Aime Cesaire’s *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*: A Self-Liberation

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**ABSTRACT**

*Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* of Aimé Césaire presents a speaker besieged with his own identity, ragged between a double consciousness of his black African legacy and his French-European education. This dichotomy appears in the poem in terms of his understanding of his ancestry. For the speaker, the African appears as the “real” around him, while the European is an “absent presence,” and he confronts the two at the poem’s pinnacle, when he encounters a comically stereotypical African-Caribbean man on a street-car.

Certainly the speaker of the poem is Césaire as he mentions in an interview with Haitian poet and militant Rene Despértre¹ at the Cultural Congress of Havana in 1967,

“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”².

Here lies the split soul and at the same time the identification of Césaire with the speaker in *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* (1983) where he (the speaker) looks into himself, at the world around him, and into his ancestral past in attempts to discover his own identity. This speaker is in the process of becoming aware of his identity, and central to this awareness is his understanding of his African heritage as well as his relation to the white European World that has influenced him and his island community. These two deviating kinds of consciousness divide the speaker’s attempts at self understanding to a higher existence of self-liberation. The African appears more real to the speaker; it is easy to see the African presence in his life, his ancestry, and his world. The European, however, appears as more of an absent-

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¹Rene Despértre is a Haitian poet and Militant.
presented surrounding the speaker in his daily life. Whereas in this long narrative poem, Cesaire discarded European culture, accepting his African and Caribbean roots juxtaposing historical data, descriptions of nature, and dream imagery, he praises the offerings of the black race to world civilization. In *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* we can see that the refutation of European culture reconstitutes a new ‘self’, and to this extent, a newly realized oppositional praxis to confront Westernized models of socio-cultural production:

“Oh friendly source of light
Oh fresh source of light
Those who have invented neither powder nor compass
Those who could harness neither stream nor electricity
Those who exploited neither the seas nor the sky but those
Without whom the earth would not be earth
Gibbosity [gibbosite] all the more beneficent as the bare earth
even more earth
Silo where that which is earthiest about earth ferments and ripens
My negritude is not a stone, its deafness hurled against the clamor of the day
My negritude is not a leukoma[une taie] of dead liquid over the earth’s dead eye
My negritude is neither tower nor cathedral
It takes root in the red flesh of the soil
It takes root in the ardent flesh of the sky
It breaks through the opaque prostration [troue l’accablement] with its upright
Patience.”

He recognizes these two forces chiefly in the poem’s most narrative scenes and in personal reminiscences. The most heartrending and most often critically discussed moment occurs when he encounters a stereotypically comical-looking black man on the street-car. Scenes such as this one cast the speaker as a black man looking the eyes of a white man.

A kind of paradox works in such a scene where the speaker needs to see through white eyes, attitudes, and prejudices in order to look more meaningfully at what defines the black individual and the black community. Both positions -- black standpoint and white standpoint offer the speaker definitions of his "race" that are essentializing. What the speaker discovers in the course of the poem is that having moved through both positions allows him to accept more than one definition; he is able from a third position, one that is between these two and, even as the poem concludes, unfomed and undefined, to view himself in complex ways that allows the poem’s ending -- his return -- to be a beginning and a future potential for his identity. *The Notebook* consists, as Annette Smith and Clayton Eshleman's introduction to Césaire's *The Collected Poetry* describes, of three movements. The opening of the poem consists of descriptions of the "sprawled flat" topography of Césaire's Martinique in prose-like sections linked structurally by the use of anaphora. The second movement introduces the speaker's desire to go away from his homeland while using techniques of surrealist juxtaposition to describe the horrors of Martinique's colonized past and present. This section contains the poem's crucial scene in which the speaker encounters and mocks -- a stereotypically comical black man on a street-car. Finally, the third movement of the poem gestures toward a universal sense of identity as it suggests a future hero who will appear from the past. In this section, the poem's topography seems to lift from the flat earth into the stars and heavens, and the speaker searches for a collective sense of identity that is paradoxically both black and white while being neither black nor white.

*Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* represents Cesaire’s attempt to subvert the language of the colonizer to recreate a black collectivity that had been denied the concreteness of expression, a process which derives from Surrealist concern with the intensification of collective activity and the subversion of refined forms of socio-cultural production as James Arnold writes,

“At the outset the Martinician poet, whose literary culture is essentially European, cannot but use the elements of style provided by the colonizer. The language and literary forms at

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his disposal belong to the very tradition that must attack in order to affirm the uniqueness of his own community.4

Cesaire reveals the same truth of choosing French for his poetry which he accepts in an interview with Rene Despertre:

“It was not something I wanted, but it happens that the language I used was the language I had learned at school. That didn’t bother me in the slightest, it didn’t in any way come between me and my existential rebellion and the outpouring of my innermost being. I bent the French language to my purposes.

Nature and History have placed us at the crossroads of two worlds, of two cultures if not more. There is the African culture, which I see as being below the surface; and precisely because it is below the surface, overlooked, treated with contempt, it needed to be expressed, to be brought out alive into the light.

But the other culture was the obvious one, the one we were conscious of from the books and from school, and which was also ours, an integral part of our individual and collective identity.

And also I have tried to reconcile those two worlds, because that was what had to be done. On the other hand, I feel just as relaxed about claiming kinship with the African griot and the African epic as about claiming kinship with Rimbaud and Lautreamont—and through them with Sophocles and Aeschylus.5

Applying our earlier description of the European as absent presence here is tricky because it is a paradox. The European world as ancestral consciousness to the speaker is not physically palpable and yet it is everywhere, influencing his attitudes and behavior. The speaker’s relationship to the European world is a paradox as its manipulation is both that of a father-figure to him and something external and foreign. Most notably, the poem’s French language is the European presence, though the speaker does not directly concede that he writes and speaks in a European tongue. Perhaps we can interpret the speaker’s relation to the Europeans through Frantz Fanon’s sense of language as expressed in his Black Skin, White Masks (1967). For Fanon, to speak “means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization” (17-18).6 In the chapter “The Negro and Language,” Fanon suggests that as a black man from the Antilles begins to speak French he becomes whiter, renouncing his blackness and his “jungle” heritage, in Césaire’s poem, though, the speaker seems intent on recovering and describing his ancestral black heritage. If the European has seemed privileged in the poem’s opening half, it is because of the long history of white domination. As Cesaire mentions in his interview with Rene Despertre:

“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.”7

The speaker in Notebook of a Return to the Native Land, however, wants to discover an alternative to this legacy. Perhaps because the speaker lives in a world subjugated by the white colonizer, he cites many racial stereotypes while attempting to define himself and his black heritage, as Davis notes. These stereotypes, however, are only "masks" which the speaker discards:

"The stereotypes, which are images of the self projected by the other, are also brought into the evanescent limelight, only to be discarded in their turn along with the others. Throughout Césaire seems to be cataloguing the various forms or guises that the black identity has assumed in its interaction with the

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European colonizer. In subjecting them to uncompromising scrutiny he is not so much concerned with repudiating them outright (though exorcism is certainly part of his plan) as with exploring the nature of racial identity, which is always constructed in relation to the other; for it soon becomes painfully clear, as the poem progresses, that certain negative self-images are, or have been at one time, internalized by the first-person narrator (42).8

After a stereotypically hilarious description, the speaker tells us,

"And the whole thing added up perfectly to a hideous nigger, a grouchy nigger, a melancholy nigger, a slouched nigger, his hands joined in prayer on a knobby stick. A nigger shrouded in an old threadbare coat. A comical and ugly nigger, with some women behind me sneering at him. He was COMICAL AND UGLY, COMICAL AND UGLY for sure. I"9

We must also judge this struggle in the broader context of the poem, perhaps in terms of the three principles of negritude in the Notebook. It seems the colonized man struggles to establish his own identity and sense of self by overthrowing the colonizer. As Césaire suggests:

“Our struggle was a struggle against alienation. That struggle gave birth to Negritude. Because Antilles 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.”10

