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THINKING WITH SPIRITS, OR DWELLING AND KNOWING IN THE WORK OF AIMÉ CÉSAIRE

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In a 1978 interview with Jacqueline Leiner, on the occasion of Jean-Michel Place's republication of *Tropiques*, Aimé Césaire declares that 'une culture naît, non pas quand l'homme saisit, mais quand l'homme *est saisi*'.[1] This is an idea that 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,

> il joue le monde, il mime le monde. C'est ce que je veux dire quand je parle de l'Univers joué et mimé. . .
>
> *Il est saisi*. . . autrement dit, il est *possédé*, exactement comme dans le vaudou. Ce sont les rites de la possession — que Michel Leiris a étudiés — phénomène très typique des Antilles.
>
> [. . .] il est passé à autre chose. Il n'est plus Monsieur un tel ou Mademoiselle une telle; il est Chango, il est Ogou, il est Erzulie. Il *est*, et il *le mime* et il *le joue*![2]

These ideas are a response to Leiner's request for clarification of a passage from 'Poésie et connaissance' in which Césaire characterizes 'la phrase du poète' as 'univers joué et mimé'. The original is worth quoting for context:

> Gros du monde, le poète parle.
>
> Il parle et sa langue ramène le langage à l'état pur.
>
> État pur, je veux dire soumis non pas à l'habitude ou à la pensée mais à la seule poussée du cosmos. Le mot du poète, le mot primitif: dessein rupestre dans la matière sonore.
>
> La phrase du poète: la phrase primitive, univers joué et mimé.[3]

What do we make of Césaire's gestures connecting poetry, mimesis, and possession? Let me hasten to define my understanding of certain key terms in this discussion — first of all, mimesis. I associate this notion with the inclination of

My sincerest thanks to Marc Césaire for granting me permission to used extended quotes from the poetry of Aimé Césaire.

[1] Aimé Césaire, 'Entretien avec Jacqueline Leiner', in *Tropiques, 1941–1945: collection complète*, ed. by Jacqueline Leiner (Paris: Place, 1978), pp. v–xxiv (p. xvii); original emphasis.

[2] Césaire, 'Entretien avec Jacqueline Leiner', p. xvii; original emphasis.

[3] Césaire, 'Poésie et connaissance', in *Aimé Césaire: poésie, théâtre, essais et discours*, ed. by Albert James Arnold (Paris: CNRS; Présence africaine, 2013), pp. 1373–90 (p. 1384).

the human mind to 'become-other', or 'become-similar', if we choose to use Walter Benjamin's terminology ('ähnlich zu werden'[4]) — that is, to express powerful correspondences in the natural world based on an intensely expressed, primal recognition of the inherent tendency of life forms towards metamorphosis. Mimesis thus understood calls upon a primitive sense of play, as described by various anthropologists including Frobenius, Leiris, Alfred Métraux, and Maya Deren, as discussed below, but, more importantly, as evidenced in traditional African approaches to art.[5] For the Western imaginary, it is impossible for the term 'primitif' to evoke anything other than wildness, savagery, states of underdevelopment, the notion of being behind time. Césaire's thought enables us to interrogate the genealogy of the Western idea of the primitive. One may conceive of the primitive, following Césaire, as an orientation to life — an *Einstellung*, to use Frobenius's term — that has less to do with being on time, ahead of time, or with running late — in sum, with a Western metaphysic of history — than with a way of inhabiting the world. In other words, rather than a measure of a people's on-time-ness, viewed as a function of their degree of mastery of facts, Césaire's thinking invites us, I would argue, to view civilization as a manifestation of a people's way of being in the world. In this way, perhaps the greatest significance of the category of 'primitive' is to open up a non-normative temporality, a consciousness of time that operates outside of a Western genealogy of perception.

Césaire himself, in his 'Discours sur l'art africain', links this idea of mimesis to 'pre-modern' traditional cultures in which the human has not yet severed itself from nature. Accordingly, instead of seeking to objectify nature through representation, Césaire contends, in traditional African art the artist identifies with nature and seeks to become-similar to it through a principle of inter-energetic exchange:

> Dans [l'art africain], il s'agit pour l'homme de recomposer la nature selon un rythme profondément senti et vécu, pour lui imposer une valeur et une signification, pour animer l'objet, le vivifier et en faire symbole et métalangage. Autrement dit, l'art africain est d'abord dans le cœur et dans la tête et dans le ventre et dans le pouls de l'artiste africain. L'art africain n'est pas une manière de faire, c'est d'abord une manière d'être, une manière de plus-être, comme dit le teilhardien Léopold Sédar Senghor.[6]

This conception of mimesis is thus wholly opposed to the notion of imitation. In Césaire's view, mimesis frames being as, at once, self and other than self: I am myself *and* another (which implies, of course, that the other is *also* not me). Here, we must therefore also move away from the idea of an occupation of the body (demonic or otherwise). We must view mimesis as a breaking-down of

[4] Walter Benjamin, 'Lehre vom Ähnlichen (1933)', in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, 7 vols, 6th edn (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2015), II. 1, 204–10 (p. 210).

[5] Here I refer the reader to Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), pp. 144–60, and to Césaire, 'Discours sur l'art africain', in *Aimé Césaire*, ed. by Arnold, pp. 1562–70.

