

An Interview with Aimé Césaire

The following interview with Aimé Césaire was conducted by Haitian poet and militant Rene Depestre at the Cultural Congress of Havana in 1967. It first appeared in Poesias, an anthology of Césaire's writings published by Casa de las Americas. It has been translated from the Spanish by Maro Riofrancos.

RENE DEPESTRE: The critic Lilyan Kesteloot has written that *Return to My Native Land* is an autobiographical book. Is this opinion well founded?

AIMÉ CÉSAIRE: Certainly. It is an autobiographical book, but at the same time it is a book in which I tried to gain an understanding of myself. In a certain sense it is closer to the truth than a biography. You must remember that it is a young person's book: I wrote it just after I had finished my studies and had come back to Martinique. These were my first contacts with my country after an absence of ten years, so I really found myself assaulted by a sea of impressions and images. At the same time I felt a deep anguish over the prospects for Martinique.

R.D.: How old were you when you wrote the book?

A.C.: I must have been around twenty-six.

R.D.: Nevertheless, what is striking about it is its great maturity.

A.C.: It was my first published work, but actually it contains poems that I had accumulated, or done progressively. I remember having written quite a few poems before these.

R.D.: But they have never been published.

A.C.: They haven't been published because I wasn't very happy with them. The friends to whom I showed them found them interesting, but they didn't satisfy me.

R.D.: Why?

A.C.: Because I don't think I had found a form that was my own. I was still under the influence of the French poets. In short, if *Return to My Native Land* took the form of a prose poem, it was truly by chance. Even though I wanted to break with French literary traditions, I did not actually free myself from them until the moment I decided to turn my back on poetry. In fact, you could say that I became a poet by renouncing poetry. Do you see what I mean? Poetry was for me the only way to break the stranglehold the accepted French form held on me.

R.D.: In her introduction to your selected poems published by Editions Seghers, Lilyan Kesteloot names Mallarme, Claudel, Rimbaud, and Lautreamont among the poets who have influenced you.

A.C.: Lautreamont and Rimbaud were a great revelation for many poets of my generation. I must also say that I don't renounce Claudel. His poetry, in *Tete d'Or* for example, made a deep impression on me.

R.D.: There is no doubt that it is great poetry.

A.C.: Yes, truly great poetry, very beautiful. Naturally, there were many things about Claudel that irritated me, but I have always considered him a great craftsman with language.

R.D.: Your *Return to My Native Land* bears the stamp of personal experience, your experience as a Martinican youth, and it also deals with the itineraries of the Negro race in the Antilles, where French influences are not decisive.

A.C.: I don't deny French influences myself. Whether I want to or not, as a poet I express myself in French, and clearly French literature has influenced me. But I want to emphasize very strongly that - while using as a point of departure the elements that French literature gave me - at the same time I have always strived to create a new language, one capable of communicating the African heritage. In other words, for me French was a tool that I wanted to use in developing a new means of expression. I wanted to create an Antillean French, a black French that, while still being French, had a black character.

R.D.: Has surrealism been instrumental in your effort to discover this new French language?

A.C.: I was ready to accept surrealism because I already had advanced on my own, using as my starting points the same authors that had influenced the surrealist poets. Their thinking and mine had common reference points. Surrealism provided me with what I had been confusedly searching for. I have accepted it joyfully because in it I have found more of a confirmation than a revelation. It was a weapon that exploded the French language. It shook up absolutely everything. This was very important because the traditional forms - burdensome, overused forms - were crushing me.

R.D.: This was what interested you in the surrealist movement...

A.C.: Surrealism interested me to the extent that it was a liberating factor.

R.D.: So you were very sensitive to the concept of liberation that surrealism contained. Surrealism called forth deep and unconscious forces.

A.C.: Exactly. And my thinking followed these lines: Well then, if I apply the surrealist approach to my particular situation, I can summon up these unconscious forces. This, for me, was a call to Africa. I said to myself: it's true that superficially we are French, we bear the marks of French customs; we have been branded by Cartesian philosophy, by French rhetoric; but if we break with all that, if we plumb the depths, then what we will find is fundamentally black.

R.D.: In other words, it was a process of disalienation.

A.C.: Yes, a process of disalienation, that's how I interpreted surrealism.

R.D.: That's how surrealism has manifested itself in your work: as an effort to reclaim your authentic character, and in a way as an effort to reclaim the African heritage.

A.C.: Absolutely.

R.D.: And as a process of detoxification.

A.C.: A plunge into the depths. It was a plunge into Africa for me.

R.D.: It was a way of emancipating your consciousness.

A.C.: Yes, I felt that beneath the social being would be found a profound being, over whom all sorts of ancestral layers and alluviums had been deposited.

