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A POETICS OF ANTICOLONIALISM

Robin D.G. Kelley

Aimé Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism* might be best described as a declaration of war. I would almost call it a "third world manifesto," but hesitate because it is primarily a polemic against the old order bereft of the kind of propositions and proposals that generally accompany manifestos. Yet, *Discourse* speaks in revolutionary cadences, capturing the spirit of its age just as Marx and Engels did 102 years earlier in their little manifesto. First published in 1950 as *Discours sur le colonialisme*, it appeared just as the old empires were on the verge of collapse, thanks in part to a world war against fascism that left Europe in material, spiritual, and philosophical shambles.¹ It was the age of decolonization and revolt in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Five years earlier, in 1945, black people from around the globe gathered in Manchester, England, for the Fifth Pan-African Congress to discuss the freedom and future of Africa. Five years later, in 1955, representatives from the Non-Aligned Nations gathered in

Bandung, Indonesia, to discuss the freedom and future of the third world. Mao's revolution in China was a year old, while the Mau Mau in Kenya were just gearing up for an uprising against their colonial masters. The French encountered insurrections in Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, Cameroon, and Madagascar, and suffered a humiliating defeat by the Viet Minh at Dien Bien Phu. Revolt was in the air. India, the Philippines, Guyana, Egypt, Guatemala, South Africa, Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, Harlem, you name it. Revolt! Malcolm X once described this extraordinary moment, this long decade from the end of the Second World War to the late 1950s, as a "tidal wave of color."

Discourse on Colonialism is indisputably one of the key texts in this "tidal wave" of anticolonial literature produced during the postwar period—works that include W.E.B. Du Bois's *Color and Democracy* (1945) and *The World and Africa* (1947), Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), George Padmore's *Pan-Africanism or Communism?: The Coming Struggle for Africa* (1956), Albert Memmi's *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (1957), Richard Wright's *White Man Listen!* (1957), Jean-Paul Sartre's essay, "Black Orpheus" (1948), and journals such as *Présence Africaine* and *African Revolution*. Like much of the radical literature produced during this epoch, *Discourse* places the colonial question front and center. Although Césaire, remaining somewhat true to his Communist affiliation, never quite dethrones the modern proletariat from its exalted status as a revolutionary force, the European working class is practically invisible. This is a book about colonialism, its impact on the colonized, on culture, on history, on the very concept of civilization itself, and most importantly, on the colonizer. In the finest Hegelian fashion, Césaire demonstrates how colonialism works to "decivilize" the colonizer: torture, violence, race hatred,

and immorality constitute a dead weight on the so-called civilized, pulling the master class deeper and deeper into the abyss of barbarism. The instruments of colonial power rely on barbaric, brutal violence and intimidation, and the end result is the degradation of Europe itself. Hence Césaire can only scream: “Europe is indefensible.”

Europe is also dependent. Anticipating Fanon’s famous proposition that “Europe is literally the creation of the Third World,” Césaire reveals, over and over again, that the colonizers’ sense of superiority, their sense of mission as the world’s civilizers, depends on turning the Other into a barbarian.² The Africans, the Indians, the Asians cannot possess civilization or a culture equal to that of the imperialists, or the latter have no purpose, no justification for the exploitation and domination of the rest of the world. The colonial encounter, in other words, requires a reinvention of the colonized, the deliberate destruction of the past—what Césaire calls “thingification.” *Discourse*, then, has a double-edged meaning: it is Césaire’s discourse on the material and spiritual havoc created by colonialism, and it is a critique of colonial discourse. Anticipating the explosion of work we now call “postcolonial studies,” Césaire’s critique of figures such as Dominique O. Mannoni, Roger Caillois, Ernest Renan, Yves Florenne, and Jules Romains, among others, reveals how the circulation of colonial ideology—an ideology of racial and cultural hierarchy—is as essential to colonial rule as police and corvée labor.

