



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

This is a repository copy of *Unthinking philosophy: Aimé Césaire, poetry, and the politics of Western knowledge*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/164876/>

Version: Accepted Version

Article:

Allen-Paisant, J orcid.org/0000-0002-5705-0522 (2021) *Unthinking philosophy: Aimé Césaire, poetry, and the politics of Western knowledge*. *Atlantic Studies*, 18 (2). pp. 193-216. ISSN 1478-8810

<https://doi.org/10.1080/14788810.2020.1816129>

© 2020 Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group. This is an author produced version of an article published in *Atlantic Studies*. Uploaded in accordance with the publisher's self-archiving policy.

Reuse

Items deposited in White Rose Research Online are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved unless indicated otherwise. They may be downloaded and/or printed for private study, or other acts as permitted by national copyright laws. The publisher or other rights holders may allow further reproduction and re-use of the full text version. This is indicated by the licence information on the White Rose Research Online record for the item.

Takedown

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing eprints@whiterose.ac.uk including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



eprints@whiterose.ac.uk
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>

Unthinking philosophy: Aimé Césaire, poetry, and the politics of Western knowledge

Jason Allen-Paisant*

School of English, University of Leeds, Leeds UK

Abstract

Energised by his concern with the place of poetry *in* and *as* philosophy, Césaire's work is engaged in thinking knowledge, a praxis which becomes fundamental to his critique of the ideology of imperialism. The concern with poetry as magical thinking and the question of what it contributes to philosophy, and more particularly, to epistemology, takes on pressing importance in the light of colonialism, whose domination is predicated on the hegemonic disruption and erasure of indigenous knowledges. Through his radical re-evaluation of Western epistemology, Césaire shows that what is at stake in African/diasporic, and indeed planetary, futures, is a radical reframing of the category of philosophy and the possibility of an alternative relation to objects. The issue of coloniality's imbrication in a Western ontology of objects takes on amplified importance in the light of current capitalist crises, including ecological collapse.

Keywords: Aimé Césaire; knowledge; decolonization; possession; ontology; epistemology; race; Enlightenment; Négritude; poetry

In this essay, I examine the interplay between poetry and philosophy, and the functioning of poetry *as* philosophy in Aimé Césaire's work. To show that the two are not characterized by rigid borders or categories moves the study of Césaire's thought in a new direction. I emphasize

* Email: J.Allen1@leeds.ac.uk

that, in his work, the philosophical takes root in the poetic in a way that returns philosophy to the realm of the magical and the sensual, from which the epistemology of the Western subject¹ has dislodged it. Previous scholarship has pointed to the way Césaire's work challenges the subject-based ontology of Western philosophy. Annette Smith and Clayton Eshelman allude to his notion of consciousness "in which the human mind and the world of objects embrace each other harmoniously."² Other scholars have highlighted rhythm as a "participation" in life (over and against the ideological distortions of European ethnography);³ and Léopold Senghor, commenting extensively on Césaire's poetry, speaks about rhythm's facilitation of what he calls "embrace-reason," an effort of intuition that overcomes the analytical barrier between the human and the object in space.⁴ However, I want to show that, in linking the fate of poetry to the fate of philosophy in modernity, Césaire shows that the fate of poetry bears certain stakes for the survival and flourishing of life on Earth. His work extends Horkheimer's and Adorno's theses on philosophy and European imperialism by highlighting the complicity of bourgeois philosophy in the historical and ongoing Western domination of the globe and in the privileges of imperialism.

Consequently, this essay also expands the work of others who have enlisted Césaire in the articulation of a newly insurgent "decolonial" thought, showing how his work serves as a "decolonial" praxis *avant la lettre* (Nelson Maldonado-Torres, Ramón Grosfoguel). My approach in this essay centres Césaire's thought around the epistemic dimensions of poetry and its relationship to objects and shows how these challenge the governmentality and biopolitical management of life attendant to Western epistemology. I examine a set of epistemological viewpoints that take shape around poetry in its necessary relationship with Being and humanness and argue that these ethical questions are central to his understanding of what Négritude was to be. My project, therefore, involves a detailed consideration of Césaire's work that resituates Négritude as a critique of the politics of Western philosophy. Césaire's

understanding of “poetry” should gradually become clear – for now, suffice it to say that it is *not* the idea of a solitary bourgeois preoccupation.

Decolonization and the problem of philosophy

Césaire repeatedly stressed that colonial capitalism and its inevitable crises are a problem of Western philosophy. Works such as the “Discourse on Colonialism,” the “Letter to Maurice Thorez,” and the “Discourse on African Art,” seek to unravel and defamiliarize the Enlightenment and the institution of Western philosophy, to show their relationship with Euro-American imperialism. The importance of foregrounding poetry as a locus of epistemic significations lies in Césaire’s invocation of its power in an anticolonial counter-imaginary. This is because poetry constitutes, for him, a mode of knowledge antithetical to Enlightenment and its logics of domination. This viewpoint is significant for an understanding of Négritude, since coloniality grows natively from Enlightenment’s logic of domination and the currents that prepared it, as Césaire himself demonstrates, and as scholars such as Sylvia Wynter and Walter D. Mignolo have subsequently argued.⁵ In Césaire’s work, poetry as knowledge proposes a mode of knowing the world that might transcend the epistemic hegemony of the Enlightenment.

Césaire draws on Nietzsche in “Poésie et connaissance,” because of Nietzsche’s denunciation of the Western equation of knowledge with objectivity, a Cartesian epistemology that underpins science in the Age of Enlightenment and the intellectual currents that emerged as a result of it (as developments or reactions). In *Beyond Good and Evil* and *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche argues that Plato begins the trouble of associating ideas/concepts to static/dead entities, insofar as he, Plato, viewed the idea or concept as eternal and unchanging rather than subject to flux. Plato, Nietzsche contends, throws “drab, cold, gray nets of concepts over the brightly colored whirlwind of the senses – the rabble of the senses, as [he] said.”⁶ This

is one of the strands of thought that seems important to Césaire, since in his interview with Jacqueline Leiner he reflects on the centrality of abstract identity to Western metaphysics, and, indeed, to the epistemic processes that underpin colonialism.

Césaire thus places the modern Western concept of identity (built on the philosophical foundations laid by Plato) within its Western rationalistic moorings. Moreover, from an epistemological standpoint, he views this “identity” as implicated in the history of colonialism. The critique of Cartesian subjectivity, and the need for a form of selfhood distanced from the Western philosophical lineage, became compelling for Césaire in light of the historical trauma and violence of slavery. The ontological disturbance of slavery and racism induced him to find a “non-colonial” worldview (a more liquid conception of time, place/space, things, and persons) that would transcend the epistemological paradigms of Western modernity.

Césaire has more to say about the other within the self than Romanticism’s Western-centred spiritualism allowed. Understanding selfhood in Césaire’s work requires thinking beyond the modern Western construal of self as separate from phenomena. For Western rationalism and science, history, progress, even knowledge itself, require distinction from the particulars of the world. As sources of the self in Western modernity, they construe phenomena as other. For instance, historiography, as a modern concept, developed in the eighteenth century and was isomorphic with the idea of marking a clear line between the self and the past, the object of its experience.⁷ However, imperialist contact configures a different idea of selfhood for those othered by it, since it disrupts the illusion of being other to the past. The phenomenon itself becomes present to the body as something that cannot be worked out, a moment that cannot be exorcised. Therefore, to understand what “History” means in Black Africa and its diaspora requires us to embrace a different conception of the life, place, and status of the dead. It leads us to understand the connection to the dead as part of an ontology of vital forces that sustains life in an environment that seeks to strip the human being of its rooted connections.

