the poets finally really do see the true, unstable, undefinable, and fragmented nature of the Caribbean: “The poets feel their heads capsize, and inhaling the fresh smells of the ravines, they take possession of the wreath of islands, they listen to the sound of the water surrounding the islands, and they see tropical flames kindled no longer in the heliconia, in the gerberas, in the hibiscus, in the bougainvilleas, in the flame trees, but instead in the hungers and in the fears, in the hatreds, in the ferocity, that burn in the hollows of the mountains” (Césaire 2012, 45).

Here, the poets really see that the Caribbean is not what it is made out to be, they see through the great camouflage. But what they see is not one, fixed thing: what they see is fragmentation and instability, and danger. In Césaire’s work, there is an explicit and implicit rejection of categorization in a sense that fits well with Singh’s ideas about mastery: Césaire rejects masterful categorization of the Caribbean as one thing, either in relation to the colonizers, to Europe, but also to Africa in the *négritude* movement. She rejects the drawing of boundaries, which separate the Caribbean from itself, and instead moves to accept an unstable, fragmented nature, one that cannot be categorized. Furthermore, she resists the

categorization of Africa or of Europe as one thing. In general, she seems to reject the idea of categorization altogether. Again, we see a space for unthinking mastery: unstable, fragmented, uncomfortable spaces are the spaces in which mastery can be challenged, and unraveled.

In the next section, I discuss physical manifestations of the unmasterful nature of the Caribbean that are prevalent in Césaire's work: the use of the notion of the Paideuma and the presence of natural disasters.

The Paideuma and the Natural Disaster

In the first essay Césaire published, *Leo Frobenius and the Problem of Civilizations*, she focuses on the issue of civilization and the question of the agency of man. Frobenius was a German ethnologist who theorized that advanced African societies of the past were created by an original white civilization (Nelson 2020, 171). Despite the racist message, this theory was quite popular with *négritude* scholars, including Aimé Césaire and Léopold Sédar Senghor, because it framed "native" African civilizations as advanced (Nelson 2020, 171). Frobenius also theorized what he called the Paideuma, the living organism that is and drives civilization and culture. For Frobenius, "humankind ... is only an instrument the Paideuma force makes use of to reveal itself" (Césaire 2012, 4). Césaire takes this sentiment and uses it to cleverly subvert Western narratives of mastery. Césaire states: "No, humankind does not create civilization, no, civilization is not the work of humankind. Quite the contrary, humankind is the instrument of civilization, a simple means of expression of a power which infinitely surpasses his understanding. Man does not act, he is activated, moved by a superior force which pre-dates humanity, a force to be likened to the life force itself, the foundational Paideuma" (Césaire 2012, 3).

Further on in the text, she writes: "In effect Frobenius discovered that the idea of uninterrupted progress, cherished by the nineteenth century, which showed civilization progressing along a single line from primitive barbarism to modern high culture, was a false idea. Humanity does not have a will to achieve perfection. Moreover, it does not create for itself a civilization that aspires to ever-higher levels. It goes forth, on the contrary, motivated by the internal Paideuma, in multiple directions, from one 'shock' to the next, just as the vital force goes from mutation to mutation among the diversity of living species" (Césaire 2012, 7).

Still further on, she states the following: "It seems that Euro-American man in the nineteenth century has been seized with a veritable madness for science, technology, machines, the result of which has been the creative imperialist thought of the world economy and its encircling of the globe. This veritable madness for power and domination, which turned humanity upside down during catastrophes as horrible as the wars of 1914 and 1939, is the symptom of a new surge of the Paideuma. These are surges we cannot fully comprehend, the real meaning of which still remains hidden" (Césaire 2012, 9).

In these three quotes, Césaire questions the agency involved in colonization. In the first quotation, Césaire denies the idea that humankind would "build" a civilization, because it is an expression of a kind of higher power, the Paideuma. In the second quotation, Césaire turns her attention more explicitly to Western culture, the Enlightenment, and the Industrial Revolution. Césaire takes on the idea that there is a line of progress for societies that is in line with humankind's accomplishments. It is not the development of technology and reason

that took society to “higher levels,” it is chance, motivated by the superior, incomprehensible force of the Paideuma. In the third quote, it becomes even clearer that Césaire is speaking about Western culture and Western reason. By explicitly referring to these colonial forces and the thought that enabled imperialism but then subverting the assertion that this could happen by virtue of some bodily and mental superiority of Western man, Césaire undermines their very existence. She, to an extent, reduces their “accomplishments” to chance—it is the way that the Paideuma behaved.