Surprisingly, few assessments of postcolonial criticism pay much attention to *Discourse*, besides mentioning it in a litany of “pioneering” works without bothering to elaborate on its contents. Robert Young’s *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (1990) dates the origins of postcolonial studies to Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth*, despite the fact that some of the arguments in Fanon were

already present in *Discourse*.³ On the other hand, literary critics tend to skip over *Discourse* or dismiss it as an anomaly born of Césaire's eleven-year stint as a member of the Communist Party of Martinique. It has been read in terms of whether it conforms to or breaks from "Marxist orthodoxy."⁴ I want to suggest that *Discourse* made some critical contributions to our thinking about colonialism, fascism, and revolution. First, its recasting of the history of Western Civilization helps us locate the origins of fascism within colonialism itself; hence, within the very traditions of humanism, critics believed fascism threatened. Second, Césaire was neither confused about Marxism nor masquerading as a Marxist when he wrote *Discourse*. On the contrary, he was attempting to revise Marx, along the lines of his predecessors such as W.E.B. Du Bois and M.N. Roy, by suggesting that the anticolonial struggle supersedes the proletarian revolution as the fundamental historical movement of the period. The implications are enormous: the coming revolution was not posed in terms of capitalism versus socialism (the very last paragraph notwithstanding, but we shall return to this later), but in terms of the complete and total overthrow of a racist, colonialist system that would open the way to imagine a whole new world.

What such a world might look like is never spelled out, but that brings me to the final point about *Discourse*: it should be read as a surrealist text, perhaps even an unintended synthesis of Césaire's understanding of poetry (via Rimbaud) as revolt and his re-vision of historical materialism. For all of his Marxist criticism and Negritudian assertion, Césaire's text plumbs the depths of one's unconscious so that colonialism might be comprehended throughout the entire being. It is full of flares, full of anger, full of humor. It is not a solution or a strategy or a manual or a little red book with pithy quotes. It is a dancing flame in a bonfire.

Aimé Césaire's credentials as colonial critic are impeccable. He was born on June 26, 1913 in the small town of Basse-Pointe, Martinique where he, along with five siblings, were raised by a mother who was a dressmaker, and a father who held a post as the local tax inspector. Although their father was well educated and they shared the cultural sensibilities of the *petit bourgeois*, the Césaires nonetheless lived close to the edge of rural poverty. Aimé turned out to be a brilliant, precocious student and, at age eleven, was admitted to the Lycée Schoelcher in Fort-de-France. There he met Léon-Gontran Damas from Guiana, one of his childhood soccer-mates (who would go on to collaborate with Césaire and Senegalese poet Léopold Sédar Senghor in launching the Negritude movement). Césaire graduated from the Lycée in 1931 and took prizes in French, Latin, English, and history. Unlike many of his colleagues, he could not wait to leave home for the mother country—France. “I was not at ease in the Antillean world,” he recalled. That would change during his eight-year stay in Paris.⁵

Once settled in Paris, he enrolled at the Lycée Louis-le-Grand to prepare for the grueling entrance exams to get into the Ecole Normale Supérieure. There he met a number of like-minded intellectuals, most notably Senghor. Meeting Senghor, and another Senegalese intellectual, Ousman Soce, inspired in Césaire an interest in Africa, and their collaborations eventually gave birth to the concept of Negritude. There were other black diasporic intellectual circles in Paris at the time, notably the group surrounding the Nardal sisters of Martinique (Paulette, Jane, and Andrée), who ran a salon out of which came *La Revue du monde noir*, edited by Paulette Nardal and Léo Sajous. Another circle of Martinican students, consisting mainly of Etienne Léro, René Ménil, J.M. Monnerot, and Pierre and Simone Yoyotte, joined together to declare their

commitment to surrealism and communist revolution. In their one and only issue of *Légitime Défense*, published in 1932, they excoriated the French-speaking black bourgeoisie, attacked the servility of most West Indian literature, celebrated several black U.S. writers like Langston Hughes and Claude McKay, and denounced racism (paying special attention to the Scottsboro case). Césaire knew about the Nardal sisters' salon but found it entirely "too bourgeois" for his tastes. And though he had read *Légitime Défense*, he considered the group too assimilated: "There was nothing to distinguish them either from the French surrealists or the French Communists. In other words, their poems were colorless."⁶

