INTRODUCTION
Aimé Césaire as Poet, Rebel, Statesman

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On 17 April 2008, at the age of ninety-four, the foremost Black French intellectual-cum-politician of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries passed away. Born in the northwestern fishing village of Basse Pointe on the southeastern Caribbean island of Martinique on 26 June 1913, Aimé Césaire rose from humble beginnings to become a giant in the annals of colonial and postcolonial francophone literature. As the holder of several elected offices, from city mayor of the capital of Martinique to representative in the National Assembly of France, he was also a significant political actor. He was largely responsible for the legislation that, following World War II, elevated four of France’s “Old Colonies” in the West Indies and Indian Ocean into full French states (départements). A dozen years later he founded a political party that would struggle to roll back the very assimilating, deculturalizing processes that statehood (départementalisation) unleashed.

One of the singular achievements of this towering Black figure of modest physical stature was his ability to combine these usually contradictory roles, that of reflective writer and activist politician. Yet there was a common link. For all his deference to the tight strictures of parliamentary rules and French grammatical structure, Césaire was a rebel. In how he acted to change France and in what he committed to paper, he rebelled against the tendency, sometimes overt but usually insidious, to negate the value and dignity of Black culture and Black individuals within a nation that defined itself as the world’s pioneer in equality, liberty, and fraternity.

To be sure, Césaire was more prolific as a writer than as a legislator. Among his sixteen books, plays and poetry collections are such classics as Return to My Native Home, Discourse on Colonialism, and The Tragedy of King Christophe.1 The literary and intellectual movement with which he is most often identified is
négritude, which he founded in the 1930s along with the future president of Senegal, Léopold Senghor (who died seven years before Césaire, at the age of ninety-five). Beyond his literary bequests, Césaire’s posterity is being assured by a France that granted him a state funeral, issued a postage stamp in his image, and rechristened a Parisian exurb street in his name. His legacy is also burnished by the journal you are holding in your hands.

Several of the contributors to this special issue of French Politics, Culture & Society first encountered Aimé Césaire, intellectually if not in person, during a most formative period in their lives—research for their doctoral dissertation. Through Césaire one discovered a new world—or several different ones, as suggested by the title of Susan Frutkin’s 1973 biography, Aimé Césaire: Black Between Worlds.² Thanks to a Fulbright-Hays French Government Teaching Assistantship in 1980-81, my own horizons were expanded to a part of France that was in the Caribbean, a Creole society that reluctantly acknowledged the rest of the Caribbean. In Martinique I encountered a complexity in issues of race and identity that I had not previously experienced either in New York (where I grew up) or in West Africa (where I had recently served as a Peace Corps Volunteer). By sheer chance, that year in Martinique (a leave of absence from graduate school) also coincided with French presidential elections. The
traumatic and (to me) paradoxical outcome—by rejecting candidate François Mitterrand, Martinique for the first time voted itself out of the mainstream of French national sentiment—seemed like a dissertation topic offered up on a silver platter. So, after spending most of the school year’s leisure moments investigating the island’s magnificent beaches, I frantically began to research the polity’s perplexing politics. In my interviews, one name loomed above all, among detractors and stalwarts alike: Aimé Césaire.3

It is not as a poet or playwright, then, that Césaire penetrated my consciousness. (I had read Frantz Fanon as an undergraduate, but back in the 1980s he was barely acknowledged in his native land). In contrast, present contributors James Arnold, Nathalie Etoke, Thomas Hale, Francis Abiola Irele, Ronnie Scharfman, and Kora Véron came to the study of Césaire with considerably greater literary sensibilities and training than I. Their essays here attest to the profound impact that Aimé Césaire has made in the high arts of the academy, not only in France, francophone cultures, and the Third World but in North America as well. Several of them succeeded in interviewing Césaire in person, a testament both to their tenacity and Césaire’s generosity. My doctoral research interview with Césaire, whose contents I publish here for the first time, took place in 1982.

Journal editor Herrick Chapman, whose support for this special issue I gratefully acknowledge, agreed that we should expand our scope of invitations to colleagues from Martinique itself. Fred Constant, Justin Daniel and Fred Reno, all from the Université des Antilles-Guyane, readily agreed to join this project. Such Martinico-American collaboration is itself testament to the transnational bonds to which Aimé Césaire’s oeuvres and actions gave rise. Spurred by start-up support by this journal, various units at Brown University (especially the Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies, directed by Professor James Green and then Mathew Gutmann) agreed to co-sponsor a Memorial Symposium and Exhibit in honor of Césaire. So did the Consulate of France in Boston and the Alliance Française of Providence. The Symposium, held at The Watson Institute for International Studies on 17 April 2009, was an opportunity for four of the contributors here to present at first some of their reflections on Césaire publicly. I take this opportunity to thank Professor Reda Bensmaïa, chair of the French Studies Department, for facilitating at the Memorial Symposium the participation of Professor Scharfman. Mille mercis also to Dominique Coulombe of the John Hay Library for her collaboration in putting together the exhibit of Césaire’s oeuvres, works on the French Caribbean, related objets d’art, and memorabilia.