[6] Césaire, 'Discours sur l'art africain', p. 1568.

the logic that drives the fundamental property of identity, namely, that X is X, and not Y.

One point that becomes clear in anthropological accounts of the ritual phenomena referred to as 'spirit possession' is that possession is mimetic. This is true insofar as ritual events characterized as spirit possession constitute acts of both thinking *with the other* and thinking *as other*. Frobenius underscores this fact in his description of *Ergriffenheit* [primal seizure]: 'Das Wesen der kosmischen Umwelt erschließt sich, ergreift den Menschen, wird as Wirklichkeit ihm zum Spiel, zum Drama, zur Tragödie. Da ist eine dritte Kultur, in der der Mensch selbst wesenhaft wird, sein Schicksal zum Spiel' [The essence of the cosmic environment opens up, seizes man, and, as reality, becomes for him play, drama, tragedy. There is a civilization in which man himself becomes essence, and his destiny play].[7] And the Haitian ethno-psychiatrist Louis Price-Mars describes the crisis of possession as a psychosomatic transformation based on the models provided by Vodou's collective beliefs. The possessed is said to be 'mounted' by a *loa* or divine spirit, the metaphor being drawn from the horse and its rider. He or she thereby manifests a metamorphosed or normalized psychological state 'qui reproduit le visage et les gestes des dieux à la manière d'une personnification dramatique' transmitted by tradition.[8] (In my attendance at numerous Vodou ceremonies, I have personally observed the essential mimetic nature of spirit possession, in consonance with Price-Mars's observations and Métraux's foundational anthropological work.) The fact that the gods' external appearance, attitudes, and gestures are transmitted by tradition is significant, since it should be pointed out that the theatrical conventions whereby the god is manifested reflect a communal narrative of the natural world — and herein lies its deeper significance. The possessed worshipper's miming of nature through the miming of the god constitutes an attempt to apprehend the mysterious, often incomprehensible, dimensions of the cosmos.

Given Césaire's remarks to Leiner, it is evident that he understood this conception of spirit possession, which he describes as being 'seized by the world'. His linking of Vodou spirit possession to Frobenius's *Ergriffenheit*, rendered by his French translators as 'saisissement' — an idea first foregrounded in the *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* — is indicated: 'C'est une conception qui beaucoup m'a frappé, que j'ai dû prendre chez Frobenius', he states.[9] In *Schicksalskunde im Sinne des Kulturwerdens* (1932) and *Kulturgeschichte Afrikas* (1933), Frobenius associates *Ergriffenheit* with the animist instinct of becoming-other through the ability to 'sich seelisch und in voller "Wirklichkeit" einer zweiten Erscheinungswelt hinzugeben, [. . .] sich von einer Erscheinung, die außerhalb seiner natürlichen Beziehungen und ihrer selbstverständlichen Ursachen liegt, ergreifen [lassen]' [abandon oneself spiritually and in full 'reality' to another phenomenal world, [. . .] to be moved by a phenomenon that is outside of natural human relations as well as outside of the

[7] Leo Frobenius, *Kulturgeschichte Afrikas: Prolegomena zu einer historischen Gestaltlehre* (Zürich: Phaidon, 1933), pp. 38–39.

[8] Louis Price-Mars, *Les Maîtres de l'aube* (Port-au-Prince: Le Natal, 1982), p. 33.

[9] Césaire, 'Entretien avec Jacqueline Leiner', p. xvii.

obvious causes of phenomena themselves].[10] Senghor, who, like Césaire, first read Frobenius in translation in December 1936 while at the École normale supérieure,[11] also links the *saisissement* to the 'animist' practice of thinking with/as other(s), to a redistributed, non-monadic sense of personhood. In the words of Senghor, 'the sense of life' or 'the perfection of the essence of life' 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'.[12] Césaire's interest in spirit possession through the framework of Haitian Vodou and its African retentions has been amply evidenced in his play *La Tragédie du roi Christophe* (1963).[13]

Details about the exact point at which Césaire encounters Vodou specifically, and under what form, are, unfortunately, unavailable to us. However, his interest in spirit possession from the late 1930s is traced, as we have seen, through his poetry and through the essay 'Poésie et connaissance'. As for the Vodou thought system specifically, references to it begin to appear in his work from the mid to late 1940s. Several elements in his work from this period also point to the significance he accords to possession as a paradigm of consciousness.

In the short essay 'L'Appel au magicien: quelques mots pour une civilisation antillaise', a series of twenty aphorisms in which he summarizes the essence of his poetics, Césaire refers specifically to the shamanic 'saisissement' 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.[14] If the shamanic seizure is the guarantor of 'civilisation' and an escape from alienation, it is because it is a 'participation' in the life force; it is a new attitude to the desecrated world that surrounds us, restoring to it 'sa dignité de mystère et de force radiante'.[15] The allusion to shamanic practice is unambiguous here, as Césaire refers to the object in the natural world as 'Le Grand Intercesseur', and every living and non-living thing, this surprising phrase suggests, is endowed with spirit.[16] 'Le vrai idéal', declares Césaire, is 'la femme "possédée"', as he associates poetry with the shamanic, prophetic spirit unleased by possession, and presents it as 'le seul refuge avoué de l'esprit mythique'.[17] 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

[10] Frobenius, *Kulturgeschichte Afrikas*, p. 24; original emphasis.