Following this line of argumentation, then, leads to the undermining of the idea of Western mastery, but also Western responsibility. There are many ways in which this essay can be read—there is a certain deterministic element to it—and a reading that falls in line with masterful narratives is certainly possible. However, I would argue that it provides a narrative space in which mastery can be questioned and *is* questioned. I propose an ironic reading in which Césaire subverts the idea of Western reason and agency and thereby diminishes their masterful accomplishments.⁹ If you act masterfully but are controlled by an incomprehensible life force, are you really a master? Césaire uses these racist ideas and cannibalizes them: she argues with a racist European against the racist European by twisting the narrative of the Paideuma very cleverly. It is not due to Western agency, Western superiority, that they were able to colonize a good part of the world. It was not their accomplishment, it was chance. However, even when we see this as a cannibal use of the narrative there is still a danger in it. I mentioned above that this narrative denies Western agency, but also Western responsibility. It might invoke the idea of the West as “innocent colonizers”. Even so, it is an interesting twist to the idea of a higher, determining, force, which is in line with the logic of mastery. The same kind of focus on a higher force—be it unpredictable “nature”—can be found in the following section on natural disasters.

The Natural Disaster

Natural disasters abound in Césaire’s writing. In *The Malaise of a Civilization*, Césaire speaks about an explosion, “called forth by solar fieriness to cast its creative forces to the wind” (Césaire 2012, 28). However, the use of the natural disaster as a motif is especially prevalent in *The Great Camouflage*. In the section on *doudouisme*, I spoke about the use of natural disaster to subvert stereotypical tropes with mention of the age-old killer storm at Hinche (Césaire 2012, 39). Later in the paragraph, Césaire speaks about “the island’s absence of equilibrium” and places this in the context of “the other Caribbean islands, their volcanoes, their earthquakes, their hurricanes” (Césaire 2012, 39). Further on in the essay, she follows the path of a cyclone headed from the Caribbean to the United States.

All throughout the essay, there are mentions of volcanoes, cyclones, and other natural disasters, and at the end of the text, as mentioned in the section on poetry, the poets are the ones who see the islands clearly: tropical and yet filled with danger and disaster. The great camouflage Césaire refers to is again mentioned in the last sentence of the text: “if my Antilles are so beautiful, it is because the great game of hide-and-seeK has succeeded, it is then because, on that day, the weather is most certainly too blindingly bright and beautiful to see clearly therein” (Césaire 2012, 46).

The “great game of hide-and-seeK” is the great camouflage; the great beauty that Césaire mentions is here framed as a purposeful camouflage, a tactic of diversion. The ones

who see the islands clearly are the ones who see the danger that lies therein. This means that the hammock poets do not really see the Antilles, their categorization of it has failed, they are not masters over the islands, and they cannot be—they cannot even see them. There is also a physical nature to the prevalence of natural disasters in the Caribbean. The volcano, the cyclone, and the earthquake can be read as physical manifestations of the instability of the Caribbean and the unmasterful nature of it. It is not a tropical paradise, no, it is a very dangerous place to live, which cannot be denied, and it will not behave in the way the colonizers want it to.

Rabbitt argues that Césaire “builds from meteorological and geological representations of the area’s tensions to explore its underlying violence and complexity” (2013, 124). The natural disaster represents, for Césaire, the physical rejection of colonization, the rejection of a single narrative and definition by virtue of being unpredictable and these two factors come together in order to form the Caribbean self, which is defined by this very instability. This instability goes directly against Western ideas of mastery and fits well with Singh’s writing on unthinking mastery. Instability leaves room for questions, for uncomfortable tensions, for contradiction. This is needed in order to be able to unravel mastery. In this sense, the three themes discussed here all come together: Surrealism allows for contradiction, the role of the poet is to see the Caribbean self clearly, and this is defined by its instability in a way that rejects the logic of mastery completely. There is, however, one more figure I want to discuss, which is the plant-human. Although the aforementioned themes defy the logic of mastery in the sense that they resist categorization, there is one vital dichotomy that can still exist within them: that of human/nature. However, Césaire, in her essay *The Malaise of a Civilization*, does tackle this dichotomy in a way that I think is quite compelling and most importantly, for this paper, opens up an uncomfortable narrative space in which to unthink mastery. When she talks about the plant-human, Césaire breaks down what Lugones calls the “central dichotomy of colonial modernity” (2010, 743).

