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Allen-Paisant, J orcid.org/0000-0002-5705-0522 (2022) Aimé Césaire: Possession as paradigm of consciousness. *Cultural Critique*, 117. pp. 1-27. ISSN 0882-4371

<https://doi.org/10.1353/cul.2022.0046>

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Aimé Césaire: Possession as paradigm of consciousness

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Abstract

This essay particularises Césaire's poetic project through the lens of spirit possession. My aim is to show how spirit possession offers a philosophical paradigm through which Césaire challenges the narrative of European humanism, anchoring Négritude in an alternative, decolonial sense of what it means to be human. Presenting poetry as a sensuous mode of knowledge of the real, Aimé Césaire's conception of the poetic avoids the otherworldly lure of the religious, even as it resists the post-Enlightenment world's violence against magic and myth through the desacralizing logic of transcendental reason. Highlighting a parallel line of thinking in the European tradition that connects ancient Greek ritual poetry to the Surrealists, Nietzsche, Rimbaud, and some of his other more obvious influences, Césaire's theorization of the poetic amounts to a reassessment of the primitive in human living practices, and brings useful perspectives to current debates surrounding capitalist crises, climate collapse, and indigenous lifeways.

Césaire's relationship to possession, and through it to Ancient Greece and the pre-Socratics, is key, I argue, to understanding his work and the connections he makes between the world of pre-classical Greece and African spirit cosmologies, including Vodou. This offers us a different way of understanding the genealogy of his thought and how it relates to anti-colonial resistance. His work, in acting as a bridge between Caribbean culture, and a

minor “parallel” line of thinking in the European tradition that connects ancient Greek ritual poetry to the Surrealists, Nietzsche, Rimbaud, and others, evidences more than a mere desire to bring into interaction a number of literary and cultural influences. It embodies the search for a way out of history. Through its account of poetry, Césaire’s work offers an alternative history of knowledge and of the senses that, in rebutting the putative universals of Western epistemology, effectively thinks through a different future for humanness, one that appears particularly resonant in our contemporary moment.

Rather than “being an apologist for primitive societies” (Diop, 6), as some have charged, Césaire presents the primitive as a salutary mode of consciousness in an antimythical age. The phenomenon of spirit possession therefore becomes, above all, a way of conceptualizing and executing a practice of poetry that combats the *ethos* of human mastery. In that sense, Césaire’s portrayal of primitive or traditional African lifeways, rather than presenting a utopia of an Africa before the Fall, should be read as a construal of humanness that rankles the governmentality and biopolitical management of life attendant to Western epistemology at least since Descartes. But it must be emphasized that Césaire’s “recovery” of the primitive goes wholly beyond primitivism in the Romantic sense. Besides, his poetry envisions, not some facile “time before”, as some critics have erroneously characterized it, describing it as a “pre-modern” (Dash, 148) 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. Césaire’s work of poetry restores a more ancient sense of time physicalised in dwelling practices oriented towards inter-subjectivity, rather than mastery and domination. We may hear echoes of this concern in certain modernist “recoveries” of indigenous culture and knowledge systems: H.D., Ezra Pound, Charles Olson, among others.

But an important issue is the locus of enunciation from which artists speak about the primitive, and whether it is invested as dwelling practice, or contrarywise, as an idealism or an aesthetic devoid of an ethical burden. Suffice it to say that the tag of “black primitivism” attached to Négritude is the fruit of an epistemology which it is my intention to challenge. For since blackness was an invention of the imperialist mind, Négritude’s affirmation of ancestral connections and recovery of African knowledge systems was much more about the recovery of humanness than of blackness as an end in itself.

Aimé Césaire unthinks the very foundations of modernity, and proposes an alternative account of humanness. Modernity, in his work, appears as a distorted definition of the possible, and of the Real. His account of poetry and of the senses works at destroying its appearance as a natural order. For him, the appearance of genocides, conquests, domination, racism, is not just symptomatic of modernity *as* modernity — of its distortion of humanness — but of the loss of what is natural in human life. This loss, he suggests in “Poésie et connaissance,” was commensurate with the erosion of the human sense of concinnity or co-naturalness with the universe. Césaire, in observing the loss of a “gnarled primitive unity” in human life, seeks to (re)position the poet as the witness of Nature, rekindling the primitive, not only to imagine what an unavailable world would look and feel like, but also to recover a sense of time and “history” as a constitutive condition of human being in nature.

Within the historical conjuncture of 1944, the year in which he gave the lecture “Poésie et connaissance” in Haiti, Césaire presented poetry as part of a movement to reenchant the world, an attempt to prolong and recreate a system in which community and the ties between the human and nature were primary. In that year, he would spend over seven months in Haiti. He was thirty-one years old at the time, and was beginning to gain international recognition thanks to André Breton’s discovery of his work in 1941. His mission in Haiti, where he was

invited by the diplomatic representative of the Free French government, was to conduct workshops on poetry and present lectures at various venues across the country. This was his first time there, though Haiti had occupied his thinking for many years.

The lecture “Poésie et connaissance” was one of the landmark events during his visit. Césaire delivered it to the Société Haïtienne d’Études Scientifiques in September 1944 (Césaire 2013a, 1373). It was a philosophical enquiry into the nature of knowledge, and as the title suggests, Césaire’s intention was to give an account of knowledge in which poetry played a key role. In this lecture, published later in issue number 12 of Tropiques (January 1945), nature also occupies a central place. Indeed, the lecture, laying out the significant aspects of Césaire’s poetic œuvre, was as much an attempt to square these two ideas – poetry and nature – as it was a re-affirmation of an essential kinship between poetry and knowledge, one disavowed by Plato in the Republic and, in significant ways, by the ensuing history of Western philosophy.¹

In a 1978 interview with Jacqueline Leiner, on the occasion of Jean-Michel Place’s republication of Tropiques, Césaire declares that “a culture is born, not when man seizes [saisit], but when he is seized [est saisi]. He is seized [saisi] by the world” (1978, xvii; emphasis in original). This is an idea that, as he states, he adopts from the ethnographer Leo Frobenius, and confirms through reading the ethnographer and poet Michel Leiris. Césaire continues, saying that when one is so seized, “He begins to play the world, to mime the world. He is possessed...exactly as in Vodou...he is transformed into something else. He is no longer Mister So and So or Miss So and So; he is Shango, he is Ogou, he is Erzulie. He is, and he mimes it and he performs it!” (ibid.). The ideas are a response to Leiner’s request for clarification on a phrase from the abovementioned 1944 lecture, “Poésie et connaissance,” in which Césaire characterizes “the poet’s phrase” as “the world played and mimed [la phrase du poète; univers joué et mimé]”. The original passage is worth quoting for context:

Pregnant with the world, the poet speaks.

