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Negritude Revived: Gary Wilder on the Postcolonial Politics of Aimé Césaire and Léopold Sédar Senghor

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Gary Wilder, *Freedom Time: Negritude, Decolonization, and the Future of the World*. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015), 400 pp.

From the early 1960s to 1980s, Negritude was repeatedly discredited as social or cultural theory, with Wole Soyinka mockingly declaring that “A tiger doesn’t proclaim his tigritude, he pounces on his pray” at a conference in Berlin in 1964; Marcien Towa and Stanislaw Adotevi attacking the movement as contrary to African progress in 1971 and 1972, respectively¹; René Depestre bidding goodbye to it forever in 1980²; and Ousmane Sembène dismissing it with a wave of the hand in interviews, saying he didn’t even want to talk about it³. Consequently, the study of Negritude has often been considered outmoded and obsolete, a necessary educational component for the purposes of understanding origins and allusions, but not necessarily an object of serious scholarly study. Aimé Césaire’s poems had all been thoroughly analyzed, the thinking went, Léopold Senghor branded an essentialist, and the relationship between the literary and political careers of these two thinkers was left as a conundrum full of contradictions that could never be resolved. As a result, the prevailing sentiment in the late 1980s and 1990s was that Negritude had had its heyday, and that it was time for Francophone scholars to turn their attention exclusively to the exciting voices emerging from France’s former colonies in Africa and the Caribbean.

In the past decade, however, there has been a renewed interest in the works of Césaire and Senghor, in particular some of their more neglected texts, as well as their politics and philosophies of Negritude. In 2013, the Centennial of Césaire’s birth inspired an abundance of international conferences and publications that sought to revive and shed new light on the work of this poet-politician, including events in the U.S., Britain, France and Martinique. In recent years, several book-long studies have inspired a serious reconsideration of these two thinkers, highlighting their potential insight into contemporary questions of poeticity and textual materiality, modernity and globalization. Carrie Noland’s

¹ Marcien Towa, *Léopold Sédar Senghor: Négritude ou servitude* (Yaoundé: Éditions CLE, 1971) and Stanislaw Adotevi, *Négritude et négrologues* (Paris: Éditions Le Castor Astral, 1972).

² René Depestre, *Bonjour et Adieu à la Négritude* (Paris: Éditions Laffont, 1980).

³ “Negritude? I don’t know anything about it! I don’t even want to talk about it. My worth is not tied to the color of my skin. And the worth of African culture is not tied to certain fantasies or to repressed complexes in the presence of the ideals of Greek beauty” (“Entretiens avec Ousmane Sembène” *Jeune Afrique* 1979:74).

Voices of Negritude in Modernist Print: Aesthetic Subjectivity, Diaspora and the Lyric Regime (Columbia University Press, 2015) approaches Negritude as an experimental, text-based movement, focusing on the poems of Césaire and Léon-Gontron Damas. Cheikh Thiam's *Return to the Kingdom of Childhood: Re-envisioning the Legacy and Philosophical Relevance of Negritude* (Ohio State University Press, 2014) proposes a reconsideration of Negritude—including associations with essentialism—through a detailed analysis of Senghor's philosophical writings. John Walsh's *Free and French in the Caribbean: Toussaint Louverture, Aimé Césaire and the Narratives of Loyal Opposition* (Indiana University Press, 2013) examines the writings of Césaire and Toussaint Louverture side by side, in order to determine how they construct a narrative on the two defining events of Caribbean decolonization: the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) and departmentalization of Martinique in 1946. And Nick Nesbitt's *Caribbean Critique: Antillean Critical Theory from Toussaint to Glissant* (Liverpool University Press, 2013) includes chapters analyzing Césaire's contributions to Critical Theory.

It is within this ambiance of revival and reconsideration that Gary Wilder conducted the research for this study, beginning in 2006. Whereas his first book, *The French Imperial Nation-State: Negritude and Colonial Humanism between the Two World Wars* (University of Chicago Press, 2005) examines the development of Césaire and Senghor's thinking from the 1930s to 1945, *Freedom Time* focuses on the postwar period of 1945 to 1960, the "Year of Africa" when seventeen nations—including Cameroon, Mali, Senegal, and the Republic of Congo—achieved independence. Wilder considers this later period all the while relating his analysis to the earlier days of Negritude, as well as to the most significant political issues of the present, such as globalization, immigration, and neocolonialism. His book provides a detailed intellectual history of Césaire and Senghor during this crucial moment of world history, situating them within a Benjaminian "constellation" that links them to figures such as Bloch, Adorno, Hannah Arendt, Albert Camus, and John Dewey.