R.D.: Now, I would like to go back to the period in your life in Paris when you collaborated with Leopold Sedar Senghor and Leon Damas on the small periodical *L'Etudiant noir*. Was this first stage of the Negritude expressed in *Return to My Native Land*?

A.C.: Yes, it was already Negritude, as we conceived of it then. There were two tendencies within our group. On the one hand, there were people from the left, Communists at that time, such as J. Monnerot, E. Lero, and Rene Menil. They were Communists, and therefore we supported them. But very soon I had to reproach them - and perhaps I owe this to Senghor - for being French Communists. There was nothing to

distinguish them either from the French surrealists or from the French Communists. In other words, their poems were colorless.

R.D.: They were not attempting disalienation.

A.C.: In my opinion they bore the marks of assimilation. At that time Martinican students assimilated either with the French rightists or with the French leftists. But it was always a process of assimilation.

R.D.: At bottom what separated you from the Communist Martinican students at that time was the Negro question.

A.C.: Yes, the Negro question. At that time I criticized the Communists for forgetting our Negro characteristics. They acted like Communists, which was all right, but they acted like abstract Communists. I maintained that the political question could not do away with our condition as Negroes. We are Negroes, with a great number of historical peculiarities. I suppose that I must have been influenced by Senghor in this. At the time I knew absolutely nothing about Africa. Soon afterward I met Senghor, and he told me a great deal about Africa. He made an enormous impression on me: I am indebted to him for the revelation of Africa and African singularity. And I tried to develop a theory to encompass all of my reality.

R.D.: You have tried to particularize Communism...

A.C.: Yes, it is a very old tendency of mine. Even then Communists would reproach me for speaking of the Negro problem - they called it my racism. But I would answer: Marx is all right, but we need to complete Marx. I felt that the emancipation of the Negro consisted of more than just a political emancipation.

R.D.: Do you see a relationship among the movements between the two world wars connected to *L'Etudiant noir*, the Negro Renaissance Movement in the United States, *La Revue indigene* in Haiti, and *Negrismo* in Cuba?

A.C.: I was not influenced by those other movements because I did not know of them, But I'm sure they are parallel movements.

R.D.: How do you explain the emergence, in the years between the two world wars, of these parallel movements - in Haiti, the United States, Cuba, Brazil, Martinique, etc. - that recognized the cultural particularities of Africa?

A.C.: I believe that at that time in the history of the world there was a coming to consciousness among Negroes, and this manifested itself in movements that had no relationship to each other.

R.D.: There was the extraordinary phenomenon of jazz.

A.C.: Yes, there was the phenomenon of jazz. There was the Marcus Garvey movement. I remember very well that even when I was a child I had heard people speak of Garvey.

R.D.: Marcus Garvey was a sort of Negro prophet whose speeches had galvanized the Negro masses of the United States. His objective was to take all the American Negroes to Africa.

A.C.: He inspired a mass movement, and for several years he was a symbol to American Negroes. In France there was a newspaper called *Le Cri des negres*.

R.D.: I believe that Haitians like Dr. Sajous, Jacques Roumain, and Jean Price-Mars collaborated on that newspaper. There were also six issues of *La Revue du monde noir*, written by Rene Maran, Claude McKay, Price-Mars, the Achille brothers, Sajous, and others.

A.C.: I remember very well that around that time we read the poems of Langston Hughes and Claude McKay. I knew very well who McKay was because in 1929 or 1930 an anthology of American Negro poetry appeared in Paris. And McKay's novel, *Banjo* - describing the life of dock workers in Marseilles - was published in 1930. This was really one of the first works in which an author spoke of the Negro and gave him a certain literary dignity. I must say, therefore, that although I was not directly influenced by any American Negroes, at least I felt that the movement in the United States created an atmosphere that was indispensable for a very clear coming to consciousness. During the 1920's and 1930's I came under three main influences, roughly speaking. The first was the French literary influence, through the works of Mallarmé, Rimbaud, Lautréamont, and Claudel. The second was Africa. I knew very little about Africa, but I deepened my knowledge through ethnographic studies.

R.D.: I believe that European ethnographers have made a contribution to the development of the concept of Negritude.

A.C.: Certainly. And as for the third influence, it was the Negro Renaissance Movement in the United States, which did not influence me directly but still created an atmosphere which allowed me to become conscious of the solidarity of the black world.

R.D.: At that time you were not aware, for example, of developments along the same lines in Haiti, centered around *La Revue indigène* and Jean Price-Mars' book, *Ainsi parla l'oncle*.

A.C.: No, it was only later that I discovered the Haitian movement and Price-Mars' famous book.

R.D.: How would you describe your encounter with Senghor, the encounter between Antillean Negritude and African Negritude? Was it the result of a particular event or of a parallel development of consciousness?

