

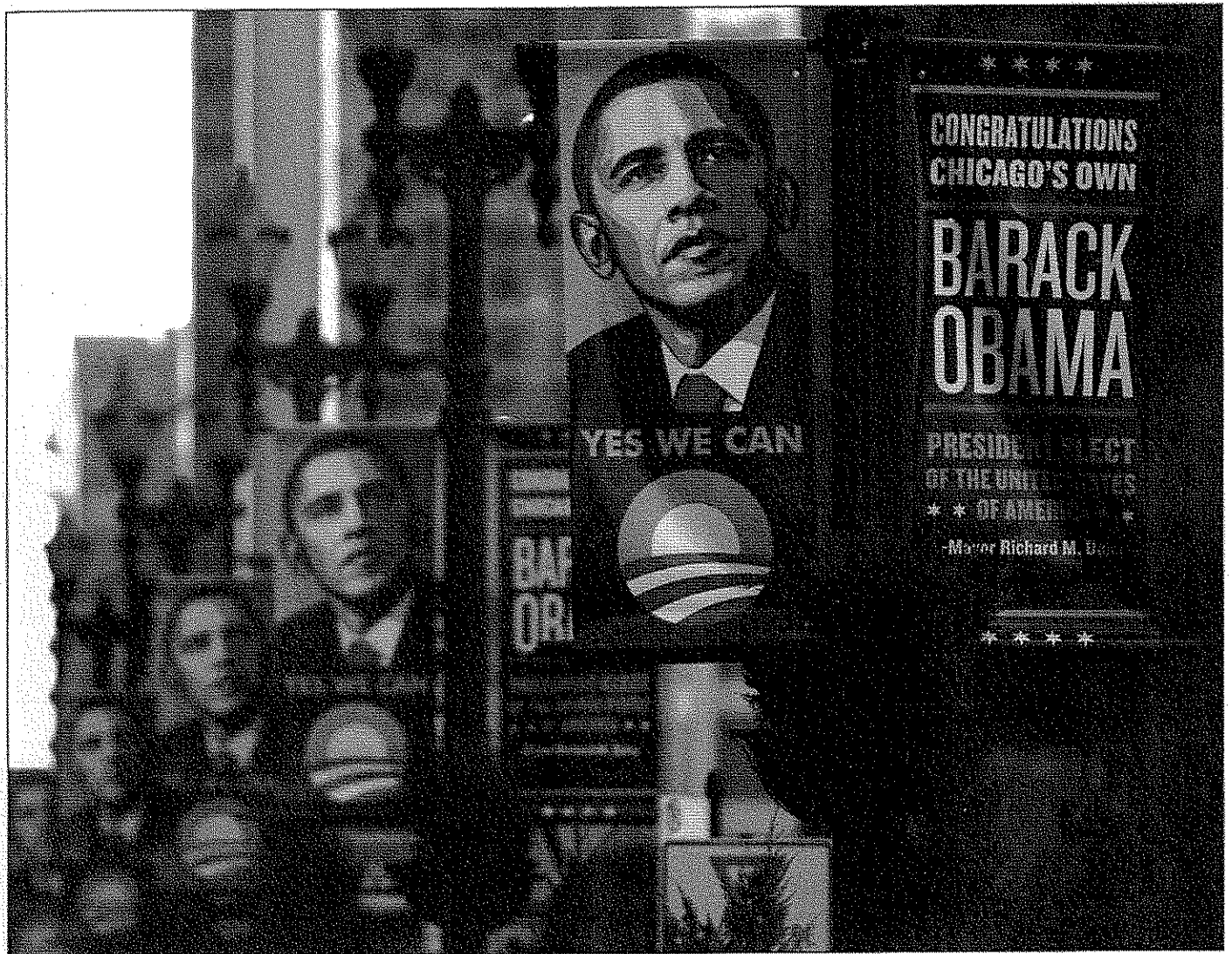
IN MEMORIAM



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AIMÉ CÉSAIRE
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CUTTING DOWN "THE WRATH-BEARING TREE"

The Politics Issue

HOMAGE TO AIMÉ CÉSAIRE, 1913–2008

by Ronnie Scharfman

When Aimé Césaire died at the age of 94 in his native Martinique on April 17, the francophone world arguably lost the greatest contemporary poet of the French language. Césaire, the author of numerous volumes of poetry, as well as plays and essays, is perhaps best known as the coiner of the term *négritude* in his epic, groundbreaking poem *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (*Return To The Native Land*, 1939). He is also revered and beloved by his people, having been consistently reelected to serve as the mayor of Martinique's capital, Fort-de-France, for 56 years, and as the Deputy from Martinique to the French Assembly for 48 years. Yet aspects of his dual career were also highly contested in his lifetime. His violent, hermetic, powerful French poetry, which he inflected to articulate a specifically Black Antillean subjectivity that denounced the crimes of slavery and the outrages of colonialism, was critiqued by the next generation of writers in the French West Indies—P. Chamoiseau, R. Confiant and J. Bernabé—for being too racially charged and too French at the expense of local Creole culture. Similarly, his urbanization projects as mayor were sometimes criticized for opting for modernity over tradition, and his co-sponsoring of the 1946 law that made Martinique and Guadeloupe (along with French Guyana and Réunion) departments of France, with equal economic and legal rights as any other French departments, was harshly critiqued as pushing the island towards assimilation, rather than autonomy. Césaire himself realized soon after the vote in 1946 that *départementalisation* was a mistake, and it remained one of the regrets of his long career of political engagement.

