

MARTINSKA/MARTINIQUE.

AIMÉ CÉSAIRE *RETURN TO MY NATIVE LAND*

In the summer of 1935, a young black man from Martinique, Aimé Césaire, traveled to Yugoslavia at the invitation of his dear and close friend Petar Guberina. It was his first travel outside France since his arrival in Paris in 1931, to study at the prestigious Lycée Saint-Louis. Césaire, then only twenty-two, found there the source of inspiration for the first opus, *Return to My Native Land*, of his oeuvre as a great anticolonial poet, writer, and political leader.

It was during that summer that he started to write his magnificent poem *Return to My Native Land*. It was in the city of Šibenik that this descendant of African slaves, this colonized of the French colonial empire, found his inspiration.

Sitting on his first day in Šibenik in front of a window facing the sea, he reflected, writing in a student notebook, on his native island, slavery, the fact of being Black, colonialism and anti-Black racism.

However, the genesis and the itinerary of the writing of *Return to My Native Land*—from Yugoslavia to Martinique, Martinique to France—has for a long time been barely acknowledged and never fully analyzed. Césaire's friendship with Guberina is often told in passing. Much more is made of his friendship with the Senegalese poet and political leader Léopold Sedar Senghor, even though Césaire and Guberina remained in contact until Césaire's death. Many

critics look at *Return to My Native land* in relation to the binary space France/Martinique: distance from Martinique had engendered nostalgia and fostered a notion of authenticity. But the ways in which Césaire retold the starting point of his writing is not so much a tale of nostalgia and authenticity, but rather of the creative tension triggered by randomness, by the unexpected. His memories of the summer of 1935 are joyous, a respite from Paris where he had discovered freedom but not the capacity to be at ease with himself, to drop the guarded posture of a young black colonized man thrown into the capital of the empire.

At the end of daybreak burgeoning
with frail coves,
the hungry Antilles, the Antilles pitted
with smallpox,
the Antilles dynamited by alcohol,
stranded in the mud of this bay,
in the dust of this town sinisterly stranded.

Friendship and Creativity

Césaire's meeting with Petar Guberina was pure serendipity. At the beginning of the summer of 1935, Césaire went to the Comédie Française. After the show, with no money in his pocket, he chose to walk home. Arriving at Porte d'Orléans, quite a walk from the Place du Palais Royal where the Comédie Française stands, he met some young men he knew. Among them, he noticed a "very good-looking guy, almost black, a guy who looked black, with very dark hair." His name was Petar Guberina and he was from

Yugoslavia. It was friendship "at first sight," Césaire remembered later. Petar became Pierrot, the affectionate form of Pierre (Petar) in French. They had long conversations during which they shared the history of their respective countries. Though neither Césaire nor Guberina recounted their conversations in detail, it is logical to presume that Césaire talked about slavery and colonialism and that the deep friendship that resulted was partly built on a shared understanding of oppression and emancipation.

When the summer vacation arrived, Guberina went back to his hometown, Šibenik, from which he wrote to Césaire telling him to join him right away. He knew Césaire was lonely in Paris, with no friends and no money. Traveling by train to Šibenik, Césaire was carried away by the beauty of the Dalmatian coast, which reminded him of a place in Martinique, Carbet. Taken to his room was on the first floor of the Guberina family home, he opened the window and asked Petar:

"What a magnificent scenery! Pierrot, what is the name of the small island that we see?"

"Martinska," Guberina answered.

"Martiniska!" Césaire cried.

"Translated into French, it means the island of Saint-Martin, but it is Martinique!" He said later

"I went to Yugoslavia. What did I find? Martinique, where I had not been in five years. I had no money to go to Martinique, but I had some to arrive in Martiniska! That night, I sat in front of the window and started to write *Return to My Native Land*." It seems though that there is not even an island with that name around Šibenik, but a bay on a peninsula,

(<http://www.worldcam.pl/mapa/8645/fr>), which underlines the power of the imagination. Césaire went to Yugoslavia and found Martinique. That was enough.

Césaire felt safe in Guberina's home. In the fall of 1936 Césaire went back to Martinique and back to Paris where he finished his long poem. *Return to My Native Land* was first published in 1939 in the communist journal *Volontés*.