A.C.: It was simply that in Paris at that time there were a few dozen Negroes of diverse origins. There were Africans, like Senghor, Guianans, Haitians, North Americans, Antilleans, etc. This was very important for me.

R.D.: In this circle of Negroes in Paris, was there a consciousness of the importance of African culture?

A.C.: Yes, as well as an awareness of the solidarity among blacks. We had come from different parts of the world. It was our first meeting. We were discovering ourselves. This was very important.

R.D.: It was extraordinarily important. How did you come to develop the concept of Negritude?

A.C.: I have a feeling that it was somewhat of a collective creation. I used the term first, that's true. But it's possible we talked about it in our group. It was really a resistance to the politics of assimilation. Until that time, until my generation, the French and the English but especially the French had followed the politics of assimilation unrestrainedly. We didn't know what Africa was. Europeans despised everything about Africa, and in France people spoke of a civilized world and a barbarian world. The barbarian world was Africa, and the civilized world was Europe. Therefore the best thing one could do with an African was to assimilate him: the ideal was to turn him into a Frenchman with black skin.

R.D.: Haiti experienced a similar phenomenon at the beginning of the nineteenth century. There is an entire Haitian pseudo-literature, created by authors who allowed themselves to be assimilated. The independence of Haiti, our first independence, was a

violent attack against the French presence in our country, but our first authors did not attack French cultural values with equal force. They did not proceed toward a decolonization of their consciousness.

A.C.: This is what is known as *bovarisme*. In Martinique also we were in the midst of *bovarisme*. I still remember a poor little Martinican pharmacist who passed the time writing poems and sonnets which he sent to literary contests, such as the Floral Games of Toulouse. He felt very proud when one of his poems won a prize. One day he told me that the judges hadn't even realized that his poems were written by a man of color. To put it in other words, his poetry was so impersonal that it made him proud. He was filled with pride by something I would have considered a crushing condemnation.

R.D.: It was a case of total alienation.

A.C.: I think you've put your finger on it. Our struggle was a struggle against alienation. That struggle gave birth to Negritude. Because Antilleans were ashamed of being Negroes, they searched for all sorts of euphemisms for Negro: they would say a man of color, a dark-complexioned man, and other idiocies like that.

R.D.: Yes, real idiocies.

A.C.: That's when we adopted the word *negre*, as a term of defiance. It was a defiant name. To some extent it was a reaction of enraged youth. Since there was shame about the word *negre*, we chose the word *negre*. I must say that when we founded *L'Etudiant noir*, I really wanted to call it *L'Etudiant negre*, but there was a great resistance to that among the Antilleans.

R.D.: Some thought that the word *negre* was offensive.

A.C.: Yes, too offensive, too aggressive, and then I took the liberty of speaking of *negritude*. There was in us a defiant will, and we found a violent affirmation in the words *negre* and *negritude*.

R.D.: In *Return to My Native Land* you have stated that Haiti was the cradle of Negritude. In your words, "Haiti, where Negritude stood ' on its feet for the first time." Then, in, your opinion, the history of our country is in a certain sense the prehistory of Negritude. How have you applied the concept of Negritude to the history of Haiti?

A.C.: Well, after my discovery of the North American Negro and my discovery of Africa, I went on to explore the totality of the black world, and that is how I came upon the history of Haiti. I love Martinique, but it is an alienated land, while Haiti represented for me the heroic Antilles, the African Antilles. I began to make connections between the Antilles and Africa, and Haiti is the most African of the Antilles. It is at the same time a country with a marvelous history: the first Negro epic of the New World was written by Haitians, people like Toussaint l'Ouverture, Henri Christophe, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, etc. Haiti is not very well known in Martinique. I am one of the few Martinicans who know and love Haiti.

R.D.: Then for you the first independence struggle in Haiti was a confirmation, a demonstration of the concept of Negritude. Our national history is Negritude in action.

A.C.: Yes, Negritude in action.. Haiti is the country where Negro people stood up for the first time, affirming their determination to shape a new world, a free world.

R.D.: During all of the nineteenth century there were men in Haiti who, without using the term Negritude, understood the significance of Haiti for world history. Haitian authors, such as Hannibal Price and Louis-Joseph Janvier, were already speaking of the need to reclaim black cultural and aesthetic values. A genius like Antenor Firmin wrote in

Paris a book entitled *De l'egalite des races humaines*, in which he tried to re-evaluate African culture in Haiti in order to combat the total and colorless assimilation that was characteristic of our early authors. You could say that beginning with the second half of the nineteenth century some Haitian authors - Justin Lherisson, Frederic Marcelin, Fernand Hibbert, and Antoine Innocent - began to discover the peculiarities of our country, the fact that we had an African past, that the slave was not born yesterday, that voodoo was an important element in the development of our national culture. Now it is necessary to examine the concept of Negritude more closely. Negritude has lived through all kind of adventures. I don't believe that this concept is always understood in its original sense, with its explosive nature. In fact, there are people today in Paris and other places whose objectives are very different from those of *Return to My Native Land*.