Importantly, separateness from phenomena marked a boundary between Europe and the savage. It conscribes a zone of discourses which finds within its boundaries “the practice of a *possession*,”⁸ for, as Laurent Dubreuil puts it:

The colonial empire is described and controlled as the land of enchantment – of magicians, phantoms, spirits, ecstasies. Beyond the effective appropriation of resources, of labor and of bodies, the description of savages as possessed, and their transformation by texts into magical primitives, serve the illusory design of civilisation – that fallacious process that would banish the supernatural while trying to propagate its practice outside the closed field of Europe.⁹

Dubreuil’s summation is as terse as it is vigorous: “The colonial *phrase* of possession organizes imperial politics.”¹⁰ For that reason, for Lévy-Bruhl, “participation,” the mark of the “primitive mentality,”¹¹ is “prelogical.” Further, he argues, the fact that “the mentality of primitives does [...] more than imagine its object: it possesses it and is possessed by it,”¹² makes it inferior to the Western way of functioning: the “law of contradiction”¹³ makes it impossible for a thing to be both itself and other than itself. In similar terms, Césaire, in a scathing criticism of Roger Caillois and his article “Illusions à rebours,”¹⁴ denounces the doctrine that “only the West can think; that at the limits of the Western world begins the dark kingdom of primitive thought, which, dominated by the notion of participation, incapable of logic, is the very typology of false thought.”¹⁵

In contrast to the Western subject conceived in terms of separateness, the poetry of Négritude emphasizes the intertwinement of human consciousness and the natural world. Its “recovery” of the primitive operates wholly beyond *primitivism* in the Romantic sense and attendant colonialist appropriations. Césaire’s poetry envisions, not some facile “time before,”

as some critics have erroneously characterized it, describing it as a “pre-modern”¹⁶ poetics which the work of an Édouard Glissant would supersede, but an *alternative temporality*. Such an alternative temporality is not a chronological one, but a temporality of the sacred, that works against the predations of “colonial time,” insofar as colonialism’s cannibalistic social and cultural appropriation of labour and land constitutes a particular view of temporality. And though Senghor has been charged with “romanticising Blackness,” I contend that this is an essential aspect of his work. For both Senghor and Césaire, poetry restores a more ancient sense of time physicalised in dwelling practices oriented towards inter-subjectivity, rather than mastery and domination. The “intuitive reason” native to poetry “integrates the subject into the object,” Senghor says, so that “the subject and object identify with each other, which is the true mode of knowledge – the most efficient means.”¹⁷ Poetry, then, reflects a state of consciousness in which there is no external world outside of us, separate from us. This idea lies at the core of Césaire’s conception of art, and, in particular, of poetry.

In Césaire’s poetry, the metamorphosis of the elements allows for continual traffic between the landscape of the world and that of the mind, offering the poet ways of figuring the self as co-natural with the world, and giving form to a mode of thought that positions human life within the flesh of nature. The descriptions move beyond – or rather, through – the material, suggesting that that is the only way to connect with and see the world, to see below the surface, to see how things connect with unsuspecting things, and the movement of life that links everything. In the poems, the human subject is not dominant, masterful and fixed, but fluid and moving, like the world, of whose life it is a part. The poems imagine all the things that the self becomes. Nothing stands on its own; everything can turn into something else. The vegetal, the animal, and the mineral are internal to each other. Every piece of nature is layered and inexhaustible; every element is more than itself.

Pour moi qu'on me serre la jambe

je rends une forêt de lianes

Qu'on me pendre par les ongles

je pisse un chameau portant un pape et je m'évanouis en une

rangée de ficus qui très proprement enserrent l'intrus et l'étranglent dans un beau

balancement tropical

La faiblesse de beaucoup d'hommes est qu'ils ne savent pas devenir ni une pierre ni

un arbre

Pour moi je m'installe parfois des mèches soufrées entre mes doigts de boa pour

l'unique plaisir de m'enflammer en feuilles neuves de poinsettias tout le soir

rouges et verts tremblant au vent

*comme dans ma gorge notre aurore.*¹⁸

As for me should they grab my leg

I vomit up a forest of lianas

Should they hang me by my fingernails

I piss a camel bearing a painted bunting and vanish in a row

of fig trees that quite neatly encircle the intruder and strangle him in a

beautiful tropical balancing act

The weakness of many men is that they do not know how to become either

a stone or a tree

As for me I sometimes fit sulphurous wicks between my boa fingers for the sole

pleasure of bursting into a flame of new poinsettia leaves all evening long

the reds and greens trembling in the wind

like our dawn in my throat.

In the relationship of the human mind and body to nature, the model of the self consists of manifold affinities between existing things, and this self is articulated around a principle of reflexivity of human and animal/mineral/vegetal and *vice versa*. Parts of the body are erased in the process of metamorphosis, giving way to new and surprising features and figures: “dear head I lose you again I lose my memory I don’t/ recover it don’t give a damn since right where I’m mutilated other limbs grow back”.¹⁹ Césaire plays with conceptions of the human/animal, human/vegetal threshold: “admirable wound I lose my blood I lose my breath I lost my head and/ find it again at the outfall of the digestion of great boa constrictors”.²⁰ “Losing [the] head” is philosophically emblematic of the desire to de-centre the “I”, of the human being as always the receiver or host of others. From *Les Armes Miraculeuses* (1946) to *moi, luminaire...* (1982), Césaire’s poetry constantly articulates a state of humanness in which the “I” is no longer separate from the external world, in which the animist manifestation of the spirit of things breaks down the dichotomy between Mind and the mass of creatures in the world.

Far from an idealism or an aesthetic devoid of an ethical burden, the value of the primitive lies in reconnection and *ancestralization*. But ancestralization is not just *a particularity of Blackness*: it is a rebuttal of the Enlightenment *cum* colonial ontology of the subject. Césaire’s work displaces the Enlightenment’s radical autonomy of the individual with a radical entanglement of consciousness: memory in his work implies that the human body is entangled with matter, that consciousness exceeds the body and its limits. His problem, like René Ménil’s, was the isolation to which the Enlightenment logic “savagely condemns thoughts and things.”²¹ Césaire and the *Tropiques* writers’ gesture was at once, and by the same token, a revolt against Western epistemology and an affirmation of African and Afro-Caribbean world views, cosmogonies, most notably a world-language in which “Everything is in everything.”²² The underlying question is “what do we [the poets of Négritude, the writers and thinkers of

Tropiques] miss by neglecting or losing (touch with) the African world, an African way of viewing, and living with, the world?” A question which, at the outset, seemed purely a question of material freedom and of an abstract notion of “identity,” reveals itself to be profoundly ontological. The quest for Africa and for rootedness in an African cosmology is not a sterile identitarian gesture but the quest for a different way of viewing the world, and the quest for a different *history* of knowledge. Césaire’s and the *Tropiques* writers’ restless questioning of the Western episteme could be summed up in the following question: Is there a different account of knowledge to that of the West, to the Platonic lineage of philosophy which has been imposed on us through our colonial education?

Their questioning has everything to do with an “intense awareness of a community of the living and the dead”²³ in the Afro-Caribbean cosmogony, with the plant-man or plant-woman, who abandon themselves to a world which pulsates infinitely and in every dimension; the idea of a self that is older than the body and will outlast it. This is the world Aimé Césaire articulates, against the realism of capitalism, and he found this world in his African ancestral heritage.

The *saisissement*, or against “death metaphysics”

The idea of considering subjecthood from a point of view of seizure, of a kind of consciousness that exceeds the individual, can be traced back to Césaire’s early fascination with Leo Frobenius and his idea of the *saisissement*. Inspired by Frobenius, he viewed civilization as manifested primarily in the space of seizure or possession, understood as a primordial instinct, a sort of convulsion beyond individuality and rationality. For Césaire, civilization was lived above or through human beings, as distinct from the Enlightenment *cum* capitalist schema of civilization as human progress.²⁴

His engagement with Frobenius’s ideas about seizure, primitive culture, and civilisation, are evident from the first (1939) edition of the *Cahier*, where he contrasts seizure by the world,

associated with pre-colonial African culture, with the decadence of European civilisation. The “omniscient and naive conquerors” that are the European colonising powers are contrasted with African abandon to the “breath,” “waters,” and “sacred fire” of the world:

ils s'abandonnent, saisis, à l'essence de toute chose
ignorants des surfaces mais saisis par le mouvement de toute chose
insoucieux de dompter, mais jouant le jeu du monde
véritablement les fils aînés du monde
poreux à tous les souffles du monde
aire fraternelle de tous les souffles du monde
lit sans drain de toutes les eaux du monde
étincelle du feu sacré du monde
chair de la chair du monde palpitant du mouvement même du monde !²⁵

They abandon themselves, possessed, to the essence of all things, ignorant of surfaces but seized [*saisis*] by the movement of all things, unconcerned with mastery, but playing the game of the world truly the elder sons of the world porous to every breath of the world drainless channel of all the waters of the world spark of the sacred fire of the world flesh of the flesh of the world throbbing with the very movement of the world.

In “seizure by the essence of things” we hear the echo of Frobenius’s description of the primitive consciousness in *Histoire de la civilisation africaine* (1936), a text which, along with

the later *Le Destin des civilisations* (1940), was instrumental in providing a mythical foundation for Césaire's conception of Négritude. Frobenius's "*die Besenssenheit*," rendered by his French translators as *saisissement*, relates, as Senghor points out,²⁶ to "possession". Given that concepts by means of which reality is mastered are the eventual expressions of pre-existing attitudes towards life (*Lebensgefühl*), everything that can be interpreted as a guiding idea or principle first appears as an involuntary and misunderstood "seizure," a kind of powerful emotional grasp of life which mechanical and technological civilisations suppress or obscure, but which are intensely evidenced in primitive cultures that seek to conjure the forces of nature.²⁷ For Césaire, banishing the "sacred fire," emblem of ancient Greek primitive devotion to Earth and its spirits, from consciousness, becomes a deception to which "conquering" European civilisation has fallen prey, hence the poet's deploration of a decadence to which this civilisation has been blinded: "Pity on our omniscient and naïve conquerors!"

