

LATITUDE AND LONGITUDE OF THE PAST: PLACE, NEGRITUDE AND FRENCH CARIBBEAN IDENTITY IN AIMÉ CÉSAIRE'S POETRY

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ABSTRACT

Césaire is one of the greatest French poets of the 20th century and his oeuvre has been studied by many scholars in its slightest recesses. In what way could a geographic analysis lead to a better understanding of Césaire's poetry and his process of identity-making? Actually, the geographic dimension of his writings has not really been analyzed, though it is one of the main backdrops of his poetry. Césaire invents his own geography of imagination as he claims it. What are the frames of his map of the world for personal use? Césaire's purpose is to find again his latitude and longitude lost in the wake of the slave ships. To exist, an uprooted person, as Césaire was, has to write a new relationship with the Earth according to the philosophy of geography developed by Eric Dardel. The author of this paper analyzes the influence of Césaire's poetry and his vision of the world in the process of identity-making. Césaire's poetry is first a personal revolt against colonial domination. But thanks to the strength of his writings, he overcame his inner wound to build a new Caribbean identity.

Keywords: Césaire, geography and literature, identity, Caribbean, slavery, colonialism

RESUMEN

Césaire es uno de los más grandes poetas franceses del siglo veinte y su obra ha sido estudiada en sus menores rincones por numerosos universitarios. ¿En que podría un análisis geográfico conducir hacia una mejor comprensión de su poesía y de su proceso de construcción identitaria? En realidad, la dimensión geográfica de sus escritos nunca fue realmente analizada pese a que constituya una de las principales telas de fondo de su poesía. Césaire inventa su propia geografía imaginaria como lo proclama. ¿Cuáles son las tramas de su mapa del mundo para uso personal? El propósito de Césaire es volver a encontrar su latitud y longitud perdidas en la estela de los barcos de esclavos. Para existir, una persona desarraigada, como Césaire lo era, deber escribir una nueva relación con la Tierra según la filosofía de la geografía desarrollada por Eric Dardel. El autor de este artículo analiza la influencia

de la poesía de Césaire y de su visión del mundo en el proceso de construcción identitaria. La poesía de Césaire es ante todo una revuelta personal en contra de la dominación colonial. Pero gracias a la fuerza de su escritura, sobrepasa su herida interior para edificar una nueva identidad caribeña.

Palabras claves: Césaire, geografía y literatura, identidad, Caribe, esclavitud, colonialismo

RÉSUMÉ

Césaire est l'un des plus grands poètes français du 20^{ème} siècle et son œuvre a été étudiée dans les moindres recoins par de nombreux universitaires. En quoi une analyse géographique pourrait-elle conduire vers une meilleure compréhension de la poésie de Césaire et de son processus de construction identitaire ? En réalité, la dimension géographique de ses écrits n'a jamais été profondément analysée, bien qu'elle constitue l'une des principales toiles de fond de sa poésie. Césaire invente sa propre géographie imaginaire comme il l'a proclamé. Quelles sont les trames de sa carte du monde à usage personnel ? L'objectif de Césaire est de retrouver sa latitude et sa longitude perdues dans le sillage des navires d'esclaves. Pour exister, une personne déracinée, comme Césaire l'était, doit écrire une nouvelle relation avec la Terre selon la philosophie de la géographie développée par Eric Dardel. L'auteur de cet article analyse l'influence de la poésie de Césaire et de sa vision du monde dans le processus de construction identitaire. La poésie de Césaire est d'abord une révolte personnelle contre la domination coloniale. Mais grâce à la force de son écriture, il dépasse sa blessure intérieure pour bâtir une nouvelle identité caribéenne.

Mots-clés: Césaire, Césaire, géographie et littérature, identité, Caraïbes, esclavage, colonialisme

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Introduction

The famous maxim by surrealist Paul Eluard, “The Earth is blue like an orange,” should be adopted for Aimé Césaire but with a minor qualification, that of color. Césaire’s chromatic palette is indeed quite reduced: on the whole, black and white, in their clear-cut oppositions or combined in subtle *chiaroscuro*. Color certainly makes a great difference. Césaire’s Earth is not blue, but black as an orange, an Earth blackened by the wounded memories of slavery, injustice and racial discrimination. Confronted with Césaire’s poetry, whose

work has been studied in its slightest hidden recesses, in what way could a geographic analysis lead to a better understanding of Césaire's influence in the construction of a new Caribbean identity?

In 1952, Eric Dardel (1899-1967) wrote a book entitled *L'homme et la terre. Nature de la réalité géographique*, published by the University Press of France. This premonitory work, which remained unknown for a long time, represents nevertheless an essential contribution to the philosophy of geography (Raffestin 1987:472). Dardel's conception of geography is useful to understand Césaire's poetry. For Dardel, geography "is not an open atlas under the eyes, it is a call that rises from the ground, the wave or the forest, a piece of luck or a refusal, a power, a presence" (Dardel 1952:3). He considers geography is above all a *geography*, that is, writing about one in the world and the world in oneself. In opposition with the rationalist geography of the 1950s, Dardel advocated a return to a primitive and sensitive geography based on the relationship between human beings and the Earth.¹ Dardel's geography is like the poetics of space to take up Gaston Bachelard's expression. Poetry is "the direct, transparent language that speaks to the imagination without any difficulty, undoubtedly much better than the objective discourse of scientists, because it faithfully transcribes the writing traced on the ground" (Dardel 1952:3). A person cut-off from his roots is entirely disorientated as Dardel says. To exist in the world, one has to find his North and South (Dardel 1952:14-15). That is not a mere matter of geographic coordinates in their most trivial significance. To find one's North and South is an act which needs to be rooted in ancient knowledge as well as in geosymbols engraved in a collective memory and in a particular identity. To exist, the uprooted person has only one possibility, to write a new relationship with the Earth. In Dardel's mind, that is the first role of geography.