Césaire, Senghor, Léon Damas, and others, were part of a different intellectual circle that centered around a journal called *L'Étudiant noir*. In its March 1935 issue, Césaire published a passionate tract against assimilation, in which he first coined the term "Negritude." It is more than ironic that at the moment Césaire's piece appeared, he was hard at work absorbing as much French and European humanities as possible in preparation for his entrance exams for the Ecole Normale Supérieure. The exams took their toll, for sure, though the psychic and emotional costs of having to imbibe the very culture Césaire publicly rejected must have exacerbated an already exhausting regimen. After completing his exams during the summer of 1935, he took a short vacation in Yugoslavia with a fellow student. While visiting the Adriatic coast, Césaire was overcome with memories of home after seeing a small island from a distance. Moved, he stayed up half the night working on a long poem about the Martinique of his youth—the land, the people, the majesty of the place. The next morning when he inquired about the little island, he was told it was called Martinska. A magical chance encounter, to say the least; the words he penned

that moonlit night were the beginnings of what would subsequently become his most famous poem of all: *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (*Notebook of a Return to My Native Land*). The next summer he did return to Martinique, but was greeted by an even greater sense of alienation. He returned to France to complete his thesis on African-American writers of the Harlem Renaissance and their representations of the South, and then, on July 10, 1937, married Suzanne Roussy, a fellow Martinican student with whom he had worked on *L'Étudiant noir*.⁷

The couple returned to Martinique in 1939 and began teaching in Fort-de-France. Joining forces with René Ménéil, Lucie Thésée, Aristide Maugée, Georges Gratiant, and others, they launched a journal called *Tropiques*. The appearance of *Tropiques* coincided with the fall of France to the fascist Vichy regime, which consequently put the colonies of Martinique, Guadeloupe, and Guiana under Vichy rule. The effect was startling; any illusions Césaire and his comrades might have harbored about colorblind French brotherhood were shattered when thousands of French sailors arrived on the island. Their racism was blatant and direct. As literary critic A. James Arnold observed, "The insensitivity of this military regime also made it difficult for Martinicans to ignore the fact that they were a colony like any other, a conclusion that the official policy of assimilation had masked somewhat. These conditions contributed to radicalizing Césaire and his friends, preparing them for a more anticolonialist posture at the end of the war."⁸ The official policy of the regime to censor *Tropiques* and interdict the publication when it was deemed subversive also hastened the group's radicalization. In a notorious letter dated May 10, 1943, Martinique's Chief of Information Services, Captain Bayle, justified interdicting *Tropiques* for being "a revolutionary review that is racial and sectarian." Bayle

accused the editors of poisoning the spirit of society, sowing hatred and ruining the morale of the country. Two days later, the editors penned a brilliant polemical response:

To Lieutenant de Vaisseau Bayle:

Sir, We have received your indictment of *Tropiques*.

“Racists,” “sectarians,” “revolutionaries,” “ingrates and traitors to the country,” “poisoners of souls,” none of these epithets really offends us. “Poisoners of Souls,” like Racine, . . . “Ingrates and traitors to our good Country,” like Zola, . . . “Revolutionaries,” like the Hugo of “Châtiments.” “Sectarians,” passionately, like Rimbaud and Lautréamont. Racists, yes. Of the racism of Toussaint L’Ouverture, of Claude McKay and Langston Hughes against that of Drumont and Hitler. As to the rest of it, don’t expect us to plead our case, or to launch into vain recriminations, or discussion. We do not speak the same language.

Signed: Aimé Césaire, Suzanne Césaire, Georges Gratiant, Aristide Maugée, René Ménéil, Lucie Thésée.⁹

But in order for *Tropiques* to survive, they had to camouflage their boldness, passing it off as a journal of West Indian folklore. Yet, despite the repressions and the ruses, *Tropiques* survived the war as one of the most important and radical surrealist publications in the world. Lasting from 1941 to 1945, the essays and poems it published (by the Césaires, René Ménéil, and others) reveal the evolution of a sophisticated anticolonial stance, as well as a vision of a postcolonial future. Theirs was a vision of freedom that drew on Modernism and a deep appreciation for pre-colonial African modes of thought and practice; it drew on Surrealism as the strategy of revolution of the mind and Marxism as revolution of the produc-