He speaks and his words bring language back to a pure state [...] I mean subject not to habit or thought, but to the very thrust of the cosmos. The word of the poet, the primitive word: a rupestrian design in the body of sound.

The poet's sentence: the primitive sentence, the universe played and mimed (Césaire 2013f, 1384).²

Césaire's fascination with spirit possession is likely to have originated in his reading of Leo Frobenius, the German ethnographer whose work sought to challenge the rationalist divide between "primitivity" and "civilisation." Césaire first read Frobenius' Kulturgeschichte Afrikas in French translation during the time when his Cahier au pays natal was being written. What made Frobenius's conception of civilization radically new and enabling for him was the fact that it was not evolutionary, progressing through successive stages of rational perfectibility. Instead, Frobenius considered civilisation to be a living organism whose organic "cycles" were independent of human beings, living above them or through them, as distinct from the Enlightenment *cum* capitalist schema of civilization as human progress. Significant to civilization was the idea of "primal seizure" [Ergriffenheit] (Frobenius 1940, 211), according to Frobenius, who believed that a people's "feeling of life" [Lebensgefühl], be it primitivity, the mastery of facts, or an ultimately self-destructive collective disposition, first comes about as an intense, primal manifestation of the life-force. Concepts by means of which reality is mastered are the eventual expressions of pre-existing attitudes towards life, and everything that can be interpreted as a guiding idea or principle first appears as an involuntary "seizure," a kind of powerful emotional reaction to life within a community. As he saw it, primitive civilizations (to Césaire, it seemed revolutionary for

these terms to be used together) were ones which remained close to their auroral manifestations, in other words, to their “youth,” marked by the desire to be moved by and be penetrated by “the essence of things” (Frobenius 1936, 26). He contrasts this primordial instinct to the organic cycles of mature expression (Ausdruck), characterized by the mastery of facts), and of “application” or utility (Anwendung), a mechanistic and materialistic phase typical of a civilization’s decadence. For Frobenius, being moved by the world was linked to play. For to be moved by the world is to become-other, in other words, to become one with it. Simply put, becoming-other is the quintessence of civilization. As such, there is an essential link between what Frobenius describes as civilization and what one might term “thinking with spirits,” since he views civilization as being manifested primarily in the space of seizure or possession, understood as a primordial instinct, a sort of convulsion that goes beyond individuality and rationality. This, Frobenius argues, is the space of art:

In the intense play of the child we find the primal source of the sacred underground waters of every civilization and every great creative force. In it is manifested the ability to abandon oneself spiritually and in full “reality” to another phenomenal world, since the child is moved by a phenomenon that is outside of natural human relations as well as outside of the obvious causes of phenomenon itself. Here we witness a change in its deepest inclination. Here, a person acquires two forms of life, that of “being” and that of play. (1936, 26)

Art is the “metaphysic” of participation, of becoming-similar, to be distinguished from the Socratic metaphysic of separation and representation. Frobenius’ ethnological theory provided much to reckon with in its entangling of the notions of play, possession and

civilization. The influence of these ideas on the *Cahier* and on the rest of Césaire's work was decisive, providing a mythical foundation of Césaire's conception of Négritude.

Their resonance is hard to miss in the above-mentioned remarks to Leiner, in which, moreover, he alludes to Frobenius: "This is a conception which I found striking, and which I must have taken from Frobenius" (Césaire 1978, xvii). In these remarks, it is also obvious that Césaire understands the essence of spirit possession which he links to Frobenius' Ergriffenheit (rendered by the French saisissement), which Césaire describes as being "seized by the world", the result being, as he says, that one begins to "mime the world." This is as accurate as any description given to me by Vodouists in Haiti, or provided by ethnographers such as Alfred Métraux or Maya Deren.

Of course, the history of Western thought on spirit possession is complex and entangled with the very history of modernity. To trace this history would be to reveal how European ideas about possession took shape in relation to new ideas about states, rationalism and morality, and the affirmation of colonial power (Johnson, 395). Showing that spirit possession is deeply embedded in the history of the West, Paul Christopher Johnson argues that modern Western thought invents the category of spirit possession, that is, possession as an epistemic descriptor of a "faulty ontology of objects" (403) and of an indeterminate personhood from which the rationalist being must, of necessity, be distanced. However, what is absent from Johnson's essay is a sense of what the act of welcoming spirits represents for African ontologies on its own terms, that is, beyond discourses of pathology, freedom and autonomy created by the Western epistēmē and in the interest of the capitalist administration of life and culture. Linking the raison d'être of spirit possession in Africa and its diaspora with loss, separation and displacement does not accomplish this, and is a reductive view of the meaning of possession in these contexts. (African ontologies are emphasized in the essay because of their place in nineteenth century ethnography.) Contrary to Johnson, deciphering

the notion of possession, getting to the heart of what it refers to among those for whom it is part of civilization, is precisely my goal. Thus, I am less interested in tracing the ways in which European philosophy from Hobbes to Hegel and Kant have created an episteme of possession which is well known, or in Christian demonological discourse on the category. In reading the work of Aimé Césaire, I want to move the lens back to what possession means for ontologies of selfhood that remain tied to it. In this regard, I will let the Latin-derived term “possession” suffice to describe ontologies of thinking with and welcoming spirits that rankle with the European epistēmē. In short, in reading the work of Césaire, I am referring to another history of possession.