Although Césaire is now highly respected by both the French literary establishment and the public sector, to the extent that it was even suggested that he be buried in the Panthéon in Paris among France's great luminaries (a dubious honor given his stance on French colonialism, and one which his family declined), he is hardly a household name in France. In America, a country that he visited only once, being a *persona non grata* as a member of the Communist party from 1945–1956, his poetry is known to Anglophone audiences thanks in large part to the admirable translation work of Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith (*The Collected Poetry; The Complete Lyric and Dramatic Poetry*), which includes the *Cahier*. But it is perhaps his *Discours sur le colonialisme* (*Discourse on Colonialism*, 1950), a scathing indictment of the European West's colonial ideology and policies, which has had the greatest impact on African-American readers of postcolonial texts.

Although this very brief introduction points to a career both complex and contradictory, I would like to argue for the profound integrity and coherence of Césaire's poetic project and, by extension, his political commitment. It is to his invaluable poetic contribution then, that I shall devote the remainder of this homage. Césaire himself often said, "If you want to understand my politics, ready my poetry."

Who, then, was Aimé Césaire? Born on June 16, 1913 in Basse-Pointe, Martinique, Césaire was the 4th of 7 children of a modest family with ambitions for its children that included the valorization of the French (colonial) language as the language not only of freedom and upward mobility, but also as that of a great, universalist literary tradition. Even as a child, Césaire read Hugo and Voltaire, and became a passionate student of Rimbaud, Baudelaire, Mallarmé and Claudel. A brilliant student, Césaire won a scholarship to the Lycée Schoelcher in the capital, Fort-de-France, and his family moved so that he could pursue his secondary education there. Thus began an academic trajectory that was to bring Césaire to Paris in 1931 to prepare for the examinations to enter the prestigious Ecole Normale Supérieure.

It would be an understatement to say that studying in Paris in the 30's changed Césaire's life. It was there that, paradoxically, far from his native land, he began to become aware of his *negritude*, in the company of the future poets and statesmen L.S. Senghor and L.G. Damas. "They were black, so was I. We had points in common, and we had questions," Césaire said later in one of the many interviews he gave willingly over the years. "We taught each other. The answer was African." Together they founded the literary journal *L'étudiant noir*, addressed to all black students wherever they came from, dedicated to the exploration of black cultural values across continents, including the work of cultural memory as a form of resistance against racist colonial ideology. They listened to African-Americans play jazz; read and discussed Frobenius's anthropological work on the history of African civilization, which appeared in French in 1933; discovered and devoured the writers of the Harlem Renaissance in America: Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Richard Wright. They were struggling with the dawning consciousness of their common blackness and its potential as a unifying force, and for these young "French" intellectuals, the encounter with literary works confronting issues of African-American identity and racism in America was a revelation. These rich cultural exchanges in Paris had an enormous impact on Césaire's imagination and sense of himself in a larger context as an African-Caribbean. For Césaire in particular, the need for cultural renewal in his native Martinique, which he now understood as alienated from its deepest African roots, was beginning to take poetic form.

It is against this background that Césaire's first poem, which the critic A. James Arnold has aptly characterized as "the epic of *négritude*," took form. The young poet was on the verge of returning home to Martinique to take a teaching post as a literature professor at his former Lycée Schoelcher, with his newly minted French diploma and his new wife, Suzanne Roussi. The summer before his return, visiting a school friend from then Yugoslavia on vacation, Césaire wrote the *Cahier*, which was published in 1939 in a little known journal, *Volontés*. It is impossible to measure the impact this long poem has had on Caribbean literature, on French letters, on decolonization movements across Africa, on the affirmation of black identity in the francophone world and beyond. Nothing like it had ever come out of the French Antilles, where previous efforts at poetry had yielded distinctly "color-free" texts. In the very process of writing this text which uses both verse and prose poetry, through a merciless, willed remembering, Césaire came to understand the devastating alienation, exploitation and isolation of his fellow Martinicans wrought by the sequelae of slavery and colonization and the ensuing devalued sense of self. Through the volcanic, often violent imagery, using a vocabulary both obscure and technically very

precise, as well as drumming rhythms released by the poetic word, Césaire's poem takes us on a journey through his intolerable reality, both subjective and objective. The text is a taking stock and a denunciation, utilizing the most scathing imagery of disease, abjection and putrefaction, of the ravages of his island, its city, its people, and at the same time a prophetic desire for the amelioration of an intolerable state of stagnation. Césaire's painful personal journey in this poem requires acknowledging, in order to overcome it, a specific shameful racial image—that of the *nègre*, the "nigger." The coming-to-the-term *négritude* has an important psychic as well as poetic function. The poet takes the insult-word, the humiliation-word, and reverses its valence, transforming it into a foundation-word, an action-word, a challenge-word. In his exploration of the past and present of an uprooted people, the poet strips reality bare as he identifies, first reluctantly, and then proudly, with his race and his island. He reaches a bedrock level from which he can rebuild, through poetry and community, all that has been alienated. As the speaker in the poem begins, slowly, to enumerate all of the positive contributions of black people to world civilization, he rises up out of the depths of self-hatred and internal conflict that he passed through as he conjured up the desire to deny the painful collective memory of slavery, and first characterizes *négritude* by what it is not, then proceeds to describe not what it *is* but, rather, what it *does*, designating it as a powerful, phallic life force that espouses the world:

my negritude is neither tower nor cathedral
it takes root in the red flesh of the soil
it takes root in the ardent flesh of the sky
it breaks through the opaque prostration with its upright patience