[11] See Léopold Sédar Senghor, 'The Lessons of Leo Frobenius', in *Leo Frobenius on African History, Art, and Culture: An Anthology*, ed. by Eike Haberland (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener, 2014), pp. vii–xiii (p. vii). The date is significant because we know Césaire had begun work on the 1939 *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*.

[12] Senghor, 'The Lessons of Leo Frobenius', p. ix.

[13] In his 1980 interview with Jacqueline Leiner for Radio France internationale (RFI) and the Club des lecteurs d'expression française (CLEF), Césaire stresses the significance of Vodou and its possession rites as part of the worldview of *La Tragédie du roi Christophe*, noting that 'Il faut situer mon théâtre dans son contexte culturel' and not neglect 'l'importance de la cérémonie dans les civilisations africaines et les civilisations néo-africaines'; 'L'Ecrivain', *Archives sonores de la littérature noire* (Paris: RFI, CLEF, 1980), two vinyl discs and a twenty-page booklet, side C. For a discussion of these influences, see for example Frederick Ivor Case, 'Ṣango Oba ko so: les vodoun dans *La Tragédie du roi Christophe*', *Cahiers césairiens*, 2 (1975), 9–24.

[14] Césaire, 'L'Appel au magician: quelques mots pour une civilisation antillaise', in *Aimé Césaire*, ed. by Arnold, pp. 1398–1401.

[15] Césaire, 'L'Appel au magicien', p. 1400.

[16] Césaire, 'L'Appel au magicien', p. 1400.

[17] Césaire, 'L'Appel au magicien', pp. 1399, 1398.

kinship between poetry, ecstasy, and shamanism. In a modern world stripped of myth and reduced to the mere factual surface reality of things, it is the poet who is the keeper of the shamanic instinct for the 'noueuse unité primitive' of the natural world to which all mankind was attuned before the 'éparpillement secondaire de la vie'.[18] The poet's ability to be in touch with this primal unity thus allows him to 'rétablir avec les choses un contact personnel, frais, contraignant, magique'.[19]

Where this idea of civilization as the mobilization of an 'énergie émotionnelle' through human contact with an enspirited natural world is concerned, Césaire remained remarkably consistent throughout the many decades of his career.[20] In a speech on the future of Martinique delivered not far from Fort-de-France in 1979, he did not hesitate to invoke this idea in arguing for the flourishing of a Martinican culture that could be 'le contre-poids aux forces d'agression et d'aliénation contenues dans la culture européenne qui nous cerne et nous enserre de toutes parts'.[21] 'Les masses, partout,' Césaire states, 'n'entrent en scène et n'agissent que lorsqu'elles sont saisis et mobilisés par le MYTHE'.[22]

The versions of the *Cahier* published in January 1947 by Brentano of New York and in March of the same year by Bordas in Paris make reference to the figure of the *hougan*, the male priest of Vodou. It is part of Césaire's answer to the question 'Qui et quels nous sommes?':

> Admirable question.
>
> Haïsseurs. Bâtisseurs. Traîtres. Hougans. Hougans surtout. Car nous voulons tous
>
> les démons
>
> ceux d'hier et ceux d'aujourd'hui
>
> ceux du carcan et ceux de la houe[23]

The word 'démons' here is ironic, as are other passages appearing in the versions of the *Cahier* published in 1947 by Brentano and Bordas.[24] Though appearing less than three months after the Brentano publication, the Bordas edition represents an eclipse of the spiritual thrust of the 1939 version in favour of a more militantly political orientation of the text, particularly in the context of the Cold War.[25] The shift of emphasis from spiritual metamorphosis in the original *Cahier* towards explicit anti-colonial revolt is accentuated in the 1956 Présence africaine edition.[26] However, despite these changes, which correspond with Césaire's turn to a more

[18] Césaire, 'Poésie et connaissance', p. 1383.
[19] Césaire, 'L'Appel au magicien', p. 1399.
[20] Césaire, 'La Martinique telle qu'elle est', in *Aimé Césaire*, ed. by Arnold, pp. 1575–87 (p. 1579).
[21] Césaire, 'La Martinique telle qu'elle est', p. 1580.
[22] Césaire, 'La Martinique telle qu'elle est', p. 1579; original emphasis.
[23] Césaire, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (1947 Brentano edition), in *Aimé Césaire*, ed. by Arnold, pp. 106–35 (p. 120). Two editions of the *Cahier* were published in 1947: Césaire, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (Paris: Bordas, 1947); *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (New York: Brentano, 1947).
[24] Césaire, in *Aimé Césaire*, ed. by Arnold, pp. 106–35 and 151–82.
[25] Arnold, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (1947 Bordas edition), in Césaire, *Aimé Césaire*, ed. by Arnold, p. 149.
[26] This has been demonstrated in the CNRS/Présence africaine genetic edition of Césaire's complete works published in 2013, *Aimé Césaire*, ed. by Arnold.

overt political posture in the mid-1950s, the themes of African spirituality and animism remain visible. The comparison of the *hougans* to demons aligns with the series of passages in which he attacks white stereotypes about African spiritual beliefs, and the additions of 1947 evidence his interest in so-called pagan spirituality, as well as in blaspheming against Christianity to confront its role in colonialism.