In traditional African or Africanist societies in which “culture” continues to be understood as being “of the soil” or “of Earth,” the idea of being habitable by the invisible is often a feature of culture. This disposition is not an index of “bodies without will” (Johnson, 419) and therefore fit to be owned or occupied as property, nor is it an expression of what is known in religious terms as “demonic possession.” In Haitian Vodou, for example, possession manifests itself as a bodily transformation based on the models provided by the community’s collective beliefs. In Vodou, where the possessed is said to be “mounted” by a *loa* or divine spirit, he or she manifests a metamorphosed or normalised psychosomatic state “which reproduces the face and gestures of the gods in the manner of a theatrical personification” (Price-Mars, 33). The fact that these attitudes and intonations are transmitted by tradition is significant. The anthropologist Maya Deren, underscores the fact that the loa, or Mystères as they are sometimes called – the gods who, in Vodou, are necessarily personified – represent archetypes enshrined in ancestral narratives, phenomena that relate deeply to the Earth, and to the natural world (Deren, 29). The gods are all extended aspects of the life force, forces of nature and aspects of the human condition in symbolic form.

Indeed, Vodou is a drama whose characters are symbols, in the primary sense of the Greek symbolon, signs of recognition between humans in the lived experience of the community (Métraux 1958, 96), and indices of the alliance between the human and Earth. As symbols, the Vodou gods are not objects of thought, but expressions of active, lived relations. This can be illustrated with regard to the serpent god Damballa and his rainbow serpent wife Ayida Wedo who are viewed as the progenitors of life and who “represent the unity of male and female and the generation of life force and consciousness that comes from that union” (Heaven, 96). These aquatic snakes therefore symbolise an aspect of the Real as it has been apprehended and transmitted through myth. Damballa and Ayida Wedo are the image of the connection of worlds, of unity within the cosmos, and of human being’s connection with the Infinite, since they connect “the water (lower) world, the land of the ancestors, with the sky (the upper world), the home of the loa, through their ascent of the pole” (ibid.). Moreover, miming the nature of Damballah, those possessed by him “cannot speak [...] and cannot walk or use their arms [...]; instead they crawl on their bellies over to the offerings and lick up the milk or raw egg white with their tongues” (97). This points to the origin of the category of possession in the primal instinct of mimesis, which, in primitive civilization, is consistently linked to the human’s relationship with the invisible.

In Vodou, as in ancient Greek communities, the domain of the gods is Earth, not the “bastion of divine remoteness” that is the Catholic paradise (Soyinka, 24). As terrestrial deities, the *loa* are considered manifestations of total reality in its different dimensions. The idea that the earth is shared with the gods makes it possible to imagine that natural, human and mental landscapes coexist and merge with each other, and that the divine, as that Consciousness which exceeds the human, is best accessed through a mimetic disposition. In spirit possession, the human being plays the world by playing the god. Through the “monumental archetypes” (Deren, 247) that are the loas, to reference only the case of Haitian

Vodou, possession is being connected to the memory of the Earth. It indicates a desire and will to manifest Earth itself, its energies and rhythms. Underlying spirit possession rites in Vodou, and other similar knowledge systems, is therefore a belief in interenergetic relations, the possibility of energy exchanges between the human and the cosmos. Vodou itself is but one example of how humans throughout time and civilisations have sought to attract the powers of the earth to themselves, to make myths of them, and, by honouring them, place them on their side.

As such, possession suggests a praxis in which myth is realness, since possession is a performative, mimetic interpretation of total reality that often renders knowledge as myth. Myth, in its primal sense, should not be understood as narratives of origin or identificatory mechanisms, as in widespread contemporary renderings, but as mimetic interpretations of reality, operating, as such, beyond the spatio-temporal. The category of possession thus suggests a praxis that places magic within life, rather than exiling it to the category of fiction. The latter gesture constitutes what Laurent Dubreuil has termed “the phrase of possession” (Dubreuil, 13-35), the epistemic enunciation of the primitive as the Other of Western humanism and thought.

Césaire’s fascination for Frobenius’s ideas about seizure, primitive culture and civilization, are evident from the first (1939) edition of the Cahier, where he contrasts “seizure”, associated with pre-colonial African culture, with the decadence of European civilisation. The “omniscient and naive conquerors” that are the European colonizing powers are said to embody a worldview starkly at variance with pre-colonial African abandon to the “breath”, “waters”, and “sacred fire” of the world. For Césaire, the banishing from consciousness of the “sacred fire” [“feu sacré du monde”], emblem of Ancient Greek primitive devotion to Earth and its spirits, is viewed as a deception to which “conquering”

European civilisation has fallen prey, hence the poet's deplored of Europe's blindness to its own decadence: "Pity on our omniscient and naive conquerors!":

They abandon themselves, possessed, to the essence of all things, ignorant of surfaces
 but seized [saisis] by the movement of all things,
 heedless, taking no account, but playing the game of the world
 truly the elder sons of the world
 porous to every breath 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.

(Césaire 2013a, 86)

In "seizure by the essence of things" we hear the echo of Frobenius' description of the primitive consciousness in Kulturgeschichte Afrikas (1933), published as Histoire de la civilisation africaine in France in 1936, which he poet Léopold Sédar Senghor also found instrumental (Senghor, ix).

Contrary to the famous "Wotan essay" (1936) in which Jung uses the notion of "archetypal Ergriffenheit" to frame National Socialism as a confrontation between the Germans and their inner divinity (Dohe 2011), a confrontation which could potentially reawaken and reaffirm a collective racial libido and lead to a spiritual rebirth of the German nation in the wake of the catastrophe of World War I (Jung 1970, §384), Frobenius argued against all imperialisms and rejected the "daimon of the ego" and "the philosophy of the superman" (Frobenius 1940, 226), which he considered deleterious products of Euro-American civilization. Besides, he thought, perhaps naïvely, that the German people's desire for a new social order after World War I suggested the "recognition of a common destiny"

(207) and signalled, more broadly, the end of a civilization “dominated by decomposition and utilitarianism” (208) — in a word, that the hour of European imperialisms was now up.

