theories and methodologies

# The Transformational and Enduring Vision of Aimé Césaire

KEITH L. WALKER

## Messenger of a New Design

AS THE NINETEENTH CENTURY WAS THE CENTURY OF COLONIZATION, THE TWENTIETH CENTURY WAS THE CENTURY OF *DECOLONIZATION*. THE neologism entered popular usage during the 1950s, gained sudden prestige, and was declared crucial and, indeed, "beautiful" by Aimé Fernand David Césaire ("L'homme" 116). Césaire lived at the center of the global tempest and cultural sea change that characterized the anticolonial, civil rights, independence-movement years from 1932 to 1968. Césaire's rhetorical virtuosity and intellectual genius coincided with a moment of worldwide paradigm shifts and conceptual earthquakes, or *tremblements de concepts*, as he termed them ("Culture" 453). Césaire embodied what Edward Said called the "sensuous particularity as well as historical contingency" of a man living on the borderline of historical transition (39). On the actors, artists, and intellectuals of this borderline moment, the Senegalese writer Mariama Bâ reflected that it was the "[p]rivilège de notre génération, charnière entre deux périodes historiques, l'une de domination, l'autre d'indépendance. Nous . . . étions porteurs de projets" 'privilege of our generation to be the link between two periods in our history, one of domination, the other of independence. We . . . were the messengers of a new design' (*Une si longue lettre* 40 [*So Long a Letter* 25]). According to Césaire, the messengers had duties:

> Notre devoir d'hommes de culture, notre double devoir est là: Il est de hâter la *décolonisation*, et il est, au sein même du présent, de préparer une bonne *décolonisation*, une *décolonisation* sans séquelles. Il faut hâter la décolonisation, qu'est-ce à dire? Cela veut dire qu'il faut, et par tous les moyens, hâter le mûrissement de la PRISE DE CONSCIENCE POPULAIRE sans quoi il n'y aura jamais de décolonisation. Nous dans la conjoncture où nous sommes, nous sommes des *propagateurs d'âmes*, des multiplicateurs d'âmes, et à la limite des *inventeurs d'âmes*. ("L'homme" 121)

> Our responsibility as intellectuals, our double responsibility, is the following: it is to hasten *decolonization*, and it is at the very present

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> time to prepare a sound *decolonization*, a process of *decolonization* that leaves no posttraumatic scars. What exactly does it mean that we must hasten decolonization? It means that we must by every means available to us hasten the maturation of the RAISING OF THE MASSES' CONSCIOUSNESS, without which there will be no decolonization. In our present situation we are *propagators of souls*, multipliers of souls, and almost *inventors of souls*.[1]

As we see in *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (*Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* [1939]), it was clear from the outset that the concept of negritude, with its many associations, was not an antiracist racism but rather a program of liberation for all and a map toward the realization of universal humanism:

> . . . préservez-moi de toute haine
> ne faites point de moi cet homme de haine
> pour qui je n'ai que haine
> . . . . . .
> vous savez . . .
> . . . . . .
> que ce que je veux
> c'est pour la faim universelle
> pour la soif universelle
> . . . . . .
> et aucune race ne possède le monopole de
> la beauté, de l'intelligence, de la force,
> et il est place pour tous au rendez-vous
> de la conquête
>
> (68–69, 73)

> . . . preserve me from all hatred
> do not make me into that man of hatred
> for whom I have nothing but hatred
> . . . . . .
> you know . . .
> . . . . . .
> that what I want
> is for universal hunger
> for universal thirst
> . . . . . .
> no race has a monopoly on beauty, on
> intelligence, on strength, and there is
> room for all at the rendezvous of
> victory

Césaire's language is not only liberatory, elevatory, and humanistic but also challenging and questioning.

