

Aimé Césaire, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* (1939 edition, trans. Arnold and Eshleman)

Reading and Discussion Questions

(to help you with your thinking/note-taking as you begin reading the poem)

CONTENT WARNING: Use of racial slurs/offensive language.

The English translation of Césaire's poem uses the "n-word" – about which we will have a conversation when we are all together in the classroom. I ask that all students abide by a single rule when we read texts with the "n-word": I ask that you do NOT speak this word aloud in class. We may need to refer to this word or discuss how it is used in the text. But we will not ever speak it aloud. This rule holds for students from all racial backgrounds and identities.

Questions through p. 55:

1. **Repetition** is an important element in the poem, and it becomes very clear in the first several paragraphs (really, the first several pages) that patterned repetitions, particularly of the incipit (opening line), structure the poem. "At the end of the wee hours..." (*Au bout du petit matin...*)

What quality or qualities do these patterned repetitions lend to the poem?

Do these repetitions work to foreground sameness or difference? Do they contribute to a sense of development?

2. Toward the bottom of the first page (p. 35 in the English translation), we are introduced to the image of a **throng "detoured"** from a list of different things (starting with "detoured from its true cry" [*à côté de son cri de faim*]).

Describe in your own words the impression of this throng that is created for you by the poem. Be as detailed and specific as you can in describing this impression and the poem's language.

How do you make sense of the narrator's (or the poem's) claim that the throng is both chattering and mute?

3. What ideas about education—or at least **formal education**—do you take from the words and images used to describe the "teacher in his classroom" (about 2/3 of the way down on p. 37)?

4. The Christmas scene (toward the bottom of p. 59) seems to mark a series of significant transitions in the poem.

a) The passage of time is suddenly marked on a longer cycle than that of days (the sun rising/first light): here, time is marked in months and seasons.

b) The pronoun "you" begins to be used much more regularly in the poem. (The pronoun "I" is used for the first time two paragraphs earlier.)

c) This seems to be the first scene in which joy, celebration, and pleasure are explicit themes.

How do you interpret these transitions at this point in the poem?

Questions pp. 57-85:

5. How are **ideas of “leaving”** first introduced in the poem (around p. 59 in the English translation)?

Does the narrator simply say, “I left and now I have come home,” or do ideas of leaving get expressed in a different way? How is this complexity of ideas about “leaving” linked to the poem’s larger themes?

6. In the sequence starting around p. 47, the narrator starts to **situate himself/Martinique in relation to other countries, continents, and sites**. At the top of p. 47, he describes himself as “severed from the cool oases of brotherhood.” This statement describes an experience of radical isolation. Yet the poem goes on to describe a series of historical events linking Martinique/Martinicans to both Americas (South and North), to Europe, to Africa, and to other islands in the Caribbean (e.g., Guadeloupe, Haïti).

How do you interpret the poem’s two contradictory statements about isolation and relation?

How or why might this tension between isolation and relation be important to Martinique’s history?

7. What is the role played by **references to the domestic US** in the poem?

Note, more specifically, that Florida, Virginia, Tennessee, Georgia, and Alabama are all mentioned as part of the poem’s geography. What kinds of events, and what kinds of image of Black/diasporic experience, does the narrator seem to associate with these parts of the US?

7b. What about the references to jazz, to the Lindy-hop, and to other Black forms of artistic and cultural production a few paragraphs later? Does the poem seem to you to cast Black American art and culture in a positive light?

8. What is the role played by **references to pre-colonial African empires** in the poem? What about references to Dahomey and the Amazons, Askia (the founder of Timbuktu), the mosque at Djenne?

Does the narrator (or the poem) seem to you to be embracing these symbols of ancient African greatness or is the framing more ambiguous?

Do you read the poem as clearly reaching beyond, or situating itself outside, European/Eurocentric understandings of Africa?

How does the poem’s treatment of these symbols of ancient African greatness work with (or against) the idea of a “return”?

9. The sequence starting around p. 63 marks another turning point, in which the speaker articulates a series of complex (and, to us, likely confusing) ideas about Blackness and African or Black cultures and peoples. It begins with a clear refutation of ideas about the racial inferiority of people of African descent promoted by the so-called 19th-century “sciences” of race before moving into a poetic description of **the narrator’s own racism** when encountering another Black person. There follows a sequence in which he suggests that he has been deluded, not worthy of better treatment, and not living his life properly.

How do you interpret these paragraphs in the context of the poem’s narrative arc? Is the narrator’s strategy, here, to elevate himself by contradicting Europeans’ racist views? Or is his strategy something else? Describe in your own words.

10. Note that the descriptions of African “versus” European cultures that appear on pp. 65-67 are some of the most controversial for contemporary interpreters of the poem, in that they seem to express—and even openly to endorse—**racist views about the supposed superiority of European/white over African/Black cultures**. It is easy to see, from a contemporary vantage point, how these views are racist, historically inaccurate, and grounded in Eurocentric and white supremacist ideologies.

And yet, despite their racism, inaccuracy, and ideological nature, these paragraphs play an important role in the narrative arc of the poem. How would you characterize this role?

How do ideas about weakness, poverty, and histories of oppression more generally get deployed in the poem?