This neologism, assimilating poetic to ancestral fathers, combining the African and the Latinate French, inscribes Césaire's own original solution to the problem of decolonizing consciousness. In returning to the native land in his poetic imagination, in allowing the full return of the native land, with all of its tragic horrors and terrors, as Freud speaks of the "return of the repressed," Césaire empowers himself to become the visionary and the spokesperson for a wounded people. The poetic voice that he discovered in the writing of the *Cahier* was his "miraculous arm" throughout his career, and its rhythms and rhetoric can be found in his theater, his essays and even his speeches in the French Assembly. Césaire said throughout his long career as both poet and statesman that he never abandoned writing poetry because he considered that it was always what allowed him to have access to his deepest, truest self: his name, his country. He repeatedly reconstructed, in the time/space of a poem, the continued persistence of the strictures of alienated consciousness, and then, through the magic of the poetic word, like Houdini, broke the chains he had imposed on himself.

The *Cahier* did not, of course, become an instant black literary classic, having first been published in an obscure Parisian journal. But the discovery of Césaire and his poetry by the famous surrealist writer André Breton, forced to stop in Martinique as he was fleeing the Nazis, eventually catapulted Césaire to literary fame. In 1947, Breton reedited the *Cahier*, including with it his earlier prefatory essay on Césaire, "A Great Black Poet," in which he characterizes him as "a black who handles the French language in a manner that no white man is capable of today," and the *Cahier* as "nothing less than the greatest

lyrical monument of our times." Breton began publishing Césaire's poetry in the journal *Fontaine*, and crowned him the *Nègre fondamental*. After Breton's recognition came that of his contemporaries Michel Leiris and Jean-Paul Sartre in France (Sartre referring to Césaire as a "Black Orpheus"), as well as that of francophone African writers such as Alioune Diop. Senghor, of course, knew Césaire's poetry from its inception.

Shortly after Césaire's return to Martinique, the fall of France to the Germans in June, 1940 saw the French West Indies occupied by Vichy rule. In part as a response to fascist domination, the poet and his wife, along with several colleagues, founded the literary and cultural journal *Tropiques*, which was published between April 1941 and the end of WWII in 1945. *Tropiques* had a dual purpose: to constitute a local version of resistance to the oppressor by keeping the freedom of the poetic word alive, in however veiled a form, and to raise native consciousness of and pride in Martinique's repressed Creole culture, by foregrounding folk tales, expressions, African religious traces, and the unique flora and fauna of the Caribbean island. "We are those who say no to darkness," Césaire proclaimed in the preface to the first issue. Although the poet's invaluable contributions to *Tropiques* as its founding editor and guiding spirit are not well known in the Anglophone world (excerpts from the collected volumes of *Tropiques* have recently been translated into English as part of a study of surrealism in the Caribbean in *Refusal of the Shadow*), it is safe to say that these publications provided a unique opportunity for his role as an engaged poet working to raise the awareness of his people. Césaire published many of his most surrealist poems in those issues, sounding his unconscious by using surrealist techniques of free association to achieve psychic liberation. These poems were collected after the war in the volume *Les armes miraculeuses*.

Césaire wrote poems his whole life, the last ones published in 1993. The next volumes in chronological order are: *Cadastre (Soleil cou coupé; Corps perdu)*; *Ferrements*; *Moi Laminairé*; *Noria*. His poems have also appeared in various French language poetry journals, and they were all collected in one volume edited by Daniel Maximin and Gilles Carpentier, *La Poésie* (Seuil, 1994). All of his poems are recognizable by their aesthetic and ethical integrity, "that unfailingly major quality of tone by which one can so easily tell the great poets from the lesser ones," as Breton described it. But it is the poet himself who best characterizes what poetry is for him: "that process which, by the word, the image, myth, love and humor, places me at the heart of the world and myself" (in "Poésie et Connaissance"). Poetry is then, for Césaire, always a means of knowledge. And, in a letter to the critic Lilyan Kesteloot, he speaks of rhythm as the first emotion, "my most profound internal vibration." But the nature of Césaire's imagery, culled from the erudite quality, depth and extent of his culture, makes access to his poetry difficult for a broad readership. This may account for why he turned to theater in the 1960's, producing a trilogy of plays that all deal with colonial issues, past and present: *La Tragédie du Roi Christophe*, about the hero-turned-tyrant of the Haitian revolution; *Une Saison au Congo*, dealing with Lumumba's tragedy; and *Une Tempête*, a racially charged version of Shakespeare's play. Like his poetry, the plays demonstrate Césaire's unique blend of lofty poetic innovation, a passion for social justice, a profound awareness of the role of history in the formation of collective consciousness, and an authentically black voice, "le grand cri nègre." Césaire's theater has been translated and performed all over Europe, Africa, the Caribbean and North America, expanding his

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reputation as the conscience of anti-colonialism, and was published all together as part of the three volume *Oeuvres complètes* edited by Desormeaux in Fort-de-France in 1976.

The power of Aimé Césaire's poetry, despite its difficulty, remains utterly compelling. Although the poet often defended *négritude* as a form of humanism in response to his critics, it is in the engaged defiance of injustice, hypocrisy and compromise that the freshness of his voice remains: "Put up with me, I won't put up with you."

The world has indeed lost a great Black poet.

from AIMÉ CÉSAIRE*

by Amiri Baraka

It is important that we realize how clearly one breaks into two, how the contradictions in the Negritude movement and its different tendencies break it apart. Césaire reflects to one degree or another most of these tendencies, but he is in the main reflective, in *Retours*, of the revolutionary nationalist aspect of what is called the Negritude movement, rather than the negative or cultural nationalist aspect.