Ergriffenheit was, for Frobenius, a state of consciousness antithetical to human mastery, and even more clearly so to the idea of a Nietzschean master race. The most fundamental aspect of Frobenius’ work is arguably the ethnographical demonstration that race was not a cultural factor in the existence or development of any civilization: “everything that is alive is one; there exists no fundamental difference between nature and civilization [...] all that is alive is linked by a common destiny”(198-199; emphasis in original).

Certainly, where Césaire was concerned, civilization was to be viewed from the point of view of totality, rather than from a narrow-minded one-sidedness. Therefore, despite the ideological context of Nazi mythology in Germany and its occupied territories during World War I (including Martinique, which, as a French colony, came under Vichy rule), Césaire articulates an notion of the *saisissement* which is to be distinguished from ideas of a return to tradition and nature foregrounded by Pétain’s Révolution Nationale. In Césaire’s view, the true enchantment of the real represented by poetry was a counter-logic to the to the mystifications of imperialism and to false enchantment represented by capitalism.

Between the first publication of the *Cahier* to the speech “La Martinique telle qu’elle est” (Césaire 2013d) delivered forty years later (in 1979), Césaire would return repeatedly to this idea of the *saisissement*. He takes up the concern in the 1945 essay “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. (Césaire 2013c, 1398).

In the essay, a series of twenty aphorisms in which he summarizes for the Martinican reader the essence of his poetics, Césaire refers specifically to the shamanic “seizure” as a paradigm of mental and cultural operation, taking up the theme in relation to civilization, and to myth, its “manifestation”, as he sees it. If the shamanic seizure is the guarantor of “civilization” and a way out of alienation, it is because it is “participation” in the life force (Césaire 2013c, 1399); a reenchantment of the “desecrated” world that surrounds us, restoring to it “its dignity and mystery, its radiant force”. The allusion to shamanism is unambiguous here, as Césaire refers to the object in the natural world as “The Great Intercessor” (1400): every living and non-living thing, this phrase suggests, is endowed with spirit. “The true ideal”, declares Césaire, “is the ‘possessed’ woman” (1399), as he presents poetry as “the only avowed refuge of the mythical spirit” (1398). The young Césaire, fascinated by the writings of Frobenius and Nietzsche and with the cultic world of the ancient Greeks, here finds in poetry a primitive sacral authenticity. The poetic experience becomes a manifestation of otherness within self. In a modern world stripped of myth and reduced to the mere factual, surface reality of things, it is the poet, he declares in the longer “Poésie et connaissance”, who is the keeper of the shamanic instinct for the “gnarled primal unity” of the natural world (Césaire 2013f, 1383), an instinct towards which humankind was universally attuned before the “secondary dispersion of life” (*ibid.*). The poet’s ability to be in touch with this primal unity thus allows them to “re-establish a personal, fresh, binding and magical contact with the world [“les choses”] (Césaire 2013c, 1399). Where this idea of civilization as mobilization of “emotional energies” (1579) through the human contact with an enspirited natural world is concerned, Césaire remained remarkably consistent throughout

the decades spanned by his career. He did not hesitate, in a speech on the political future of Martinique delivered not far from Fort-de-France in 1979 (Césaire 2013d), to invoke 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” (1580). “The masses, everywhere,” Césaire states, “do not take the stage or act until they are seized and mobilized by MYTH” (1579; emphasis in original).

The interview with Jacqueline Leiner is interesting for, among other things, its connecting primitive civilizations of Rome, Greece and the Mediterranean with the culture of Vodou. Here, 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” (Césaire 1978, xix). Describing the poet “at the time of Bacchus” (*ibid.*) as a seer or “vates,” Césaire sites the appearance of poetry in ancient Greece in the earth-honouring rites of that world, even as he compares ancient Greek and Roman “propitiatory divinities” (*ibid.*) with the centuries-old primitive cults of African societies and their new-world mutations, including Haitian Vodou. For Césaire, the elements that pointed to spirit possession as the original nature of poetic inspiration in ancient Greek life must have included the ecstatic worship of Dionysus (which Plato associates with tragic poetry); the close relation perceived between ritual ecstasy (manía) and “prophecy” (mantiké) in ancient Greek life, as highlighted by nineteenth and twentieth-century anthropological studies of the ancient Greeks (e.g. Thompson 1968, Harrison 1913, Dodds 1951, de Coulanges 1866); and the terminology by which ancient writers including Plato related spirit possession to the arts, and specifically to poetry (see Pl. Phdr. 244a-c; Pl. *Ion* 533c-536d), even if the assumption that “poetic inspiration” among the pre-classical Greeks necessarily involved ecstasy or possession has been disputed by some scholars . Besides, the Nietzschean tragic imperative to lift the veil of

Apollonian civilization and, under it, rediscover primal Dionysian powers, as expressed in The Birth of Tragedy must have also helped to anchor his vision of poetry. Nietzsche's book, which Césaire encounters in the late 1930s, had a profound impact on him and he viewed it as attesting the ancient portrayal of the poet as "seer" [devin] and prophet (Césaire 1978, xix).

If the ancient poet was thus seized by the essence of phenomena and moved by the life-force, poetry must contain within it, Césaire suggests, a more or less residual relationship to possession, and this relationship seems best demonstrated in the kind of affect that poetry fosters and based on which it functions: welcome, receptivity, openness, submission to the autonomous life of the senses.

It is arguably Rimbaud, however, more than any of the European thinkers surveyed in "Poetry and Knowledge," who enables Césaire to bridge the apparently distant worlds of ancient Greek poetry and African and Afro-Caribbean conceptions of art. To Césaire's mind, "literature [was] still registering the aftershocks of the incredible seismic shock of [Rimbaud's] famous lettre du voyant" (Césaire 2013f, 1379). Indeed, Rimbaud, speaking of the Romantic sense of poetry as a form of otherness within the self, and associating it with the ancient Greek tragic arts, declares:

[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 (Rimbaud, 95).