## The Question of the Question: Poetic Process and Epistemological Point of Departure

> *Et j'ai toujours eu l'impression que je partais à la reconquête.*
> *À la reconquête de mon nom.*
> *À la reconquête de mon pays.*
> *À la reconquête de moi-même.*
>
> *I have always had the impression that I was leaving in quest of recovery.*
> *In quest of my name.*
> *In quest of my country.*
> *In quest of myself.*
> —Aimé Césaire, *ABCésaire* (14–17)

For Césaire, it was always a question of the question, of posing the compelling question at the propitious historical juncture. In *Cahier*, issues surrounding identity, cultural affirmation, and the decolonization of the mind precipitated the lines "Qui et quels nous sommes? / Admirable question!" 'Who and what are we? / Admirable question!' (54). Césaire would pursue the elusive and evolving question of identity through a poetic and cultural process of discovery and recovery:

> Nous cherchons notre vrai visage. Nous avons suffisamment condamné la littérature artificielle qui prétend nous en donner l'image: poètes attardés, héros du poncif, superstitieux faiseurs d'alexandrins, très lâches diseurs de rien. Narcisse martiniquais où donc te reconnaîtras-tu? Plonge tes regards dans le miroir du merveilleux: tes contes, tes légendes, tes chants. Tu y verras s'inscrire, lumineuse, l'image sûre de toi-même.
>
> We are searching for our true visage. We have sufficiently condemned fake literature that claims to give us a reflection of ourselves: behind-the-times poets, heroes of hackneyed

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> convention, overly scrupulous crafters of alexandrines, quite cowardly sayers of nothing. Martinican Narcissus, where then will you recognize yourself? Plunge your gazes into the mirror of the marvelous: your short stories, your legends, your songs. You will see inscribed therein, luminous, the unfailing image of yourself. (qtd. in Walker 7)

The identity quest and the disdain for "behind-the-times poets" led Césaire and his wife, Suzanne, to espouse a cannibalist aesthetic, not only as a subversive expropriation of the colonizer's representation of Africa and the New World as cannibalistic but also as a rejection of the hyperassimilated epigones of Euro-American "tracing paper" artistic expression and political culture.

"La poésie martiniquaise sera cannibale ou ne sera pas" 'Martinican poetry will be cannibalistic or it will not be,' Césaire wrote ("Misère" 50): "Parce que nous vous haïssons vous / et votre raison nous nous réclamons / de la démence précoce de la folie flamboyante / du cannibalisme tenace" 'Because we hate you / you and your reason we claim kinship / with dementia praecox with flaming madness / with tenacious cannibalism' (*Cahier* 53).

A cannibalist aesthetic was part of the poetic process of questioning the colonial order and as such constituted an "arme miraculeuse" 'miraculous weapon' for Césaire:

> Quand l'homme est au fond du désastre, au fond de la fosse, il sait bien que la seule arme qui lui reste, ce n'est pas la raison cartésienne, ce n'est pas la raison discursive, c'est le miracle.
>
> Il y a toujours des armes miraculeuses.
> Et ce ne sont pas les moins efficaces.
> La poésie est une arme miraculeuse.
> Je crois que l'homme porte en lui des armes miraculeuses.
>
> When man is in the grip of disaster, at the bottom of the pit, he well knows that the only weapon remaining for him, is not Cartesian reasoning, not discursive reasoning, it is the miracle.
>
> There are always some miraculous weapons.
> And they are not the least effective.
> Poetry is a miraculous weapon.
> I believe that people carry within themselves miraculous weapons.
> (*ABCésaire* 62–63)

Some ten years before the publication of *Cahier*, the ironic Brazilian writer Oswald de Andrade proclaimed, "Perguntei a um homem o que era o Direito. Ele me respondeu que era a garantia do exercicio da possibilidade. . . . Comia" 'I asked a man what the Law was. He answered that it was the guarantee of the exercise of possibility. . . . I ate him' ("Manifesto" 4; "Oswald de Andrade's 'Cannibalist Manifesto'" 41). Césairian "tenacious cannibalism" is similarly a hunger for originality, emancipation, economic empowerment, and justice through a strategic assimilation of the strengths of Afro-Euro-American values and cultures. As Césaire posits in *Discours sur le colonialisme (Discourse on Colonialism)*, the goal is to craft a society that is enriched by modern technological productivity yet tempered by the warmth of ancient communal fraternity.

