

Aged 22, Aimé Césaire gained admission to the prestigious Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris. At the same time, he founded the monthly journal L'Étudiant Noir – the black student – with his high-school friends Léon-Gontrand Damas, Léopold Sédar Senghor, and Suzanne Roussy (who later became his wife). The most important publication, no.3, contains Césaire's first article. Note that the journal's very existence bothered many people: whoever was in charge of archiving the journal deemed it was better to cut it in half than to fold it. In his article entitled *Conscience Radicale et Révolution Sociale*, Césaire starts by citing Dostoyevsky to say that “any race which believes it has nothing to tell the world is but an ethnic curiosity”. It is in the same article that he introduced the term Negritude – which later represented his movement.

A clear definition of Negritude can be found in an excerpt of a 1963 interview of Senghor for the Office de Radiodiffusion de Télévision Française (translated):

“Negritude is the African personality, all of the values of black civilization. Naturally, what is the goal of the black poet, the black author, or even the black politician? It is to defend his collective personality, his negritude. All of the efforts of my generation has been to defend these values culturally – because cultural independence is a prerequisite to any authentic independence – but also the on political front by advocating for decolonization.

Negritude isn't enclosing on oneself, it isn't racism. On the opposite, it's opening up to all peoples of the world, to everything that the other civilizations can bring, because we [the Negritude movement] believe that all civilization in its own right is *Métissage*.

Therefore, Negritude is the act of taking roots in your own black heritage and opening up towards the other civilizations”.

In 1940, France signed the armistice with Germany. This is an article from the New York Times, which shows this event in a neutral eye since the United States only entered the war a year later. This marks the period known as the Occupation, or in the French textbooks the Regime de Vichy, or less formally the Collaboration. On July 10, 1940 President Petain announced constitutional law, giving full powers to the government. Some wealthy individuals managed to flee via boat, to the US, including the famous authors Claude Levy-Strauss and Andre Breton. Their ship, however, was diverted to Martinique.

While in Martinique, the Surrealist Andre Breton stumbled upon a copy of Tropiques, and was immediately taken aback by the beauty of its writing. Tropique was a periodical to which Césaire contributed. Suzanne wrote in the preface of Tropiques no.1: “We are those who say no to darkness. The world needs us”. Also, the style of poetry can be described as avant-garde, with Césaire explaining “It’s not old verses that we’re going to use to describe a new world!”

Césaire’s meeting with Breton had a deep impact on both parties. Césaire learned the freedom and the exploratory missions that poetry as a genre confers to words. It “allows us to break the shell and go beyond the surface to reach the deepest truths”. Breton also wrote the preface of Césaire’s 1947 masterpiece Cahier d’un Retour au Pays Natal. On the other hand, Breton wrote a book about this encounter, Martinique Charmeuse de Seprents. At the time where occidental poetry was losing its breath, becoming a mere speculative language, all of a sudden words came back to Breton, only this time they had the weight of flesh and blood. So in this sense the meeting had a big impact on poetry and surrealism itself.

The best context possible to explain the groundbreaking nature of Césaire’s Discourse on Colonialism is the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Man by the United Nation in 1949, so one year before the initial release of the former text. The world was still scarred after the atrocities

of the Second World War. At the same time, there was undoubtedly a general trend to forget about history: As a response to fascism, racism was universally condemned; all the peoples were given the right to self-determination; and all countries had to decolonize (this became the norm). Césaire, instead, said that Europe was colonized by its own colonial thought, its own colonial epistemes. He explains that it has penetrated its philosophy, its laws, its arts, and its culture. The discourse makes the reader ask: The colonized can gain their freedom, but what can Europe do? This is one of Césaire's most oft-used dialectic tool: the stigma reversal.

——— 1956 was a very important year for Césaire. He participated in the First International Congress of Black writers and artists. At the initiative of the Senegalese Alioune Driop, who was the editor-in-chief of Presence Africaine, the congress took place in the Université de la Sorbonne for three days. Also present were Leopold Senghor, Frantz Fanon, James Baldwin and Amadou Hampate Ba. The topics of the debates included black culture and the politically tense climate. The congress was organized exactly like a United Nations meeting: each intellectual who was invited represented a delegation: Martinique, Guadeloupe, Senegal, Congo, as well as the Afro-American delegation.

——— On October 25, 1956 Césaire published his letter of demission from the Parti Communiste Français (PCF) in France-Observateur, the official journal of the PCF. It was addressed to Maurice Thorez, the general secretary of the party. The former maintained he still fully believed in Marxism, but that he rejected Stalinism. As Krouchev's report showed the monstrous 'deviations' by the USSR, Césaire denounced the PCF's lack of reaction. He created the Parti Communiste Martiniquais, again to denounce the communists' eurocentrism and to "let the decolonized peoples to think about Marxism for themselves". The PCM later became the PPM (Parti Progressiste Martiniquais).

It is crucial to our understanding of Aimé Césaire that we know of the Theater plays he wrote: Three tragedies, Et les chiens se taisaient (1956), La tragedie du roi philosophe (1963) and Une saison au Congo (1966); as well as one romance, Une tempete (1969). The first literary review of Césaire's plays was released in 1973, about the adaptation of Shakespeare's The Tempest, which discusses the master/slave condition. We see that the literary were starting to grasp Césaire's message: Césaire adapted Shakespeare because this particular version of the good master/humble slave depicted by Shakespeare had penetrated occidental culture for centuries and had contributed to the spreading of these epistemes not only in literature but also in the modern day-to-day lives of masters and their slaves. Thomas Hale concludes: "It's inevitable that this play won't be understood in Paris, where the same slave/master myth is still anchored in its society. And the fact that we find so much enthusiasm in its reception in Abidjan, in Fort-au-France and elsewhere shows that the new epistemes have set anchor and are developing in the third-world."

Doctor Davis further analyzes Césaire's plays. For instance, on A Tempest:

"For Césaire, then, negritude, as incarnated in the Haitian revolution, involves adopting a rebellious stance against the dehumanization of blacks. This theme is present in several of his plays, such as *A Tempest*, which explores the psychological complexity of the relationship between colonizers and colonized. In his brilliant recasting of Shakespeare's play, the monstrous figure of Caliban is transformed into an articulate, subjugated native who plots a successful rebellion against his repressive master, the European Prospero.

Césaire's dual agenda was, at bottom, moral in conception. His consistent goal, as poet and politician, was to promote genuine equality for the blacks of his homeland in the sphere of public policy no less than in social relations."

In this class, on more than one occasion, we have been asked what it means for a thinker to use certain forms of writing. Césaire, who had been writing poetry for thirty years and philosophical essays since he was twenty-two years old, decided to start writing plays in 1956. This is definitely a conscious shift. If Du Bois chose to follow the same episteme as Hegel, for instance, so the same form as him, it means he was consciously conforming to a system. On the other hand, when Césaire writes plays and opera, he is becoming the anti-system. He is accepting his own marginalization, or his status as the marginalized, and developing his own anti-colonial episteme based on that. In that sense, Césaire's choice of literary form, as well as his Negritude movement as a whole, become giant mechanisms of stigma reversal in their own right.