Building on the work of Frobenius, Senghor also views the Black African conception of art as "the sense of life" or "the perfection of the essence of life" which comes about when the human being is "moved [...] to 'act', to relive the Other – plant, animal, star, etc. – first to dance it, then to sculpt it, paint it, sing it."²⁸ For Senghor, art, as the "essence of life" – its "rhythm" – is associated, at least in the traditional West African societies he describes, to the "'possession' of the ego by the Other and the reaction of the ego to the Other".²⁹ The convergence with Césaire's views on poetry and possession are striking, if unsurprising.³⁰

Between the first publication of the *Cahier* and the speech "La Martinique telle qu'elle est," delivered forty years later (in 1979), Césaire would return repeatedly to this idea of the *saisissement*. He takes up the concern in the 1945 text "L'Appel au magicien":

The true civilisations are poetic seizures [*saisissements*]: seizure of the stars, of the sun, of the plant, of the animal, seizure of the round globe, of the rain, of the light, of the

numbers, seizure of life, seizure of death. Between the temple of the sun, between the mask, between the Indian, between the African, and us, too much distance. Too much distance has been created between things and us.³¹

In “L’Appel au magicien,” a series of twenty aphorisms in which he summarizes the essence of his poetics for the Martinican reader, Césaire refers specifically to the shamanic “seizure” as a paradigm of mental and cultural operation, taking up the theme in relation to civilisation, and to myth, its “manifestation.”³² The shamanic seizure is the guarantor of “civilization” and a way out of alienation because it is a “participation” in the life force; it offers a new attitude to the “desecrated” world that surrounds us, restoring to it “its dignity and mystery, its radiant force.”³³ The allusion to shamanic practice is unambiguous here, as Césaire refers to the object in the natural world as “The Great Intercessor”:³⁴ every living and non-living thing, this surprising phrase suggests, is endowed with spirit. “The true ideal,” declares Césaire, “is the ‘possessed’ woman,”³⁵ as he associates poetry with the shamanic, prophetic spirit unleashed by possession, and presents it as “the only avowed refuge of the mythical spirit.”³⁶ The young Césaire, fascinated by the writings of Frobenius and Nietzsche and with the cultic, pre-classical world of the ancient Greeks, here affirms the kinship between poetry, ecstasy, and shamanism. In a modern world stripped of myth and reduced to the mere factual, surface reality of things, he believes that the poet serves as the keeper of the shamanic instinct for the “gnarled primal unity of the natural world” to which all mankind was attuned before the “secondary dispersion of life.”³⁷ The poet’s ability to connect with this primal unity allows her, him, or them to “re-establish a personal, fresh, binding and magical contact with the world [*les choses*].”³⁸ Throughout the decades of his career, Césaire remained remarkably consistent in his thoughts about civilisation as mobilisation of “emotional energies”³⁹ through human contact with an enspirited natural world. In a speech on the future of Martinique delivered not far from Fort-

de-France in 1979,⁴⁰ he passionately invoked this idea in arguing for the flourishing of a Martinican culture that could be “the counterweight to the forces of aggression and alienation contained in the European culture which surrounds us on all sides.”⁴¹ “The masses, everywhere,” Césaire states, “do not take the stage or act until they are seized and mobilized by MYTH.”⁴²

The interview with Leiner foregrounds a connection between the primitive civilisations of Rome, Greece, and the Mediterranean with the culture of Vodou. Césaire associates primitivity with a belief in the sacredness of Earth manifested most intensely among “all agrarian peoples [who] – in Rome, in Greece, in the Mediterranean – have had their propitiatory divinities, divinities whom they needed to have on their side.”⁴³ Describing the poet in “the time of Bacchus” as a seer or “vates,” Césaire situates the appearance of poetry in ancient Greece within the Earth-honouring rites of that world, even as he compares ancient Greek and Roman “propitiatory divinities”⁴⁴ with the primitive cults of ancient African societies and their new-world mutations, including Haitian Vodou. For him, the elements that pointed to spirit possession as the original nature of poetical inspiration in ancient Greek life must have included the ecstatic worship of Dionysus (which Plato associates with tragic poetry), the close relation perceived between *manía*, “ritual madness,” and *mantiké*, “prophecy” in ancient Greek life,⁴⁵ and the terminology by which ancient writers, including Plato, related spirit possession (or “divine power”) to the arts, and specifically to poetry (see Pl. *Phdr.* 244a-c; Pl. *Ion* 533c-536d).⁴⁶ Césaire notes that the idea of the poet as “vates,” as “seer” (*devin*), as prophet,⁴⁷ establishes an attunement to the primitive, and thus to a “seizure by the essence of things” that implies possession by the sacred spirits of the Earth.

As such, Césaire saw poetry and civilisation as part of a shared concern, namely, the flourishing of humanity. His political vision was a poetic one, since he believed human civilisation to be impossible without poetry, the impulse that places the human *within* the object

through a kind of “sympathy.”⁴⁸ In other words, poetry was inseparable from the overall denotation of “art.”⁴⁹ Significantly, he did not consider the poet, that “very ancient and very new being,”⁵⁰ to be only, or essentially, African. On the one hand, the fact of poetry as a form of knowledge, as a vital sensitivity to the essence of being and the cosmos, as evidenced through Black Atlantic music, dance, orality, and languages, needed to be affirmed, given the history of violence and domination exerted by the Western world against African knowledge systems.⁵¹ On the other hand, Césaire did not hesitate to relate this “ancient being,” to certain Western figures, many of whom were major, and indeed, primary, inspirations of his, not the least because of the nature of his education that took place within the colonial system: Nietzsche, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Claudel, Apollinaire, among others.

The development of Césaire’s concept of *Négritude*, corresponding with his discovery of, and expanding relationship with, African primitivity from 1936 to the early 1940s, not only helped him better articulate the importance of these Western writers, but also foreground an African ontological conception of the human and the world founded on an essential will to integration, reconciliation, and harmony. As a result, *Négritude* became the expression of an alternative account of art and of the senses to that presented by the modern Western *episteme*.

This becomes paramount in Césaire’s critique of modern Western philosophy in “*Poésie et connaissance*,” where he argues that it is possible to free ourselves from the narrow prescriptions of Western science regarding the sources and limits of knowledge. Later, in his 1978 interview, Césaire argues that the enshrinement of logical reasoning as the be-all of philosophy leads to a diminished importance of the *analogon*, that is, process thinking or connection,⁵² obscuring the entanglement of our trans-subjective reality:

The West prefers the concept over the image and is wary of the latter; it privileges

logical reasoning over analogical reasoning, the *analogon*... (the motor of the image is

analogy...). All European thought has been a reaction against analogical reasoning, a fact which helps us, moreover, to understand its success [...]. It seems to me that the surrealist conception of the image is encounter! With this conception, Europe sees its shortcomings and returns, essentially, to primitive traditions.⁵³

Césaire therefore criticises the parameters of Western epistemological praxis as anchored in the dogma of representation (the concept) – the emphasis on mimesis in a theory of art is tied up with this – privileging *logos* over *analogon* (the law of identity over the dynamic of difference and connection) as the access route to knowledge. This obsession with identity is what Michel de Certeau has described as the West’s obsession with death: in the West, the group (or individual) is legitimised by what it excludes as being not alive or vital to it.⁵⁴ As an example, History, as the preeminent Western practice of documentation and storage, proposes a view of knowledge as a type or degree of mastery of facts, rather than a relationship to what is known.⁵⁵ By obscuring the ways in which the present “re-presents the past” through physical embodiments and living ancestral connections, History as a discipline participates in the capitalist work of stripping the world of connections to ancestry and of rendering the past usable only as the material of progress. Present moments are liberated from the power of the past by banishing the latter beyond the absolute boundary of the tangible “and placing it, as usable knowledge, in the service of [an absolute] present.”⁵⁶ By contrast, in the traditional African worldview, historical practice must also be sought in the interplay of material and mythical forces, and at the level of ritual actions. Myth and ritual imply a different apprehension of temporality, one that falls outside the canons of a more positivist social science, in that they are expressed by and for the sake of those who are their living embodiments, that is, on behalf of the community as a whole. Négritude’s “quarrel with History,” besides a quarrel with “what happened,” may also be framed as a quarrel with *the*

discipline of History, whose overarching articulations, are entangled with the ontology of colonialism. In a word, History, as a typical form of Western “archiving,” reveals an epistemology that affirms the scission between knowledge and embodiment, one whose function is to separate, distance, and objectify.