*Discours* poses a cluster of questions: What is colonialism? What path is Europe on after colonial logic culminated in the Nazi atrocities of World War II? And, finally, what have been the mutually dehumanizing consequences for colonizer and colonized of the colonial hierarchy and project? Césaire describes these consequences:

> L'action coloniale, l'entreprise coloniale, la conquête coloniale, fondées sur le mépris de l'homme indigène et justifiées par ce mépris, tendent inévitablement à modifier celui qui les entreprend: que le colonisateur, qui, pour se donner bonne conscience, s'habitue à voir dans l'autre *la bête*, s'entraîne à le traiter en *bête*, tend objectivement à se transformer *lui-même* en *bête*. C'est cette action, ce choc en retour de la colonisation qu'il importait de signaler. (367)
>
> Colonial activity, colonial enterprise, colonial conquest, which is based on contempt for the native and justified by that contempt, inevita-

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> bly tends to change him who undertakes it; the colonizer, who to ease his conscience gets into the habit of seeing the other man as an *animal*, accustoms himself to treating him like an *animal*, tends objectively to transform *himself* into an *animal*. It is this result, this boomerang effect of colonization, that I wanted to point out.

After declaring Europe to be on a path of destruction, at the end of *Discours*, Césaire defines colonialism as a monologue: "Les Indiens massacrés, le monde musulman vidé de lui-même, le monde chinois pendant un bon siècle souillé et dénaturé; le monde nègre disqualifié; d'immenses voix à jamais éteintes; des foyers dispersées au vent; tout ce bousillage, tout ce gaspillage, l'humanité réduite au monologue" 'The Indians massacred, the Muslim world drained of itself, the Chinese world defiled and perverted for a good century, the Negro world disqualified, mighty voices stilled forever, homes scattered to the wind, all this wreckage, all this waste, humanity reduced to a monologue' (398).

In *Toussaint Louverture: La Révolution Française et le problème colonial* (*Toussaint Louverture: The French Revolution and the Colonial Problem*), Césaire demonstrates that, more than a monologue and more effective than a hierarchy, colonialism was an ontology. *Toussaint Louverture* can be read as a long query on what is required of a leader in the decolonial moment, the stakes involved in the quest for independence, and the viability of a commonwealth or departmental status for certain French colonies whose natural economies had been exhausted by colonial exploitation.

Toussaint-Louverture in 1800 and Aimé Césaire some 150 years later aimed pragmatically to break the economic stranglehold of colonialism by exploiting—indeed, expropriating—colonial managerial structures. Like Toussaint-Louverture, Césaire envisioned a carefully thought-out process of political and infrastructural assimilation leading toward eventual economic autonomy. Toussaint-Louverture thought a nation of newly freed slaves, having won independence from Spain and England, could not go it alone and thus sought a commonwealth relation with France. Espousing independence for African colonies rich in natural resources, Césaire supported department status for Martinique, Guadeloupe, Guyana, and Réunion, whose natural economies had been exhausted by the French colonial mercantilist exploitation known as L'exclusif (the Exclusive Colonial Pact). In *Toussaint Louverture*, Césaire explains that L'exclusif was in no way a pact or shared agreement and that, with globalization, "le pacte colonial reste intacte" 'the colonial pact is still intact' (21). Césaire in postwar colonial Martinique felt that an exploited New World neoindigenous population of the Antillean slave archipelago should not go it alone.

The strategic assimilation of department status with local autonomy in 1945 shifted in the 1950s toward greater autonomy and resistance to the leveling discourse of French and communist universalism. In 1956, after the Soviet invasion of Hungary, Césaire resigned from the French Communist Party. In his letter of resignation, addressed to the party chief, Maurice Thorez and, by extension, to Stalin, Césaire unmasks the colonialist drives of communism. He asserts that Marxism and communism should serve the black people of the world instead of being served by them.