Oppressed by imperialism, colonialism, racism, Zionism, the oppressed nations and peoples fight back. To the extent that nationalism represents resistance to oppression it is revolutionary. Even where it focuses on culture, when it refuses to be wiped out by the imposition of colonial culture, when it raises up the history and lives of the oppressed people as part of the struggle for their future, it is revolutionary. That is revolutionary culture. When it sees that culture as some static, unchangeable, mystical phenomenon with certain eternal, metaphysical, nonmaterial, and nonmaterially derived values, it is reactionary; it is bourgeois nationalism; and finally it serves to raise a new bourgeoisie, the national bourgeoisie, to power. Senghor's Senegal is proof in living color of the reactionary nature of such cultural nationalism. The "eternal mystical values" of black communalism, supposedly raised in a modern African socialism, are the excuse of the most shameless bootlicking of French imperialism, and for one of the most relentlessly class-stratified black societies in West Africa today.

For instance, Senghor's definition of Negritude (which is niggerness or blackness), "the total of black Africa's cultural values," proposes that there is a static cultural essence to blacks apart from the development of the specific material base of the culture itself. But culture reflects first and foremost the material, i.e., the economic and with that the political, framework of its being. Africa's cultural values when? During primitive communalism, slavery, feudalism, capitalism? During ancient Egypt? In Songhai, enslaved by colonialism, or up under the well-polished fingernails of black neocolonialism.

Césaire, on the other hand, defines Negritude in 1959 as "the awareness of being black, the simple acknowledgement of a fact which implies acceptance of it, a taking charge of one's destiny as a black man, of one's history and culture." Here there is self-knowledge, self-affirmation, and the move to liberation. Blackness is not a static, mystical, "eternal" cultural quality; it is concrete consciousness and with that, concrete struggle. It is not enough to understand the world; we must change it...

* Excerpt from "Aimé Césaire," *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*, ed. by William J. Harris (NY: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1991) 322-332. The complete essay was published prior in Amiri Baraka, *Daggers and Javelins: Essays* (New York: Quill, 1984) 189-200.

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A MEETING WITH AIMÉ CÉSAIRE

by Phyllisa A. Smith

On January 9, 2008, I had the honor of meeting one of the founding fathers of Negritude, Aimé Césaire. With their joint participation as students of the journal *L'Étudiant noir* in 1935 and Césaire's publication of *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* in 1939, Césaire, Léopold Sédar Senghor, and Léon-Gontran Damas launched this pan-African cultural movement. As I walked the hot, downtown streets of Fort-De-France, Martinique in search of the old city hall building, I took a moment to consciously inhale the fresh Caribbean air. It was warm, humid, and flavored with pleasant scents that can only be found a world away from the frigid winter winds of State College, PA. When I found myself standing in front of Martinique's Hôtel de Ville, I proceeded beyond the newer building to the rear. There, covered in chipped-white paint and free of any air-conditioners, stood the older structure where Aimé Césaire maintained his office—a stance against relocating to the modern city hall building. These feelings reminded me of lines from Césaire's "Pour saluer le Tiers-Monde" ("Greetings to the Third World"):

Ecoutez:
de mon île lointaine
de mon île veilleuse
je vous dis Hoo!

Listen:
from my distant island
from my watchful island
I call out to you: Ho!

At 9:50 am, ten minutes early, I proceeded inside and walked up the winding staircase to the second floor. Césaire's office was covered with magnificent artwork, including wooden crafts and oil paintings. I was able to tell the receptionist, in halting, heavily accented French that I was there for a ten o'clock meeting. I wrote my full name, occupation, and reason for the visit on a notepad which the receptionist took to a back room. Upon her return, she asked my Martinican fiancé, Thierry, and me to follow her to the back room.

My amazing encounter with Aimé Césaire began when the door opened. I saw the small, bright-eyed, handsomely dark Césaire sitting behind a huge oak desk. He greeted us with a friendly smile while his personal assistant asked us to sit next to him. I was amazed! In my mind, I asked her if she was serious, and if she really meant that I could sit *beside* Césaire. However, I said nothing and excitedly took my place next to him. In the forty-five minutes I spent in the chair beside Aimé Césaire, I never stopped smiling. After learning that I, too, was a poet, he asked me to recite a poem for him. With Thierry translating, Césaire listened attentively to my poem and then we all began conversing.

During the almost hour long meeting, Césaire learned that college students, like myself, could publicly study African American literature, African American history, and black diasporic studies in the classroom. He asked more than once, "Who pays for that?" finding it hard to believe that the predominately white country of America would support (on any level) the study of black literatures. Equally surprising to him was the knowledge that his work is still widely read in academic institutions, forums, and conferences. Upon hearing this, he turned and looked into my eyes. I nodded "Yes," relying heavily on my non-verbal skills to assert my sincerity. And to my amazement, he said, in English, "You need to learn French." Laughter saturated the room. There I was pulling together all the coherent French I had, which was not much, and he not only understood English, but spoke it as well. I guess the joke was on me. He proceeded to speak in English, telling me that he learned English as a young boy in school. Césaire said that it was very unfortunate that Americans did not learn other languages and advised me to become fluent in both French and Spanish. That triangle of languages, he explained, would allow me to speak to the majority of the blacks throughout the world.

With pleasure, Césaire agreed to autograph my copy of *Discours Sur Le Colonialisme*. Although it took him roughly ten minutes to do so with help from his personal assistant and son, he proudly and carefully crafted his words of encouragement and signature onto the front page: "We are a small island with a big heart, enjoy your visit and come again. Aimé Césaire."