tive forces. It was an effort to carve out a position independent of all of these forces, a kind of wedding of Negritude, Marxism, and surrealism, and their collective efforts would have a profound impact on international surrealism, in general, and on André Breton, in particular. *Tropiques* also published Breton, as well as texts by Pierre Mabilille, Benjamin Peret, and other surrealists.¹⁰ In fact, it is not too much to proclaim Suzanne Césaire as one of surrealism's most original theorists. Unlike critics who boxed surrealism into narrow "avant garde" tendencies such as futurism or cubism, Suzanne Césaire linked it to broader movements such as Romanticism, socialism, and Negritude. Surrealism, she argued, was not an ideology as such but a state of mind, a "permanent readiness for the Marvelous." In a 1941 issue of *Tropiques*, she imagined new possibilities in terms that were foreign to Marxists; she called on readers to embrace "the domain of the strange, the marvelous and the fantastic, a domain scorned by people of certain inclinations. Here is the freed image, dazzling and beautiful, with a beauty that could not be more unexpected and overwhelming. Here are the poet, the painter, and the artist, presiding over the metamorphoses and the inversions of the world under the sign of hallucination and madness."¹¹ And yet, when she speaks of the domain of the Marvelous, she has her sights on the chains of colonial domination, never forgetting the crushing reality of everyday life in Martinique and the rest of the world. In "Surrealism and Us: 1943," she writes with a boldness and clarity that would come to characterize her husband's *Discourse on Colonialism*:

Thus, far from contradicting, diluting, or diverting our revolutionary attitude toward life, surrealism strengthens it. It nourishes an impatient strength within us, endlessly reinforcing the massive army of refusals.

And I am also thinking of tomorrow.

Millions of black hands will fling their terror across the furious skies of world war. Freed from a long benumbing slumber, the most disinherited of all peoples will rise up from plains of ashes.

Our surrealism will supply this rising people with a punch from its very depths. Our surrealism will enable us to finally transcend the sordid dichotomies of the present: whites/Blacks, Europeans/Africans, civilized/savages—at last rediscovering the magic power of the *mahoulis*, drawn directly from living sources. Colonial idiocy will be purified in the welder's blue flame. We shall recover our value as metal, our cutting edge of steel, our unprecedented communions.¹²

Although the influence of surrealism on Aimé Césaire has been called into question recently, the question of his surrealism is usually posed in terms of André Breton's influence on Césaire. Surrealism in this context is treated as "European thought," and like Marxism, considered foreign to non-European traditions. But this sort of "diffusionist" interpretation leaves no room for the Césaires (both Aimé and Suzanne) to be innovators of surrealism, to have introduced fresh ideas to Breton and his colleagues. I want to suggest that the Césaires not only embraced surrealism—independently of the Paris Group, I might add—but opened new vistas and contributed enormously to theorizing the "domain of the Marvelous."¹³

Aimé Césaire, after all, has never denied his surrealist leanings. As he explains in the interview appended here: "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." Surrealism, he explained, helped him to summon up powerful 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.” And, in another interview with Jacqueline Leiner, he was even more enthusiastic about Breton’s role: “Breton brought us boldness, he helped us take a strong stand. He cut short our hesitations and research. I realized that the majority of the problems I encountered had already been resolved by Breton and surrealism. I would say that my meeting with Breton was confirmation of what I had arrived at on my own. This saved us time, let us go quicker, further. The encounter was extraordinary.”¹⁴ Furthermore, even as a communist deputy in the later 1940s, Césaire continued to publish poetry for surrealist publications such as *Le Surrealism en 1947*, an exhibit catalogue edited by André Breton and Marcel Duchamp. His surrealist imagery is undeniable in two poetry collections from that era, *Les Armes miraculeuses* (Miraculous Weapons) in 1944 and *Soleil cou coupé* (Beheaded Sun) in 1948.¹⁵