## The Intellectual's Work

*Car il n'est point vrai que l'œuvre de l'homme est finie.*

*For it is not at all true that the work of man is done.*
—Aimé Césaire, *Cahier* (73)

Césaire's life was one of work. Poetry, theater, essays, speeches, journalism, the mayoral office, and the French National Assembly were all occupations. In this sense, Césaire was the complete intellectual, whose public and private lives were an indivisible whole.

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In 1993, on Césaire's eightieth birthday, the tributes were numerous. A special volume, *Césaire at Eighty*, was published in recognition of his extraordinary achievements as poet, playwright, essayist, historian, and unparalleled spokesperson for and champion of the wretched of the earth. The year also marked Césaire's forty-eighth year as deputy representative from Martinique to the French National Assembly. He had served almost as long, from 1946, as mayor of Fort-de-France, the capital of Martinique. In 1946 Guadeloupe, Guyana, Martinique, and Réunion denounced colonialism and formed a coalition in support of departmentalization. The scholar Ernest Moutoussamy maintains that "Aimé Césaire made history" with his analysis, documentation, and presentation to the National Assembly of the legal arguments supporting the case for classifying the four former colonies as French departments (13).

Césaire did not consider any literary form or venue unworthy of his message. For him the integrity of the intellectual resides in the consistency of the message regardless of genre or platform. The artist-intellectual studies reality, analyzes the material conditions of existence, and critiques the sociopolitical dynamics of a society in all its complex movements and interactions. The intellectual's responsibility is to see and expose the contradictions in a system and to incite reflection—to perform a sociodiagnostic by metaphorizing society's triumphs, paradoxes, tragedies, and aspirations.

To Césaire the distinction between the prophetic work of poetry or theater and the pragmatic political work of nation building was false. The link between the tasks of political and social urgency and the visionary process of art is metaphorized in the ending of *La tragédie du roi Christophe* (*The Tragedy of King Christophe*): at a construction site in the mountains, we see scaffolding, the dead king's body, and a heraldic vision of resurrection: the red phoenix crowned with gold. At the center of Césaire's plays and poetry is the unfinished business of nation building, a task that requires artists as social engineers, without Afro-pessimism or epistemological resignation, regardless of the odds:

MARTIAL BESSE: Majesté, à bâtir, ce sont d'effroyables pentes!

CHRISTOPHE: Précisément, ce peuple doit se procurer, vouloir, réussir quelque chose d'impossible! Contre le sort, contre l'Histoire, contre la Nature, ah! l'insolite attentat de nos mains nues! Porté par nos mains blessées, le défi insensé! (*La tragédie* 141)

MARTIAL BESSE: Majesty. These are terrifying slopes to build on.

CHRISTOPHE: Exactly. This people has to want, to gain, to achieve something. Against fate, against History, against Nature. That's it. Extravagant venture of our bare hands! Insane challenge of our wounded hands! (*Tragedy* 44)

Concretely, yet no less poetically, Césaire, the mayor, makes clear the conjunction for him of poetry and social practice: "Le poète a toujours parcouru sa ville. Le poète, c'est d'abord celui qui crée. C'est la création. C'est la vie continuée. Mais par conséquent ça me paraît tout à fait normal qu'un poème débouche sur la création d'une société, d'une école, ou d'une crèche. C'est de la poésie" 'The poet has always roamed his city. The poet is first and foremost the one who creates. The poet is creation. The continuation of life. And so consequently it seems quite natural to me that a poem gives rise to the creation of a society, of a school, of a day-care center. All of it is poetry' (Palcy).