The link between Dardel's geography and Césaire's poetry is rather amazing. Césaire is the archetypal uprooted person as he calls himself: "I am of no nationality ever provided for by the chancelleries" (Césaire 2007a:107). The purpose of Césaire's poetic work is to find again his geographic coordinates lost in the wake of the slave ships: "I, a man, to so deny creation as to contain myself between latitude and longitude" (Césaire 2007a:89). As known, Césaire was not only a poet. He was also mayor of Fort-de-France and member of Parliament for Martinique in the French National Assembly. He wrote drama as well. But undoubtedly it is through his poetry that he succeeded in giving most strength to his process of identity-making.

The aim of the article is to analyze, both through the space and time perspective, the place of Césaire's poetry in the foundation of a French Caribbean identity. His poetry is based on a tangible materiality, to live

in an island, misplaced on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean. But in Césaire's mind, the island of Martinique also suffers from its dark past. With Guadeloupe and French Guyana, it is one of the last vestiges of the French colonial Empire in the Caribbean. How can one exist in the world when one belongs to "those whose only voyages were uprooting" (Césaire 2007a:111)? How can one give meaning to the signs of the Earth, to appropriate an island made of "uprooted mountains" and haunted by "epileptic mornings" (Césaire 2007a:97 and 99)? How can one find "the tepid dawn of ancestral virtues" (Césaire 2007a:115) when living in a distant world which has not kept any trace of them? In other words, in what way did Césaire manage to transcend his own wound in order to build a new French Caribbean identity in a context of colonial legacy?

ISLANDS SCARS ON EARTH

Seldom has the fact of being born somewhere in the vastness of the world been so important in a man's life. In 1962, paying homage to Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire claimed what was necessary to be a West Indian "that is to be so destitute, so depersonalized, to run out with such an ardour in search of oneself" (Césaire quoted by Kouassi 2006:9). Of course, the assertion is also true for Césaire himself. To be born or not to be born in the French West Indies, that is the first clue of his poetry.

Geographic Anchorage

Aimé Césaire was born on 26 June 1913 in Basse-Pointe, a little place located in the North of Martinique. The title of his most famous piece of poetry, *Notebook of a Return to my Native Land* (1939), shows the great significance of the poet's birthplace in his personal world. In the *Notebook*, the descriptions of the island of Martinique are quite geographic. Surprisingly, no researcher has analyzed the depth of Césaire's geographic knowledge, though it is one of the main backdrops of his oeuvre. Where does the attention paid to the geography of places come from? As often in Césaire's life, it results from meetings. At Victor Schoelcher's High School in Fort-de-France, from 1927 to 1931, young Aimé attended Eugène Revert's course (Pinguilly 2008:14). Who is the mysterious teacher mentioned by Césaire every time he is interviewed about his high school years? What influence did Revert (1895-1957) have on his pupil? Georges Ngal, the author of a masterly analysis on Césaire reflected on this point but without bringing satisfactory answers (Ngal 1994:36). Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith did the same in their introduction to Césaire's collected poetry when they said that the many evocations of Martinican nature in his poetry "has as its first cause the

influence of a teacher he studied with at *Lycée Schoelcher*. Eugène Revert taught geography and attempted to interest his student in the peculiar geographical characteristics of Martinique” (1983:1). But they did not give further development on the subject.

After being a student of the prestigious *Ecole Normale Supérieure*, Revert was appointed to a post of teacher in Fort-de-France at Victor Schoelcher’s High School (Allix 1958:371-372). Martinique Island and her inhabitants greatly appealed to him. That is why he devoted his Ph.D. to the following topic, *La Martinique, étude géographique et humaine* (Revert 1949). The work received an award by the Sciences Academy of Paris and was regarded by Fernand Braudel as a masterpiece (Braudel 1950:494-496). So, Césaire’s teacher was one of the most distinguished French geographers in the years between the two World Wars.² He shared his knowledge of the volcanic nature of the island with his pupil (Revert 1931:275-291). He was also the first one to lead them on pedagogical outings in order to explain the diversity of the Martinican landscapes in the field. For young Aimé, the landscapes of his childhood became understandable thanks to Revert. His countless evocations of the nature of Martinique, and also the fact that he himself qualifies his poetry as ‘Pelean,’ are elements undoubtedly rooted in Revert’s teachings (Arnold 1981:7-8).

Césaire was filled with admiration for his teacher. In an interview given to Françoise Vergès, the only one of his high school teachers he mentions is Revert. He remembers that when Revert asked him about what he wanted to do after the high school diploma, his answer was without any ambiguity: “Like you, Mister Professor” (Césaire 2005:22). In 2003, in another interview, Césaire still recalled that he was a “pupil of teacher Eugene Revert, a native of Alençon who wrote such a powerful Ph.D. on the geography of Martinique” (Alliot 2008:238). Césaire was thus not only Revert’s pupil, but he also went further into the lessons of his geography teacher by reading his research works published nearly 20 years after young Aimé had left the high school in 1931.