The 1948 collection *Soleil cou coupé*, published three years after Césaire's return from Haiti, and charged with animist spirituality, contains mentions of different features of Vodou: the 'Vierges d'Ogoué' in 'Galanterie de l'histoire'; the allusion to Legba in the 'maître des trois chemins' of 'Depuis Akkad depuis Elam depuis Sumer'; and the 'poteau mitan' of 'Marche des perturbations'. It also mentions other Afro-Caribbean practices of ritual invocation, for example, the 'Mayumbé sacré' of the poem 'Le Griffon'. Moreover, Césaire's evocation of a series of African religious practices (as evidenced through the allusion to the 'tours du silence' of the ancient Zoroastrians in 'Calme', and to the Babylonian goddess of sex, desire, and fertility in the poem 'À l'Afrique') points to what readers familiar with the 1947 versions of the *Cahier* may also realize, namely, his general interest in what he refers to in unequivocally positive terms as 'primitive' ancient cultures and their links to animist construals of art and subjectivity.[27]

The idea of possession as being 'seized by the world' is readily illustrated with reference to numerous first-hand anthropological accounts of spirit possession in Vodou and other similar knowledge systems. A number of anthropologists of Vodou (Métraux, Leiris, Deren) and practitioners (Erol Josué, Ross Heaven) have explained spirit possession in terms of a seizure of the human ego by the world's unconscious. Deren underscores the fact that the *loa* — the gods who, in Vodou, are necessarily personified — represent archetypes of the unconscious, phenomena that relate deeply to the earth and to the natural world. In her anthropological study of Vodou, *Divine Horsemen*, Deren describes a moment of Vodou spirit possession which begins with 'the bodies of the dancers undulat[ing] with a wavelike motion' and culminates with their bodies bending 'towards the Earth, the undulation becom[ing] more and more horizontal, until all figures blend into a slow flowing serpentine stream circling the center-post with a fluency that belies the difficulty of the movement'.[28] At such moments, Deren tells us, 'one does not move *to* the sound, one *is* the movement of the sound, created and borne by it'.[29] One is therefore seized by the rhythm or essence of natural elements, and moved to embody them. The human is thought to be possessed by the ego or personhood of things — plant, animal, star.[30] Underlying the spirit possession rites in Vodou, and in other knowledge systems, is therefore a belief in inter-energetic relations: the possibility of energy exchanges between the human and the living world. The *loa*, as archetypes, are possibilities for these relations.

[27] Césaire, 'Entretien avec Jacqueline Leiner', p. xix.
[28] Maya Deren, *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* (New York: McPherson, 2004), pp. 252, 253.
[29] Deren, *Divine Horsemen*, pp. 252–53; original emphasis.
[30] Senghor, 'The Lessons of Leo Frobenius', p. ix.

The possession rite is an expression of — indeed a strengthening of — the human's relation with the Earth and with its forces, a gesture which itself functions as 'cultural guerrilla resistance' against the colonial order.[31] Connecting the living to the Earth, it reactivates the souls of the dead and extends their energies forward into the lives of the living. 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 a narrative of origin or identificatory mechanisms, as in widespread contemporary renderings, but as a mimetic interpretation of reality, linking the temporal with the invisible. 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', the epistemic enunciation of the primitive as the Other of Western humanism and thought.[32]

If the poet mimes the world, it is not hard to envision poetry as a form of possession, and here certain theoretical reflections can be invoked: Leiris's idea that poetry is 'une sorte de corps étranger', or Edward Kamau Brathwaite's declaration that 'the poet conceives of literature as spirit', or even Arthur Rimbaud's famously elliptical remark that 'je est un autre'.[33] Poetry, Césaire asserts in 'Poésie et connaissance', counters the idea of thought or knowing as transcendence and separateness from phenomena and affective experience. Much of the essay is a development of the theme of 'knowledge', in which the familiar Western representational paradigm of thought is unsettled, in which knowledge is associated with a state of existence that is no longer individual but is inhabited by others: 'En nous, l'homme de tous les temps. En nous, tous les hommes. En nous l'animal, le végétal, le minéral. L'homme n'est pas seulement homme, il est univers.'[34] As Césaire views it, the poetic is not merely the labour of those named poets, but rather a disposition towards the world that relates to an embrace of those obscure junctures where spirit and matter, the visible and the invisible, meet and impinge upon each other. The end of the lecture affirms that his voice 'est la mienne est plus que la mienne. C'est ma voix d'herbe. C'est ma voix d'eau. C'est ma voix de pierre. Ma voix de soleil et de pluie'.[35]

Césaire thereby offers a different analytic to the Platonic tradition of philosophy, to which the 'gradual erosion of Earth in the European metaphysic scope' can be linked.[36] For while the pagan Greeks did not neglect the terrestrialism of

[31] Sylvia Wynter, 'Jonkonnu in Jamaica: Towards the Interpretation of Folk Dance as a Cultural Process', in *We Must Learn to Sit Together and Talk about a Little Culture: Decolonizing Essays 1967–1984*, ed. by Demetrius L. Eudell (Leeds: Peepal Tree, 2018), pp. 192–243 (p. 199); see also p. 202.