Serendipity, Detour and Anticolonialism

If meeting Petar Guberina was an act of serendipity, writing his opus in Šibenik was another act of serendipity. The term was coined in 1754 by Horace Walpole, after hearing the Persian story of *The Three Princes of Serendip* (from Persian Sarandip—or Sri Lanka—from Arabic Sarandib) which told the story of three princes sent by their father to a prolonged journey so that they can acquire empirical knowledge. The princes proved their sagacity along their journey. Walpole transformed this sagacity into the capacity for discovering, inventing, creating or imagining something new without having looked for it. It is the capacity to seize the fleeting moment of the unexpected. Thus, discovering is also about programming chance, happenstance, and randomness. In other words, you do not reach a goal by plotting a course for it. You have to set out in good faith for elsewhere and lose your bearings by happenstance. Reality is not law-governed.

Césaire went to Yugoslavia without a plan, except to spend the summer with a close friend and

escape his solitude in Paris. He "found" Martinique, but without expecting to, by the sheer power of his memory triggered by the scenery of the Dalmatian coast, by the light and smell of summer. Writing was made possible after five years in Paris, far from his native land, thanks to the safety of friendship and the warm welcome to a young black man by a Yugoslav family. Even the terror of an old peasant woman surprised by the sudden appearance of a young black man on a path did not strike Césaire as being hostile, unlike the racist remarks directed at him in Paris. He understood that she could have been dumbfounded by his apparition and that her terror was caused not by hostility but by sheer surprise.

It is also possible that starting to write *Return to My Native Land* in Šibenik was also the result of what Edouard Glissant has called the detour. Shifting focus away from "origins" (or the loss thereof), Glissant points to the painful but necessary reconstruction of memory. Césaire's travel in the summer of 1935 took him to a country whose language, culture, and history he did not know, but which might have allowed him to lift the weight imposed by the confrontational relation with France. Away from the colonial power, away from Martinique, the native land could be remembered. With no French present, either in front of him or as a ghostly warden, Césaire could write about Martinique's ugly side, about its assimilated petty bourgeoisie for which he would later declare his full contempt, about the destructive aspect of slavery. He could write about his love for the "Nègres," for his people. He could recall the blood and the deaths, "So much blood in my memory! In my memory are lagoons

/ They are covered with death's-heads / They are not covered with water lilies/ In my memory are lagoons." And he could chant a possible future, of solidarity among the oppressed.

As there are hyena-men and panther-men,
I would be a jew-man
a Kaffir-man
a Hindu-man-from-Calcutta
a Harlem-man-who-doesn't-vote
the famine-man, the insult-man,
the torture man you can grab anytime,
beat up, kill—
no joke, kill—without having to account
to anyone,
without having to make excuses to anyone
a jew-man
a pogrom-man
a puppy
a beggar

Return to My Native Land speaks for transnational link. The summer scenery and smell of a city in Yugoslavia, the history and scenery of a French colony where Césaire's ancestors had been enslaved... It brings forth a multifarious and diverse vision of colonial creativity that impels us to revise conceptual systems based on the notions of roots, fixity and linearity.

Return to My Native Land was conceived in a "periphery" of Europe, Yugoslavia, about a "periphery" of the French colonial empire. It is a text palimpsest. Anticolonial texts are palimpsests, they show

successive episodes of deposition, layers of activity, that remain superimposed one upon the other without loss of evidence.

Return to My Native Land is a cry against slavery "We the vomit of slave ships / We the venery of the Calabars," against colonialism, its destructive impulse, and about the transnational routes of solidarity.

During the summer of 1935, Peter Guberina offered a refuge to his black friend. A gesture of friendship that led to the writing of one of the greatest texts against colonialism. Césaire experienced a moment of freedom from the French gaze, from the injunction of becoming what he did not want to become, a man who had rejected his past. James Baldwin wrote "One cannot claim the birthright without accepting the inheritance". Césaire's birthright was vast, connecting him to African women and men who had been enslaved, to all the oppressed peoples, to an old peasant woman near Šibenik, and to his friend, Petar, from Yugoslavia.

II

EMBEDDED MEMORIES POSTCOLONIAL HISTORY IS GLOBAL HISTORY

I grew up in a communist, anticolonialist, and feminist family in Reunion Island, a French colony in the Indian Ocean, which became a French department in 1946. My father was among the founders of the Communist Party of Reunion Island in 1959. My paternal grandfather, who had lived for 32 years in Asia where he worked as an engineer, a doctor and a diplomat, was the founder of Reunion Communist Federation

and of the Workers' Federation. My mother, who was French, was an active feminist and journalist in the communist newspaper.