Césaire's scaffolding and child care center are emblems of the future and challenges to imagine beyond the language and conditions of today, concepts for which there are not yet names. It is often a sensuous conjuring of the future: "Il y a des tas de choses dont je ne sais pas le nom et que je voudrais te dire" 'There are so many things, whose names I do not know and that I would like to tell you' (*Corps* 276); "Pour penser à toi j'ai déposé tous mes

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mots au mont-de-piété" 'To think about you, I have turned all my words into the pawnshop' (*Les armes* 110); "viennent les ovaires de l'eau où le futur agite ses petites têtes / viennent les loups qui pâturent dans les orifices sauvages du corps à l'heure où à l'auberge écliptique se rencontrent ma lune et ton soleil / . . . / et toi veuille astre de ton lumineux fondement tirer lémurien du sperme insondable de l'homme la forme non osée / que le ventre tremblant de la femme porte tel un minerai!" 'let the ovaries of the water come where the future stirs its testes / let the wolves come who feast in the savage openings of the body at the hour when my moon and your sun meet at the ecliptic inn / . . . / and you star please from your luminous foundation draw lemurian being of man's unfathomable sperm, the not-yet-dared form / that woman's trembling belly carries like a precious ore' (*Cahier* 66).

Poetry, decolonization, and independence were not overnight cures for all the cognitive, ethical, aesthetic, political, and psychological consequences of the colonial discourse, discourse in the Foucauldian sense of a system and practice of violence imposed on people and things to organize social existence and reproduction. Negritude was to be a curative process that would, ideally, outlive its necessity, falling into obsolescence. Césaire believed negritude would not lose its relevance until the problem of individual and collective alienation was resolved. He was unequivocal in stating that the literary and artistic act was sacred because of its intimate role and responsibility in the rehabilitation of performative personal and national identity:

> Dans les conditions qui sont les nôtres, notre littérature, sa plus grande ambition, doit être de tendre à devenir *littérature sacrée*, notre art, *art sacré*. En haussant à l'universel la situation particulière de nos peoples, en les reliant à l'histoire, en les hissant sur un plan qui est précisément du devenir, donc négation de la stagnation, la création artistique, par sa force, doit mobiliser les forces émotionnelles vierges, et voici qu'à son appel se lèvent des ressources psychiques insoupçonnées qui contribuent à rétablir le corps social ébranlé par le choc colonial dans son aptitude à résister et sa vocation à entreprendre. ("L'homme" 122)
>
> Under the circumstances that are ours, our literature must have as its greatest ambition to tend toward becoming *sacred literature*, our art *sacred art*. In raising to the level of the universal the particular situation of our people, in linking them to history, in placing them on a trajectory that is precisely one of becoming and, therefore, a negation of stagnation, artistic creation, by its power, must mobilize untapped emotional forces, and thereby, at its summons, will rise unsuspected psychic resources that will contribute to restoring the social body, which has been so traumatized by the impact of colonialism in its capacity to rebel and its will to carry on.

Césaire's intellectual work involved projects of repair and a will to promote critical reflection: "Mon théâtre a une fonction critique, il doit inciter le public à juger" 'My theater has a critical function; it must incite the public to think critically' (Antoine 97). To counter the national memory that tends, as he states in *Discourse*, to crank up "l'oublioir" 'the forgetting machine' (376), Césaire executed projects of historiographical repair such as *Discours*, *Toussaint Louverture*, and "Culture"; projects of repair in critical thinking through a psychodramatic model of ritual theater, which, in capturing the perennial, does so in pursuit of the conflicts, paradoxes, and ambiguities that surround the realization of utopian revolutionary ideals, as in *Une tempête* (*A Tempest*); projects of psychological repair through a therapeutic poetry of disalienation such as *Cahier* and "Les armes miraculeuses" 'The Miraculous Weapons'; and projects of epistemological repair through a series of conceptual reversals throughout his canon that dissolve the old antinomies of particular and universal, poetic and scientific, public and private, and civic and moral, as in "Poésie et connaissance" 'Poetry and Knowledge.'

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## "I Have Said What Needed to Be Said. That Is What I Believe I Have Done."

Césaire went to a university in France on scholarship but never chose voluntary exile from his native land. The thematic thrust of the volume of poems *Moi, laminaire* 'The Laminarian Self' is wandering in the world with unbroken attachment to the native land. Césaire explains, "Laminaire c'est l'algue, l'algue enracinée, accrochée à son rocher. C'est un peu ce que j'ai voulu être, dans la solitude, s'il le faut, mais accroché au rocher antillais" 'Laminaria is the long brown coastal algae, the rooted algae, attached to its rock. It is somewhat what I wanted to be, in solitude, if it be necessary, but attached to the Caribbean rock' (*ABCésaire* 52–53).