As Rimbaud suggests here, the aesthetic life implies an entanglement of the subject, so that the very act of creation is not the domain of one subjectivity. Poiesis, rather than a creation by one rational consciousness, is much more the conditions that allow a certain *otherliness* to emerge: “I am present at the birth of my thought,” etc. Rimbaud also states that in ancient Greece, “verses and lyres give rhythm to Action” [rythment l’action]. What does he mean by this? He seems to suggest that in ancient Greece, poetry provided the space of real action, which would imply that poetry, rather than representation, is meant to foster presence, at least in the way the ancient Greeks conceived of 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 that inheres within it necessarily involves the sensate, rather than (merely) the ideational. It can be said, then, that poetry thus involves rendering present to the senses that which is not, functioning at that juncture where spirit and matter meet. Thus poetry seems to stand, in this mode of thinking, as the concrescence of what Baumgarten calls “aesthesia,” a way in which the rational is rethought as emerging from the sensible and as overflowed by it (Baumgarten 1954), and seems, then, as Césaire suggests in “Poetry and Knowledge,” 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 to what is beyond its materiality, yet its function is to body forth the thing that is beyond it. Benjamin and Adorno were both very interested in the idea of art as providing a medium for phenomena to be felt, and this paradigm is encapsulated in Adorno’s phrase, “The true is unconcealed for discursive

knowledge, but for this reason the latter does not possess it; the kind of knowledge that art is, has the true, but as something incommensurable to it” (Adorno, 191; my translation).

If, as Whitehead argues, nature is constituted by events and not things, as idealist philosophy holds, then this would support Rimbaud’s conception of poiesis. More, it solidifies a lineage from ancient Greek ritual and poetry through Nietzsche, Rimbaud, and others to the Modernist heritage that Césaire inherits, which relates to the different type of epistemology that Césaire poetically articulates in the Cahier d’un retour au pays natal. That lineage takes form around the notion of art and poiesis as the obligation of presence, a fact readily suggested by Césaire’s “Poésie et connaissance,” that rejects the idea of pastness and takes creation out of the representational paradigm.

If writing serves to consecrate absence, poiesis, as it is understood here, affirms presence(s), an ontology that breaks down the walls of time. 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.

The essential connections between poetry and civilization makes poetry a political concern, which is also to say that Césaire’s political vision was an artistic one, since he believed human civilization to be impossible without art. An important fact which has been underemphasized because of ideological distortions is that Césaire did not consider the “very ancient and very new being” (Césaire 2013e, 1390) that was the poet 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, was one that needed to be affirmed, given a history of violence, aggression and domination exerted by the Western world against African knowledge systems (Césaire 2013b, 1577). On the other hand, Césaire did not hesitate to

associate this “ancient being” that was the poet with certain Western figures, many of whom were, indeed, primary, inspirations for his work: Nietzsche, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Claudel, Apollinaire, and so on.

I want to emphasize the point that what is problematic in the eyes of Césaire is the material realities constitutive of the West, and the fact that modernity and coloniality are co-constitutive categories. From that standpoint, the fact that a number of European figures have been important for him does not represent a contradiction or slippage in Négritude’s terms of reference, since the figures his work engages are ones who question the problematic aspects of European humanism.

Césaire’s thinking does not trade in a binary (West/non-West) way of conceptualising poetry, as an oft-reiterated account of his work has claimed. To the contrary, the phenomenon that is racism creates false scissions that Négritude denounces in the interest of a universal flowering of humanity. The fact that it (Négritude) aspires to repair these scissions for populations which have suffered some of capital’s worst predations does not create some sort of binary, since on numerous occasions this aspiration is placed within an overall vision of the human, one in which the particular coheres within the universal, in which the universal “is the deepening of the particular” (Césaire 1996; 2013e).

The development of Césaire’s concept of Négritude, corresponding with his encounter with, and ever expanding relationship with, ethnography from the 1930s onwards, not only helped him to better articulate the importance of Western writers such as Nietzsche and Rimbaud, but to foreground an African ontological conception of the human and the world founded on an essential will to integration, reconciliation and harmony. The result is that Négritude became the expression of an alternative account of art and of the senses to that presented by Western epistemologies. The fact is readily demonstrated in the composition of

the war time magazine Tropiques, through the contributions of Aimé and Suzanne Césaire and their collaborators.

Aimé Césaire's work established a continuity between ancient and new worlds that sought to transcended the intervening "history" of the West. To put it differently, his gesture was a way of affirming a vision of poetry that was ante- and, as such, counter-historical, for, to quote Césaire, "poetry is the reconstitution of sacred time, the time that is before history" (Césaire 1963, 188), particularly when "history was the history of a separation, from primal culture [...] separation from oneself" (*ibid.*). In this regard, he makes an unambiguous statement: "if historical time is a tearing apart, abduction, the severing of the umbilical cord, [...] what can the effort of the poet be, if not to constitute and recreate another time; sacred time, paradisiacal time, which is reconciliation and totality" (*ibid.*). If spirit possession was linked to poetry it is because it was perhaps, above all, a way of envisaging, and conceptualising, the way in which poetry could achieve this work of de-ideologizing knowledge on its own terms and de-linking it from the temporal economy of capitalism, and from the tyranny of its destructive obsession with the "now." All of which is to say that thinking with spirits bears on time, and a deep, ancient and planetary construal of its workings that can free us from the normative logics of the capitalist status quo.

If this view of poetry constitutes a way out of history, imagining a real world in which the ancient Greeks, Haitian Vodou, and European heretics of rationalism shared kinship ties, it does not for all that constitute a flattening out of historical experience. Quite the opposite. For not only was Césaire cognisant of the meaning of spirit possession from an ethnographic point of view, referring to Frobenius, Leiris and Bastide, among others (Césaire 2013b; 1978), he was also aware of the specific history that accounted for the existence of Haitian Vodou and, broadly, for the persistence of African primitive belief that it embodied.