Césaire’s essay, “Poetry and Cognition,” which he delivered during his seven-month visit to Haiti in 1944, and which appeared in *Tropiques* the following year, represents one of his most systematic statements on the revolutionary nature of poetry. Opening with the simple but provocative proposition that “Poetic knowledge is born in the great silence of scientific knowledge,” he then attempts to demonstrate why poetry is the only way to achieve the kind of knowledge we need to move beyond the world’s crises. Césaire’s embrace of poetry as a method of achieving clairvoyance, of obtaining the knowledge we need to move forward, is crucial for understanding *Discourse*, which appears just five years later. If we think of *Discourse* as a kind of historical prose poem against the

realities of colonialism, then perhaps we should heed Césaire's point that "What presides over the poem is not the most lucid intelligence, the sharpest sensibility or the subtlest feelings, but experience as a whole." This means everything, every history, every future, every dream, every life form, from plant to animal, every creative impulse—is plumbed from the depths of the unconscious. If poetry is, indeed, a powerful source of knowledge and revolt, one might expect Césaire to employ it as *Discourse's* sharpest weapon. And I think most readers will agree that those passages which sing, that sound the war drums, that explode spontaneously, are the most powerful sections of the essay. But those readers who are expecting a systematic critique replete with hypotheses, sufficient evidence, topic sentences, and bullet points, are bound for disappointment. Consider Césaire's third proposition regarding poetic knowledge: "Poetic knowledge is that in which man spatters the object with all of his mobilized riches."¹⁶

Surrealism is also important to the formation of *Discourse* because, like the movements that gave rise to Pan-Africanism and Negritude, it has its own independent anticolonial roots. I am not suggesting that Césaire's critique of colonialism necessarily derived from the surrealists; rather, I want to suggest that the mutual attraction engendered between Césaire (and many other black intellectuals at the time) and the surrealists can be partly explained by affinities in their position toward Empire. Up until the mid-1920s, the European surrealists were largely cultural iconoclasts who made radical pronouncements but displayed little interest in social revolution. But that would change in 1925, when the Paris Surrealist Group and the extreme left of the French Communist Party were drawn together by their support of Abd-el-Krim, leader of the Rif uprising against French colonialism in Morocco. They actively called for the

overthrow of French colonial rule. That same year, in an “Open Letter” to Paul Claudel, writer and French ambassador to Japan, the Paris group announced: “We profoundly hope that revolutions, wars, colonial insurrections, will annihilate this Western civilization whose vermin you defend even in the Orient.” Seven years later, the Paris group produced its most militant statement on the colonial question to date. Titled “Murderous Humanitarianism” (1932) and drafted mainly by René Crevel and signed by André Breton, Paul Eluard, Benjamin Peret, Yves Tanguy, and the Martinican surrealists Pierre Yoyotte and J.M. Monnerot, the document is a relentless attack on colonialism, capitalism, the clergy, the black bourgeoisie, and hypocritical liberals. They argue that the very humanism upon which the modern West was built also justified slavery, colonialism, and genocide. And they called for action, noting, “we Surrealists pronounced ourselves in favor of changing the imperialist war, in its chronic and colonial form, into a civil war. Thus we placed our energies at the disposal of the revolution, of the proletariat and its struggles, and defined our attitude towards the colonial problem, and hence towards the color question.”¹⁷

While “Murderous Humanitarianism” certainly resonates with Césaire’s critique, he had less faith in the proletariat—the European proletariat, that is—than those who signed this document. Moreover, as a product of the period following the Second World War, *Discourse* goes one step further by drawing a direct link between the logic of colonialism and the rise of fascism. Césaire provocatively points out that Europeans tolerated “Nazism before it was inflicted on them, that they absolved it, shut their eyes to it, legitimized it, because, until then, it had been applied only to non-European peoples; that they have cultivated that Nazism, that they are responsible for it, and that before engulfing the whole edifice of Western,