Rationalism and the fiction of race

Paradoxically, Western systems of knowledge tend to prove that their sites of production can encompass otherness: for historiography, the other is the past; for philosophy, it is the concept; for science, it is the material world. These discursive systems posit rupture as a condition of knowing. Death and loss are necessary. Yet death and loss are simultaneously and necessarily denied through the re-appropriation of the foreign (dead or other) object in the form of “knowledge,” understood as a detached gaze toward what is other to the self. Western epistemology therefore entails “a labour of death and a labour against death.”⁵⁷

Césaire’s qualm is that the identity paradigm grounded in the principle of rupture and death is organic to the domination drive of the Western imperialist project.⁵⁸ “First, they reduce you to the minimum, to the least of all minimums which, in effect, represents *identity*.”⁵⁹ Identities appear as rationalist European universals. As Western science provides deep knowledge of the hidden universal laws supposed to govern nature, the human becomes a set of ideas, an ideology (reason, race, measurement, etc.): human perfectibility, the European human – particularised and universalised, as Césaire remarks in his “Discours sur la Négritude”⁶⁰ – the human that has the keys to progress. As opposed to the primitive human being, Enlightenment man’s natural inclination to reason drives progress. The paradigm of measurement itself, tethered to the orthodoxy of reason, attends to the coupling of scientific efficiency and capitalist expansionism. Knowledge is given to abstraction, to an ability to be disengaged from nature (unlike primitive men). It therefore relates to a disengaged “radically reflective” subjectivity.

This radically reflective subjectivity becomes commensurate with European identity, particularly during the Enlightenment.

Transcendent reason relies on a rejection of the human's entanglement with the natural world, one which humans are meant to dominate under the capitalist rubric of progress, underpinned by an inexorable forward-moving logic of time. Capitalism repels every sense of deep time, that is, humanity's connection to the primitive, since what attends to progress (science, mechanisation) must work against the human's intertwinement with a natural world that exceeds it. In a word, progress is a *myth* of the human being distanced from the natural, a myth that reaches its apogee in the nineteenth century.

Implicit in Césaire's critique of modernity, therefore, is the claim that rationalism banishes the magical and the sensual (for the sake of the deductive and mathematical), not merely in the name of a disembodied ideal (i.e., Reason, some faculty separate from and independent of the body and what one does with it) but in the name of materialist domination and of capitalist efficiency – in the name of Power. From the moment Enlightenment humanism erected itself as an ideal based on reason, it spawned fantasies of purity whose corollary was exclusionary violence.

Of course, this critique of modernity must be brought into relation with other perspectives, including Horkheimer's and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer's "The End of Reason," and Adorno's "Subject and Object." However, what does it mean to examine rationalism from the point of view of (anti-)Blackness? Examining rationalism within the history of European imperialism highlights the obscured ways in which it has constructed and continues to underpin the imaginaries that legitimate racial hierarchies. This exercise unveils the material impacts of rationalism's evolutionist prejudice for African/diasporic peoples, cultures, and civilizations. European rationalism, through the work of some of its most famous philosophers, has authorized the distinction between human and less human, between

civilization and its Others. This fact elucidates how Western philosophy has thwarted a relational understanding of the world as a meshwork of variously animated, agential personhoods, and the possibility of true fraternities between the world's populations. It shows how rationalism has indicted life itself by positioning origin and race as the criteria for cultural valuation, paving the way for a global ecological catastrophe whose main victims have been, and continue to be, Black and indigenous communities.

Laying the foundation for rationalism, Descartes claims unambiguously that the sensible and the particular experience cannot be made into the object of science. From an Enlightenment point of view, origin and race are assimilated to a people's level of "objective existence" in Hegel's philosophy, which invents the West as the incarnation of the philosophical Spirit [*Geist*]. Hegel reconstructs and redefines philosophy as belonging in a unique way to Europe, indeed, as *defining* the European spirit. This construction of the history of philosophy as the peculiarity of Europe is articulated in its opposition to the African mind. In *The Philosophy of History*, he writes,

The peculiarly African character is difficult to comprehend, for the very reason that in reference to it, we must quite give up the principle which naturally accompanies all *our* ideas — the category of Universality. In Negro life the characteristic point is the fact that consciousness has not yet attained to the realization of any substantial objective existence — as for example, God, or Law — in which the interest of man's volition is involved and in which he realizes his own being. [...] The Negro, as already observed, exhibits the natural man in his completely wild and untamed state. We must lay aside all thought of reverence and morality — all that we call feeling — if we would rightly comprehend him; there is nothing harmonious with humanity to be found in this type of character.⁶¹

For Hegel, therefore, philosophy is the peculiar destiny of European humanity, on account of its attainment of an “objective existence,”⁶² that is, of a separateness from phenomena. “Africa Proper” is the Other by virtue of which this Spirit exists, being “the land of childhood, which lying beyond the day of self-conscious history, is enveloped in the dark mantel of Night.”⁶³ This worldview, articulated between 1822 and 1930 (the period during which Hegel gave his lectures at the University of Berlin) is coeval with the commencement of colonialism’s veritable phase of planetary expansion. Hegel would salute the conquest of the city of Algiers by France in 1830, praising European expansionism in the northern part of Africa.⁶⁴

Adorno and Horkheimer, despite their critiques of rationalism, and the links they draw between rationalism and anti-Semitism, neglect to highlight anti-Blackness as a foundational and enduring cornerstone in the worldview of rationalism, having implicitly adopted a view of civilization that is both evolutionary and Euro-centric. In pinpointing the eclipse of magic in the European philosophical worldview,⁶⁵ they ignore the importance of magic in the history of imperialism, where it has served the enslaved in the culturing of their own counter-imaginings.

The colonial system fought against magic. The enslaved and their descendants in the new world have fought to preserve it in an existential struggle, despite the cultural brainwashing to which many have been victim. In the end, magic has functioned as “cultural guerrilla warfare against the market economy.”⁶⁶ It served to rehumanise nature, “and helped to save [the African’s] own humanity against the onslaught of the plantation system.”⁶⁷ This history of resistance, of embodied epistemic struggle as a rebuttal to the history of modernity, also signals the need to decolonise epistemology. Diasporic knowledge systems and living practices are forms of counterinsurgent knowledge. To think with spirits was to position a counter-current to an imperial ideology built upon the normalised and invisibilised fictions of race. The

subterranean traffic of ancestral spirits in new world practices such as Vodou, Myal, and Santería, keep an alternative account of knowledge of the world in modernity alive. Négritude is in the lineage of this epistemic counterinsurgency.

Thinking with spirits: A different ontology of objects

Césaire's gesture of recuperating the primitive denounces the loss of what is natural in human life, even as it points to an alternative history of knowledge and of the senses that challenges the human-centred sacrosanctity of Western rationalism. Not only was Césaire cognisant of the meaning of spirit possession from an ethnographic point of view, referring to Frobenius, Leiris, and Bastide,⁶⁸ he was also aware of the specific history that accounted for the existence of Haitian Vodou and, broadly, for persistence of African "primitive" belief that was unusual in relation to the rest of the Caribbean, as he explains in his interview with Leiner.⁶⁹

It becomes clear in "Poésie et connaissance" that, if the human being was entangled with the spirituality and materiality of the natural world, this challenged the Cartesian model of the singular *cogito* and of the *ego* as sole knower of the world, as evidenced in the primitive state of possession. Accordingly, for Césaire, "a great culture is born, not when man *seizes* [*saisit*], but when he *is seized* [*est saisi*]. He is seized [*saisi*] by the world."⁷⁰ Possession or "seizure" is the role assigned to poetry, as it places the human in connection with the divine, not understood in a religious sense, but in the sense of the sacredness of Earth or nature. Poetry thus becomes a thinking tool for challenging the modern Western paradigm of knowledge.