In other words, let me emphasize that this view of poetry as knowledge and living philosophy needed to be affirmed precisely *because* of the ontological cataclysm that was slavery. In other words, despite displacement and deportation, an active link with ancestry remains and allows for the culturing of counter-imaginings and insurgent modes of expression. Césaire's resistance is based on the rebuilding of a co-naturality ruptured by colonialism.

Possession, or how poetry thinks

"How does poetry think?" The question I pose here opens a field of interrogation around the "thinking" capacities of poetry as an autonomous concern. As I have suggested above, poetry conjoins abstract thinking capacities with the faculty of thinking with the body and the environment in a horizontal, non-hierarchical manner. The capacity for philosophical thought is thus broadened beyond abstraction and logic to denote responses to the active meanings of lived experience in nature. It is useful to show, through examples from Césaire's work, how poetry challenges the onto-epistemological foundations of the entrepreneurial self and subject, by constituting a medium through which matter moves.

In his provocative book *Does Literature Think?*, Stathis Gourgouris remarks, "it is fair to say that since Plato's famous decision [to expel the poets from the city in the Republic] there has been an implicit but consistent association of the poetic act with a peculiar, mysterious, and even dangerous sort of knowledge" (Gourgouris, 2). For Plato, poetry is dangerous because it trades in myths. Myths are "untrue stories" and thus "dangerous" as they tamper with the work of transcendent reason. The real stakes for Plato's city is to provide proper "guidelines for talking about the gods" (Republic, 379a) in the interest of the training of the

guardians. If the guardians fear the gods, they are more likely to be afraid of death than of losing their freedom, and this is anathema to courage.

In the modern West, the reasons for poetry's perceived danger may be envisioned differently, though they may be still essentially linked to the Platonic paradigm. Is poetry dangerous, because with it we lose a grip on self, becoming vulnerable? Or is what makes poetry ultimately dangerous the fact that it threatens the rationalist administration of "culture" and of life (including its fundamental expression in capital)? It is worth pointing out that the aspect of poetry's nature that makes it reprehensible and dangerous in the eyes of Plato is mimesis. As for mimesis, one must remember that its most terrifying element for Plato is impersonation: "the act of speaking as another" (Republic, 393c).

What does it mean for poetry to be, as Plato admits, the quintessential mimetic activity? What do we make of its ability to plastically form images? What I have been proposing is that poetry necessarily entails some sort of other body (Leiris, 73); here, I would like to suggest that this "other body" is created through the word and through rhythm. Poetry, in this view, is a power more than it is a thing, conjuring subterranean, invisible energies. Kamau Brathwaite puts it this way : "the poet conceives of literature as spirit, rather than as politics" (Brathwaite 1996), in speaking about how poetry allows him to know what cannot be found in the archive.

It seems that there is something underground, ungovernable about poetic knowledge that must be brought under control if knowledge is to fit into an administered form of culture. The stance of the Negritude poets that aligns poetry to nature, viewing it as a portal of connection to the invisible, is untenable in a rationalist culture whose main interest is governmentality. Is it its essential capacity to "think" through rhythm? Is it its reliance on myth as a way of apprehending the real? For myth (re)frames the conditions of action and perception,

especially when the social body in the West consigns myth to literature, encoding it in the category of fiction.

Given the way it moves beyond the art of description and towards a renewed focus on the material and energetic aspects of land, minerals, plants, trees, etc., Césaire's poetry may indeed suggest the idea of poetry as a way of thinking and feeling, a way of cultivating affective energies towards soil, land, and matter. His poetry, consistently foregrounding the figure of the poet, is presented as a space of transformation of energies, of the materialization of memory.

The poem "Lost Body" [Corps perdu], from the 1950 collection by that name, is an enactment of this idea. The giving of oneself to total reality is first and foremost a state of welcome. Desire enables an attitude of reception:

Then I imagine life would flood my whole being
 better yet I would feel it touching or biting me
 lying down I would see the free odours, finally free, come to me
 like merciful hands
 finding their way
 to sway their long hair in me
 longer than this past I cannot reach.
 Things, stand back make room among yourselves
 room for my repose carrying in waves
 my frightening crest of anchor-like roots
 looking for a place to take hold
 Things, I probe and probe you

I the street-porter I am root-porter
 and I bare down and I force and I arcane
 I omphale (Césaire et al. 2013, 498; my translation)

This attitude of welcome and of reception is not powerlessness, but synthesis of all one's forces lived and condensed. Even when the poet commands the elements to make way for his own being, it is not to master them, but to receive from them their essence, to abandon himself to their rhythm.

Such interenergetic exchange is also illustrated in the poem “Speed” [“Allure”] (from the collection Solar Throat Slashed [Soleil cou coupé]), in which the poet’s attention is drawn to the living energy of stone, particularly the dolomite rocks, seen as “the heart of a bird under my childish hands” (Césaire 2017, 322). His attention is not only drawn to stone and minerals, to the manifested world of rocks and geological phenomena (“iceberg”, “veins” of rocks, “dolomite”) as they metamorphose and manifest different faces of the solid world, but also to the more fluid, less graspable, life that lies beneath and within them, to the energies that produce change and spread life throughout the surfaces of things. In “Speed,” the image of “old gods sealed in full glory” provides a metaphor for such energies. One manifestation of energy is rhythm. Recreating a scene of primitive ritual (locating himself “around a three-stone fire crowned with a vibrating circle of tipulas”), the speaker associates the vibrating energies of both fire and stone with rhythm. If the fire’s energy is manifested in its “speed”, the “gong” of the poem may allude to the rock gong, a slab (or pieces) of rock used for the production of music in pre-historic times, and whose geographical distribution in various locations of Africa is thought to be associated with cave paintings (Fagg, 6). The gong thus also serves to recreate the scene of ancient rituals. Evoking vibrating energies

contained or produced in matter, it depicts rhythm as the embodiment of a life force linking rock, fire and human being. Fire is the element that conjoins all living things in this poem, fertilizing, tempering, maturing, or destroying (as suggested by “the petrifaction of thousand year forests”). The visible fire reflects another invisible fire animating the poet’s substance and manifesting itself through the many sparks and excitations of his psychic and bodily life. As shaman, the poet can become master of the fire, in line with ancient magical beliefs. The speaker seeks the energy of the fire to “fight with him,” in other words, for his being to assimilate its power, even as he wears a “solar crown,” a diadem symbolizing the sun, or more generally, powers associated with the sun, in cults dedicated to it in ancient Egypt (see Stewart, 246).