Christian civilization in its reddened waters, it oozes, seeps, and trickles from every crack.” So the real crime of fascism was the application to white people of colonial procedures “which until then had been reserved exclusively for the Arabs of Algeria, the ‘coolies’ of India, and the ‘niggers’ of Africa.” (p. 36) Here we must situate Césaire within a larger context of radical black intellectuals who had come to the same conclusions before the publication of *Discourse*. As Cedric Robinson argues, a group of radical black intellectuals, including W.E.B. Du Bois, C.L.R. James, George Padmore, and Oliver Cox, understood fascism not as some aberration from the march of progress, an unexpected right-wing turn, but a logical development of Western Civilization itself. They viewed fascism as a blood relative of slavery and imperialism, global systems rooted not only in capitalist political economy but racist ideologies that were already in place at the dawn of modernity. As early as 1936, Ralph Bunche, then a radical political science professor at Howard University, suggested that imperialism gave birth to fascism. “The doctrine of Fascism,” wrote Bunche, “with its extreme jingoism, its exaggerated exaltation of the state and its comic-opera glorification of race, has given a new and greater impetus to the policy of world imperialism which had conquered and subjected to systematic and ruthless exploitation virtually all of the darker populations of the earth.” Du Bois made some of the clearest statements to this effect: “I knew that Hitler and Mussolini were fighting communism, and using race prejudice to make some white people rich and all colored people poor. But it was not until later that I realized that the colonialism of Great Britain and France had exactly the same object and methods as the fascists and the Nazis were trying clearly to use.” Later, in *The World and Africa* (1947), he writes: “There was no Nazi atrocity—concentration camps, wholesale maiming and mur-

der, defilement of women or ghastly blasphemy of childhood—which Christian civilization or Europe had not long been practicing against colored folk in all parts of the world in the name of and for the defense of a Superior Race born to rule the world.”¹⁸

The very idea that there was a superior race lay at the heart of the matter, and this is why elements of *Discourse* also drew on Negritude’s impulse to recover the history of Africa’s accomplishments. Taking his cue from Leo Frobenius’s injunction that the “idea of the barbaric Negro is a European invention,”¹⁹ Césaire sets out to prove that the colonial mission to “civilize” the primitive is just a smoke screen. If anything, colonialism results in the massive destruction of whole societies—societies that not only function at a high level of sophistication and complexity, but that might offer the West valuable lessons about how we might live together and remake the modern world. Indeed, Césaire’s insistence that pre-colonial African and Asian cultures “were not only ante-capitalist . . . but also anti-capitalist,” anticipated romantic claims advanced by African nationalist leaders such as Julius Nyerere, Kenneth Kaunda, and Senghor himself, that modern Africa can establish socialism on the basis of pre-colonial village life.

Discourse was not the first place Césaire made the case for the barbaric West following the path of the civilized African. In his Introduction to Victor Schoelcher’s *Esclavage et colonisation*, he wrote:

The men they took away knew how to build houses, govern empires, erect cities, cultivate fields, mine for metals, weave cotton, forge steel.

Their religion had its own beauty, based on mystical connections with the founder of the city. Their customs were pleasing, built on unity, kindness, respect for age.

No coercion, only mutual assistance, the joy of living, a free acceptance of discipline.

Order—Earnestness—Poetry and Freedom.²⁰

Reading this passage, and the book itself, deeply affected one of Césaire's brightest students, named Frantz Fanon. It was a revelation for him to discover cities in Africa and "accounts of learned blacks." "All of that," he noted in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), "exhumed from the past, spread with its insides out, made it possible for me to find a valid historical place. The white man was wrong, I was not a primitive, not even a half-man, I belonged to a race that had already been working in gold and silver two thousand years ago."²¹

Negritude turned out to be a miraculous weapon in the struggle to overthrow the "barbaric Negro." As Cedric Robinson points out in *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, this was no easy task, since the invention of the Negro—and by extension the fabrication of whiteness and all the racial boundary policing that came with it—required "immense expenditures of psychic and intellectual energies of the West." An entire generation of "enlightened" European scholars worked hard to wipe out the cultural and intellectual contributions of Egypt and Nubia from European history, to whiten the West in order to maintain the purity of the "European" race. They also stripped all of Africa of any semblance of "civilization," using the printed page to eradicate their history and thus reduce a whole continent and its progeny to little more than beasts of burden or brutish heathens. The result is the fabrication of Europe as a discrete, racially pure entity, solely responsible for modernity, on the one hand, and the fabrication of the Negro on the other.²²

Yet, despite Césaire's construction of pre-colonial Africa as an aggregation of warm, communal societies, he never calls for a return. Unlike his old friend Senghor, Césaire's concept of Negritude is future-oriented and modern. His position in *Discourse* is unequivocal: "For us the problem is not to make a utopian and sterile attempt to repeat the past, but to go beyond. It is not a dead society that we want to revive. We leave that to those who go in for exoticism It is a new society that we must create, with the help of our brother slaves, a society rich with all the productive power of modern times, warm with all the fraternity of olden days."