This special issue is organized in three parts. Part One examines Césaire’s legacy—less well appreciated in North America than even in France—as an elected leader and statesman; in short, as a politician. In “Césaire is Dead: Long Live Césaire!” James Arnold winds the film of Césaire political life backwards, beginning with his distinctive state funeral (the first ever outside of metropolitan France) and focusing on one of the most important inheritances that Césaire left
the world to fight over: the everlasting meaning and value of négritude. Arnold looks especially at the last five years of Césaire’s life, the éminence grise consenting, through interviews that were broadcast and published, to put the finishing touches on his legacy. Yet, Arnold argues, Césaire’s political life did not end when he physically expired. Whether on the question of reparations for descendants of slaves or which political party is best for his mourners, politicians (ranging from local aspirants to President Sarkozy himself) lost no time in invoking Césaire to advance their own positions. Arnold subtitles brilliantly: “Long Live Césaire!”

Fred Reno asks us to reflect honestly with him about the ambivalence that emerges from any objective appraisal of Césaire’s legacy. On the one hand, Césaire typifies le nègre marron, the rebel par excellence. On the other hand, he is also le nègre départementalisé, a salaried official deeply implicated in France’s system of governance and overseas administration. Yes, he was “Papa” for ordinary Martinicans, but a distant father, a literary francophile who preferred wearing a suit and tie to donning a bakoua (the island’s signature broad-brimmed straw hat). Ultimately, for Reno, the ambivalence of Césaire’s legacy is a fruitful one, enriching in its possibilities for intellectual growth.

Justin Daniel has us consider, in tandem, the biography of Aimé Césaire the politician alongside the unfolding of the French Antilles as a political entity. Despite the more than half century of this pathway, the historical path remains incomplete. For those unfamiliar with French West Indian history, Daniel provides an easily accessible guide, examining Césaire’s engagement in Martinican politics in three phases: departmentalist (1946-1956), autonomist (1956-1981), and revisionist (1981-2001). Daniel leaves us—as did Césaire—with the enduring tension between a unique cultural identity and a juridical-political framework inadequate for expressing it.

From another political science perspective, Fred Constant hones in on seven leadership traits that Césaire exemplified. Rhetorical mastery, uncompromising principles, prophetic vision, universalizing nationalism, unflinching willpower, democratizing faith, and irrepressible empathy: through these combined qualities Césaire made his political mark on his native island and on the decolonizing world. By dissecting Césaire’s genius in such a way, Constant provides us with tools that might help us identify other, Césaire-like leaders.

Part Two brings us back in history to three key periods in Césaire’s life. Tyler Stovall repositions Césaire as a young intellectual in France, an active participant in the creation of a “Black Paris.” Césaire’s conscience-clanging break with the French Communist Party is the subject of Thomas Hale’s and Kora Véron’s collaborative research. With my interview of Césaire, we return to the halcyon days of hope that characterized the Martinican Left following the election of François Mitterrand and the Socialists’ return to power in France. All three moments reveal aspects of Césaire’s thought that would characterize his worldview for the rest of his life.

Finally, we have reflections on Césaire, the master poet. Nathalie Etoke is disarmingly frank about the difficulties that Césaire initially presented her, as
a young *lycéenne* in Africa. It is through reading Fanon, in France, that she rediscovered Césaire and experienced a second—more fortuitous—wave of shock. Far from traumatizing, *this* Césaire was practically therapeutic, saving her from an incipient and “arrogant Afrocentrism” that other readings and reflections had begun to impart. Etoke’s relative youth (she was born in 1977, sixty-four years after Césaire) attests to the enduring, trans-generational impact that we can expect Césaire to have in the future.

Abiola Irele begins by invoking Césaire’s own Africanity, first via his friendship with Léopold Senghor and then through the influence he had on younger African poets (Tchikaya U Tamsi, Jean Baptiste Tati-Loutard, Lamine Sall, to name but three.) It is in the francophone Caribbean, however, that Césaire’s literary legacy has been the “most durable” (e.g., Frantz Fanon, René Depestre, Édouard Glissant, Patrick Chamoiseau, Raphaël Confiant, and Jean Bernabé). Through Derek Walcott, Kamau Brathwaite, and Lansana Sekou one can detect Césaire’s “far-reaching resonance” among anglophone Caribbean poets as well.

It is fitting that the last of our reflective homages, that of Ronnie Scharfman, would itself conclude with an original poem on “Rereading Aimé Césaire Thirty Years On.” Like James Arnold, who leads off this collection, Scharfman is a veteran scholar of Césaire poetics. Her ode to *bien-aimé* Aimé poignantly encapsulates, and translates into poetry, the critical prose that she and others have used to explain the power of Césaire’s pen.