The reference here to the solar crown also brings to mind the poem “Afrique” in the collection Ferments, where this crown is also mentioned. Here, in a grotesque and brutal reversal, the slaver’s carcan encircling the neck of the African captive takes the place of the solar crown that “extends down to the neck, covering it” [enfoncé jusqu’au cou]. In this poem (“Afrique”), the solar diadem is associated with “prophetic gifts” [voyance] of which the African captive, and the poet by extension, has been robbed.

The importance of ancient myths and dispositions in restoring the significance of earth in the metaphysical scope is key. Such African myths countered the Platonic idea of knowledge as a moving beyond the world and the senses to the world of “ideas” and “forms” existing independently of the visible realm, and suggested knowledge as entanglement with the natural world. As such, the poet seeks to conjure or attract the powers of Earth to himself, to be penetrated by the essence of life, while aligning himself with an African ancestral construal of the Real. Visible symbols of the primordial fire are meant to underscore the way it suffuses and connects all of life.

As in “Speed,” the poem “Chevelure” plays on the ambivalence of its title, which denotes both a head of hair and a coma (a nebulous envelope around the nucleus of a comet that gives it its fuzzy appearance when viewed in a telescope). This duality is already embedded in the ancient Greek “komētes,” meaning “long-haired star.” Telescoping images to create an organic unity of multiple facets of nature, the poem conflates the full hair of a woman, the comet’s gaseous atmosphere, and the hair-like canopy of a tree.

In “Chevelure,” the speaker relishes the touch of different elements upon each other and upon his body: “the soft muzzle/ of the great rivers,” something “travelling under the mature forest of a flesh that watches me.” The eye is drawn to surfaces brimming with mysterious life: a tree is “beautiful” and “naked”; a forest is enfleshed; an ocean “reveals/ the treacherous creation of diamonds.” But here again in this poem, the tree is at the centre of the poet’s attention. The “chevelure” links its canopy of leaves and branches to the dense, hair-like light of the comet, as in the lines “artless flames licking a strange heart.” The earth is a fabulous sensorium in which the boundary between the body and the world is hard to define, when, for example, “shoulders [are] tied to the raindrops.” The canopy of the tree is an “innocent one undulating,” much like the comet, and that sees, that watches, that remembers.

The “I” is remarkably absent from the poem (as in most of the poems in Soleil cou coupé), except when it “remember[s] the soft muzzle of the great rivers,” and when at the end of the poem, the speaker tells the “messy mane of creepers” to “sleep softly at the meticulous trunk of [his] embrace,” and the tree is addressed as “my wife/ my citadel.” 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.

In the words of Nan Shepherd, who also described her poetry in terms of possession (Spepherd 1931), “place and a mind interpenetrate until the nature of both is altered”

(Shepherd 2014, 8). 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.

Frobenius' remark that "it was not things themselves, but their essence, that 'seized' men" (1940, 216) not only alludes to the function of possession in the primitive mind, but provides a way of understanding the attachment of Césaire's poetry to the elements. Césaire's entire poetics, grounded in a desire to be moved by the Real and to recreate it through the poetic word, constitutes an attempt to connect with the "essence of things," a connection that provides a way out of history by virtue of the ancestral ties that it affirms, or indeed, recreates.

In Soleil cou coupé [*Solar Throat Slashed*], blood runs through the barks of trees, trees keep secrets that humans desire to find out. The poet speaker constantly changes into trees, plants, minerals and back into the human. The idea of metamorphosis is underscored, attributing subjectivity to all the elements of nature. 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 is able to 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.

This language of metamorphosis is more than just a mirror of the imaginary. It is a call for a different way of seeing. By emphasising the theme of energetic exchange in nature, the poet affirms a primitive mindset that redistributes personhood to other-than-human beings:

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 (Césaire 2017, 430)

The poet becomes “l’homme-plante” (Césaire 1942, 46), human being becomes stone or tree, fingers turn into boas, the poet bursts into a flame of new poinsettia leaves.

Decapitation, a theme of Solar Throat Slashed, as inscribed in its title, foregrounds the possibility of accessing a superior consciousness. The loss of one’s head is symbolic of a liberation from the universalizing orthodoxy of Western rationalism. The image of the mutilation of the head relates to a profound interrogation of the identity of the “I.” This concern is also emphasized in the revised 1947 versions of the Cahier published by Brentano and Bordas respectively:

From staring too long at trees I have become a tree and my long feet of trees have dug
 in the ground large sacs of venom high cities of bone
 from brooding too long on the Congo
 I have become a Congo resounding with forests and rivers
 where the whip cracks like a great banner
 the banner of a prophet
 where the water goes likouala-likouala (Césaire 2013a, 119-120)

The tree, the forest, and the river (the Likouala and the Congo) represent attempts to reconnect with African memory. The Congo here is imagined nature. A creaturely connection to it, to the baobab, the cailcedrat, to the Congo, to Likouala, etc. – to an African natural world that pervades Césaire’s poetry – represents a way out of History by virtue of the ancestral ties that such connection evokes. Such aspiration to connection is now a way to imagine what an unavailable form of life would feel like. With affective, emotional connections to ancestral geographies, the poet crosses the river of time and opens up a new world hitherto inaccessible. As such, creaturely connection, the ability to penetrate the universe, may entail not only connection to what one sees, materially manifested, but to what one cannot see. The catalogue of rivers (Likouala, Congo, Zambezi) is not a learned distraction but an expression of enthusiasm for particulars of knowledge that bring the speaker closer to the object of his adoration. The creaturely disposition breaks open the spatialized world.

