Review Article

Césaire's Negritude To “Africa” and Back

A. James Arnold

Department of French, University of Virginia,
Charlottesville VA 22904, U.S.A.
aja@virginia.edu

Lilian Pestre de Almeida, *Césaire hors frontières: Poétique, intertextualité et littérature comparée*. Würzburg, Germany: Königshausen & Neumann, 2015. 402 p. (Paper €49.80)

Ernstpeter Ruhe, *Une œuvre mobile: Aimé Césaire dans les pays germanophones (1950–2015)*. Würzburg, Germany: Königshausen & Neumann, 2015. 293 pp. (Paper €38.00)

Aimé Césaire's version of Negritude ideology originated as a French West Indian student's response to the rise of fascism in Europe, as the recent French edition of his literary works has demonstrated. (See my general introduction to Aimé Césaire in *Poésie, Théâtre, Essais et Discours* [Paris: CNRS-Éditions, 2014], pp. 15–23.) During World War II he explored the potential of surrealist metaphors for reactivating a collective unconscious that he imagined as African and accessible by the descendants of slaves in the Americas. Between 1941 and 1944, Césaire received considerable support, in the form of access to publishing outlets, from surrealists dispersed throughout the western hemisphere. His *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, published on the eve of the war in an avant-garde Paris magazine, was first issued as a book in Havana in January 1943 under the title *Retorno al país natal*, translated by Lydia Cabrera and illustrated by Wifredo Lam. The first edition of the poem in French was

published in a bilingual edition in New York four years later; the cosmopolitan Franco-German poet Yvan Goll and Lionel Abel (who later edited *Partisan Review*) provided the English translation under the title *Memorandum on My Martinique*. It is important to note that this edition, which remained essentially unknown and unstudied until 2014, referenced Martinique, Haiti, and the Caribbean primarily. André Breton's preface, "A Great Negro Poet," did much to establish Césaire as a powerful new voice in the surrealist vein. The second edition in French, markedly different from the New York text, was published just two months later in March 1947, still prefaced by Breton. Since the 1960s, when Césaire began to be read and studied in the context of decolonization in Africa, the conviction has remained strong that his work had, from its beginnings in 1930s Paris, an African orientation. How that shift occurred is still not well understood.

Two new books by senior Césaire specialists demonstrate how the 1956 *Présence Africaine* edition of Césaire's long poem served the interests of formerly colonized élites intent on wresting the discourse of dominance away from the former colonial powers. Lilian Pestre de Almeida focuses her first chapter on this problem. Mário Pinto de Andrade (1928–1990), who founded the Angolan Communist Party in 1955 and the Movement for the Liberation of Angola the following year, and was senior editor at *Présence Africaine* from 1955 to 1958, reviewed the proofs of *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*. He may also have been responsible for adding the label "definitive edition" to the title page. According to Pestre de Almeida, who was given access to the annotated typescript and the third set of proofs by Andrade's family, the Angolan poet-politician intervened at the textual level primarily in the preface by Petar Guberina, a linguist at the University of Zagreb who had studied with Césaire at the École Normale Supérieure in the mid-1930s. It is impossible to know precisely who decided to exclude André Breton's essay "A Great Negro Poet" from the *Présence Africaine* edition of the *Cahier*, but the reason is clear enough. By prefacing the two 1947 editions Breton had placed a surrealist stamp on the poem. He had also commented on Césaire's editorial activities in Martinique during the Second World War. Guberina's preface, although undistinguished as a commentary on the poem, was substituted to position the *Cahier* as an ideological cornerstone of African independence movements. This purpose was furthered by a new publicity page printed on the back cover, which Pestre de Almeida has included in her study. Since the publicity page refers to Césaire in the third person, it is reasonable to assume that it was initially drafted by Andrade. Earlier editions of the *Cahier*, it told potential purchasers, "were far from satisfying the needs of the African public. Is it known that these cantos whose style and vocabulary discourage the good will of so many European readers ... [and that]

youths, sometimes scarcely literate, but ardent and hungry, recite entire passages of it in French Africa?" (my translation). One might well wonder where and how these scarcely literate youths acquired a long poem that was not sold on the African continent prior to 1956. Be that as it may, the hortatory purpose of the packaging of this edition is self-evident.