If all the world pulses and acts and nothing is merely acted upon, then the urge to be possessed by the god, the ancestor, the snake, the river and so on, demonstrates our awareness of the animacy of the world acting upon the self, of billions of neutrinos constantly penetrating our human bodies, and so on. Poetry engenders the kind of knowledge that is "absolute total encounter" with the world:

je voudrais être de plus en plus humble et plus bas
toujours plus grave sans vertige ni vestige
jusqu'à me perdre tomber
dans la vivante semoule d'une terre bien ouverte.
Dehors une belle brume au lieu d'atmosphère serait point sale
chaque goutte d'eau y faisant un soleil
dont le nom le même pour toutes choses
serait RENCONTRE BIEN TOTALE
si bien que l'on ne saurait plus qui passe
ou d'une étoile ou d'un espoir
ou d'un pétale de l'arbre flamboyant
ou d'une retraite sous-marine
courue par les flambeaux des méduses-aurélies
Alors la vie j'imagine me baignerait tout entier
mieux je la sentirais qui me palpe ou me mord
couché je verrai venir à moi les odeurs enfin libres
comme des mains secourables
qui se feraient passage en moi
pour y balancer de longs cheveux
plus longs que ce passé que je ne peux atteindre.⁷¹

I would like to be more and more humble and more lowly
 always more serious without vertigo or vestige
 to the point of losing myself falling

into the live body of a well-opened Earth
 Outside in lieu of atmosphere there'd be a beautiful haze no dirt in it
 each drop of water forming a sun there
 whose name the same for all things
 would be ABSOLUTE TOTAL ENCOUNTER
 so that others would no longer know what I am
 – a star or a hope
 or a petal from the flamboyant tree
 or an underwater retreat
 raced across by the flaming torches of aurelian jellyfish
 Then I imagine life would flood my whole being
 better still I would feel it touching me or biting me
 lying down I would see the finally free odours come to me
 like merciful hands
 finding their way
 to sway their long hair in me
 longer than this past I cannot reach.⁷²

Here, poetry is the language of animacy, offering paradigms of humanness that accommodate more-than-human worlds, and which suggest, if not offer, what Sylvia Wynter calls “an alternative process of making ourselves human.”⁷³ While science feels its ways around the exterior of things, the poet attains knowledge through rhythm, sound, and vibrations. Knowledge by feeling, by conjoining ourselves with phenomena, is the only *true knowledge* we can have of the Real. True knowledge, then, is “imprehension,” for we can only know existence by practising it, by being conjoined to it, through presence, feeling, or illumination.

In Césaire's account, poetry activates the primitive instinct of possession to offer a kind of accession to the "inwardness of life."⁷⁴ Poetry, he says, is "a penetration of the universe,"⁷⁵ a phrase evocative of the power to identify oneself with the thing contemplated, to leap into its centre.

With spirit possession, Césaire opposes a Western-centric disembodied epistemology with an embodied (with that term evokes of the mutual penetration of matter and spirit) alternative. Indeed, by reading Western-centric scientific knowledge alongside poetry, Césaire creates a space for ways of existing that emphasise the embodiment of spirit. Such ways of existing are neglected in the academy, excluded by epistemologies posited as disembodied, and universal precisely because they are disembodied.

The ability to conceive of consciousness through the connectivity and relationality of human beings with the more-than-human world underpins the "universal humanism"⁷⁶ of Négritude, its view of human existence as a fundamentally co-subjective/inter-subjective relationship with the other and with nature. Césaire was at pains to overturn the idea that the West was naturally the stage for the universal and that it brought the rest of the World into its universality. In fact, in his "Discourse on Négritude," Césaire frames its project as a denunciation of universalism:

Négritude was a revolt against what I will call European reductionism, [...] a system of thought or rather an instinctive tendency of an eminent and prestigious civilization to abuse its very privilege and create a void around itself by reducing the notion of the universal [...] to its own dimensions, to conceive of it based on its own postulates and through the prism of its own categories.⁷⁷

The issue of the universal was another way of viewing the problem of a Western rationalist model of the human which obscures the racialized experience, even as it constitutes the very grounds of this experience. The sentiments are echoed in his “Lettre à Maurice Thorez,” in which he perceived the challenge posed by universalism as one of “reinventing what has been undone.”⁷⁸ He maintained that the universalism of Western epistemology had created a worldview that was ultimately sterile and unusable from the point of view of the colonized, and it constituted the epistemic conundrum of both politics and art in the colonial continuum. His letter to Thorez was a radical indictment of Western humanism and its ongoing consequences for the disenfranchised peoples of the planet.

Césaire insisted repeatedly that he did not conceive of *Négritude* as an Afro-centric universalism, a kind of reverse paradigm of European humanism which reduced the world to its own categories.⁷⁹ Instead, the universal, he pointed out, was to be found in *every particular*, always *specifically incarnated* in every instance. Therefore, the particular, as Léopold Senghor also insisted,⁸⁰ was an instance of the universal, rather than its fragmentation or dissolution. Particularity is not self-enclosure but relation. “There is no Other, but multitudes of others,”⁸¹ including Europe. By contrast, the ground zero of Enlightenment thought lies in the dissolution of the particular into an abstract universalism, which is Reason’s ultimate declension as mathematics,⁸² that is, the reduction of the world to numbers, and of nature to a computational, aggregative logic. We are now witnessing the consequences of this for the planet’s natural integrity.

If colonial expansion “mostly had to do with the reallocation of the Earth’s resources and their privatisation by those who had the greatest military might and the largest technological advantage,”⁸³ then decolonisation, by definition, must entail the unthinking of the hegemonic imaginaries of Enlightenment that fashion human attitudes to nature. Decolonisation and epistemology must be understood together in their relation to ecological

justice, now that the “Anthropocene” has finally become an object for thought in the Western world. However, “imperialism and ongoing (settler) colonialisms have been ending worlds” for centuries, as Kathryn Yusoff forcefully reminds us.⁸⁴

Césaire’s “Discourse on Colonialism” is replete with denunciations of the norming and invisibilising of the relationship between coloniality, catastrophe, and Enlightenment thought. This helps us understand what is at stake in the unravelling of the Enlightenment *episteme*. It is more than about how or whether a set of people (i.e., the “White race”) get to maintain their privilege within the current social imaginary. It is about the well-being of the planet and the ultimate survival of life:

And since you are talking about factories and industries, do you not see, you hysteric, right in the heart of our forests and our bushes, the formidable factory spitting its slag, the factory full of drudges? Do you not see the prodigious mechanization – of human beings? Do you not see the unquantifiable violation of what our despoiled people have struggled to hold on to, keep intact, undefiled? The machine, yes, the unseen machine that crushes, grinds, stultifies the peoples of the world?⁸⁵

Poetry, for Césaire, offers a corrective to Enlightenment’s mathematical logic, by reanimating the world, by reawakening human-being to its particulars. “In the end,” declared Césaire, “saving poetry and saving art meant saving the human being of modernity by ‘re-personing’ humanity at large and re-subjectivising nature.”⁸⁶ “Re-subjectivising nature” requires being attuned to the manifold agential qualities of nature that keep human beings alive; it rejects the autonomy of thought and mind, and consequently of the “subject”, in relation to the natural world: “Within us, all the ages of mankind. Within us, all humankind. Within us, animal, vegetable, mineral. Mankind is not only mankind. It is *universe*.”⁸⁷

Césaire's philosophy drives us, then, to align epistemic processes not necessarily regarded as connected: the development of modern Western philosophy, acapitalism, and racism. When he declares in the *Cahier*, "We hate you, you and your reason," ironically adding "We adhere to the early dementia of the flamboyant madness of stubborn cannibalism,"⁸⁸ he does so with full knowledge of what reason is meant to be: namely, that reason in Western philosophy is held up as a force of transcendence. Nevertheless, the evocation of the colonial-era racist stereotype of the African as cannibal implies that reason is also a matter of race; that is, part of the Enlightenment era's glorification of European man that posits him as an exception, an apogee, supported by writings that represent non-European men as savages and barbarians: anthropophagi, cannibals, etc.

In other words, Césaire suggests that rationalism has a historiography, and that that historiography cannot be neatly separated out from what the thing is. This does not debunk the utility of reason, but rejects a conception of *autonomous reason* that separates the human from all other life. If reason is not autonomous, that is, independent of movement, experience, emotion, and feeling, then the philosophical demarcation between us and all other lifeforms is brought into question. The "hatred" of Western reason, beyond a mere cry of revolt, alludes to the existence of modes of consciousness that can be marshalled as part of a non-Western knowledge system. The "entangled subject," based on a non-Western idea of what a thinking consciousness is or can be, could be seen as Césaire's own response to the rationalist *cogito*. Wildness, the animal, even "madness," offer a source of unfettered possibility for humanness, and a valorisation of intuition alongside rationalism suggests a different template for what it means to be alive.

If the Western conception of the self is one of the main, if sometimes unarticulated, determinations on which the ideology of imperialism is predicated, then Césaire's thinking about this idea and about the cognate concepts of freedom, inwardness, and individuality⁸⁹ to

which it is yoked connects with his overall project, invested in an ethic of encountering the other. Ultimately, one of Césaire's the most radical postulates is this: given the identity paradigm's associations with epistemic violence, poetry enacts a radical re-conceptualisation of the boundary between self and other. Poetry embodies or illustrates the notion of *elseness* – the primitive apprehension of nature as profoundly spiritual.

