Aimé Césaire, *Resolutely Black: Conversations with Françoise Vergès*. Oxford: Polity, 2020. xxiii + 93 pp. (Paper US\$19.95)

Françoise Vergès has usefully updated her 2005 French edition of these conversations with a new ten-page preface and a substantial postface that's nearly as long as the main text. The Polity edition provides readers with valuable insights into the state of France's overseas departments, which Aimé Césaire helped to create in 1946 with the assistance of Raymond Vergès, Françoise's grandfather. There is an easy familiarity of tone in the conversations owing, no doubt, to this political and cultural proximity between Vergès's Réunion and Césaire's Martinique.

When she undertook this project in 2004, Françoise Vergès was justifiably distressed that Césaire's reputation had been relegated, in the press and in the general culture of France, to the moment between the mid-1950s and the mid-1960s—a period during which he was identified with his powerful denunciation of colonialism. The conversations on family, early education in Martinique, and then his years in Paris, provide nothing that hasn't been available in French for decades. Now this little volume condenses the essential points into bite-size nuggets for Anglophone readers.

For me, Césaire's most valuable insight concerns those things that differentiate the French West Indies from the former British colonies. Since the British never taught their colonial subjects that they were, in some sense, tropical Brits, citizens of Dominica or Trinidad (for example) "can't say they are British, 'because nobody can be an Englishman.' Nobody can be English, unless you are born in England" (p. 12). Outside the Francophone world, one needs to grasp that "the French believed in universality and, for them, there was only one civilization: their own" (p. 12). Césaire clarifies in these conversations that *Négritude*, the label that has clung to him like a second skin, was born of the painful struggle to throw off the artificial identification of the colonial intellectual with the culture of the colonizer. That process was powerfully embodied in the structure of Césaire's long poem *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* (translated by Matthew B. Smith, following Gregson Davis, as *Journal of a Homecoming*) and also underlay the violence of Césaire's rhetoric in the essay *Discourse on Colonialism*.

Resolutely Black's salient contribution to a better understanding of Aimé Césaire's place in twentieth-century intellectual and artistic history is to be found in the central section of the conversations, where Vergès draws him out concerning the relationship between his poetry and his political essays. It is still true today that appreciation of Césaire falls into two camps that do not communicate easily with one another: assessment of his political action, on the one

hand, and admiration for his contributions to poetry and drama, on the other. Although Césaire always claimed that “my poetry certainly contains whatever lies deepest inside my self” (p. 25), his political commentators, in the main, read his *Notebook* as political statement. The extended quotation from Césaire’s late poem “Lagoonal Calendar” (pp. 25–26) expresses elegiacally his regret at having invented “imaginary ancestors” as part of the creation of a heroic *Négritude* in the 1930s. The litany of reduced and restricted residences, introduced by “i inhabit,” concludes with this bitter assessment of his place in history: “the atmospheric, no historic pressure / increases immeasurably my plight / even as it changes with beauty my words.”

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