Gary Wilder

Freedom Time: Negritude, Decolonization, and the Future of the World. Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2015. xvi + 384 pp. (Paper US\$28.95)

Gary Wilder's study of the two *négritude* poets who embraced politics in spite of themselves—Aimé Césaire and Léopold Sédar Senghor—is a welcome antidote to the essays and monographs that have been, for half a century and more, bogged down in antinomies. In an effort to understand their “attempts ... to invent forms of decolonization that would secure self-determination without the need for state sovereignty” between 1945 and 1960, he devotes his introductory chapter to “unthinking France, rethinking decolonization.” His point of departure is admirable: “Scholarship long promoted one-sided understandings of Césaire and Senghor as either essentialist nativists or naïve humanists” (p. 8). He is right to posit that both young men, as colonized intellectuals, had to think their way out of the Cartesian strait-jacket their education had fashioned for them. Starting with their reading of Leo Frobenius's neoromantic ethnology of colonial Africa, both developed a pro-German posture that provided some leverage against the Jacobin nation-state model of polity imposed by France. Wilder takes seriously Senghor's study of the German language, and especially his reading of Goethe, during incarceration in a prison camp between 1940 and 1942. He rightly sees the promotion of Frobenius by the *Tropiques* editorial team in Martinique between 1941 and 1945 as a parallel move. Wilder is thus able to appreciate, in his detailed analysis of Césaire's 1944 lecture “Poetry and Knowledge,” the idealist underpinnings of a poetics that relies on the avant-garde—from Baudelaire to Breton—to discredit both Cartesian reason and the Kantian model of universality that held sway in French universities through the 1930s. His argument would have been stronger still if he had read those few critics who have commented on Spengler's influence on Césaire's 1939 *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*. The link in the poem between Frobenius's notion of pseudomorphosis and Spengler's idealist conceptualization of major historical shifts, had he seen it, would have helped complete Wilder's thesis that Senghor and Césaire were vitalist thinkers who belong to a family he calls “romantic anti-capitalism” (p. 277, n. 21).

Chapter 2, “Situating Césaire: Antillean Awakening and Global Redemption,” would have benefited from an enlarged scope in this respect, since the influence of Spengler in the Spanish-speaking islands has long been recognized. The principal virtue of Wilder's argument is that it defuses the antinomy that has befuddled critics of Césaire, right down to Romuald Fonkoua in his 2010 biography, who have been unable to understand how Césaire could have practiced a surrealist poetics if he was a Marxist. Since Césaire's Marxism has long been

taken for granted and scarcely examined at all in its philosophical underpinnings, and since his early poetry was either no longer available or unread, the majority view had it that Surrealism could have held no interest for him.

Having situated Césaire and Senghor, respectively, in Chapters 2 and 3 with respect to France, Wilder devotes his fourth chapter to “freedom, time, territory.” His commentary on the liberation of Paris in 1944 as political theater recuperated by Charles de Gaulle in the interests of a centralized nation-state illuminates the sociopolitical context in which Senghor and Césaire were obliged to function politically after 1945. Somewhat later in the chapter he examines self-determination without state sovereignty, focusing on the political projects of Giuseppe Mazzini and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon. Both provided a theoretical basis for national freedom within a supranational polity. Had Wilder read Césaire’s *La Martinique telle qu’elle est*, which dates from 1979, he could have cited the mayor of Fort-de-France to excellent effect: “In the great debate that opposes Marx to Proudhon, I am, on this precise point, on the side of Proudhon and Bakunin rather than that of Marx”.¹ Unfortunately for Wilder, Césaire’s lecture was little known before 2013. John Patrick Walsh’s *Free and French in the Caribbean* (reviewed in *NWIG* 89–1&2) was also published in 2013; it covers in much greater detail the same ground that Wilder is concerned with in his discussion of Césaire’s essay on *Toussaint Louverture* (1961) and his *La tragédie du Roi Christophe* (1963).

In Chapter 8 Wilder reads Senghor’s dramatic poem “Chaka” as a tragic sacrifice on a christic model. Perhaps treatment of Senghor and Césaire in separate chapters prevented him from recognizing the cogency of readings of Césaire’s *La tragédie du Roi Christophe* as a cultural tragedy² that shares structural elements with his essay on Toussaint Louverture. Chapter 9, “Decolonization and Postnational Democracy” brings the previous analyses together. Wilder, rightly claiming that “Senghor and Césaire are ... more likely to be invoked instrumentally than read closely” (p. 258) intends his book to be a “contribution to decolonize intellectual history, to deprovincialize African and Antillean writing, to deterritorialize social thought, and to globalize critical theory” (p. 258). The task is monumental; he’s made a good start.

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1 Aimé Césaire in A.J. Arnold et al. (eds.), 2013, *Poésie, Théâtre, Essais et Discours* (Paris: CNRS-Éditions), p. 1579.

2 See Césaire 2013, pp. 987–99.