Then comes the shocking next line:

"For some examples showing that this is possible, we can look to the Soviet Union."

By 1950, of course, Césaire had been a leader in the Communist Party of Martinique for about five years. On the Communist ticket, he was elected mayor of Fort-de-France as well as Deputy to the French National Assembly. Now, given everything he has written thus far, everything that he has lived, why would he hold up Stalinism circa 1950s as an exemplar of the new society? Why would a great poet and major voice of surrealism and Negritude suddenly join the Communist Party? Actually, once we consider the context of the postwar world, his decision is not shocking at all. First, remember that Communist parties worldwide, especially in Europe, were at their height immediately after the war, and Joe Stalin spent the war years as an ally of liberal democracy. Second, several leading writers and artists committed to radical social change, particularly in the Caribbean and Latin America, became Communists—including Césaire's friends, Jacques Romain, Nicolas Guillén, and René Depestre. Third, Césaire, who was reluctant to become involved in politics, discovered early on that he could be effective.

Almost as soon as he was elected, Césaire set out to change the status of Martinique, Guadeloupe, Guiana, and Réunion from colonies to “departments” within the French Republic. Departmentalization, he insisted, would put these areas on an equal footing with departments in metropolitan France. Césaire’s eloquent and passionate arguments led to a law in 1946 resulting in departmentalization. However, his dream that assimilation of the old colonies into the republic would guarantee equal rights turned out to be a pipe dream. In the end, French officials were sent to the colonies in greater numbers, often displacing some of the local black Martinican bureaucrats. By the time he drafted the popularly known third edition of *Discourse* in 1955, he had become an outspoken critic of departmentalization.²³

Thus, given Césaire’s role as Communist leader, we should not be surprised by *Discourse*’s nod to the Soviet Union, or even the final closing lines of the text, in which he names proletarian revolution as our savior. What is jarring, however, is how incongruous these statements are in relation to the rest of the text. After demonstrating that Europe is a dying civilization, one on the verge of self-destruction (in which the chickens of colonial violence and tyranny have come home to roost while the white working class looks on in silent complicity), he proposes proletarian revolution as the final solution! Yet, throughout the book, he anticipates Fanon, implying that there is nothing worth saving in Europe, that the European working class has too often joined forces with the European bourgeoisie in their support of racism, imperialism, and colonialism, and that the uprisings of the colonized might point the way forward. Ultimately, *Discourse* is a challenge to, or revision of, Marxism; it draws on surrealism and the anti-rationalist ideas of Césaire’s early poetry and explorations in Negritude. It is fairly unmaterialist in the way it cries

out for new spiritual values to emerge out of the study of what colonialism sought to destroy.

Césaire's position vis-à-vis Marxism becomes even clearer less than one year after the third edition of *Discourse* appeared. In October 1956, Césaire pens his famous letter to Maurice Thorez, Secretary General of the French Communist Party, tendering his resignation from the party. Besides its stinging rebuke of Stalinism, the heart of the letter dealt with the colonial question—not just the Party's policies toward the colonies but the colonial relationship between the metropolitan and the Martinican Communist Parties. Arguing that people of color need to exercise self-determination, he warned against treating the “colonial question . . . as a subsidiary part of some more important global matter.” Racism, in other words, cannot be subordinate to the class struggle. His letter is an even bolder, more direct assertion of third world unity than *Discourse*. Although he still identifies as a Marxist and is still open to alliances, he cautions that there “are no allies by divine right.” If following the Communist Party “pillages our most vivifying friendships, breaks the bond that weds us to other West Indian islands, severs the tie that makes us Africa's child, then I say communism has served us ill in having us trade a living brotherhood for what seems to be the coldest of all chill abstractions.” More important, Césaire's investment in a third-world revolt paving the way for a new society certainly anticipates Fanon. He had practically given up on Europe and the old humanism and its claims of universality, opting instead to re-define the “universal” in a way that did not privilege Europe. Césaire explains, “I'm not going to confine myself to some narrow particularism. But I don't intend either to become lost in a disembodied universalism . . . I have a different idea of a universal. It is a universal rich with all that is particular, rich with all the

particulars there are, the deepening of each particular, the coexistence of them all.”²⁴