One can detect in the *Notebook* the influence of Revert’s teachings. Some images express one of the main characters of these insular territories, their exiguity which makes them hardly visible on a world map. Revert could not miss underlining this geographic reality to his pupils. That is why under the pen of Césaire, Martinique is reduced to a “little ellipsoidal nothing” or to a “calabash of an island” (Césaire 2007a:89). Other elements refer to the West Indies geographic characteristics, in particular when Césaire evokes “the archipelago arched” of the Caribbean bathed by “the sweet liquor of the Gulf Stream” (Césaire 2007a:89). But in order to see the influence of Revert more clearly, those elements of description must be analyzed in their full context:

What is mine these few thousands death-bearers who turn in circles in this calabash of an island and what in mine too, the archipelago arched with the anxious desire to deny itself, as thought eager to protect with maternal anxiety the more delicate tenuity separating the two Americas; and its flanks secreting for Europe the sweet liquor of a Gulf Stream; and one of the two slopes of incandescence between which the Equator funambulates to Africa. And my non-enclosure island, its clear boldness standing at the back of this Polynesia, before it, Guadeloupe split in two along its backbone and sharing our misery, Haiti where negritude stood up for the first time and said it believed in its humanity and the comic little tail of Florida where the strangulation of a nigger is about to be completed and Africa gigantically caterpillaring as far as the Hispanic foot of Europe, its nakedness where Death swings its scythe widely. (Césaire 2007a:89-91)

By reading this passage without taking into account the poetic images, what does remain if not a map of the Atlantic area? As a geographer, Césaire use maps at different scales in order to describe the area and situate his island in its geographical environment. At a large scale, the Atlantic is bounded by the three continents, America, Europe and Africa. The Equator line connects together America and Africa, and indicates that Césaire's island is located in the tropical zone. The tropical feature of the area is also given by mentioning the warm waters of the Gulf Stream. Then, at a regional scale, Césaire's Martinique belongs to the Caribbean volcanic arc, south to the "little tail" of Florida. The volcanic nature of the string of islands is suggested by the word "incandescence." Césaire gives two geographical keys at local scale that make it possible to identify his island which is not directly quoted by the author. Martinique is part of a "Polynesia." Here, the term is used by Césaire as synonymous with archipelago. Of course, in the author's mind it also refers to the sister islands of French Polynesia. In that way, Césaire underlines that his native land is part of the French overseas colonies. In this Caribbean "Polynesia," Martinique can be located thanks to the mention of Guadeloupe which stands just "before it."

The originality of Césaire's map is to fit different scales of representation at the same time into each other, what a geographer cannot do on a single map. But this passage of Césaire's *Notebook* expresses above all the necessity for every person to have a geographical anchorage. The link between existence and geography is vital for Dardel. It is only thanks to the consciousness of being from somewhere that a man can "realize his Earthly condition" (Dardel 1952:46). So, human existence first depends on a primitive and instinctive relationship with one's living space. That is certainly why mapping one's immediate environment goes back to the beginnings of humanity as is recalled by the maps carved on rock at Valcamonica, Italy, dating from the Iron Age (Grataloup 2009:38-39).

Missed Paradise

Obviously, the purpose of Césaire is not to create an academic portrait of the French West Indies. In fact, the author has a very personal way to feel, perceive and portray the French Lesser Antilles: “And my original geography also; the map of the world drawn for my own use, not dyed with the arbitrary colors of men of science, but with the geometry of my spilt blood, I accept” (Césaire 2007a:125). What are the frames of this map of the world for personal use?

The frames of the author’s imaginative geographic world can only be understood through the will to build a new Caribbean identity. That supposes first to destroy the caricature of those territories in European minds: “I clearly read in my pulse that exoticism is no provender for me” (Césaire 2007a:101). In the colonial imaginary, Martinique is an earthly paradise because of the exoticism and insularity of the place. In the 1930s, the tour operators and the airline companies staged Caribbean landscapes in which limpid and blue seas, beaches fringed by coconut trees and tropical forests made up the immutable elements of a largely idealized nature (Strachan 2002).

Far from this representation of an earthly paradise the French West Indies of Césaire do not have any “exotic flavor” (Rosello 2007:56). They are only a string of islands which are the victims of a tyrannical geography reducing them to small, fragmented and wounded territories because of their colonial past:

Islands scars of the water
Islands evidence of wounds
Islands crumbs
Islands shapeless
Islands waste paper torn up upon the waters
(Césaire 2007a:123)

At the beginning of the *Notebook*, Césaire sets the scene of his land. It is the opposite of the European postcard images: “At the brink of dawn budding with frail creeks, the hungry West Indies, the West Indies pock-pitted with smallpox, the West Indies blown up by alcohol, stranded in the mud of this bay, in the dust of this town sordidly stranded” (Césaire 2007a:73). New descriptions give a certain rhythm to the *Notebook* (Davis 2008:26). They go back and forth as the obstinate undertow of the sea: “At the brink of dawn, lost puddles, wandering fragrances, stranded hurricanes, unmasted hulls, old sores, rotten bones, mists, chained volcanoes, badly rooted dead, bitter screaming” (Césaire 2007a:123). The reader is invaded by a strange feeling. The strokes of Césaire’s pen become increasingly pressing and even oppressive. And at the end, his portrait of the French Antilles strangely resembles Soulages’

darkest paintings. The Martinique of Césaire is definitively no Eden. It is only an “absurdly missed version of the paradise” as he says ironically (Césaire 2006:97).

For Césaire, Martinique is above all a land of violence. First, the violence of nature: located along the Atlantic Ocean, the East coast is regularly crossed by devastating hurricanes. In the North of the island, the *Montagne Pelée* represents a real threat. On 8 May 1902, an eruption of the volcano burnt to the ground Saint-Pierre, which was the capital of the island, and caused the death of 29,000 people. Césaire draws the strength of his poetry from the violence of nature:

And suddenly, strength and life charge me [...] and the enormous lung of the cyclones breathes and the hoarded fire of volcanoes and the gigantic seismic pulse now beats the measure of a body alive in my firm blazing. (Césaire 2007a:125).