While today we generally view France and its former colonies as separate entities, and take it for granted that the imposition of French rule was forced and unnatural, Wilder shows the extent to which Césaire and Senghor thought of France and its colonies as inextricably linked, a symbiotic—albeit toxic—relationship that could be substantially improved. They both envisioned reforms that would not only transform the role of the colonies in governance—by providing them with representation and new administrative entities that decentralized power—but completely reconfigure France and the metropole, including notions of French national identity. Although anticolonialism has long been equated with the quest for independence in the form of state sovereignty, Wilder convincingly illustrates how these thinkers believed that the colonized

peoples of the world could fight against colonialism and obtain self-determination without necessarily establishing sovereign states. He is not primarily concerned with the “futures whose promise faded after imperfect implementation,” but rather, the “futures that were once imagined but never came to be, alternatives that might have been” (16).

In Chapter 1, “Unthinking France, Rethinking Decolonization,” Wilder describes his book as a lengthy essay about “the problem of freedom” after the end of empire, and states that the “title refers not only to the postwar moment as a time *for* colonial freedom but to the distinct types *of* time and peculiar political tenses required or enabled by decolonization” (1). In particular, Wilder addresses temporal questions, seeking to view Césaire and Senghor’s texts from within the historical moment in which they were produced, and even to allow them to talk back to the reader if necessary. This is no doubt in response to the numerous critics of Césaire and Senghor who deplore the failure of their projects, especially the extent to which their political machinations may have set the scene for neocolonial relationships that persist to this day. As Wilder emphasizes, in order to fully understand why Césaire and Senghor tried to envision alternatives to both the colonial order and independence, it is necessary to place ourselves into the context of 1945, a year Wilder calls a “world-historical opening” during which “the contours of the postwar order were not yet fixed” (1), and international pressures from Europe, the U.S. and UN suggested that this postwar world would revolve around territorial nation states.

The second, third and fourth chapters seek to place the reader’s perspective within this “world-historical opening” by providing some fascinating biographical and historical contextualization that sets the stage for the detailed analyses of Césaire and Senghor’s political projects in later chapters. Chapter 2, “Situating Césaire: Antillean Awakening and Global Redemption,” revisits the development of Césaire’s pragmatism by describing his studies in Paris, inspiration for the *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land*, experiences in Martinique during the Vichy regime, founding of the journal *Tropiques* with his future wife Suzanne Roussi, and encounters with André Breton and French Surrealism. Chapter 3, “Situating Senghor: African Hospitality and Human Solidarity” outlines how Senghor’s time in captivity during World War II (especially his readings of German philosophers) colored his political views, and how his critiques of materialism, instrumentalism, and utilitarianism explain his initial reluctance to enter into politics. Chapter 4, “Freedom, Time, Territory” provides a historical analysis of the debates surrounding the political status of France’s colonies following the war, including the new federalist forms of government proposed by Albert Camus and Charles De Gaulle, the rise of UN Internationalism, and the influence of Kant’s notion of “cosmopolitanism” on policy-making.

The fifth, sixth, seventh and eighth chapters form the heart of the study, by laying out in the detail how Césaire and Senghor envisioned and attempted to realize federalist forms of government that would comprise France and its colonies, and provide alternatives to both the colonial order and independence. Critics have often perceived a paradox between the writings and political positions of Césaire and Senghor: Césaire, seemingly much more outspoken than Senghor, comparing colonialism to Nazism in the *Discourse on Colonialism*, and railing against the evil colonizer in *A Tempest*, nonetheless proposed and accepted departmentalization; Senghor, for whom colonization appears much less traumatic, who was a greater advocate of assimilationist practices, as evidenced by his utopian notion of a “Universal Civilization” that harmoniously combines elements of black African and white European cultures, negotiated and achieved independence.

