Césaire’s Negritude
To “Africa” and Back

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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]