Violence also concerns the social relationships. On this sugar island, young Aimé was revolted by the miserable living conditions of the cane-cutters who worked on the plantations, all the more so as racial discriminations was superimposed on social inequalities: the Congo Blacks were at the bottom of the social ladder, the Mulattos in the middle and the Whites at the top. In the 1930s, the White Creoles of Martinique (called *Békés*) kept a stranglehold on the sugar economy (Benoist 1972:82). For the descendants of slaves, work on the plantations was very hard. It was still carried out according to antiquated methods which had not really changed since the middle of the 19th century. Planters preferred to invest in new varieties of canes rather than to improve the working conditions of the cane-cutters who were always perceived as former slaves (Maurice 1932:543).

In Césaire’s mapping of Martinique, the image of the volcano concentrated all the violence of his “missed paradise.” Of course, the recurrent evocation of the volcano in Césaire’s *Notebook* has a political meaning and can be regarded as a revolutionary image as asserts Eric Prieto. For him, the volcano expresses “Césaire’s desire to sweep away the injustices of the past in a cataclysmic moment of renewal” (Prieto 143). But the poetic image of the volcano is more than the promise of a revolt. The geosymbol of the *Montagne Pelée* help the poet to situate himself between latitude and longitude. Thanks to this landmark drawn on his map of the world for personal use, Césaire can determinate a “new set of relationships, directions and distances” what is vital for Dardel to settle down one’s existence (Dardel 1952:19).

PLACE OF WOUNDED PAST

Césaire’s map of the world is also inhabited by what Dardel calls

'historicity.' In Dardel's mind, historicity can be shortly defined as the encounter of global and personal history into one's living space (Dardel 1952:59). Indeed, if the Earth is the material condition of existence, it is always invaded or impregnated with the heavy shadow of the past as the reader can perceive in Césaire's poetry. To be born somewhere implies for everyone to carry on the memory of the native country. That is why the other essential framework of Césaire's mental map is related to his hometown where the colonial past left its mark.

Traces of Domination

In the *Notebook*, Césaire's poetry winds and unwinds around the wounded memory of Martinique. His hometown does not lead the author to the soft years of childhood, but towards the muted history of slavery. By following Revert's geographical method, his living space comes on various spatial scales. About his birthplace Césaire writes that Basse-Pointe is a town that is "inert, panting under the geometric burden of its forever renascent cross, unresigned to its fate, dumb" (Césaire 2007a:73). The author expresses in these terms the colonial legacy of this urban space drawn with straight lines, as well as what he considers the guilty resignation of the inhabitants. The shape of the town, "flat" and "staked out," reinforces the idea of a subjected population that seems to accept their fate: "At the brink of dawn, this flat town, staked out. It crawls on its hands with never any impulse to pierce the sky with a posture of protest" (Césaire 2007a:83).

Then, Césaire zooms in on the street of his Creole childhood. *Rue Paille*, his house is reduced to a "wooden carcass comically perched on tiny skinny cement paws," as he confesses (Césaire 2007a:79). Far from being emotional about the place of his childhood, Césaire continues his deconstruction of the idyllic image of the French Caribbean strongly anchored in the European imaginary: "A shocking sight, this *rue Paille*, a revolting appendix like the private parts of the town which, right and left of the colonial road, spread the grey swell of its tiled roofs" (Césaire 2007a:85). We still find here, in the mention of the colonial road, the territorial trace of colonization. This town planning is characterized by a geometrical model which was repeated *ad infinitum* in the West Indies. The colonial cities were drawn out according to a network of streets crossing at right angles and following a mathematical pattern insensitive to the topography of the place. For Césaire, they are the material traces of domination.

Why is the *Rue Paille*, which should be the place of the games and joys of childhood, a shame for Césaire? What earthly hell does it lead this man to? The *Rue Paille* leads to the beach:

Another wretched sight, this beach, with its heaps of garbage rotting away, furtive rumps relieving themselves, and the sand is so black, so lugubrious, no one has ever seen a sand so black, and the foam yelps as it glides over it, and the sea beats it with great big buffets, or rather the sea is a big dog which licks and bites the shins of the beach, and bite after bite, it will eventually devour it, of course, the beach and all the *Rue Paille* along with it. (Césaire 2007a:85)

In this passage, it is easy to understand that the beach was the one of the arrival of the slaves. The image of the slave, however, does not appear here. Voluntarily, the deportees from Africa have neither name nor face. They are compared by the author to the beach itself which the sea will eventually erase. For Césaire, it is a way of stressing that the man of Africa, once captured and embarked on the ship of a slave trader, lost all humanity. In the interior of the island, the *Rue Paille* leads just towards an unknown world, impossible to name, that is a dehumanized place.

The map of the world for personal use of Césaire is thus also inhabited by a memorial link interrupted between Africa and the French Antilles: “At the brink of dawn these countries with no stela, these roads with no memory, these winds with no tablet” (Césaire 2007a:93). Césaire is haunted by the lapse of memory which in the 1930s seemed to affect Europeans and most of the West Indians. In his last collection of poems, one feels that the wound of the slave trade has never really been healed:

I live in a sacred wound
I live among fictional ancestors
I live in an obscure desire
I live in a prolonged silence
(Césaire 2006:97)

Césaire was born only sixty-five years after the abolition of slavery in 1848 in France. These few decades between the abolition and the birth of the poet were not enough to enable one to forget the slavery and humiliations. The Black Code of 1685, written by Seignelay, Colbert’s son, authorized the colonists to inflict corporal punishments on the slaves. The harshest sentences were for the fugitive slaves, in particular the recidivists who were put to death. Fugitives were called maroons which comes from the Spanish word *cimarron*. In Spanish America it designated a fugitive slave, but also a farm animal turned over to wild life. As Victor Schœlcher (1804-1893) explained, the Black slaves were in fact assimilated by the colonists to beasts (Schœlcher 1842:102).