Emphasising the interconnectedness of the natural world, Césaire’s is a work that defines ecological sensibility without being overtly “environmental” (a word which, in the 1940s, would probably have had little resonance for him). The point is that this politics, which is borne from a critique of the geological conditions of racism, provides for me a counter-analytic to a just declared Anthropocene. And without a doubt, this view of the world has ethical ramifications. In asking us to think about creaturely, nonhuman life, on its own terms, this construal of poetry not only challenges certain “modes of knowledge,” but more importantly, affects our conception of what knowledge is.

The reader familiar with Heidegger’s late work will have perceived certain correspondences with what I have presented of Césaire’s thought, above. Particularly in Poetry, Language, Thought (2001), especially the essay “Building Dwelling Thinking,” and in *The Question Concerning Technology* (1977), Heidegger argues that poetic language

gives human beings access to nature and the material world; that through language we learn how to “dwell” on, within and with the earth. Heidegger’s world is always in flux, and the self is formed in interaction with the phenomenal world. As he points out, the German ich bin, du bist comes from Old English/High German buan/bauen, which means both “to dwell” and “to build”, where “build” can mean to cultivate or to construct (143-149). So not only does language allow us to really “be,” to dwell – lets us access our environments – but also, creativity emerges from dwelling, and is in fact one of its essential aspects. Knowledge is incremental and a process, and poetry has a unique and privileged status in allowing one to dwell.

As a practice, poetry allows us to go further and further into existence, whereby we move away from an entrepreneurial sense of the individual. We lose the will to mastery and surrender to an intrinsic human inclination to identify with the world, to be the world. Which is one conception of poetry and art that has existed and still exists in many places. And being the world is a state of consciousness in which the functions of poet, shaman, and philosopher are fundamentally linked, if not one. This is the conception of the poet which one such as Empedocles, and many of the moderns (Rimbaud, de Nerval, and Adonis are only a few examples), fulfilled in their own spheres. So does the man or woman mounted by the loa, the man or woman for whom and to whom a tree, a stone, a mountain or stream can and does speak. What all of this suggests is the need to rethink our conceptions of what the poet is in light of what the poet and poetry have been in the past — and, indeed, what poetry still aspires to be, i.e. magical thinking.

Being the world opens up a different approach to dwelling in and with the world by opening up a different approach to knowledge. Poetry, by freeing language from the mathematical circle of objects, opening it up to the full vibration of things through rhythm, sound and the image, enables us to dwell and to know in the flesh, to know by being a

dweller. All of this is about the possibility of knowledge as being thought – the possibility of thinking with spirits. About how rhythm, sound and image (vibrations, in short) point to our status as dwelling-knowers. For knowledge, it shows us, is presence. The Ionic hylozoists, we are told, philosophized on the basis of the consciousness of the object (Klages, 67). Perhaps a return to the unity of poetry and philosophy, a return to poetry's status as philosophy, might help to solve the ethical conundrums of the object-based ontology that has dominated Western thought. One such conundrum is the conspiracy of limited expectations that perpetuates the belief that civilization is the mastery of things. The idea of poetry understood not as a wishy-washy, private hidden art or a bourgeois preoccupation, but as a way of dwelling, may somehow be essential to creating a paradigm of living in which working to make money to buy things is not “how the world works.”

Conclusion

My reading of Césaire’s poetry has emphasized the way in which he views poetry as countering the “necropolitical” drive to destroy life and abolish “any idea of ancestry” (Mbembe, 269) with its own life-drive, its affirmation of a creaturely connectedness that searches for, and attempts to recover, ancestral connections that have been obscured, if not lost. Poetry becomes a “surrogate mode of inheritance” (Durrant, 183) that affirms its autonomy from the necropolitical drive towards amnesia. It offers a second handle on reality by allowing connection to those worlds made inaccessible by the instrumental reality of necropolitical colonialism – not only the universe of the ancestors, but also the essence or particular nature of things that lies beneath the surface. Poetry joins present and past, the living and the dead, and thus begins the work of resubjectification of the natural world.

In Césaire's work, possession is key for articulating what sort of knowledge poetry achieves on its own terms. In his eyes, and from the point of view of a certain tradition which he points to, possession becomes a paradigm for how poetry knows and thinks the world. As I have shown in this essay, articulating what sort of knowledge poetry achieves on its own terms touches on a range of "non-poetic" questions, conventionally speaking, which relate ultimately to what determines one's orientation in the world as a human person, and — if one can thus conceive of it — dweller of Earth. Poetry, as we have seen, thus fundamentally poses questions about the nature of humanness, of the senses, and of being. Such questions are highlighted, and conventional responses to them challenged, when poetry is viewed as being of the nature of possession, that is, of a performative mode of worldly knowledge necessarily involving the body and the interfusion of its energies with those of the world.

In the work of Césaire, the poetic as primal seizure marks a self-expressive freedom from the normative constraints of an antimythical globalizing West. Linking the poetic to the immanence of the human and the earth allows him to connect the world of ancient Greece to that of Haitian Vodou and to place the function of poetry at the heart of this history, and indeed to mark this connection as a connection in the history of poetry and of knowledge. If possession is an intense expression of the concinnity of the natural world and the human, the association of possession and poetry makes poetry a central concern of Being, of which nature is both setting and evidence.

Notes

¹ Readers of the Martinican poet and philosopher, Édouard Glissant, will be aware that for him, too, the demythologization of knowledge in the West finds its clearest reflection in Plato's gesture of banning poets from the Republic. In *L'Intention poétique*, Glissant, following Césaire, claims affinity with the pre-Socratics (1969, 14), meaning an archaic Greek culture

before Plato's intervention, in which the sharp Platonic distinction between art and reality did not exist.

² Unless otherwise stated, all translations of works published in French are mine.

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