[32] See Laurent Dubreuil, *Empire of Language: Toward a Critique of (Post)colonial Expression*, trans. by David Fieni (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013), pp. 13–35.

[33] Michel Leiris, 'Antilles et poésie des carrefours', in *Zébrage* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), pp. 67–87 (p. 73); Edward Kamau Brathwaite, 'Interview with the University of Memphis English Department, River City Writers' Series, 1995–1996', Part 1 and Part 2, 17 April 2020, <https://www.youtube.com>; Arthur Rimbaud, 'Lettre à Paul Demeny', in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Jean-Luc Steinmetz (Paris: Flammarion, 2010), pp. 93–103 (p. 95).

[34] Césaire, 'Poésie et connaissance', p. 1382.

[35] Césaire, 'Poésie et connaissance', p. 1390.

[36] Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World*, p. 3.

knowledge characteristic of the mimetic rites, that is, a consciousness in which their own earth being, their 'gravity-bound apprehension of self, was inseparable from the entire cosmic phenomenon'[37] (the terrestrialism of their gods and the people's Earth-honouring rites demonstrate this), Plato posits knowledge to be a moving beyond the world and the senses to the realm of 'ideas' and 'forms' that exist independently from the visible and sensible,[38] suggesting knowledge's disentanglement from the natural world, and laying the groundwork for René Descartes's conception of knowledge as disembodied object.

By contrast, Césaire wants to reaffirm an account of thinking that involves the body's flows and energies. Knowledge is not autonomous, that is, independent of movement, experience, emotion, and feeling; it is not, primarily, metaphysical. Thus, the philosophical demarcation between us and all other beings is brought into question. The entangled subject, in this case grounded in 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*.

By reading Césaire's poetics through this anthropological lens, I am highlighting an aspect of Césaire's poetry which previous scholars have pointed to in different ways. Annette Smith and Clayton Eshleman allude to his notion of consciousness 'in which the human mind and the world of objects embrace each other harmoniously'.[39] Other scholars have highlighted rhythm as a 'participation' in life (over and against the ideological distortions of European ethnography);[40] and Senghor, commenting extensively on Césaire's poetry, speaks about rhythm's facilitation of an effort of intuition that overcomes the analytical barrier between the human and the object in space.[41] Césaire's challenge to the object-based ontology of Western thought is in itself, therefore, hardly a novel contention. Besides his concern with rhythm, a number of critics have highlighted Césaire's views on trees and nature.[42] However, this kernel of truth deserves to be woven into a new accounting of Césaire's thoughts on poetry as possession. What they amount to is a challenge to

[37] Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World*, p. 3.

[38] Plato, *The Republic*, ed. and trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 236–39, 509a–11a.

[39] Annette Smith and Clayton Eshleman, Introduction to Césaire, *Lost Body*, trans. by Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith (New York: George Braziller, 1986), pp. vii–xxvii (p. xxii).

[40] See, for example, Lilyan Kesteloot, 'Première lecture d'un poème de Césaire, "Batouque"', *Études littéraires*, 6 (1973), 49–71; Georges Ngal, *Aimé Césaire: un homme à la recherche d'une patrie* (Paris: Présence africaine, 1994), pp. 147–64; and more recently, Jean Khalfa, *Poetics of the Antilles: Poetry, History and Philosophy in the Writings of Perse, Césaire, Fanon and Glissant* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2017), pp. 92, 123, 131. Also of note as a recent discussion of rhythm in Césaire's poetry is the doctoral thesis of Eva Hernandez-Monmarty, 'Musicalité, corps et spiritualité dans la poésie de la négritude chez Césaire, Senghor et Craveirinha' (Université Côte d'Azur, 2018).

[41] Léopold Sédar Senghor, *Liberté*, 5 vols (Paris: Seuil, 1964–93), II: *Nation et voie africaine du socialisme* (1971), pp. 222–27, and III: *Négritude et civilisation de l'universel* (1977), p. 239.

[42] For a discussion of nature, and particularly trees and other flora, in Césaire's poetry, see, for example, A. James Arnold's thoughts on 'Poetry and Cultural Renewal', in *Modernism and Negritude: The Poetry and Poetics of Aimé Césaire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), pp. 71–101; Smith and Eshleman, Introduction to Césaire, *Lost Body*, p. xxii; Annie Lebrun, *Pour Aimé Césaire* (Paris: Place, 1994), pp. 52–53; Ngal's thoughts on 'Le Dynamisme de l'imaginaire et l'enracinement', in *Aimé Césaire: un homme à la recherche d'une patrie*, pp. 164–92; Ursula K. Heise, 'Surréalisme et écologies: les métamorphoses d'Aimé Césaire', *Écologie & politique*, 36 (2008), 69–83; Gina Thésée and Paul R. Carr, 'Le Baobab en quête de ses racines: la "Négritude" d'Aimé Césaire ou l'éveil à un humanisme identitaire et écologique dans l'espace francophone', *Éducation et francophonie*, 37 (2009), pp. 204–21.

the Western genealogy of thought, power and subjectivity. The emphasis on sound, on rhythm, on poetry as embodiment of the vital force of nature, relates to an ancient sense of what poetry *does* — as power, rather than thing — and poetry as possession (with the particular illustration drawn from Vodou) provides an essential gateway into this poetics, ultimately challenging commonplace Western views on knowledge and thought.