Slavery as Personal Legacy

Such a history is also Césaire’s. In his play, *And the Dogs were Silent* (1958), he raises the memory of his ancestor Jean-Baptiste Césaire from

darkness. Jean-Baptiste took part in the uprising of the Martinican slaves in Grand'Anse in December 1833 (Alliot 2008:18; Ngai 1994:24). He was first condemned to death and finally reprieved by King Louis-Philippe (Ngai 1994:22). His ancestor is somehow a totemic figure for Césaire. He was a man who stood up and refused his condition as a slave. As James Arnold says, in Césaire's mind he was a kind of Martinican Kunta Kinte, proud of his African roots (1981:2-3).

The trace of the Césaire's ancestor is difficult to find. In his book *Des colonies françaises. Abolition immédiate de l'esclavage*, published in 1842, Schœlcher inserts extracts of the *Official Journal of Martinique* where slaves are listed for sale by public auction. One of the extracts dated 6 August 1839, mentions a certain Césaire (Schœlcher 1842:58). It is probably Aimé Césaire's ancestor because the events of December 1833 are very close as well as the lawsuit against Jean-Baptiste after the uprising. In addition, one of the humiliations inflicted on the rebellious slaves was to sell them to another owner and separate them from their families. This passage appears in a selection of the most important writings of Schœlcher published in 1948 with the title *Esclavage et colonisation*. Aimé Césaire, who wrote the introduction of the compilation, could not miss the tearing revelation: the slave sold in a public place had the same surname as his (Schœlcher 2007:48).

In France, the abolition of 1848 was the result of a long process shaken by the hiccups of history. Slavery was first abolished on 4 February 1794 during the French Revolution (*16 pluviôse de l'an II*). It is what Césaire calls ironically the joke of *pluviôse* of year II, for slavery was restored in 1802 by Napoleon. At the time, Henri Grégoire (1750-1831) was one of the main abolitionist activists. In 1808, he wrote a noticeable work entitled *De la littérature des Nègres ou Recherches sur leurs facultés intellectuelles, leurs qualités morales et littéraires*. It was not a mere inventory of the literary output of the Black writers, but a rigorous demonstration against the nonsense of racial prejudice against them (Necheles 1971:233). As Grégoire put it in the introduction, his goal was to plead for abolition: "The friends of slavery are necessarily the enemies of humanity" (1808:12). Refuting the alleged inferiority of Blacks, sometimes he raised his voice against the slave traders: "For three centuries, the tigers and the panthers have not been as fearsome as you to Africa" (Grégoire 1808:278). Césaire considers that Grégoire was "the first scientific refuter of racism" (Césaire 2007b: 15).

After Grégoire's death in 1831, Victor Schœlcher became the main figure of this struggle. He efficiently took up the torch against slavery. In 1834, when slavery was already abolished in the British colonies (1833), the French Society for Abolition was created in Paris. Thanks to Schœlcher's determination, the government of the Second Republic

(1848-1851) adopted, on 27 April 1848, the final decree on abolition. In the French colonies, 262,564 slaves were released (Meyer *et al.* 1991:412). In 1948, at the celebration of the centenary of abolition, Césaire paid homage to the man of 1848: “Victor Schœlcher, a genius? Perhaps. But still better, a conscience.”³

Césaire’s poetry is rooted in this ‘historicity’ which results at once from a personal and global experience of slavery. Although he was born after the abolition, in Césaire’s mind the struggle needs to be continued. He feels himself as the inheritor of the abolitionists. Césaire’s *Notebook* is fed by the wounded past of slavery: “My memory is circled with blood. My memory has its belt of corpses” (Césaire 2007a:103). However, far from being reduced to a suffering attitude, his poetry has an evident political significance. The *Notebook* is both a cry to awaken Europe and a posture of resistance against colonial domination. As known, colonial geography rested on the triangular trade. In this geometry of the first global economy, the slave trade was the basis of the triangle. The main harbors of the French Atlantic coast (Bordeaux, La Rochelle, Lorient and Nantes) enjoyed a great prosperity thanks to it. In the 1930s, nobody spoke about the slave trade. Césaire brings back these tabooed memories to the surface:

From the hold I hear shackled curses rising, the gasps of the dying, the sound of one thrown overboard, the baying of a woman giving birth, the scraping of fingernails groping for throats, the sneer of the whip, the crawling of vermin among tired bodies. (Césaire 2007a:107)

The poet recalls in those sharpened words the terrible crossing through the tunnel of servitude of these men and women who were regarded as vulgar goods. For him, on this point Europe is indefensible. Colonization was “neither evangelization, nor a philanthropic enterprise, nor a desire to push back the frontiers of ignorance, disease, and tyranny” as he staged later in the *Discourse on Colonialism*, published in 1950 (Césaire 2000a:32). So, the *Notebook* is not only a poetic work. It is also the first political expression of Césaire’s revolt against colonization and slavery. His revolt, however, could not give the same strength to his poetry as if Césaire did not have been confronted with the White world in Paris.

THE LAND REGISTRY OF THE ORIGINS

What distant world could one turn to when coming from an insular territory marked by such a heavy colonial past? How did the passage from an underground wound to the claim of a Black identity occur in Césaire’s mind? How is it possible to patch up the diverse pieces of the origins which are scattered between the West Indies, Europe and Africa?

Discovering his Otherness in Paris


After his high school diploma, in 1931 Césaire arrived in Paris to continue his studies. Thanks to a letter of introduction from his teacher Revert, he was enrolled at the *Lycée Louis-le-Grand*, located in the bubbling Latin Quarter in order to prepare for the competitive examinations of the *Ecole Normale Supérieure*. In 1935, he entered that *Grande Ecole* as his teacher Revert had before him. But Césaire is the first Black student to successfully pass this arduous process of competitive examinations.