Early in the poem, Césaire frames his words as weapons. For example, he describes his community's voice as "our spear point" (49).11 Perhaps he is suggesting a way to overcome the colonial father-figure through the use of weapon-like words. The violent images here are more complex than just acts directed in revolt. If the speaker intends acts of destruction as creative acts, then we should look at how he attempts to "destroy," symbolically, that which is African in his identity. The speaker has been addressing his African ancestry and his black society with the vision of a European education, and it shows him the comical and ugly, stereotypical black as a possible obstacle to his success in the world. Because of the speaker's collusion in stereotyping the man on the streetcar, he cannot hug his sense of negritude, his blackness. I suggest that the speaker must symbolically destroy the man on the streetcar in order to pledge his likeness to an African, his identity as a black man. In this way, the speaker can eliminate from his own consciousness those European prejudices which make him see only the comical and ugly. The speaker, having returned from France as the French-speaking black man who Fanon tells us is outcast from Martinique society, searches for a place in that society from which to speak and to act in a way that will allow him and his community to advance. However, he cannot, if he is aware of himself as being like the man on the streetcar. On the one hand, that the speaker's European education, as well as the sense of whiteness in the world, acts a block or embargo to his exploration of his African ancestry. He must destroy or overcome this embargo in order to strengthen his likeness to his African heritage. Both white and black consciousnesses, however, are present in the speaker's sense of identity and he must accept both of them in order to survive in his world. If it seems he is destroying "whiteness" within himself, this is because he must prevent his European education from destroying the Africanness in his heritage. The speaker must wear different masks as he attempts the balancing act that will help define a fraternal universal. The problem with searching for this universal balance in the speaker's exploration of himself is that he does not equally contain all parts of the world. Although he hints toward an all-inclusive vision of the world at the poem's end, he cannot find equal parts of both "races" in his ancestry and in his life. Instead, I think, he wants the freedom to explore his own as a complement to what is European and white in the world. In this way, he attempts to overcome, evade the white "father," thus finds the way of seeing the world that stands between him and his African ancestry in the streetcar scene. There is indication after the streetcar scene of an act of

cannibalism (in word), as the speaker uses a refrained reference to "this former dreams my cannibalistic cruelties" (65)\(^{12}\). The speaker describes this dream:

"I was hiding behind a stupid vanity called me I was hiding behind it and suddenly there was a man on the ground, his feeble defenses scattered, his sacred maxims trampled underfoot, his pedantic rhetoric oozing air through each wound. There is a man on the ground and his soul is almost naked and destiny triumphs in watching this soul which defied its metamorphosis in the ancestral slough" (65)\(^{13}\).

This man on the ground, the speaker, watches his soul in this dream, as he beats and destroys himself. The question is, which part of himself is he killing here? The white part? The black part? The point of this dream is withdrawal from his "stupid vanity," which suggests that he must kill that part of himself which is overly proud. Perhaps that is the part -- whether white or black -- which tends to be exclusionary. This scene seems to keep with the kind of narrative Fanon offers of a French-educated black man returning to Martinique as an outcast because he seems vain and thinks himself elevated to a higher status than the Creole speakers. The speaker, however, realizes that there is a metamorphosis which he must undergo.

In our view, the concluding neologism is exasperating, perhaps because it defies definition beyond the paradoxical sense of a "still sweeping" suggested by its Latinate roots. The problem Césaire has set for himself here is one of how to describe a single point on a journey of self-discovery and self-liberation, though the 'self-liberation' is not achieved easily as Césaire confesses:

"This can mean only one thing: namely, that a political and social system that suppresses the self-determination of a people thereby kills the creative power of that people. Or, what amounts to the same thing: wherever colonialism has existed, whole peoples have been deprived of their culture, deprived of all culture... Wherever European colonization has occurred, the introduction of an economy based on money has led to the destruction or weakening of traditional links, the break-up of the social and economic structure of the community.... When a member of a colonized people makes this kind of remark, European intellectuals tend to reproach him with ingratitude and remind him complacently of what the world owes Europe."\(^{14}\)

He remarks:

"Whenever colonization occurs, native culture begins to wither. And among the ruins there springs up not a culture, but a kind of subculture, a subculture that, because it is condemned to remain marginal as regards the European culture and to the province of small group, an “elite,” living in artificial conditions and deprived of life-giving contact with the masses and with popular culture, is thus prevented from blossoming into a true culture."\(^{15}\)

The poem ends with a speaker who still struggles with his sense of ‘self’. It is stronger than it was in the poem's beginning, but it is not complete, perhaps because it is a new sensibility that is luminal, between European and African. It reaches toward the universal, though conceding that its goal is beyond its reach. I have suggested that the speaker has overcome and accepted his African ancestor in the person of the man on the streetcar in order to be identified with him. This identification is to go back to a higher root of self-liberation. As Césaire’s proclaims:

“Our concern has always been a humanist concern and we wanted it to have roots. We wanted to have roots and at the same time to communicate. I think it was in a passage in Hegel

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emphasizing the master-slave dialectic that we found this idea about specificity. He points out that the particular and the universal are not to be seen as opposites, that the universal is not the negation of the particular but is reached by a deeper exploration of the particular. The West told us that in order to be universal we had to start by denying that we were black. I, on the contrary, said to myself that the more we were black, the more universal we would be. It was a totally different approach. It was not a choice between alternatives, but an effort at reconciliation. Not a cold reconciliation, but reconciliation in heat of the fire, an alchemical reconciliation if you like. The identity in question was an identity reconciled with the universal. For me there can never be any imprisonment within an identity. Identity means having roots, but it is also a transition, a transition to the universal.”

However, Fanon claims that Césaire, "once he had laid bare the white man in himself, he killed him" (198). If both of these aspects of his identity have been destroyed, what, then, is left? Perhaps the ending of the poem reaches beyond the solitary speaker and beyond essentializing, single meanings. He tells the wind to bind his "black vibration to the very navel of the world," to strangle him or to liberate him for a higher identity as he answers to Rene Despretre:

“There is an obvious fiery quality in my poetry, but why? I belong to this island.... Why this obsession in my poetry? It is not some thing I deliberately seek. I am aware-everyone is aware- that the volcano is out there. It is earth and it is fire.

Fire is not destructive. The volcano is not destructive except in an indirect way. It is a cosmic anger, in other words, a creative anger, yes, creative!

We are far removed from that romantic idyll beneath the calm sea. These are angry, exasperated lands, lands that spit and spew, that vomit forth life.

That is what we must live up to. We must draw upon the creativity of this plot of land! We must keep it going and not sink into a slumber of acceptance and resignation. It is a kind of summons to us from history and from nature.”

Thus Notebook of a Return to the Native Land and other creations of Césaire show the world to assert the importance and dignity of being black at a time when foreign powers still held up colonies around the world. The rest of the world has to comprehend that it can no longer view blacks as savage, uneducated people. The Notebook of Return to the Native Land brings both the world of domination and the strength of the Martinician people into sharp focus. The poem is Césaire’s personal history, as well as the history of his island. The fragments of foreign civilizations, the residue of imposed cultures, the medley of traditions, all contradictory and clashing, inspire the poem to liberate him. The ritual of liberation depends on a landscape suffused with spirits, trash, and mud, Césaire’s essential landscape which he explains in 1967:

“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.”

The power of Césaire’s adaptability between his black identity and imposed colonial existence excels the conscious truth of self-liberation. His passion for social justice, his love of Martinique and his global vision of mankind are reflected in every aspect of his life and poetry. In his Notebook of a Return to the Native Land, Césaire finds regenerative force in the landscape of his native Martinique. In an over-arching sense, the poem is a pursuit for inventive insight and self-liberation. In a more detailed fashion, the poem’s thematic development draws a picture of the poverty of daily reality; he writes a cry for colossal losses suffered by Caribbean people because of the slave trade; he describes


the liveliness of his people who are rooted in the soil; he explores his own agony; he celebrates the extraterrestrial and physical beauty of Caribbean islands; he experiences a catharsis; and he utters a call for a liberation: a higher freedom of SELF LIBERATION.

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