The Plant–Human

In *The Malaise of a Civilization*, Césaire ruminates on the Martinican identity, specifically focusing on what she calls the “lack in Black character” (Césaire 2012, 29). She questions why Africans brought to Martinique did not produce more art, and argues that this is because of colonial circumstances and the misunderstanding that in order to live well, the Martinican had to replicate the life-style of the colonizer, to adapt, to *master* his way of living (Césaire 2012, 29). Césaire instead poses a Martinican identity that is not an imitation of that of the colonizer, one that is fundamentally different: that of the plant-human.

In *Leo Frobenius and the Problem of Civilizations*, Césaire describes two different kinds of civilizations: the Ethiopian civilization and the Hamitic civilization. The Ethiopian civilization, according to Césaire, is tied to the plant. The Ethiopian “does not seek to understand phenomena—to grasp and dominate facts outside of himself” (Césaire 2012, 5). The Ethiopian “lives and lets live, in a life identical to that of the plant, confident in the continuity of life: germinate, grow, flower, bear fruit, and the cycle starts all over again” (Césaire 2012, 5). The Ethiopian civilization stands in stark contrast to the Hamitic civilization, which is tied to the animal and “the conquest of the right to live through violent struggle and conquest” (Césaire 2012, 5). According to Césaire, the Hamitic “never abandons himself freely to things but

strives to dominate them by force or by magical practices” (Césaire 2012, 5). Although they might seem oppositional and defined, these civilizations do not fully exist anywhere—they are not stable entities and traces of them can be found everywhere.

In *The Malaise of a Civilization*, Césaire argues that the Martinican lives by an “Ethiopian sentiment of life” (Césaire 2012, 30). He is a *plant-human*: “Like a plant, he abandons himself to the rhythm of universal life. There is not the slightest effort to dominate nature” (Césaire 2012, 30). She states: “I am saying that he grows, he lives in a plant-like manner. His indolence? That of the vegetal. Do not say ‘he is lazy,’ say ‘he vegetates’, and you will speak the truth for two reasons. His favorite phrase: ‘Let it go.’ By that, understand that he lets himself be carried along by life, docile, light, un-insistent, non-rebellious—in a friendly way” (Césaire 2012, 30).

The Martinican does not have the same desires to conquer and dominate as the Hamitic does, or even the colonizer. The Martinican is a plant-human and it is by going against this nature that he has dealt with “failure in the world” (Césaire 2012, 31). He imitates the colonizer because he has learnt that “liberation means assimilation” (Césaire 2012, 31). However, this is his true failure, and this sentiment has now migrated to the forces of the Martinican unconsciousness. Césaire argues that it is necessary to see whether this Ethiopian sentiment of life should become “the point of departure for a viable and imposing cultural style” (Césaire 2012, 32). Césaire imagines embracing the plant-human identity and “the long-lasting fruitful harmony of humankind and soil, under the sign of plant life” (Césaire 2012, 32-33).

At first glance, the idea of the plant-human seems in itself to be quite deterministic. No, she seems to tell the Martinican, you are not what you think you are. You are something different, you have a true nature that you are now ignoring. You should return to this true nature. However, Césaire herself makes it quite clear that this is not what she means when she states the following: “It is not at all about a backwards return, a resurrection of an African past that we have learned to know and respect. On the contrary, it is about the mobilization of every living strength brought together upon this earth where race is the result of the most unremitting intermixing; it is about becoming conscious of the incredible stores of varied energies until now locked up within us. We must now deploy them to the maximum without deviation, without falsification” (Césaire 2012, 33).

The plant-human, then, is what the Martinican truly is, but the plant-human in itself has no true nature: the plant-human is always neither, and both. The plant-human is both plant and human, he is intermixed humankind and soil. Furthermore, the plant-human exists on the boundary of life and death, and embodies both. Césaire writes about “the plant trampled underfoot but still alive,” the plant “dead but reviving” (2012, 30). The plant-human is neither alive, nor dead, he is both. This is further exemplified when Césaire writes about the Martinican legend accompanying the grass that grows on a grave, as it is supposed to be “the living hair of the dead female buried beneath” (2012, 30). In this, in showing the plant-human on the border of life and death, Césaire clarifies that the true nature of the Martinican is unstable and undetermined. Just as the plant-human is neither dead nor alive, the plant-human is neither human nor plant: he is both. And by being both, he destroys the separation between the two.