He then stood up from behind the desk and held my hand as we walked out of the office into the receiving room. I asked him to come back to America with me, and he replied (in English), "I am too old." We laughed. In the final moments of my visit, we snapped photos together and said goodbye. I thanked him for his time and proceeded down the stairs. As I exited the old city hall building, leaving behind a great man and a wonderful visit, I smiled knowing that he had a better understanding of the significant impact his life's work had on the hearts and minds of Americans who admire him.

On April 17, 2008, ninety-eight days after I met him, Aimé Césaire joined the ancestors. As one of the last Americans, if not the last, to meet Césaire in his lifetime, I am deeply honored to have had this amazing encounter with him. I will cherish that experience for a lifetime!

IT IS THROUGH POETRY THAT ONE COPE WITH SOLITUDE*

An Interview with Aimé Césaire

by Charles H. Rowell

ROWELL: In the United States we know you mainly as a poet and a playwright.

CÉSAIRE: The Americans know my better self.

ROWELL: When I mention your name here in Martinique, general readers not only speak of your creative writing; they also speak of you as a political figure and of how you have instilled in the minds of the people of Martinique the importance of education—that is, education for everyone, not for an elite. Would you in retrospect talk about your career in politics? In *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land*, for example, the central persona addresses his country this way:

If all I can do is speak at least I will speak for you.... My tongue shall serve those miseries which have no tongue, my voice the liberty of those who founder in the dungeons of despair.

Is that a kind of summary of your political career?

CÉSAIRE: The expression “political career” makes me shudder a little, even though you are perfectly entitled to use it. I feel a certain anxiety when reading myself again, and when I hear this, I am filled with a certain sadness. When I wrote those lines, I was twenty-five years old and I was still sitting on the benches of Normale Supérieure. This *Notebook*, in my mind is, in spite of its being short, the fundamental book. It is from this book that all the rest came. In all things there is a fundamental intuition. This intuition, this fundamental vision, is in the *Notebook*. People do not have a very keen sense of history; you must go back to the period of this *Notebook*. You must try to imagine what the life of an eighteen-year-old man of color, a young Negro isolated in Paris, was like. So I arrive in Paris. What do I know of the vast world? Not much. Two days after my arrival I meet, at

* Through arrangements made by Xavier Orville, this interview was taped in Mr. Césaire’s office in City Hall, Fort-de-France, Martinique, on February 19, 1988. The interview was conducted in French (Césaire) and English (Rowell); Véronique Robbaz served as translator. Yannick Tarrieu and Véronique Robbaz made the original English and French transcription and translation of the interview, and Suzanne Brichaux-Houyoux assisted the Editor with the final versions of the interview. This interview first appeared in *Callaloo* 12.1, Winter 1989.

the Lycée Louis-le-Grand, a young man from Senegal who was a few years ahead of me in his career. He is Léopold Sedar Senghor. From the first day a strong bond of friendship unites us. He asks me, "Where are you from, bizuth?" I answer, "I come from Martinique." "What's your name?" I recite my last name, Christian names, and background. And he says, "My name is Léopold Sedar Senghor." And he adds, "From now on you'll be my freshman." He introduces me to the school, and very quickly we become pals. We translate our Latin texts together; we build the world anew. He asks me about the West Indies. I literally drink from his lips whatever he can tell me about Africa. He brings me books, ethnography books. Together we discover Frobenius. We are filled with wonder; we read all this and comment upon it. He writes. I show him my poems ... and this goes on for months. I have mentioned Frobenius, but there is something else which also influenced us very much (you must never be ungrateful toward your predecessors): for us they were the Black Americans. In spite of our imperfect knowledge of English, we had read people like Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, later Sterling Brown and other people of the Black Renaissance collected in Alain Locke's anthology [*The New Negro*]. There was also Léon Damas, but he was already a little "emancipated," slightly marginal, and this is not pejorative. They [the Black Americans] were the first to teach us the rudiments of what we called "Négritude." They were the first to say "Black is beautiful." This does not seem to be much, but it was tremendous. It was the beginning of a cultural revolution, a kind of revolution of values. It was in no way a refusal of the outside world, it was bringing things into focus. What for us became fundamental was-and that was new-a desperate quest for the Negro "Self."

For Senghor there was no problem whatsoever, because, as a Senegalese-and in spite of his Greek and Latin culture-he had remained, I believe, a true Senegalese and, fundamentally, an African. Africa has always known that French colonialism was marginal and probably doomed from the start. But here was a man perfectly anchored in his identity, a Senegalese identity, an African one taking in all that the world could bring him, in a "Self" not assimilated but assimilating. I am always surprised by all that has been said about Senghor-the attacks directed against him, that he is a White Negro, etc.-one should only read the work of Senghor to see how African he is, how Senegalese he is. Not only how African, but also how Sérère. One should read *Chants de l'initié* to realize this. Of course, if you want to find literary references you can find some, and incidentally, they are not where you expect them. Some people believe there is some Saint-John Perse. Not in the least. It is true that Perse probable read literatures that are called "primitive." This explains the coincidences. But what you have in Senghor comes from the Sérère, from the court poetry of the Wolof, from the society that valued honor, from these gymnic poems, from this eulogistic poetry when one salutes the athlete on entering the stadium. Of course this is not without reminding one of Pindar. This means that all these societies-agrarian societies-are similar, and that fundamentally humankind is humankind. The imaginary is not *One* but something through which people meet. Senghor is sad now; he is alone. I have always admired his strength of character. One day Alioune Diop told me: "You see there is nothing tragic in Senghor, it is *the world* that is tragic." He is a man who is perfectly balanced and who knows how to find the right kind of contact with the world and other people. I add that he is a great poet, a true poet, an African poet. I wrote him a poem and the word that immediately came to my mind was *Dyâli*. Literally, the one who says words,

the poet, as he calls himself the *Master of the language*, that is what he is. I sent him the poem. He was very moved by it. The *Dyâli* is also the one who shows the way. Our lives will collapse like the Liana bridge, but what has been done, what has been said, what has been shown, and what keeps showing the way to others will remain:

Dyâli*

(For Léopold Sedar Senghor)

If the vine bridge collapses
It will be upon a hundred thousand sea urchin stars

Enough to make you believe not one less would be enough
to worry our pack oxen steps
and light up our nights
I remember
and in the already far-off echo
that growling in us of very old felines
Then solitude can rise us as much as it likes
from among the old curses
and take foot upon the shores of memory

among the sand banks rising to the surface
and the ragged wandering of the islands
I shall not forget the word
of the *dyâli*
dyâli
by the dune and the erosion
conveyor of the sap and the green tenderness
inventor of the people and of its budding
its trade winds lookout man
master of its word
you tell *dyâli*
and *Dyâli* I tell again
teller of the essential
what must always be told again
and here as before in the old days
the tireless honor

Here facing time
a new passage to be discovered
a new breach to be opened
in the opaque in the dark in the hard

**Dyali*: a Mandingo word. The *Dyâli* is a West African troubadour, in the Sudano-Sahelian region.

Here is a new burst of constellations to be located
for the hunger for the thirst of forgotten birds
new stopping places new sources

and there
There
Dyâli

the peasant patience of seeds to be forced
and the stubbornness of a conjuration of roots
earth bottomed
heart bottomed
snatched from the sun
blazon

—translated by Lee Hildreth

All this to tell you about the atmosphere in which we lived, an atmosphere of intense intellectual excitement (Senghor once said that Césaire would “go crazy.”) He wanted to stress that kind of great vision, somewhat apocalyptic, which overcomes you. *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land* was born out of this. So, of course, you must not look for a political creed in it. But, perhaps, you can look for the essential man: a cry, the fundamental cry. Now some sort of rationalization was made out of it later. Much has been said about Négritude. There was never, on my part, the intention of writing a treatise of Négritude; Négritude has never been a real philosophical concept for me. The people who know me are aware that there is no racism at all in this. I am not racist at all. I am a man who loves - I won't say culture - cultures, all cultures. I am interested in the Greek culture, in the Slavic one, in the Germanic one. And Senghor is also; he is very much interested in all this. In other words, everything human beings-in whatever part of the world-have undertaken to cope with life, to make life easier to live and to face death. That is what it is about. And you will see that this can be found in a Chinese poem as well as in a Bantu poem.

So if Senghor and I spoke of Négritude, it was because we were in a century of exacerbated Eurocentrism, a fantastic ethnocentrism, that enjoyed a guiltless conscience. No one questioned all that-the superiority of European civilization, its universal vocation-no one was ashamed of being a colony. Europe really had nothing on its conscience and the colonized readily accepted this vision of the world; they had interiorized the colonizer's vision of themselves. In other words, we were in a century dominated by the theory of assimilation. You must not forget this. So Négritude was for us a way of asserting ourselves. First, the affirmation of ourselves, of the return to our own identity, of the discovery of our own selves. It was in no way a racist theory. Négritude provided me with clues in order to read Martinique, its mirror. People ask: “Is there still something relevant in Négritude? Isn't it interesting only at a purely historical level?” This is not true at all. I think that as long as you will have Negroes a little everywhere, Négritude will be there as a matter of course. The Martinican grievance that we wanted to voice out forcefully is not so much physical misery, economic exploitation, even if this was really the case, as the *alienation* which as policy has made the Martinican conscience founder. And, believe me, this fight

against alienation is never totally over. But why am I saying all this? Mr. Rowell, you asked me a specific question....

ROWELL: The question was about your "political career," and you said you didn't like that expression.

CÉSAIRE: I would say that this "political career" was a little bit the result of chance. You will argue that pure chance never really exists. It would be surprising indeed that something which has occurred by chance forty years ago and which is still going on should have occurred by chance only! But still it is true, it is very strange. If, when I was twenty-five, I had been asked: "What do you want in life?" I would have answered a lot of things, but I would certainly not have answered: "I want to be a politician." I never had that ambition. As for being the Mayor of Fort-de-France ... I don't like honors. It is a burden, a very heavy burden. I had my conception of the Martinican people. I certainly had a very great historical awareness. This is something that very much sets me apart from my contemporaries. I always place everything I do in the perspective of historical continuity. I have a deep awareness of the origin of the struggle, of the efforts and sufferings, of the huge hurdles that we Antillans have to overcome and of the idea that this is my form of transcendence, history is basically a form of transcendence-all this will have to be taken up by others. It is a legacy that is to be transmitted. I have a great awareness of my responsibility; this is what depresses me a little, but it bolsters me at the same time. So I think it was through all this that I became involved in politics. I remember very clearly: it was during the war. Georges Gratiant, René Méné and myself all had roughly the same opinions, and I maybe a little more "Négritude" than the others. Certainly the surrealism of *Légitime Défense* was a little too assimilationistic as far as I was concerned. But what this magazine brought us was a "plus" of liberty, a greater audacity to ascertain ourselves beyond the conventional and rigid forms of literature. We all had the fervent desire to see this oppressed, confined, isolated people express itself in the strongest meaning of this word, with something that came from its gut and was hurled in the daylight. And we all agreed on this. And, as we were concerned about the miseries of that time, we'd come to a certain conception of the intellectual: we did not have the right to lock ourselves up in our ivory towers. We knew that one had to commit oneself in one way or another. And I have always been dedicated - and there is no demagoguery whatsoever in this-to the humble people. They mean very much to me, in a personal way. That's how you become a Mayor. And from then on you become a Député.