Arguably, it is Rimbaud who, more than any of the European thinkers surveyed in “Poésie et connaissance,” embodies this idea in the eyes of Césaire, enabling him to also bridge the apparently distant worlds of ancient Greek poetry and African and Afro-Caribbean conceptions of poetry and art. Rimbaud conveys this understanding of the entangled subject which I have been exploring, an understanding which he associates with ancient Greek poetry:

[The Romantics] prove so obviously that a song is so seldom a work, that is to say, a thought sung and understood by the singer.

For I is an other. If brass wakes up as a trumpet, it is not its fault. This is obvious to me: I am present at this birth of my thought: I watch it and listen to it: I draw a stroke of the bow: the symphony makes its stir in the depths, or comes on to the stage in a leap.⁹⁰

Rimbaud suggests that poetry implies an entanglement of the subject, an other within the self, so that the very act of thinking is not the domain of one's subjectivity. *Poiesis*, rather than a creation by one rational consciousness, lies more in the conditions that allow a certain otherness to emerge: “I am present at the birth of my thought.”⁹¹ Rimbaud also states that, in ancient Greece, “verses and lyres give rhythm to Action” [*rythment l'action*].⁹² This suggests that poetry provided the space of real action, which would imply that, rather than representation, it meant to foster presence, at least in the way the Greeks conceived it. Poetry

is *presenting*, where presenting means “making present.” This conception of the poetic relates to a non-rationalist sense of what it means to know a thing through the mind, that is, a thing not immediately present to the senses. Since the ancient Greek conception of *poiesis* treats making, the knowing inherent to it involves the sensible, rather than (merely) the ideational. Thus, poetry involves rendering present to the senses that which is not, functioning at that juncture where spirit and matter meet. Poetry seems to stand in this mode of thinking, as the concrescence of what Alexander Baumgarten (writing in 1735) calls “*aesthesis*,” a way in which the rational is rethought as emerging from the sensible and as overflowed by it,⁹³ and seems, then, as Césaire suggests in “Poésie et connaissance,” to contrast with Western science’s domination-subsumption method of knowledge as relating to distance, to the subject’s ability to be separate from phenomena (as the “distinction” in Descartes’s famous “clear and distinct ideas” implies).

The poetic, consequently, entails a mode of knowledge based on a rite of identification and communication with phenomena. It points beyond its materiality, yet its function is to *body forth* the thing that is beyond it. Adorno’s phrase, “The true is unconcealed for discursive knowledge, but for this reason the latter does not possess it; the knowledge embodied in art has its truth, but as something incommensurable to it,”⁹⁴ encapsulates this idea of art as providing a medium for the feeling of phenomena.

Whitehead argument that nature is constituted by events and not things supports Rimbaud’s conception of *poiesis*. Moreover, it solidifies a lineage from ancient Greek ritual and poetry through Romanticism via Nietzsche, Rimbaud, and others who shaped Césaire’s thought. That lineage takes form around the notion of art and *poiesis* as the obligation of presence. We note this in “Poésie et connaissance,” which speaks of poetry as a mode of mimetic presence, as a kind of conjuring of the object, that rejects the idea of pastness and

takes creation out of the representational paradigm. Césaire evokes Rimbaud's statement quoted above when he says:

if I take *my ego* – [it] is *vague, blurred, uncertain*. If I am asked what I think, I think nothing, *absolutely nothing* [c'est tout]! The ego *is a kind of torpor*.

I am not even that sure that it is, as Bergson would say, a flow, a river that flows. I think that it *does not even* flow. What seems to characterize it, as I have said, is *a sort of torpor*, something that has not 'ignited' [*qui n'a pas 'pris'*]. And it is the word that allows it to ignite [*c'est le mot qui lui permet de prendre*].⁹⁵

On the one hand, within Western philosophy, discourse and the body are disengaged. As de Certeau argues, "understanding" in Western discourse involves a subsumption of the object to be "understood": in making objects "readable," modern science masks their alterity; the otherness of objects is evoked only to be dispelled, to be made dead, as only the dead thing is available for conceptualisation.⁹⁶ However, in Césaire's view of consciousness, there is no dead thing in experience, everything is available and awaits to be given presence:

It is not merely with his whole soul, it is with his entire being that the poet produces poetry. What presides over the poem is not the most lucid intelligence, or the most acute sensibility, or the most delicate sensation, but the entirety of experience; all the women loved, all desires experienced, all the dreams dreamt, all the habits forged, all the images received or grasped, the whole weight of the body, the whole weight of the spirit. All of lived experience. Everything that is possible. Around the poem about to be formed a precious whirl is in motion: the ego, the self, the world. And the most extraordinary connections: all pasts, all futures...every flux, every ray. The body is no longer deaf or

blind. Everything has a right to life. Everything is summoned. Everything waits.
Everything, I say.⁹⁷

If writing serves to consecrate absence, *poiesis*, as it is understood here, affirms presences, different bodies considered long dead. It consecrates otherness, but not an otherness evoked so that it can be interpreted or made legible, but an otherness that remains itself, its elseness not hidden. This view of consciousness is commensurate with a relationship to objects different from that of the modern (Western) *episteme*. It corresponds to a different ontology of objects, in other words, a different ontology of the Other. Poetry's work is *truth* beyond the religious or ideological — this truth manifests or seizes our connection with *the real*, with *actual reality*, not with things in their bare, exploitable materiality.

Poetry as philosophy

To link philosophy to poetry once again requires us to view philosophy through the lens of feeling and embodiment. For this reason, whereas ancient philosophers such as Empedocles and Pythagoras were shape-shifters and shamans of sorts, with Plato, for whom philosophy becomes attached to writing, thought is divorced from embodied connection (i.e. rhythm) and consigned to the domain of the numinous. Césaire's dictum of poetry as knowledge is shorthand for a conception of knowledge that foregrounds embodied connection over the concept, thus breaking with the Platonic lineage of Western thought. What would it mean in our era to view philosophy as a work of spirit? Is it useful to think about what we would *gain*, rather than, in a rationalist frame, what we would lose? What would it mean for the parameters of philosophical enquiry to be animated by traditions of thinking with spirits, rather than the idealist ontology that has fundamentally shaped Western thought since Plato and Aristotle?

Césaire spoke of the capacity of poetry *qua* magical thinking to animate philosophy, positing that poetry was essentially epistemic, invoking the ancient pre-Socratic conception of the poet. The sort of knowledge that poetry contained or generated on its own terms essentially entailed a human capacity to “penetrate” the cosmos, becoming one with it, as illustrated in the genesis of the poetic spirit in primitive rites of adoration: “like the tree, like the animal, [the poet] has abandoned himself to primal life, he has said yes, he has consented to this immense life that surpasses him. He has planted himself in the earth, he has extended his arms, he has played with the sun, he has become a tree; he has flowered, he has sung.”⁹⁸ Critically, for Césaire, “primitivity” is imbued with a positive value, against the accumulated suspicion and rejection of this state of consciousness in the modern Western thought. Among the Romantics, it gave rise to a *primitivism* devoid of an ethical burden to challenge the structure of knowledge that impelled colonial power. Indeed, if “nature,” up to the late eighteenth century in Europe, was thought to involve closeness to the soil and a connection to the Earth, Romantic primitivism enshrined the separateness of humanness from the soil, and therefore, of humanness from phenomena, characteristic of Enlightenment scientism. With the scission between nature and culture enshrined among the Romantics, their questioning around personhood and human sovereignty could not transcend the rationalist safeguard, that is, overturn the Enlightenment paradigm of culture, and, therefore *capital*, and constitute that “dangerous” aspect of myth which Plato denounces. This scission exiles human life from the realm of mimetic activity, ultimately contributing to the erasure of Earth in the European metaphysic scope.⁹⁹

Europe, by dominating African civilisations, waged, and continues to wage, an epistemic war against knowledge systems that present different conceptions of selfhood. Indeed, the challenge lay in the notion of selfhood, for the position of the “I” in the human sentiment of life shapes a culture’s grip on total reality and for every act of creation. What would a dialogic

epistemology of the self have looked like in the Romantic period, if the Romantics, rather than exoticizing traditional rites of thinking with spirits and turning them into the objects of a Western human-centred gaze, had truly made space for them as part of a horizontal mode of being and reconciliation? What would that have meant for the modern history of art in the West, and indeed, for the modern history of knowledge? How would knowledge have *flowed*? What if Kant and Hegel had sought to transform their modes of knowledge and reasoning by the morphological energies of non-Western knowledge practices such as Vodou and other new world spirit cosmologies to which they had access through books, travel, and colonial contact? Perceiving our inability to master the world, such would be the philosophical attitude par excellence. An attitude that requires subject and object to identify with each other. The attitude of poetry *as* knowledge. One standing outside the foundational paradigms of our technological modernity. Can we entertain it? A view of the world as biocentric and autonomous, a sense that actuality can only be experienced, not mastered by human systems. An attitude wholly different from our modern views of science and technology whose movement claims to reduce the unknown to the knowable. The consequences have now all been seen.