In Paris, young Aimé is quickly confronted with a hard reality. It was not easy to be Black in the French capital in the 1930s. In 1931, Paris was celebrating the International Colonial Exhibition. It was the last great manifestation of the kind in France (Bancel *et al.* 2004:23). The exhibition was supposed to show the colonized population of the French Empire to the visitors and invited them “to go round the world in one day” as one of the official guidebooks proudly announced (Tranchant 1931). But actually, its main purpose was to justify the colonial expansion of France in the 1920s and 1930s. The guidebook expressed it in these terms: “Here is thus the wonderful part played by France as regards colonization; we can see the agreement reached between all races and understand how much our colonies have become necessary to us” (Tranchant 1931:19).

Césaire could not miss seeing the many posters inviting the people to visit the exhibition. Beyond their aesthetic qualities, these billboards were propaganda tools showing the superiority of Whites over colonized people. In the advertisement of the exhibition created by Jean de la Mézières, the principal ingredients of colonial imaginary are represented (Figure 1). The topless African woman in the foreground, or the characters awkwardly dressed in the background give substance to the existence of a radical otherness between the colonized people and the civilized European. These representations of the other fed the old myth of the noble savage and the allegedly civilizing mission of France. The colors in the picture also had a precise significance. For instance, whatever their geographical origins, all the characters are black-skinned, including the Asian man who is symbolized by a conical hat. The color black is thus in the colonial imaginary the one that stands for racial inferiority (Blanchard 2001:152).

So, Césaire was immediately confronted with the arrogance of colonial propaganda. Every day the newspapers relayed not only the events of the Colonial Exhibition but also the dogma of the “*Grande France*” spanned over all the seas of the world (Hodeir 1991:102). The only criticism came from the surrealist writers. All the students of the Latin Quarter knew that they had been circulating leaflets entitled “Do

RÉPUBLIQUE FRANÇAISE



EXPOSITION COLONIALE
INTERNATIONALE

PARIS
1931

IMP. DE VAUGIRARD - PARIS - 1928

J. de la Mézière

Figure 1. Billboard created by Jean de la Mézière announcing the French International Colonial Exhibition of 1931 (Paris, 1928).

not visit the Colonial Exhibition” since 30 April 1931 (Hodeir 1991:113; Alliot 2008:17). Obviously, the posture against the exhibition of the surrealist writers has a particular echo among the Black students of Paris.

A few days after his arrival in Paris, young Aimé had made friends with Léopold Sédar Senghor. Senghor introduced him to the circles of Black students in the capital. Africans and West Indians inevitably talked about colonization and wondered about their identity. It was not easy to express one’s difference when, in the French colonies, pupils learned that their ancestors were the Gauls and Vercingétorix was the father of the nation (Moudileno 1997:15-16). Two existential questions troubled the mind of young Aimé and his friends. Who am I? What does it mean to be Black?

The answer to these questions could only be found by objecting to the policy of cultural assimilation led by France. In 1934, Césaire and Senghor, with other African and West Indian writers (Gontran Damas, Diop, Dainville, Maugée) founded the journal *L’Etudiant noir*. It was to be the instrument of their liberation. They found common roots between them. They glorified black culture and celebrated Africa. The black continent was not only the land of their ancestors, but also the cradle of humankind which was symbolized by the image of the Fundamental Negro. He was the first man, the Adam of the highlands of Africa: “Dig even deeper and you will find at the bottom of you, beyond all the layers of civilizations, the Fundamental Negro” (Césaire 2005:27).

Césaire and Senghor managed to crystallize their construction of black identity around the concept of *négritude*. It appeared for the first time in the journal of *L’Etudiant noir* in September 1934. But what does the term mean exactly? What could its influence have been in the process of Césaire’s identity-making? In 1987, at a congress organized in Miami to pay homage to his oeuvre, Aimé Césaire made a speech on the concept of negritude. The poet tried to explain what negritude is not: “Negritude, in my eyes, is not a philosophy. Negritude is not metaphysics. Negritude is not a pretentious idea of the universe [...] It is neither pathos nor dolorism” (Césaire 2000b:82-84). By saying what negritude is not, Césaire determined from its outer parts this concept which he himself recognizes is not easy to handle. The reason for this difficulty is that negritude is not an academic concept (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin 2000:162-163). What is the inner content of negritude? It is the expression of a revolt, a fighting posture against the colonial domination. For Aimé Césaire, Western universalism necessarily leads towards a negation of difference, with the destruction of the non-European identities as consequence: “Europe contemplates the universal from its proper values and by making a vacuum around it” (Césaire 2000b:84). Negritude is a bulwark against this process of destruction. While inventing this concept, Césaire breaches and overcomes European universalism by affirming

his own otherness (Scharfman 1987:74). The genius of Césaire is to re-appropriate the word *nègre*, which has strong racist overtones in French, and give it a positive meaning by transforming it into the neologism *negritude*. Today, the term has gained its *Lettres de noblesse*. But in the 1930s it was a real semantic revolution.

The Call of Africa

Negritude is indeed Césaire's miraculous weapon. But young Aimé had never been to Africa, so how was he to affirm his *negritude*? His construction of identity could not be the same as that of his Senegalese friend. Senghor was born and had always lived in Africa before he went to Paris. The answers about his identity could be found in a binary relation between Europe and Africa. In Césaire's case, it was a more difficult matter. His land registry of the origins was truly a puzzle whose pieces were scattered between the Caribbean, Europe and Africa. On his map of the world for personal use, Césaire tried to draw the shape of a "long standing dream" (Césaire 2007a:109), that of an Africa forgotten because of distance and time: "We do not feel the itch of those who used to hold the spear in our armpits" (Césaire 2007a:105). His memorial link with Africa was transmitted to him by his paternal grandmother, Eugénie Macni. According to Césaire, she had the Casamance type and she recounted him the history of the Blacks (Ngal 1994:26-27).