Scharfman’s poetic acknowledgment of Césaire’s liberating power (“Words … so foreign, so familiar … [s]ummoned a timid student [t]hrough the cosmic labyrinth [o]f self, compelled [i]nto the light of liberation”) helps explain how it is that, twenty years after my first interview with Césaire, I was confident that his sensitivity about minority-hood and identity was such that I could comfortably approach him, in a second interview, about my own questions, as a Jew, in relation to Martinique. The presence of Jews and Judaism in Martinique is a delicate question in the historiography and sociology of the island, one usually skirted by local scholars. A new Jewish community had established itself since the 1960s, the one during the ancien régime having technically ended with Louis XIV’s expulsion order of 1683. During my sabbatical at UAG-Schoelcher, the Second Intifada of 2000-1 had begun to reverberate even in far-off Martinique, albeit to a much lesser extent than in the Metropole. It would not be the first time that a handful of Martinican activists would conflate anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism, with an even smaller number of French West Indian scholars debunking the polemic.

The symbol of the Jew had long been an integral part of Césaire’s writing. In the *Cahier d’un Retour au Pays Natal* (*Return to My Native Land*), Césaire extends his empathy for racial suffering thus:

> the famine-man, the insult-man, the torture-man…

> one can at any moment seize, beat up or kill—yes really kill him—
without having to account to anybody,
without having to excuse oneself to anyone.
a jew-man,
a pogrom-man
a little tyke,
a bum

Castigating the alienation, helplessness, and statelessness of the French West Indian, the Cahier invokes “wild” comparisons for his people and diasporic solutions as an individual:

To leave.
As there are hyena-men and leopard-men,
I would be a jew-man…

Césaire spoke vividly of his Jewish professors when he was a lycéen in Paris: “It was in France that I first heard about Jews, comme une espèce un peu à part [as a group set apart somewhat]. In Martinique, nobody talked about Jews.” Since the 1980s, most references to Jews in the local press have been in the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict, and not flattering. But Césaire’s perspective, as always, was nuanced: “We hear on the radio that Israelis are racist,” said Césaire, “as if they are fighting the Arabs out of racism. This confuses the matter. They are fighting the Arabs because they have the sentiment, whether right or wrong, that the new state they have constructed—the state called ‘Jewish’—is threatened in its very existence.”

“It is not that I am especially for the Israelis,” reflected the man whose brother was killed in a Palestinian terrorist explosion aboard an airliner, “but it’s necessary to put the matter justly. What motivates them is not racism but nationalism—it’s not the same thing … The roots [of the conflict] are historic, not racial … To understand Israel, you have to study its history. You have to read the Bible, the Old Testament … Israel’s essential motivation is its will to exist. It is anguished to see its future threatened.” Fear of his own people’s disappearance, expressed in “Metaphysical Considerations Can Come Later…” (my interview with Césaire, published in this journal issue), undoubtedly honed Césaire’s Semitic empathies.

The contributions here demonstrate the range of empathy that Césaire projected, and the great intellectual and professional influence he had on those whom he touched, from the French Caribbean to West Africa to North America. Three of the contributors (Etoke, Reno, and Scharfman) explicitly took me up on my invitational option also to share, in print, the personal impact that Césaire has had on their lives and careers. We are all enriched by the result.

Césaire’s influence on France and the francophone world is well-known. This collection acknowledges his profound reach within the United States and to this journal’s readers abroad.
Notes


3. The ambivalent emotions that Césaire stirred among politically engaged Martini- cans would later be summed up in a quote referring simultaneously to his electoral ambitions despite encroaching poor health: “It is incredible ... We are prisoners of this man. For, even revolted [by the idea] of consigning the history of this country in the hands of a thrombosis clot ... we will go, again, to vote for him” (*Le Naïf* 56 [June 1995]). After Césaire’s death, another Martinican writer took to task erstwhile critics (most prominently, Raphaël Confiant, a co-founder of the movement of Créolité that aimed to supersede *nègritude*) for their unseemly post-mortem hagiography (Joseph Jos, “Césaire Business, *Spécial Aimé Césaire,*” Sept Magazine 1610, 17-28 July 2008). Jos also lampooned “Césairolatres” for their sycophancy or opportunism (i.e., Metropolitan French) for whom every French West Indian writer is a “son of Césaire.” From the other side of the globe, prominent Mauritian author Dev Virahswamy characterized Césaire as “le nègre dans la vitrine francophone à la sauce franco-française” (personal communication, 10 August 2008).


8. George Césaire, a noted pharmacologist, was heading for an international conference in Israel on 20 February 1970, when his plane exploded after a layover in Europe.