To locate Césaire's poetics in an African cosmogony — at least through the links it makes between poetry, earthing, and ritual — is not to 'racialize' it. To recognize that his vitalist view of poetry is grounded in the sensibility of an African traditional worldview is not to imply a carceral conception of identity, but rather to show that, for him, the pathway to the universal runs through the particular. To adapt a famous declaration by Hannah Arendt, when one is racialized as an African or a descendant of Africans, one must respond to racialism as an African or descendant of Africans. Césaire repeatedly insisted that his conception of Négritude was not an Afrocentric universalism, a kind of reverse paradigm of a humanism which reduces the world to the particulars of European culture and thought.[43] Instead, the universal as he saw it was to be found in every culture and civilization.

Césaire's view of poetry in the perspective of spirit possession is a surrogate mode of inheriting the world in the wake of the necropolitical drive to abolish ancestral ties. His attempt is to become-similar to nature through gestures of inter-energetic exchange, rather than objectify it through representation. The preoccupation with the tree in his elemental poetics outlined in 'Poésie et connaissance' and demonstrated in the poetry produced or revised in the late 1940s is illustrative of this imperative. Speaking to Édouard Maunick in an interview in 1980, Césaire links the centrality of the tree in his poetry to an animist adoration of them, referring to 'le vieux culte païen que j'ai de l'arbre, car je suis très végétal'.[44] Becoming one with nature, being overtaken by the enspirited world, fulfils the poet's desire for a kind of selfhood that is inextricably immanent with nature and pluri-subjective: 'J'ai la tentation panthéiste. Je voudrais être tout. Je voudrais être tous les éléments. . .'[45]

The poem 'Corps perdu', from the 1950 collection by that name, evidences this 'tentation panthéiste'. The giving of oneself to the Absolute is first and foremost a state of welcome. Desire enables an attitude of reception:

> alors la vie j'imagine me baignerait tout entier
>
> mieux je la sentirais qui me palpe ou me mord
>
> couché je verrais venir à moi les odeurs enfin libres
>
> comme des mains secourables
>
> qui se feraient passage en moi

[43] See, for example, Césaire, 'Lettre à Maurice Thorez', in *Aimé Césaire*, ed. by Arnold, pp. 1500–07 (p. 1506).
[44] Césaire, 'L'Homme insulaire: entretien avec Édouard Maunick', *Archives sonores de la littérature noire*, side A.
[45] Césaire, 'La Poésie, parole essentielle: entretien avec Daniel Maximin', *Présence africaine*, 126 (1983), 7–23 (p. 9).

[. . .]
choses écartez-vous faites place entre vous
place à mon repos qui porte en vague
ma terrible crête de racines ancreuses
qui cherchent où se prendre
choses je sonde je sonde
moi le portefaix je suis porte-racines
et je pèse et je force et j'arcane
je crache je me déroule
je pénètre j'omphale j'omphale[46]

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

Such inter-energetic exchange is also illustrated in the poem 'Allure' (from the collection *Soleil cou coupé*), in which the poet's attention is drawn to the living energy of stone, particularly the dolomite rocks, seen as a 'cœur d'oiseau sous mes mains d'enfant'.[47] His attention is not only drawn to minerals, to the solid, manifested world of rocks and geological phenomena ('icebergs', 'filons géologiques', 'dolomies') as they metamorphose and manifest different faces of the Real, but also to the more fluid, less graspable, life that lies beneath and within them, to the energies that produce change and spread life.

In 'Allure', the image of 'vieux dieux scellés en pleine gloire' provides a metaphor for such energies.[48] One manifestation of energy is rhythm. Recreating a scene of primitive ritual (locating himself 'autour du feu à trois pierres couronné d'un cercle | vibrant de tipules'[49]), the speaker associates the vibrating energies of both fire and stone with rhythm. If the fire's energy is manifested in its 'allure', the 'gong' of the poem may allude to the rock gong, a slab (or pieces) of rock used for the production of music in prehistoric times and whose geographical distribution in various locations of Africa is thought to be associated with cave paintings.[50] The gong thus also serves to recreate the scene of ancient rituals and communicate a sense of deep time in which nature is always aware, conjoined, and conversational. 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,

[46] Césaire, 'Corps perdu', in *Aimé Césaire*, ed. by Arnold, pp. 498–99 (pp. 498–99).
[47] Césaire, 'Allure', in *The Complete Poetry of Aimé Césaire*, trans. by A. James Arnold and Clayton Eshleman (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2017), p. 322.
[48] Césaire, 'Allure', p. 322.
[49] Césaire, 'Allure', p. 322.
[50] See M. Catherine Fagg, *Rock Music* (Oxford: Pitt Rivers Museum, 1997), p. 6.

tempering, maturing, or destroying (as suggested by 'la pétrification des forêts de mille ans'). Indeed, 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.[51] The speaker seeks the energy of the fire to 'combats avec moi', in other words, for his being to assimilate the power of the fire, even as he wears a 'tiare solaire', a diadem symbolizing the sun, or, more generally, powers associated with the sun, in cults dedicated to it in ancient Egypt.[52] The reference here to the solar crown also brings to mind the poem 'Afrique' in the collection *Ferrements*, 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 is 'enfoncé jusqu'au cou'.[53] In 'Afrique', the solar diadem is associated with 'voyance', of which the African captive, and the poet by extension, has been robbed. The speaker in 'Allure', as in many other poems in *Soleil cou coupé*, 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 and appreciation of the Real; that is, of a universe of energies permeating and linking all of existence.