As exposed by Dardel, an uprooted person needs to re-root in his lost geography and memory (Dardel 1952:14-15). So, the *Notebook* can also be regarded as a return to Césaire's remote African origins (Toumson, Henry-Valmore 1993:26). The intention is clearly announced by the author himself: "I would rediscover the secret of the great communications and of great combustions" (Césaire 2007a:87). But the fact of looking for his African origins is a painful experience for Césaire and plunges him into a deep existential crisis. Why? Because as analyzed by Frantz Fanon, in the 1930s the French Caribbean did not consider themselves Black people and even less Africans (Fanon 1952:20). Césaire suddenly discovered his *negritude* in the confrontation with the White world in Paris. That is why, as a person who looks at himself in a mirror for the first time, Césaire paints in the *Notebook* a touching self-portrait:

And the determination of my biology, not prisoner to a facial angle, to a type of hair, to a sufficiently flat nose, to a sufficiently melanous complexion, and *negritude*, not a cephalic index any more or a plasma or a soma but measured with the compass of suffering. (Césaire 2007a:125).

Thus, the call of Africa in Césaire's poetry must be understood as a way of reviving a hidden part of him which remained unrevealed for a long time. The author does not evade his Africanity. On the contrary,

he claims Africa is his other native country: “I have now deciphered the meaning of the ordeal: my country is the spear of night of my Bambara ancestors” (Césaire 2007a:127). Apart from his grandmother, the other memorial link with Africa came from his friend Senghor. As Césaire confided, Senghor had a great influence on his personal universe (Sirinelli 1988:83). Senghor transmitted him images, sounds and feelings from Africa which actually remained unreachable to Césaire. That is why Césaire avidly read Leon Frobenius’ famous book on the *Histoire de la civilisation africaine* translated into French in 1936. He knew the book to the point of being able to recite it by heart (Davis 2008:9).

Césaire’s Africa is indeed an imaginative world built thanks to intermediary people or readings. His relationship with Africa, however, is stronger than mere reminiscences of the Black continent transmitted by his grandmother Eugenie or by Senghor. Africa greatly appeals to him to the point of embodying the land of his ancestral roots: “I have thought and thought of the Congo and so, I have become a Congo rustling with forests and rivers” (Césaire 2007a:95). In the *Notebook* his mental map of Africa serves as a backdrop. In order to find the lost Africa again and give it geographic materiality, the author mentions names of countries (Dahomey, Ghana, Congo), cities (Timbuctoo) and rivers as the Zambezi (Césaire 2007:95). Africa is unique. It is the only place on Earth where “the water goes likwala-likwala’ down the river (Césaire 2007a:95). Césaire’s African landscapes are wild, brute, composed by thick forests, impenetrable bushes and frenzied meadows (Césaire 2007a:97 and 99). Césaire celebrates the wildness of Africa where people live harmoniously with it:

those who know the femininity of oil-bodied moon the reconciled
rapture of the antelope and the star
those whose survival moves in the germination of grass!
(Césaire 2007a:115)

Here Césaire evokes the nomads of the desert. They represent in his mind the clearest evidence of harmony between Man and Nature. In this way, Césaire gives a poetic strength to Frobenius’ philosophical interpretation of the African civilization. Frobenius asserts that African civilization is based on an intuitive and harmonious relationship with Nature. He underlines the importance of grass in African civilization: “A grey blue iron sky above an endless savanna, a red soil, a dark grass, grass and grass again [...] The Ethiopic civilization hinges on the grass, on the vegetal cycle” (Frobenius 1936:26 and 30). Césaire’s negritude comes from that idealized nature. As the grass of the savanna, it is rooted in the red land of Africa: “my negritude is neither a tower nor a cathedral it reaches deep down into the red flesh of the soil” (Césaire 2007a:115).

Césaire's Africa is the Mother Land of the "eldest sons of the world" (Césaire 2007a:115). Nevertheless, it is more than the land of the origins of humankind. In his imaginative geography, Africa is the very essence of the world:

porous to all the breaths of the world
 brotherly zone of all the breaths of the world
 undrained bed of all the waters of the world
 spark of the sacred fire of the world
 flesh of the flesh of the world palpitating with the very movement
 of the world
 (Césaire 2007a:115)

In this passage of the *Notebook* Césaire clearly invents a new cosmography. As Dardel asserts, the geographic reality cannot be separated from its cosmographic dimension or, in other words, from a mythic representation of the Universe (Dardel 1952:74). In his rewriting of the world, Césaire considers Africa as an original wholeness in which all the natural forces are concentrated, wind, water and fire. Africa is represented as a circle: "Eia perfect circle of the world and closed concordance!" (Césaire 2007a:115). As in all mythologies, the image of the perfect circle contains a magic or sacred meaning: Africa is regarded by Césaire as the sacred center of the Universe. It is not only an image of poetic nature. Through his mythic geography, Césaire calls Eurocentrism into question and refocuses Africa to the centre of gravity of the world. In that way, Césaire's cosmography implicitly challenges the order of the world established by the colonial powers.

Conclusion

On 17 April 2008, Aimé Césaire died at the age of ninety-four. As with Victor Hugo, France paid homage to him by organizing a state funeral. Césaire's century was over but his writings remain. In what way does his poetic work have an eminently geographic significance? Césaire's poetry answers an essential need, perfectly summarized in Katharin Harmon's expression inspired from Descartes' famous sentence: 'I map, therefore I am' (Harmon 2005:11). To exist, all human beings need to embody the world and above all to imagine themselves in it.