A.C.: I would like to say that everyone has his own Negritude. There has been too much theorizing about Negritude. I have tried not to overdo it, out of a sense of modesty. But if someone asks me what my conception of Negritude is, I answer that above all it is a concrete rather than an abstract coming to consciousness. What I have been telling you about-the atmosphere in which we lived, an atmosphere of assimilation in which Negro people were ashamed of themselves-has great importance. We lived in an atmosphere of rejection, and we developed an inferiority complex. I have always thought that the black man was searching for his identity. And it has seemed to me that if what we want is to establish this identity, then we must have a concrete consciousness of what we are - that is, of the first fact of our lives: that we are black; that we were black and have a history, a history that contains certain cultural elements of great value; and that Negroes were not, as you put it, born yesterday, because there have been beautiful and important black civilizations. At the time we began to write people could write a history of world civilization without devoting a single chapter to Africa, as if Africa had made no contributions to the world. Therefore we affirmed that we were Negroes and that we were proud of it, and that we thought that Africa was not some sort of blank page in the history of humanity; in sum, we asserted that our Negro heritage was worthy of respect, and that this heritage was not relegated to the past, that its values were values that could still make an important contribution to the world.

R.D.: That is to say, universalizing values...

A.C.: Universalizing, living values that had not been exhausted. The field was not dried up: it could still bear fruit, if we made the effort to irrigate it with our sweat and plant new seeds in it. So this was the situation: there were things to tell the world. We were not dazzled by European civilization. We bore the imprint of European civilization but we thought that Africa could' make a contribution to Europe. It was also an affirmation of our solidarity. That's the way it was: I have always recognized that what was happening to my brothers in Algeria and the United States had its repercussions in me. I understood that I could not be indifferent to what was happening in Haiti or Africa. Then, in a way, we slowly came to the idea of a sort of black civilization spread throughout the world. And I have come to the realization that there was a "Negro situation" that existed in different geographical areas, that Africa was also my country. There was the African continent, the Antilles, Haiti; there were Martinicans and Brazilian Negroes, etc. That's what Negritude meant to me.

R.D.: There has also been a movement that predated Negritude itself-I'm speaking of the Negritude movement between the two world wars-a movement you could call pre-

Negritude, manifested by the interest in African art that could be seen among European painters. Do you see a relationship between the interest of European artists and the coming to consciousness of Negroes?

A.C.: Certainly. This movement is another factor in the development of our consciousness. Negroes were made fashionable in France by Picasso, Vlaminck, Braque, etc.

R.D.: During the same period, art lovers and art historians - for example Paul Guillaume in France and Carl Einstein in Germany-were quite impressed by the quality of African sculpture. African art ceased to be an exotic curiosity, and Guillaume himself came to appreciate it as the "life-giving sperm of the twentieth century of the spirit."

A.C.: I also remember the *Negro Anthology* of Blaise Cendrars.

RD.: It was a book devoted to the oral literature of African Negroes. I can also remember the third issue of the art journal *Action*, which had a number of articles by the artistic vanguard of that time on African masks, sculptures, and other art objects. And we shouldn't forget Guillaume Apollinaire, whose poetry is full of evocations of Africa. To sum up, do you think that the concept of Negritude was formed on the basis of shared ideological and political beliefs on the part of its proponents? Your comrades in Negritude, the first militants of Negritude, have followed a different path from you. There is, for example, Senghor, a brilliant intellect and a fiery poet, but full of, contradictions on the subject of Negritude.

A.C.: Our affinities were above all a matter of feeling. You either felt black or did not feel black. But there was also the political aspect. Negritude was, after all, part of the left. I never thought for a moment that our emancipation could come from the right - that's impossible. We both felt, Senghor and I, that our liberation placed us on the left, but both of us refused to see the black question as simply a social question. There are people, even today, who thought and still think that it is all simply a matter of the left taking power in France, that with a change in the economic conditions the black question will disappear. I have never agreed with that at all. I think that the economic question is important, but it is not the only thing.

R.D.: Certainly, because the relationships between consciousness and reality are extremely complex. That's why it is equally necessary to decolonize our minds, our inner life, at the same time that we decolonize society.

A.C.: Exactly, and I remember very well having said to the Martinican Communists, in those days, that black people, as you have pointed out, were doubly proletarianized and alienated: in the first place as workers, but also as blacks, because after all we are dealing with the only race which is denied even the notion of humanity.

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