Visible symbols of the primordial fire are meant to underscore the way it suffuses and connects all of life. The poet embraces a life of the senses lived so keenly that knowledge itself is felt. This creaturely engagement suggests an intertwinement of human consciousness and the natural world. And the metamorphosis of the elements allows for continual traffic between the landscape of the world and the mind. This offers the poet ways of figuring the self as conatural with the world, and gives form to a mode of thought that positions human life within the 'flesh' of nature. The Real is not a background truth or Being accessible through, though transcending, sense perception, as Plato views it, but the total, inexhaustible (both visible and invisible) reality of which the human is an organic part. The poem suggests that, in a primal seizure of life, one may perceive the essence of the tree as nearer to one's own being that any conceptual scientific formula could express. 'Place and a mind interpenetrate until the nature of both is altered.'[54] The descriptions move beyond — or rather, through — the material, suggesting that that is the only way to connect with and see it, to see below the surface, to see how things are unexpectedly linked with others — to see the movement of life that joins everything. All of this is placed in opposition to a world oriented towards solidity and the instrumentality of objects, an orientation which Césaire denounces in the poem 'Solide', from *Soleil cou coupé*.

Frobenius's remark that 'it was not things themselves, but their essence, that "seized" men' not only alludes to the function of spirit possession, but provides a

[51] See Mircea Éliade, *Forgerons et alchimistes* (Paris: Flammarion, 1956).

[52] See Andrew Stewart, *Faces of Power: Alexander's Image and Hellenistic Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 246.

[53] Césaire, 'Afrique', in The Complete Poetry, trans. by Arnold and Eshleman, p. 628.

[54] Nan Shepherd, *The Living Mountain* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2014), p. 8.

way of understanding the attachment of Césaire's poetry to the elements.[55] His entire poetics, grounded in a desire to be moved by the Real and to recreate it through the poetic word, is a desire to connect with the essence of things, a connection that provides a way out of history by virtue of the ancestral ties that it seems to affirm or, indeed, recreate. In *Soleil cou coupé*, blood runs through the barks of trees, and trees keep secrets that humans desire. 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 co-extensive with each other. Every piece of nature is layered and inexhaustible; every element is more than itself.

A perennial reference point in discussions of Césaire's use of myth and African ontologies is Frantz Fanon and what has been repeatedly presented by critics as his supposed critique of Négritude on those terms. But an examination of Fanon's engagement with Césaire in the section 'L'Expérience vécue du Noir', in *Peau noire, masques blancs*, reveals something rather more nuanced.[56] Echoing Jean-Paul Sartre's assertion that Négritude was a negative (if necessary) moment in a dialectic of liberation, Fanon's intention is to articulate a phenomenology of the alienated racialized Black consciousness that would explicate the different stages of this dialectical process. Fanon thus embraces the evolutionary paradigm of Hegelian dialectics and, in this evolution, the need for an affirmation of African primitive values as a counterforce to colonial alienation represents a negative moment (however cathartic the gesture) that must eventually be superseded by a new humanism, and presumably one built on mutual recognition of humanness between races. Négritude's return to myth and ancestral tradition in his mind becomes a stage in an overall struggle. But as Jean Khalfa suggests, what fundamentally separates Césaire's and Fanon's understanding of Négritude and alienation is a conception of time and temporality.[57] Whereas Fanon's Black humanism is based on the linear evolutionary paradigm of the dialectic, Césaire invokes, through poetry, an experience of time that is not evolutionary but one physicalized in dwelling practices, in ancient presences of the vegetal, the mineral, and the corporeal. Poetry throws a bridge between the consciousness of the present and the unconscious repository of ancestral memory.

Poetry provides connection to a 'temps du sacré', as Césaire remarks in his 'Hommage à Jean Rouche'.[58] This consciousness of deep time stages the political on the ground of the imaginary, which is projected outside of the materiality of colonialism, where, as Annie Lebrun observes, 'tout normalement, ethnocentrisme,

[55] Shepherd, *The Living Mountain*, p. 8, citing Frobenius, *Kulturgeschichte Afrikas*, p. 31.
[56] Frantz Fanon, 'L'Expérience vécue du Noir', in *Peau noire, masques blancs* (Paris: Seuil, 1952), pp. 99–108.
[57] Khalfa, *Poetics of the Antilles*, p. 71.
[58] Césaire, 'Hommage à Jean Amrouche', *Présence africaine*, 46 (1963), 187–89 (p. 188).

anthropocentrisme et rationnalité s'étaient, une nouvelle fois, rejoints à des fins de rendement'.[59] Offering a different template of societal life and the relations between human beings and the world, it entails a rethinking of colonial power which is at once political and philosophical, and political precisely in its philosophical gestures. For Césaire, it is poetry that stages a radically divergent praxis of temporality through its reconnection to a more (ancient) ancestralizing mode of dwelling with and on Earth. Poetry in the end was fundamentally about the imaginary, about the possibility of magical thinking as a real alternative to the denaturalization of colonialism.