What Césaire articulates in *Discourse*, and more explicitly in his letter to Thorez, distills the spirit that swept through African intellectual circles in the age of decolonization. This pervasive spirit was what Negritude was all about then; it was never a simple matter of racial essentialism. Critic, scholar, and filmmaker Manthia Diawara beautifully captures the atmosphere of the era and, implicitly, what these radical critiques of the colonial order, such as *Discourse on Colonialism*, meant to a new generation: “The idea that Negritude was bigger even than Africa, that we were part of an international moment which held the promise of universal emancipation, that our destiny coincided with the universal freedom of workers and colonized people worldwide—all this gave us a bigger and more important identity than the ones previously available to us through kinship, ethnicity, and race The awareness of our new historical mission freed us from what we regarded in those days as the archaic identities of our fathers and their religious entrapments; it freed us from race and banished our fear of the whiteness of French identity. To be labeled the saviors of humanity, when only recently we had been colonized and despised by the world, gave us a feeling of righteousness, which bred contempt for capitalism, racialism of all origins, and tribalism.”²⁵

In light of recent events—genocide in East Africa, the collapse of democracy throughout the continent, the isolation of Cuba, the overthrow of progressive movements throughout the so-called third world—some might argue that the moment of truth has already passed, that Césaire and Fanon’s predictions proved false. We’re facing an era where fools are calling for a renewal of colonialism, where descriptions of violence and instability draw on the very

colonial language of “barbarism” and “backwardness” that Césaire critiques in these pages. But this is all a mystification; the fact is, while colonialism in its formal sense might have been dismantled, the colonial state has not. Many of the problems of democracy are products of the old colonial state whose primary difference is the presence of black faces. It has to do with the rise of a new ruling class—the class Fanon warned us about—who are content with mimicking the colonial masters, whether they are the old-school British or French officers, the new jack U.S. corporate rulers, or the Stalinists whose sympathy for the “backward” countries often mirrored the very colonial discourse Césaire exposes.

As the true radicals of postcolonial theory will tell you, we are hardly in a “postcolonial” moment. The official apparatus might have been removed, but the political, economic, and cultural links established by colonial domination still remain with some alterations. *Discourse* is less concerned with the specifics of political economy than with a way of thinking. The lesson here is that colonial domination required a whole way of thinking, a discourse in which everything that is advanced, good, and civilized is defined and measured in European terms. *Discourse* calls on the world to move forward as rapidly as possible, and yet calls for the overthrow of a master class’s ideology of progress, one built on violence, destruction, genocide. Both Fanon and Césaire warn the colored world not to follow Europe’s footsteps, and not to go back to the ancient way, but to carve out a new direction altogether. What we’ve been witnessing, however (and here I must include Césaire’s own beloved Martinique, where he still holds forth as mayor of Fort-de-France) hardly reflects the imagination and vision captured in these brief pages. The same old political parties, the same armies, the same methods of labor exploitation, the same education, the same tactics

of incarceration, exiling, snuffing out artists and intellectuals who dare to imagine a radically different way of living, who dare to invent the marvelous before our very eyes.

In the end, *Discourse* was never intended to be a road map or a blueprint for revolution. It is poetry and therefore revolt. It is an act of insurrection, drawn from Césaire's own miraculous weapons, molded and shaped by his work with *Tropiques* and its challenge to the Vichy regime; by his imbibing of European culture and his sense of alienation from both France and his native land. It is a rising, a blow to the master who appears as owner and ruler, teacher and comrade. It is revolutionary graffiti painted in bold strokes across the great texts of Western Civilization; it is a hand grenade tossed with deadly accuracy, clearing the field so that we might write a new history with what's left standing. *Discourse* is hardly a dead document about a dead order. If anything, it is a call for us to plumb the depths of the imagination for a different way forward. Just as Césaire drew on Lautréamont's *Chants de Maldoror* to illuminate the cannibalistic nature of capitalism and the power of poetic knowledge, *Discourse* offers new insights into the consequences of colonialism and a model for dreaming a way out of our postcolonial predicament. While we still need to overthrow all vestiges of the old colonial order, destroying the old is just half the battle.