Conclusion

Race is the consequence of an institution of philosophy built upon the supposed superiority of Euro-Western humanity, on the idea of the “universal” as the unique *telos* of the West. To change the course of things – to check the deadly effects of climate change, to rectify the inequalities that cause wars, etc. – would require us to change our relationship to “objects,” to revise our idea of what it means to know the world, to be a dweller in the world. It implies rethinking the very category of philosophy as Western praxis. It leads us to adopt different pedagogies of philosophy, indeed, different pedagogies altogether, by considering how our

status as dwelling-knowers changes the terms of what knowledge is and challenges the subject-based orientations of Western philosophy. This is not “cancel culture,” but a shift in imaginaries that seeks to preserve life itself. Decolonization is a matter of philosophy. Literally.

I have shown how Aimé Césaire’s work presents a radical rethinking of the subject in the modern Western *episteme* that highlights the centrality of this paradigm to some of the conundrums that our civilization now faces. More broadly, in offering a way of viewing this modern history and the conflicted views on the subject, it calls for a renewed engagement with poetry as magical thinking.

Articulating an account of philosophy that would connect the world of ancient Greece to that of Haitian Vodou, as well as other neglected or obscured knowledge systems, and that places poetry at the heart of this history, Césaire presents a view of the category of “the primitive” that questions the sequencing and spatialization of post-Enlightenment cultural toponyms. I have presented these particular viewpoints while emphasizing the significance of carrying out such disruptive thinking in the our current era.

My concern has therefore been about more than signalling the limitations of Western philosophy. Heretics of Western humanism from the West itself have been doing so for centuries. In showing how certain antagonisms have shaped modernity and the modes of knowledge we often take for granted in the West, it counters the construal of modernity as a natural order, presenting it instead as a contingency, a distorted definition of the Real. The need to do this is pressing in an age of ecological collapse and possible mass extinctions. It requires us to focus on how the history of knowledge centres the history of colonialism and capitalism, even as it reveals, for those who dare to see, histories of resistance operating alongside and *despite* that hegemonic History.

Notes

¹ As Horkheimer and Adorno have rightly declared, see Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 5–7.

² Eshleman and Smith, “Introduction,” xxii.

³ See, for example, Georges Ngal, *Aimé Césaire*, 147–164, Kesteloot, “Première lecture d’un poème de Césaire”, and more recently, Khalfa, *Poetics of the Antilles*, 92, 123, 131.

⁴ Senghor, *Liberté II*, 222–227 and *Liberté III*, 239.

⁵ See Césaire, “Discours sur le colonialisme”; Wynter, “The Ceremony Must be Found”; and Mignolo, “Delinking”.

⁶ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 15.

⁷ See de Certeau, *The Writing of History*.

⁸ Dubreuil, *Empire of language*, 9.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Lévy-Bruhl, *Les fonctions mentales*, 112.

¹² Ibid., 426.

¹³ Ibid., 112.

¹⁴ See Césaire, “Discours sur le colonialisme,” 1469.

¹⁵ Ibid., 1471.

¹⁶ Dash, *Édouard Glissant*, 148.

¹⁷ Senghor, *Liberté II*, 277.

¹⁸ Césaire, *Soleil cou coupé [Solar Throat Slashed]*, 436. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of works published in French are mine.

¹⁹ Ibid., 442.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ménil, “Évidences Touchant L’esprit,” 26.

²² Ibid.

²³ S. Césaire, “Malaise d’une civilisation,” 46.

²⁴ Césaire, “Entretien avec Jacqueline Leiner,” xix.

²⁵ Césaire, *Aimé Césaire: Poésie, Théâtre, Essais et Discours*, 86. (Hereafter, *Œuvres complètes*).

²⁶ Senghor, “The lessons of Leo Frobenius,” ix-x.

²⁷ Frobenius, *Le destin des civilisations*, 222–223.

²⁸ Senghor, “The lessons of Leo Frobenius,” ix.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ By the early 1940s, Césaire, Senghor, and their colleagues from the Négritude movement had become fascinated with the work of Frobenius; along with Senghor, Aimé Césaire had encountered it at the École normale in 1936. Frobenius’ influence on *Tropiques* is also evidenced in the critical essay which Aimé’s wife and collaborator, Suzanne Césaire, wrote about him in the magazine’s first issue. See S. Césaire, “Leo Frobenius”.

³¹ Césaire, “L’Appel au magicien,” 1398.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., 1400.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., 1399.

³⁶ Ibid., 1338.

³⁷ Césaire, “Poésie et connaissance,” 1383.

³⁸ Césaire, “L’Appel au magicien,” 1399.

³⁹ Ibid., 1579.

⁴⁰ Césaire, “La Martinique telle qu’elle est.”

⁴¹ Ibid., 1580.

⁴² Ibid., 1579.

⁴³ Césaire, “Entretien avec Jacqueline Leiner,” xix.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Thomson, *Æschylus and Athens*, 353.

⁴⁶ Plato, *Complete Works*, 522–523 and 941–942.

⁴⁷ Césaire, “Entretien avec Jacqueline Leiner,” xix.

⁴⁸ Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 195.

⁴⁹ Césaire, “Discours sur l’art africain,” 1563, 1586.

⁵⁰ Césaire, “Poésie et connaissance,” 1390.

⁵¹ Césaire, “La Martinique telle qu’elle est,” 1577.

⁵² Césaire, “Entretien avec Jacqueline Leiner,” xxiii.

⁵³ Ibid., xxiii–xxiv.

⁵⁴ de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, 5.

⁵⁵ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 148.

⁵⁶ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 25.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ This is not inconsistent with Max Weber’s reasoning in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (2011), where he argues, among other things, that the doctrine of rationalism was one of the ideological driving forces of capitalist expansionism.

⁵⁹ Césaire, “Entretien avec Jacqueline Leiner,” xxiv.

⁶⁰ Césaire, “Discours sur la Négritude,” 1590.

⁶¹ Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, 110–111; emphasis in original.

⁶² Ibid., 111.

⁶³ Ibid., 109.

⁶⁴ Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, 110.

⁶⁵ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 7.

⁶⁶ Wynter, “Jonkonnu in Jamaica,” 199.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 198.

⁶⁸ In the abovementioned interview with Leiner, he also refers to Fustel de Coulanges’s *La Cité antique*, which he claims was “for a very long time *the* manual used by French ethnographers”, Césaire, “Entretien avec Jacqueline Leiner,” xix).

As Césaire explains in this interview, “in Haiti, [the] slaves were transported in large numbers, especially in the last ten years leading up to 1789. There, they represented nine-tenths of the population in entire provinces. This is how African customs were kept alive”, xviii.

⁷⁰ Césaire, “Entretien avec Jacqueline Leiner,” xvii (emphasis in original).

⁷¹ Césaire, *Soleil cou coupé [Solar Throat Slashed]*, 436. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of works published in French are mine.

⁷² Césaire, *Œuvres complètes*, 498.

⁷³ Wynter, “Ethno or Sociopoetics,” 394.

⁷⁴ Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 194-195.

⁷⁵ Césaire, “Poésie et connaissance,” 1379.

⁷⁶ Césaire, “Discours sur l’art africain,” 1564.

⁷⁷ Césaire, “Discours sur la Négritude,” 1590.

⁷⁸ Césaire, “Lettre à Maurice Thorez,” 1506.

⁷⁹ See, for example, “Lettre à Maurice Thorez,” 1506.

⁸⁰ Senghor, *Liberté III*, 152.

⁸¹ Trouillot, “Anthropology and the Savage Slot,” 39.

⁸² See Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 4.

⁸³ Mbembe, “Thoughts on the planetary.”