Emphasizing the interconnectedness of the natural world, Césaire 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 born from a critique of the epistemic conditions of racism, provides for me a counter-analytic to a just-declared Anthropocene. As characterized by Césaire himself, Négritude was a counter-epistemology to the instrumentalism of Western industrial civilization.[60] Western industrial civilization, he points out in his 'Discours sur l'art africain', develops thanks to an ideology of race that disrupts the living and knowledge practices of indigenous populations. Imperialism's efforts to secularize pre-capitalist cultures hides another equally damning reality: the way it devastates the land and the lives of the people that inhabit geologically exploitable spaces — and, now, what it has taken the West too long to notice — the way it destroys the world.

Modernity, Césaire shows in texts such as 'Poésie et connaissance', 'Discours sur l'art africain', and 'Discours sur la Négritude', is a distorted definition of the possible and the Real. Césaire's account of poetry and of the senses is aimed at destroying the appearance of capitalist modernity as a natural order. The appearance of genocides, conquests, domination, and racism in the colonial continuum is not just symptomatic of modernity as modernity, but of the loss of what is natural in human life. This loss, Césaire suggests in 'Poésie et connaissance', was commensurate with the erosion of the human sense of concinnity or co-naturalness with the universe. A potent expression of this erosion in Western philosophical discourse is Descartes's 're-totalization' of nature in his *Discours de la méthode*, in which he advances the idea that the kind of knowledge which will be of the utmost use to humans will be that which marked them as 'maîtres et possesseurs de la nature'.[61] Meanwhile, Césaire, in observing the loss of the 'noueuse unité primitive' in human life, seeks to (re)position the poet as the witness of nature, rekindling animacy, 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.

[59] Lebrun, *Pour Aimé Césaire*, pp. 52–53.

[60] Césaire, 'Discours sur la Négritude', in *Aimé Césaire*, ed. by Arnold, pp. 1588–93 (p. 1590).

[61] René Descartes, *Discours de la méthode*, in *Œuvres*, ed. by Charles Adam, Paul Tannery, Bernard Rochot and Pierre Costabel, 11 vols (Paris: Vrin, CNRS, 1964–74), VI (1973), pp. 1–78 (p. 62).

Conclusion

Aimé Césaire's work presents a praxis of poetry that actively functions as a way of thinking with spirits, that is, as a dissolvent of individual subjective boundaries and the walls between matter and thought. This is significant in that, despite displacement and deportation, the link with pre-colonial African ontologies and lifeways remains active, providing new forms of counter-insurgent expression. Césaire is both attracted by it and attracting to it. His resistance is based on the rebuilding of a co-naturality. In his work, the sense of the self as not individual and monadic, but rather as fluid and oceanic, is not a harking back to infancy or archaic non-differentiation, as in Freud's account. Instead, the conception of poetry as magical thinking points to modes of sociality and humanness that do not rely on monadic selves, but on a certain relationship to Earth and a sense of collective communion. Such praxes of poetry, which remain active in the African tradition, and which foreground the social and epistemic values of rhythm, sound, frequencies, communalism, and vital energies, serve to unthink the conception of matter as 'standing reserve'[62] which underpins the 'reality' of commodity production and exchange in the modern era.

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',[63] then decolonization, by definition, must entail the unthinking of the colonialist approach to nature and to time on a planetary scale. Decolonization cannot be thought without regard to the politics of knowledge and its ethical ramifications, if it is not to be an ideological phantasm.

For Césaire, articulating what sort of knowledge poetry achieves on its own terms has gone hand in hand with his resistance to the world-historical process of colonialism. Consequently, articulating a conception of poetry 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 dweller of the Earth. Poetry, therefore, poses fundamental 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 a performative mode of worldly knowledge necessarily involving the body and the interfusion of its energies with those of the world. To affirm the productive value of thinking with spirits in such a way is to affirm the need for a different orientation toward the extra-human domain, as a way of renewing our sense of deep time and embeddedness within the world.

If 'what might save us as we move forwards into the precarious unsettled centuries ahead is [. . .] mutualism, symbiosis, the inclusive human work of collective decision-making extended to more-than-human communities',[64] then surely poetry can be seen as attempting to invent a language for such a disposition, to

[62] Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology* (New York: Garland, 1977), p. 17.

[63] Achille Mbembe, in Torbjørn Tumyr Nilsen, 'Thoughts on the Planetary: An Interview with Achille Mbembe', 5 September 2019, *New Frame*, <https://www.newframe.com>.

[64] Robert Macfarlane, *Underland: A Deep Time Journey* (London: Penguin, 2019), p. 113.

push us into a new appreciation for the ways we relate to each other and to the living world. But to view poetry, only now, in the contemporary context of environmental crisis, as a 'language that recognizes and advances the animacy of the world',[65] would be to occlude the work of poetry within the long history of colonialism, in which it has often functioned as a language of animism for those who have had to suffer the predations of capitalism and its globalizing epistemologies. Négritude is only the most visible, political face of this resistance, which affirms poetry's non-theistic sacrality, even as it resists the (post-)Enlightenment world's violence against magic and myth.

[65] Macfarlane, *Underland*, p. 112.