Wilder shows us that what may appear at first as a paradox is not one at all. Far from a contradiction of their politics, Senghor and Césaire’s writings and speeches were actually perfectly in tandem with them: Césaire’s *Discourse* includes language about positive forms of contact and modernization; Senghor was in fact assimilationist in both his writings and his politics, since he fiercely advocated a federalist state that would include France and its colonies, and only abandoned this idea due to strong opposition among his constituents. Both thinkers repeatedly argued that a sovereign state was not necessarily more independent than one that formed part of a federalist state: they feared that long-term economic dependence would undermine political autonomy, and worried that within the context of the Cold War, new African and Caribbean nations would find themselves weak and vulnerable, such that they would eventually turn towards one of the two superpowers, the United States or Soviet Union. France, as they often emphasized in their correspondence with French government officials, provided an alternative to the extremes of American capitalism and Soviet communism (Stalinism), both evil in their own way.

A prime example of how Wilder’s analysis sheds new light on the work of these two key thinkers is his reading of the *Discourse on Colonialism* in Chapter 5, “Departmentalization and the Spirit of Schoelcher.” Wilder begins by acknowledging the harsh critiques of Césaire for supporting departmentalization, before proposing to carefully examine why he initially viewed this reconfiguration as a promising form of decolonization. As Wilder rightly points out, critics have long found a contradiction between Césaire’s staunch anticolonial stance in the *Discourse* and his acceptance of assimilation in the form of departmentalization. However, Wilder writes that Césaire had radical hopes for departmentalization: he thought that it would bring progress and modernity to Martinique; and truly believed in the French Republic’s ability to transform itself, to adapt to the inclusion of certain colonies within its structure. This optimism

was lost in the aftermath of departmentalization, as Césaire struggled for years to secure for Martinicans the same benefits (health care, social security) to which metropolitans were entitled, and ultimately realized that the colonial relationship had been replaced by a neo-colonial one.

As for Senghor, since he considered neither assimilation nor independence ideal, he developed and advocated for his own notion of a federalist state. Chapter 6, “Federalism and the Future of France” considers his statements in the French National Assembly on the future of Senegal, especially his argument for transforming the Fourth Republic into a “true federation” or “Union of French Socialist Republics” with the former colonies as self-governing autonomous states (142). Senghor “warned metropolitans that if France destroyed its connections with its former colonies, it would be weakened in relation to the Cold War superpowers, the European Community, and transnational blocs such as the British Commonwealth” (152). Even as calls for independence resonated with grassroots constituencies across Africa, he continued to press the idea of a federalist union, and only abandoned it when popular support for independence was simply too great.

Wilder’s careful readings of some of the lesser-known political writings by these two foundational thinkers—as well as famous texts such as Césaire’s *Discourse on Colonialism*—provoke a rethinking of some of the basic premises of Negritude, such as the nature of its anticolonialism, Senghor’s vision of a “Universal Civilization,” and the political project that Césaire sought to further through his theater. Wilder also sheds new light on the complex relationship between Césaire and Senghor’s roles as poets and politicians, demonstrating the extent to which the elements of their thinking long considered contradictory are only so from a perspective that equates anticolonialism and with state sovereignty. While Wilder gives Césaire and Senghor much credit for imagining political alternatives to independence and colonialism, he admits that many of their ideas—such as Senghor’s vision of a federalist state—were unpopular and reflected a profound disconnect between these African and Caribbean elites and the populations they purportedly represented.

It appears that Wilder could explore a bit more Césaire’s tremendous fear of American imperialism; after all, the *Discourse on Colonialism*, a text that presents an extensive comparison of colonization and Nazism, ends by stating that American imperialism is far worse than either of them. Given the numerous American occupations of Haiti throughout the twentieth century, to what extent did Césaire turn to France simply because he feared the U.S.? And as for Senghor, to what extent were his politics a means of enacting his ideal of a “Universal Civilization,” to which all peoples would contribute different elements? Nevertheless, the fact that Wilder does not fully explore these questions could hardly be considered a shortcoming, given the incredible quality, nature and scope

of his book. This groundbreaking study is likely to turn Negritude on its head, and provoke a radical rethinking of many basic assumptions about Césaire, Senghor and French decolonization. There is no doubt that it will be of tremendous interest to students, literary critics, and historians alike of Negritude, postcolonialism, modernity, and globalization.