Instead of arguing for a return to the past, a return to an identity that the Martinican

would have lost, Césaire points to the future, to the profound instability of the Martinican because of this “unremitting intermixing,” because of incredible stores of varied energies, because of his position between life and death, between human and plant. This also points to her allegiance to what will later be *créolité* and seems like a departure from *négritude*, a movement that did advocate, in a sense, for a resurrection of an African past. Furthermore, this shows that Césaire’s argument is that the Martinican is a plant-human, and while that might sound essentialist, it is less so when one thinks about what a plant-human actually is. If we take the human/non-human dichotomy as the foundation for Western colonialism, then Césaire argues for a Martinican identity that destabilizes this dichotomy entirely. Could the plant-human ever really be a fixed identity if its existence questions the very way in which identities are constructed and established? The plant-human does not allow for dualisms for dichotomies, it closes and questions them, it destabilizes them because the plant-human is both and neither (Nelson 2020, 163).

The narrative of the plant-human, in this sense, is cannibal. Because it reappropriates the binary, consumes it, and leaves it unrecognizable, the old rules do not apply anymore—the elements that were attached to the dichotomy do not hold up and are replaced by something new. This in itself circumvents the deterministic elements that could be part of the figure; it eats them up and spits them out, going through it, creating an uncomfortable space to create something new. The plant-human leaves a space for a reimagining of life and living together, under the sign of plant life. Reading this with Singh, then, the plant-human could be seen as a figure that refuses Western mastery and upends the fundamental dichotomy that justifies this mastery in its dehumanist leanings.

Conclusion

In this article, I have described four more or less distinct, more or less connected themes in Suzanne Césaire’s work that all stand in stark contrast with the logic of mastery prevalent in Western culture. The first, Césaire’s allegiance to Surrealism, allows her to question dichotomies and Western reason, as the entire purpose of Surrealism is to subvert rationality. Because Surrealism is irrational, it can circumvent the categorizing mechanisms inherent in mastery. Césaire’s rejection of *doudouisme*, of simplifying, exoticizing poetry about the Caribbean is tied to her reluctance to accept any narrative categorization of the Caribbean—there is no construction of the Caribbean self, according to Césaire, that is not unstable. This very instability again questions categorization and mastery. The same goes for the prevalence of natural disasters in her work. The inherent instability of the Martinican is even more clear when Césaire describes him as a plant-human, a border-figure that negates the existence these very borders, completely destabilizing the human/non-human dichotomy and again leaving instability and an absence of mastery as the only viable conception of the Caribbean self. In doing this, she makes space for an alternative way of living together, of being with each other in a way that is not reliant on the logic of mastery, a way that does not depend on the violence of boundaries. More studies of Césaire’s work are absolutely needed. Her work is important, beautiful, and insightful, and might provide us with the space for new beginnings.

Notes

- 1 In this paper, I follow Singh in the use of the terms anticolonial, postcolonial, and decolonial. I use anticolonial to describe the period of resistance against direct colonial rule and postcolonial as the period after the removal of this direct colonial rule, which shifts the focus from direct political action to reckoning with the ongoing effects of colonization. Both of these periods—periods that can overlap and are not fixed—are part of the process of decolonization (Singh 2018, 1–2).
- 2 I will never be able to stress this enough, but this is not to diminish in the slightest the impact that anticolonial struggles have had on people’s material conditions, and the impact they continue to have.
- 3 See also “Speculative Ecopoetics on ‘The Human’ with Suzanne Césaire, Édouard Glissant, and Audre Lorde” (2023) in this same volume.
- 4 In this paper, when I only use the surname Césaire, I refer to Suzanne Césaire. When I am referring to her husband, Aimé, I use his full name.
- 5 It would be quite ironic, actually, to insist on a full separation of themes while writing about the violence that comes with categorization.

- 6 This is why I write about an allegiance to Surrealism, because Surrealism is a tool—in a sense—for anticolonial thought, but also because it has its faults and did lend itself to Orientalist depictions of the Caribbean.
- 7 I maintain the use of the masculine when talking about the “Martinican,” because this is what Césaire herself does.
- 8 The topic of cannibalism in the work of Caribbean philosophers, and especially in the work of Césaire, could be the topic of multiple books and papers, but unfortunately a more thorough exploration is beyond the scope of this paper.
- 9 Something that adds some credibility to my argument is the situation in which Césaire was writing, under the Vichy occupation. In order to publish her work, she needed to conceal her messages and utilize irony. For more on this, see “Speculative Ecopoetics on ‘The Human’ with Suzanne Césaire, Édouard Glissant, and Audre Lorde” (2024) in this issue.

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Biography

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