-
- ⁸⁴ Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, xiii.
- ⁸⁵ Césaire, “Discours sur le colonialisme,” 1475.
- ⁸⁶ Ibid.
- ⁸⁷ Césaire, “Poésie et connaissance,” 1382; emphasis in original.
- ⁸⁸ Césaire, *Cahier*, 47–48.
- ⁸⁹ See Taylor, *Sources of the self*, 143–158.
- ⁹⁰ Rimbaud, “Lettre à Paul Demeny,” 95.
- ⁹¹ Ibid.
- ⁹² Ibid., 96.
- ⁹³ See Baumgarten, *Alexander Baumgarten’s Medidationes philosophicae*.
- ⁹⁴ Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, 191 (my translation).
- ⁹⁵ Césaire, “Entretien avec Jacqueline Leiner,” xii (emphasis in original).
- ⁹⁶ Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, 2–6.
- ⁹⁷ Césaire, “Poésie et connaissance,” 1381–1382.
- ⁹⁸ Ibid., 1383.
- ⁹⁹ Soyinka, *Myth, literature, and the African world*, 3.

Acknowledgements

I thank the anonymous reviewers for their careful reading and for their comments and suggestions which have helped me improve the manuscript. I also wish to thank the Leverhulme Trust for the Early Career Fellowship which allowed me to produce this article.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Jason Allen-Paisant is a Lecturer in Caribbean Poetry and Decolonial Thought, with joint appointments in the School of English and the School of Languages, Cultures and Societies at the University of Leeds. His academic research moves between theatre studies, performance studies, poetics, and critical theory. At the University of Leeds, he is also the Director of the Institute for Colonial and Postcolonial Studies. He is currently developing a monograph entitled *Thinking with Spirits: Poetry and Philosophy in the Age of Extinctions*.

Works cited

- Adorno, Theodor. *Ästhetische Theorie*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970.
- Baumgarten, Alexander. *Alexander Baumgarten's Medidationes philosophicae de nonnullis ad poema pertinentibus: Reflections on Poetry*. Translated by Karl Aschenbrenner and William B. Holther. Berkley: University of California Press, 1954.
- Bergson, Henri. *Creative Evolution*. Translated by Arthur Mitchell. New York: Random House, 1944.
- Césaire, Aimé. *Cahier D'un Retour Au Pays Natal*. Paris: Présence africaine, 1956.
- Césaire, Aimé. "Discours Sur L'art Africain." In *Aimé Césaire: Poésie, Théâtre, Essais Et Discours*, edited by Albert James Arnold, 1562–1570. Paris: CNRS Éditions/Présence Africaine Éditions, 2013.
- Césaire, Aimé. "Discours Sur La Négritude." In *Aimé Césaire: Poésie, Théâtre, Essais Et Discours*, edited by Albert James Arnold, 1588–1593. Paris: CNRS Éditions/Présence Africaine Éditions, [1987] 2013.
- Césaire, Aimé. "Discours Sur Le Colonnialisme." In *Aimé Césaire: Poésie, Théâtre, Essais Et Discours*, edited by Albert James Arnold, 1448–1476. Paris: CNRS Éditions/Présence Africaine Éditions, [1955] 2013.

Césaire, Aimé. "Entretien Avec Jacqueline Leiner." edited by Jacqueline Leiner, v-xxiv.

Paris: Place, J-M., 1978.

Césaire, Aimé. "L'appel Au Magicien." In *Aimé Césaire: Poésie, Théâtre, Essais Et*

Discours, edited by Albert James Arnold, 1398–1401. Paris: CNRS Éditions/

Présence Africaine Éditions, 2013.

Césaire, Aimé. "La Martinique Telle Qu'elle Est." In *Aimé Césaire: Poésie, Théâtre, Essais*

Et Discours, edited by Albert James Arnold, 1575–1587. Paris: CNRS Éditions/

Présence Africaine Éditions, 2013.

Césaire, Aimé. "Lettre À Maurice Thorez." In *Aimé Césaire: Poésie, Théâtre, Essais Et*

Discours, edited by Albert James Arnold, 1500–1507. Paris: CNRS Éditions/

Présence Africaine Éditions, 2013.

Césaire, Aimé. "Poésie Et Connaissance." In *Aimé Césaire: Poésie, Théâtre, Essais Et*

Discours, edited by Albert James Arnold, 1373–1390. Paris: CNRS Éditions/

Présence Africaine Éditions, [1944] 2013.

Césaire, Aimé. "Soleil Cou Coupé." In *Aimé Césaire: Poésie, Théâtre, Essais Et Discours*,

edited by Albert James Arnold, 367-478. Paris: Présence Africaine; CNRS Editions,

[1948] 2013.

Césaire, Aimé. *Aimé Césaire: Poésie, Théâtre, Essais Et Discours*, edited by Albert James

Arnold. Paris: CNRS Éditions/ Présence Africaine Éditions, 2013..

Césaire, Suzanne. "Malaise D'une Civilisation." *Tropiques*, no. 5 (1942): 43–49.

Dash, J. Michael. *Édouard Glissant*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

de Certeau, Michel. *The Writing of History*. Translated by Tom Conley. New York:

Columbia University Press, 1988.

Diagne, Souleymane Bachir, and Jean-Lou Amselle. *In Search of Africa(s): Universalism*

and Decolonial Thought. New York: Polity Press, 2020.

Dubreuil, Laurent. *Empire of Language: Toward a Critique of (Post) Colonial Expression*.

Translated by David Fieni. London: Cornell University Press, 2013.

Eshleman, Clayton and Annette Smith. "Introduction." In *Lost Body (Corps Perdu), with*

Illustrations by Pablo Picasso, vii-xxvii. New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1986.

Frobenius, Leo. *Histoire De La Civilisation Africaine*. Translated by H. Back and D. Ermont

Paris: Gallimard, 1936.

Frobenius, Leo. *Le Destin Des Civilisations*. Translated by Norbert Guterman. Paris:

Gallimard, 1940.

Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. *The Philosophy of History*. Translated by J. Sibree. New

York: Prometheus Books, 1991.

Horkheimer, Max, and Theodor Adorno. Edited by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr and translated by

Edmund Jephcott. *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Stanford:

Stanford University Press, 2002.

Kesteloot, Lilyan. "Première lecture d'un poème de Césaire," *Études littéraires* 6, no. 1 (1973): 49-71.

Khalifa, Jean. *Poetics of the Antilles: Poetry, History and Philosophy in the Writings of Perse,*

Césaire, Fanon and Glissant. Bern: Peter Lang, 2017.

Lévy-Bruhl, Lucien. *Les Fonctions Mentales Dans Les Sociétés Inférieures*. Paris: Alcan,

1910.

Mbembe, Achille. "Thoughts on the Planetary: An Interview with Achille Mbembe." *New*

Frame (5 September 2019). Accessed 12 October 2019.

<https://www.newframe.com/thoughts-on-the-planetary-an-interview-with-achille-mbembe/>.

Ménil, René. "Évidnces Touchant L'esprit Et Sa Vitesse." *Tropiques*, no. 8-9 (1943): 25-32.

-
- Mignolo, Walter. "Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality and the Grammar of De-Coloniality." *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2 (2007): 449–514.
- Murray, Penelope. "Poetic Inspiration in Early Greece." *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 101 (1981): 87–100.
- Ngal, Georges. *Aimé Césaire: Un Homme À La Recherche D'une Patrie*. Paris: Présence africaine, 1994.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm. *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*. Edited by Rolf-Peter Horstmann and translated by Judith Norman. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- Plato. *Complete Works*. Edited by John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1997.
- Rimbaud, Arthur. "Lettre À Paul Demeny." In *Arthur Rimbaud: Oeuvres Complètes*, 93–103. Paris: Flammarion, 2010.
- Senghor, Léopold Sédar. "The Lessos of Leo Frobenius." In *Leo Frobenius on African History, Art, and Culture*, edited by Eike Haberland, vii-xiii. Princeton: Markus Wiener, 2014.
- Senghor, Léopold Sédar. *Liberté II: Nation Et Voie Africaine Du Socialisme*. Paris: Seuil, 1971.
- Senghor, Léopold Sédar. *Liberté III: Négritude Et Civilisation De L'universel*. Paris: Seuil, 1977.
- Soyinka, Wole. *Myth, Literature, and the African World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976.
- Taylor, Charles. *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989.

Thomson, George. *Æschylus and Athens: A Study in the Social Origins of Drama*. New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1968.

Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1995.

Sylvia Wynter, "Jonkonnu in Jamaica: Towards the Interpretation of Folk Dance as a Cultural Process." *We Must Learn to Sit Together and Talk About a Little Culture: Decolonizing Essays 1967–1984*. Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 2018.

Wynter, Sylvia. "The Ceremony Must Be Found: After Humanism." *boundary 2* 12, no. 3 (1984): 19–70.

Wynter, Sylvia. "Ethno or Sociopoetics." In *We Must Learn to Sit Together and Talk About a Little Culture: Decolonizing Essays 1967-1984*, 377–400. Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 2018.

Yusoff, Kathryn, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019.