From 1956 onward Césaire was meant to be considered an ideologically driven poet who could be positioned as the standard bearer of the anticolonial movement in the Francophone world. The label "definitive edition" served to bury the two previous texts with their greater focus on the Caribbean. Pestre de Almeida has usefully provided the modifications made by Césaire on the third proofs of the poem. At some point in the preparation of the 1956 edition Césaire added a number of new strophes that stress the struggles of contemporary laborers working in a racist colonial system, whereas earlier texts had focused primarily on the plight of slaves prior to abolition in 1848. Pestre de Almeida's analysis of the cuts made on the third proofs show a distinct reorientation away from the poem's French Caribbean origins and toward its new African readership. The cuts also lessen the erotic and spiritual force of the earlier texts.¹ She posits a fourth set of proofs, now lost, on the basis of discrepancies between the third set and the published text. Pestre de Almeida's book is presently the only study to include this editorial material, which advances our understanding of a fundamental ideological shift. Her book also answers, implicitly but convincingly, a question that bedeviled Ernstpeter Ruhe's analysis of a hybrid German-language text of the *Cahier* that Césaire worked on with his translator Janheinz Jahn. Why did Césaire not use this text, retranslated into French, for the *Présence Africaine* edition of 1956? The Césaire-Jahn correspondence, so helpful in other respects, is silent on this question. It seems inescapable that Césaire's collaboration with Mário de Andrade would have convinced him that, whereas Jahn had heightened the mythopoetic qualities of his German edition, these same qualities needed to be minimized for his new Francophone African audience.²

Ruhe's book demonstrates how a very similar repositioning of Negritude was carried out in the German-speaking world from the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s. Jahn's translations of Césaire's poetry and first two plays had an impact in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland that contributed to a sharply "African-

1 Readers with basic French will find a summary listing of both the cuts and the new material in my 2008 article, *Beyond Postcolonial Césaire: Reading Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* historically, *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 44(3):258–75.

2 Janheinz Jahn (trans.), 1962, *Zurück ins Land der Geburt / Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (Frankfurt a/m: Insel).

ized" reception of his work. Jahn, who was an experienced theater director as well as a journalist, also published several books that placed Césaire's version of Negritude at the center of "Neo-African literature," as he termed all the diasporic literary products of the western hemisphere. (See his *Geschichte der Neoafrikanischen Literatur* [Düsseldorf-Köln: E. Diederichs Verlag, 1966], which was translated into French in 1969 as *Manuel de littérature néo-africaine du XVI^e siècle à nos jours, de l'Afrique à l'Amérique* [Paris: Resma].) However, the work that did most to propagate Jahn's view of diasporic cultures as African survivals was his 1958 volume *Muntu: Umrisse der neoafrikanischen Kultur* (Düsseldorf: E. Diederichs), translated with the same lead title into English in 1960 (New York: Grove Press) and French in 1961 (Paris: Seuil). Jahn's title refers to the unified view of "African" culture propounded by Placide Tempels, OFM, in his 1945 book *La Philosophie bantoue* (Elisabethville: Lovania), which was intended for Catholic missionaries. I list these titles to indicate their importance in the 1960s, although the methodological basis for their universalizing thesis has long been discredited.

Jahn's collaboration with Aimé Césaire began in 1953 and continued through 1964. One might say that the German translator was, with respect to Césaire's poetry, "more Catholic than the Pope." He wrote to his Munich editor in 1953 that claims for the Martinican poet's surrealism were "fundamentally false: all the 'incomprehensible' passages refer concretely to authentic African traditional concepts that one must know" (in Ruhe, p. 68; my translation). Jahn considered that his efforts to translate Césaire into German would avoid the wrong-headed "European constructions" (pp. 69–70) that characterized efforts to see him as a surrealist (Breton) or an existentialist (Sartre in Senghor's 1948 *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre*). That Jahn's intention pleased Césaire is evidenced by their close collaboration over a number of years. Their correspondence is marked by highly unusual (for Césaire) definitions of terms in his poetry and his early theater that the German-language reader would not recognize. Césaire granted permission for Jahn to fiddle with texts such as the *Cahier* or the lyrical tragedy *Et les chiens se taisaient* (*Und dei Hunde schwiegen*) by introducing extraneous material (Ruhe, pp. 139–72). On April 20, 1963 Césaire appeared with Jahn at the theater in Hanover that staged a version of *Und die Hunde schwiegen*. Jahn had reworked the text to such an extent that Césaire considered it a joint production.