On Christmas vacation in Yugoslavia with his schoolmate Peter Guberina, Césaire wrote several pages of *Cahier* after having perceived for the first time from his window the island of Martinska, whose name means "Saint Martin," the equivalent of "Martinique." Absent yet present, separated yet attached, uprooted yet still rooted in sentiment for the juridically, economically, and culturally immiserated black masses of his island, who lived in the shadow of the decadent, privileged, colonial-industrial planter-class elite:

> [J]'arriverais lisse et jeune dans ce pays mien et je dirais "Ma bouche sera la bouche des malheurs qui n'ont point de bouche, ma voix, la liberté de celles qui s'affaissent au cachot du désespoir. . . . Et surtout mon corps aussi bien que mon âme, gardez-vous de vous croiser les bras en l'attitude stérile du spectateur, car la vie n'est pas un spectacle, car une mer de douleurs n'est pas un proscenium, car un homme qui crie n'est pas un ours qui danse. . . ." (*Cahier* 50)
>
> I would arrive lithe and young in this land of mine, and I would say to it, "My mouth shall be the mouth of those sufferings that have no mouth, my voice the freedom of those who founder in dungeons of despair. . . . And above all, my body as well as my soul, beware of assuming the sterile attitude of a spectator, for life is not a spectacle, a sea of miseries is not a proscenium, a man crying is not a dancing bear. . . ."

To be "the mouth of those . . . that have no mouth" was an imperative to remove the gag externally, internally, and systemically imposed on "humanity reduced to a monologue." In his latter years, Césaire acknowledged what he considered his declining stamina, convinced, however, that he had worked and spoken justly: "Je n'ai plus du tout la même énergie tellurique. Je n'ai plus du tout la même force. Mais enfin, je la salue, je ne la renie pas. . . . Je suis au moment du grand passage, sans doute, mais je l'affronte, imperturbable, parce que j'ai proféré l'essentiel. . . . C'est ce que je crois avoir fait" 'I no longer at all have the same telluric energy. I no longer at all have the same earth force. But finally I salute it, I do not deny it. . . . I am at the stage of the great transition, without doubt, but I face it, unshaken, because I have said what needed to be said. . . . That is what I believe I have done' (*ABCésaire* 80–81).

The challenges of colonialism, decolonization, and independence have given way to the challenges of globalization, population shifts, exile, and immigration. For Césaire, these are times of distress, with new imperatives for the artist-intellectual: "Temps de détresse, effectivement le mot est très fort. Parce que temps de naufrage. . . . Des hommes séparés brutalement de leurs pays, de leurs terres, de leurs dieux, de leurs légendes, de leurs cultures, de leurs langues même. . . . C'est tout cela la détresse. Et c'est de tout cela que doit partir, me semble-t-il, le poète antillais" 'Times of distress, indeed the word is very powerful. . . . Because we are in times of shipwreck. . . . People foundering brutally alienated from their countries, from their lands, from their gods, from their legends, from their cultures, from their languages even. . . . All of that is distress. And all of that must be the point of

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departure, it seems to me, for the Caribbean poet' (*ABCésaire* 24–27).

The realization of departmental autonomy in the French Caribbean and of independence in Africa, the articulation of the sacred mission of literature and the responsibilities of the intellectual and leader in Césaire's era, the analysis of the colonial ontology and the imperfectly decolonized world, the poetic process of discovery and recovery through the searching eyes of the Martinican Narcissus, all entail rigorous questioning and, above all, vision. Césaire's passage and passing can be described as nothing less than the sea change Ariel sings of magisterially in *The Tempest*. In assessing the transformational and enduring vision of Aimé Césaire, one might offer in memoriam:

> Those are pearls that were his eyes;
> Nothing of him that doth fade
> But doth suffer a sea-change
> Into something rich and strange.
> (1.2.398–401)

## Note

1. All unattributed translations are mine.

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