ROWELL: The Lycée Schoelcher stands as a reality and as a symbol in Martinique. Would you talk about its importance in the education of intellectuals as well as its importance in the development of the culture of Martinique?

CÉSAIRE: Well, first of all, it is a site. Mr. Rowell, you are right in seeing a symbol in it. It is the symbol of the Martinicans' will for intellectual emancipation and development, because the origin of the Lycée is Martinican. The people in Martinique have passionately wanted this Lycée. It is their work, their victory. It was not basically a French creation. It is the first thing Martinicans demanded. Our fathers and grandfathers were determined

to have it. The first lycée was in Saint-Pierre and then there was the small one in Fort-de-France. Right after abolition we were in the nineteenth century with all its ideology. It was Victor Hugo who said: "If you build schools, then there will be no more prisons." The truth was that the people had no money; they were not capitalists: they were poor people; their second liberation was instruction, and it was the conquest of culture-what we call Culture. And for a long time there were two high schools face to face: there was the religious College for whites and the Lycée, the government school, for the sons of people of color. Therefore, it is really a symbol. It symbolizes a will, a will for emancipation. Now beyond this, it is obvious that the Lycée doesn't solve everything at the level of its conception of culture. The lycée is not an end in itself: it is an initiation to culture. It appeared to the people of my generation that the Lycée transmitted a very French, very traditional kind of culture, which of course has its limits. I am not criticizing the Lycée in particular; the French system was mainly characterized by centralism. You know that Napoleon's dream was to have all the drums beating at the same time in France; all schools begin at the same time of the year.... We had the same curriculum and the same books as in France. And I remember that if my grades in natural science were so low, it was because I could never find a plant from Martinique and that in my botany book I kept seeing plants from France. Everything was like that. And so we became quickly aware of the limits of official culture. This education was given by heroic people, but today we have a view of culture which enables us to propose other places of culture which are better adapted to the level of awareness in Martinique. But I won't be the person to speak against the school to which I owe so much.

ROWELL: Apparently there was something about the Lycée and the teaching there that enabled the students to develop a critical perspective on colonialism. You were a student there. So were Frantz Fanon and many other Martinican intellectuals. You also taught at the Lycée.

CÉSAIRE: Fanon was a student of mine at the Lycée. I was the first person to read his manuscripts. I do think we have participated, at a certain time, in a sort of silent cultural revolution. *Tropiques*, incidentally, was its expression. The Lycée is excellent as long as you evolve from it.

ROWELL: Would you talk more about *Tropiques*: its origins, its nature and its importance?

CÉSAIRE: *Tropiques* played a definite part in the revolution of the Antilles. It was a forum, a center of creation. *Tropiques* attempted to give a new impulse to the Martinican creativity. It was the death certificate of colonial literature.

ROWELL: Like the Lycée and *Tropiques*, the SERMAC is a truly Martinican institution. The SERMAC was recently created. What is its purpose, and what are its connections with the Martinican people. In other words, why did you create it?

CÉSAIRE: The main idea is to make culture available to all, to rehabilitate the Martinican culture, to help the Antillan people to maintain its identity.

ROWELL: I want to go back to the issue of colonialism. Your play *La tragédie du Roi Christophe* comments on colonialism. One critic describes the play as your evaluation of Christophe's methods: his obsession with European standards of dignity, respectability

CÉSAIRE: Yes, but it is not only that. This is the caricature, the "Bourgeois gentilhomme" aspect. All this is only the surface, what is ridiculous about Christophe. This is what European history remembers about Christophe. The difference between my "vision" of Christophe and that of my predecessors is that they see only the ridicule, the Bourgeois gentilhomme aspect, the "Negro vanity" aspect that abounded in the white racist and colonialist literature. But I want people to go beyond this. What I mean is that behind Christophe's ridicule there is something pathetic, and it is this pathos that European historians never perceive. It is the pathetic dimension of a man who comes out of slavery and who wants to raise his people, and who raises himself to an extraordinary kind of mystique. He uses all the means available to him in his time; but these means were not always the best ones. But there is something great that redeems Christophe, which explains why he can never be a Haitian petit bourgeois like a Papa Doc. There is Christophe's greatness behind the ridicule. And this is why Christophe is great, in spite of his methods, in spite of his ridiculous aspects (he is a parvenu). There is behind this a sort of *tragic grandeur*. There is something promethean. This does not mean I am a Christophe fan or that I take him as a model. Through him I try to understand the attitude of a man who rises from slavery, who is haunted by the necessity of building a nation, and who gets lost in there.

ROWELL: And how are we to read the character of Lumumba in *Une saison au Congo*, who says in Act 3, scene 2 that:

Africa is hungry for its own being. And that's why I don't want to be a Messiah or a prophet. My only weapon is my tongue; I speak, I awaken, I am not a redresser of wrongs. I don't perform miracles, I'm a redresser of life. I speak, I give Africa back to herself. I speak and I give Africa to the world.

CÉSAIRE: Yes, I made a poet of Lumumba. There, perhaps, is his grandeur and his failure: always ahead of things to happen. It is the tragic overhang.