Ruhe is to be congratulated for his very detailed presentation of the staging of Césaire's Haitian play *La Tragédie du roi Christophe* in French in Vienna, Salzburg, Berlin, Venice, and Brussels. Francophone specialists of Césaire have considered this production, directed by Jean-Marie Serreau but funded by a German consortium, Europa Studio, primarily as a financial and aesthetic

fiasco. The role of the Haitian mambo Mathilda Beauvoir, who played a vaudou priestess—absent from the published versions of the play—added a balletic spectacle that she herself considered of ritual importance. Césaire, for his part, specified that Christophe's tragic end results from the conflict in his spirit between European (Catholic) and African (Vaudou) belief systems: "The vaudou religion, imported from ancient Guinea, cruelly persecuted by the Christians, had become the incarnation of the self, of the non-European ... [Christophe's] effort to reconcile Africa and Europe costs him all his energy" (Ruhe, pp. 199–200, my translation). What matters here in a Caribbean perspective is that Césaire constructed his version of Negritude on a bipolar model (Africa vs. Europe) that excluded any version of cultural *métissage*. Thus, he considered Haitian vaudou to be an African religion rather than a result of the blending of various strains (nations) into a syncretic cultural expression of slave society in Saint-Domingue. This aspect of Césaire's Negritude posits something like M.G. Smith's 1965 plural society with no mechanism for eventual creolization. Consequently, local cultural products are seen as African survivals rather than as Caribbean creations. Césaire's convictions in this crucial matter were formed initially by his reading of the 1936 French translation of Leo Frobenius's *Histoire de la civilisation africaine*. Despite his adherence to the French Communist Party from 1945 to 1956, Césaire remained loyal to a neo-romantic ethnography that posited an "Ethiopian" culture frequently referenced in his work. As it happens, this distortion of Caribbean cultural processes played directly into the imaginary construct that Europeans used to mediate their understanding of the emergence of new African nation-states that rapidly replaced European colonies. By the mid-1960s Césaire's Negritude was "African" in their minds and in their representations of cultural events such as the staging of Césaire's Haitian play in Austria, Germany, Italy, and Belgium.

Pestre de Almeida's extended commentary on Césaire's relations with Brazil, where she taught for many years, illustrates the Martinican's views on "Africa" in the diaspora. Brazil became for Césaire a privileged culture, as though it were a condensate of Africanness. In his recollection of a visit to Brasilia in 1963 he wrote: "In Brasilia ... I visited the shanty-towns around the city inhabited by the migrant laborers who came from all over Brazil to work on the new capital: it was the very image of an African city, it was Africa that I had just left" (in Pestre de Almeida, p. 202, my translation). Contrariwise, "In Martinique you see only the cultural debris of a lost synthesis that is to be found elsewhere, that exists only in Africa" (p. 203). The version of Negritude that crossed the Atlantic from East to West in the 1960s is the result of all the cultural reworking, for more or less specific ends at the time of the decolonization of Africa, of Aimé Césaire's poetry of the 1940s and 1950s, as well as his *Discourse on Colonialism*. The 1955

edition of the *Discourse*, in Joan Pinkham's translation for the Monthly Review Press, became the most widely cited of Césaire's titles in the social sciences. Still today it conditions readings of Césaire's early poetry, to the detriment of the latter.

When I delivered a paper on the contemporary French West Indies at the Latin America Institute of the Free University in Berlin in 2001, a Jamaican in the audience expressed astonishment that French West Indians still talked about the construction of national identity in terms of Negritude. A 2012 article by W.F.S. Miles (Schizophrenic Island, fifty years after Fanon: Martinique, the pent-up "paradise," *International Journal of Francophone Studies* 15.1:9–33) discusses the problem in a well-referenced social science context. Once literary scholars come to realize that Negritude was, and remains down to the present, an epiphenomenon of the curious form of decolonization that tied the former French Caribbean colonies ever tighter to the former colonial power, we will better understand both its inner dynamic and its sociopolitical function.