Césaire's *Notebook* is the expression of this primitive geography as defended by Dardel (1952:6). The uprooted man is confronted with a tough dilemma or, in other words, to an almost biological imperative: to re-root or to disappear. Through his poetry, Césaire chose the way of re-rooting. In his identity-making, he invents a personal geography as he claims it: "I have my personal mythology. I built my own geography of imagination. I am in the junction of two traditions: American by the

geography, African by the history, and the myths of both continents interfere in my poems” (Ngal 1994:13). Césaire’s poetry cannot be reduced to a mere collage or overlapping of geography and history nourished by some African reminiscences. In his work, there is no spatiality without historic thickness. In fact, his map of the world for personal use consisted of a fusion of space and time. Thanks to the symbiosis between space and time, he was able to gather the scattered pieces of the land registry of the origins and overcome the distance which separated him from his African roots. Césaire succeeded in exploring a memory repressed for a long time in the Caribbean and necessary for the construction of his identity.

In his identity triangulation divided between the Caribbean, Europe and Africa, the Black continent was all the more idealized as it remained for Césaire a largely unknown world. In Senghor’s poetry, Africa is painted with bright colors. Senghor transmitted the image of a real-life Africa full of sensuality and rhythms (Leiner 1978:223). Césaire’s poetic work is of different kind. He invents a mythic geography of Africa based at once on harmony between Man and Nature and on a rewriting of the world. In his cosmography, Africa is a sacred space. It is the place of the origins of humankind symbolized by the image of the Fundamental Negro. But it is also the centre of the Universe which takes the shape of a perfect circle. Africa thus recovered its lost place in Césaire’s geography.

Because of the strength of his writings Césaire overcame his own wound to build a French Caribbean identity. Césaire’s negritude is far from amounting to community confinement. The message sent by Césaire from his island raft is meant for the whole of humankind. For him, everyone on Earth has his North, his South, his latitude and longitude. In his wake, writers such as Patrick Chamoiseau, Maryse Condé, Raphaël Confiant, Edouard Glissant, Daniel Maximin, among others, undertook a considerable work of memory by casting a significant light on the slave trade, colonization and the Creole identity (Bessière 2004:49-50). In their work the legacy of Césaire’s negritude has a major importance, for the *Notebook* is considered as the foundation act of literature and French Caribbean identity. It is a place of memory in the land registry of the origins (Bonnet 1997:407; Labeth 2006:115-116).

Before Césaire, we were only the ghosts of poets and novelists looking for the necessary Parisian support [...] Negritude, by challenging the colonial order, restored in us something of which we had lost even the echo: the shout, the original shout, emerging from the holds of the slave ship and in whose vibration our literature is rooted. (Chamoiseau, Confiant 1991:126-127)

However, the French Caribbean writers of the new generation can sometimes be hard on the bard of negritude. In *Lettres Créoles*, Chamoiseau and Confiant recognize the considerable contribution of the author

of the *Notebook*. But they also express harsh criticism against Césaire. The main criticism is that Césaire was not sensitive enough to the Creole part of Caribbean identity. He ignored Creole culture to the benefit of the African one which remains a strange and unknown world for most French West Indians. He certainly raised consciousness, but with European weapons by using the French language instead of the Creole one. The most surprising criticism concerns the literary and identity weight of the *Notebook*: “the long shadow of the Césarian cheese tree seems to have choked, since the 1960s, any poetic impulse in West Indians unless it is a periphrasis of the *Notebook of a Return to my Native Land*” (Chamoiseau, Confiant 1991:135).

These criticisms are somewhat puzzling. How is it possible to blame a poet for being too great? What would have been the scope of the *Notebook* if it had been published in Creole in 1939? Was it so undesirable that Césaire should use French while creating his own language? The American writers of the Harlem Renaissance expressed themselves in English, the Cuban Nicolás Guillén and the Puerto Rican Luis Palés Matos in Spanish, which did not prevent them from playing a major role in the construction of Black or Creole identities. But beyond the content of these criticisms, the most interesting thing is that contrary to the danger evoked by Mirelle Rosello, Césaire is not reduced to a myth or a spiritual father (Rosello 2007:9). The process of identity-making moved to the field of Creolity. While recognizing the contribution of Césaire’s negritude, the common wish is to write a new page of the land registry of the origins by refocusing on the Creole territories and cultures (Perret 2001:42-43). In Glissant’s mind, the detour via Africa only has significance if it is followed by a return movement towards Caribbean realities (1997:56-57).

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Notes

- ¹ This relationship is called “*géographicité*” by Dardel. He was the first French geographer in using the concept of geographicity (Dardel 1952:2). On the concept of geographicity, see Gary Backhaus (2008:205-207). See also Levy Jacques and Michel Lussault (2003), entries “*géographicité*” (398-399), “*imaginaire*

géographique” (489-491) and “*géographie et littérature*” (568-571).

- ² After a return to France in 1932, Revert went back to Martinique from 1937 to 1941 as Head of the Public Education for the whole French Lesser Antilles. In 1947, he became professor of colonial geography at Bordeaux University where Revert was one of the founders of the journal ‘*Cahiers d’Outre Mer.*’ In 1953, he was appointed to the post of Director of the Education Department of Overseas Ministry in Paris. In March 1957, he went back to Normandy, his native land, in order to hold a chair in geography at Caen University. But he died a few months later, on 22 December 1957.
- ³ Discourse by A. Césaire at the Sorbonne on 27 April 1948 for the celebration of the centenary of the abolition.

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