ROWELL: Will you talk about the esthetic and thematic function of the Sanza player whose lyric eloquence permeates the whole play *Une Saison au Congo*? I am referring to the 1967 version of the play, which ends with the Sanza player's song-in which he ironically says: "thus ends my babbling." All his interventions throughout the play are much more than babbling: he reminds me of the jester in certain Shakespearian tragedies.

CÉSAIRE: You are absolutely correct. Popular common sense is present in the background and it judges all the events: this is the purpose of the Shakespearian jester and the Greek chorus.

ROWELL: Will you talk about the implications of the triad Prospero-Caliban-Ariel in your play *La...Une Tempête*?

CÉSAIRE: Yes, it is *Une Tempête*. No one can write *La Tempête* again. *La Tempête* was written once and for all. *Une Tempête* is an interpretation of Shakespeare. *Une Tempête* is the point of view of the loser (Caliban) not that of Prospero: the viewpoint of the colonized, not that of the colonizer. It is the reversal that appeals to me. The doubtful victory of Prospero and his terrible solitude, that is the European's solitude who thinks he is master of the world.

ROWELL: No individual or members of a group in action are aware of the indelible impact that they will have on a country. For example, your action, that of Mr. Senghor and Mr. Damas in the Négritude Movement were global in effects. What were you trying to do when you first began what we now call the Négritude Movement?

CÉSAIRE: I think you should not look for motivations too much. Our initial actions were not completely rational; what we did was not planned at all. Incidentally, that is what made it pure. It was really an intuition; it was a rebellion, but it had not been thought out. Here I should use Dostoyevsky's words: we were really "possessed"; possessed by an idea, by a vision that was filled with naiveté, but, at any rate, with an idea that was the ferment of a great enthusiasm and that was life-giving.

ROWELL: Were there other people involved in the making and the development of the movement—that is, other people that literary historians might have overlooked? We think of you and Senghor and Damas as the center, but were there other figures surrounding you?

CÉSAIRE: It is true that the three of us had a common idea, a common passion, and at the same time we were very different from one another. But we shared this idea of Négritude, this desperate quest for ourselves, this determination to rehabilitate a history, this feeling of a solidarity to develop, this feeling of a faithfulness towards our "ancestors"; even though I don't like this word very much. Anyway, the word we abhorred was *renouncement*; we would never renounce anything. We belonged with those people who accept history, who try to understand it, and who try to make things advance.

ROWELL: Were there any conscious relationships between that movement and the Harlem Renaissance or the New Negro Movement in the United States?

CÉSAIRE: As I have already said, there is certainly a relationship with the Black Renaissance in Harlem.

ROWELL: And what about more recent movements in the U.S.A.—e.g. the Black Power Movement of the 1960s?

CÉSAIRE: The Black Power Movement, Black Panthers, etc? No, my Négritude is a basic one. From Négritude there are many different developments that are possible, all sorts of

deviations. One day I shuddered when I learned that Mobutu was interested in Négritude. He calls it authenticity, doesn't he? My hair stood on end! It's unbelievable! To make me responsible for a movement like that one! It has nothing to do with what Senghor and I had thought. And, you know, you may laugh at this, but it is true that if I am haunted by the notion of identity, it is none the less true that I am also haunted by universality. It's true and it's important. Those are two notions that one must bear in mind. I know this can appear contradictory, but once I found a formula and I showed it to Senghor. Hegel says:

One should not oppose universal to particular. It is not by negating the particular that one reaches the universal, but by exploration and clear recognition of the particular.

So we told ourselves: the blacker we are going to be, the more *universal* we'll become. I don't think in terms of antagonism. I am myself wherever men stand and struggle. Hence my way of relating (this is paradoxical) to this land, the tiniest township in the universe, this speck of an island that is, for me, *the world*.

ROWELL: This is how Afro-American writers in the South feel. The more rooted they are in the South, in the particularities of the culture and the land, the more universal they are. It's the same thing. I have two other questions. You have written poems for Wifredo Lam. Will you talk about him?

CÉSAIRE: He was a great friend of mine. I knew him well. He lived in Spain for a long time. He had fought in the Spanish Civil War; he was even a *dinamitero*. He was very much a dandy at that time. In fact, he was rather typical of that period of assimilation: he was very Spanish. And even when he went back to Cuba, people thought he was snubbing them because he had an accent (so they said), a Castilian accent. Wifredo came here with Masson. I must say that the tropics were a shock for him. The transformation occurred in Martinique, and what he painted before coming to Martinique is very different from what he painted after.

ROWELL: How does he stand aesthetically? What does Lam mean aesthetically for you?

CÉSAIRE: I think Wifredo Lam is the contemporary of all this period which has been marked by Picasso. Picasso admired Lam very much. When you look at Wifredo Lam's paintings, you can find the jungle, Voodoo, Macumba and Santéria in them. You find in them the fundamental Gods, the fundamental paganism of the African. He used to tell me, in the same way Léopold [Senghor] tells me about the village poetess who has influenced his aesthetic so much ... well, Wifredo used to tell me about Man Antonica. She was a mambo who influenced him very much, who initiated him. All of Wifredo's work continues his rendering of this primitive initiation. In the same way, people have tried to understand what Senghor wanted to say in the *Chant des circoncis*. Some seem to say that it is nothing ... it is very important: the revelation of Love, Beauty, Death; it is to be found in the *Chant des circoncis*.

ROWELL: Thank you, Mr. Césaire, for giving me so much of your time.