Early on, I observed the legacies of colonial slavery and anti-Black racism, the power of repressive State policies to instill fear and consent to one's own dependency, the price one pays if one resists, the conditions asked for being protected as a woman or a poor person (in other words, living by the rules enacted by those who declare to be your protectors), and quite early, I lost the illusion that the oppressed share a spontaneous solidarity. I experienced what [Antonio] Gramsci called the fragmentation of the subalterns. I had to understand why people did not fight back, and I could not explain everything with false consciousness or alienation.

As a child, I witnessed the searches by the police at six in the morning, when sleep is still there. We were taught to be on guard, we had been warned that they could plant something to accuse my parents of subversion against the State. My father had been accused of "offense to national security." I witnessed people being beaten, the determination of the post-colonial French power to crush any resistance to a program of assimilation to Frenchness.

There was only one connection that made sense, the connection to France, the connection with the "country of origins" of one's ancestors was accepted as long as it was within the frame of religion or "culture."

The Cold War was present in the local repressive policies against communists, the injunction to express loudly one's loyalty to France and the

"free world," the association of anyone fighting against totalitarian and imperialist regimes (Apartheid, Mozambique, Angola, Vietnam...) with "Moscow," the censorship, the rivalry between Moscow and Washington to install military bases in the Indian Ocean, to protect the routes of oil, to contain people's aspirations. Tito was a familiar name at home, along with Nehru, Dos Santos, Che Guevara...

I was taught another cartography, the cartography of struggles, of time and space that were not those of the North/South axis, of European imperialisms, but of South/South exchanges, of the encounters of the "wretched of the earth" fighting for more justice.

Alternative cartographies of connections, exchanges and encounters that question the borders of the Nation-State and suggest routes and trajectories of people, ideas, music, ideals.

III

CONFLICTING LEGACIES OF THE NON-ALIGNED MOVEMENT

The first Conference of Non-Aligned Heads of State, at which twenty-five countries were represented, was convened in Belgrade, in September 1961, largely through the initiative of Yugoslav President Tito. He had expressed concern that an accelerating arms race might result in a war between the Soviet Union and the U.S. In May, negotiations had started between the French government and the Algerian nationalists who had been supported by many countries that

would be present at the September meeting, among them Yugoslavia.

The conference was preceded by the conference held in Bandung on April 18–24, 1955, which gathered twenty-nine Heads of States belonging to the first post-colonial generation of leaders. The Non-Aligned Movement sought to build a multipolar world based on respect, equity and justice.

The writer Richard Wright recalled the headline on Bandung from the newspaper he had been sifting through in Paris in 1955: "Twenty-nine free and independent nations of Asia and Africa are meeting in Bandung, Indonesia, to discuss 'racialism and colonialism'." He decided to go. In his report, *The Color Curtain* (1956), he wrote: "The despised, the insulted, the hurt, the dispossessed—in short, the underdogs of the human race were meeting. Here were class and racial and religious consciousness on a global scale. Who had thought of organizing such a meeting? And what had these nations in common? Nothing, it seemed to me, but what their past relationship to the Western world had made them feel. This meeting of the rejected was in itself a kind of judgment upon that Western world! ... They were getting a new sense of themselves, getting used to new roles and new identities. Imperialism was dead here, and as long as they could maintain their unity, organize and conduct international conferences, there would be no return of imperialism."

The most important objectives of the 1961 meeting of the Non-Aligned Countries in Belgrade included ending of imperialism and colonialism, promotion of international peace and security and

disarmament, creation of a New International Economic Order, ending racism and racial discrimination, and ending information imperialism. In the new era of land grabs, of vast spoliation of resources, of new forms of dispossession, forms of bondage, global traffic in domestic labor, of denial of rights, when the Wretched of the Earth are now found in the North, South, East and West, these ideals still resonate. But the new politics of colonization also require new politics of decolonization.

The model of the eighteenth/nineteenth-century European colonization has become hegemonic. It is still there in new forms, in new configurations but with the same Promethean ideology of mastering all living things, of indexing the entire world, animals, plants, humans... ; the belief in infinite progress, and the refusal to consider the world as a living entity.

IV

DECOLONIZING EUROPE

Among the legacies of imperialism is the mutilated and mutilating cartography of Europe. Mutilated because it excludes from its space entire groups and territories that have contributed to its making. Mutilating because it ignores the memories and histories of its "Others."

What kind of cartography appears when we try to establish connectivity, intersections between events? Certainly not a linear story, but the history of State experimentation with targeting groups (Rroms, Muslims...) for discrimination and racialization.

Let us think about the daily politics of humiliation these groups experience and what they produce: hatred, anger, loss of self-esteem, frustration. The myriad ways in which a woman, a man is humiliated daily. Broken lives, broken bones, broken hearts, women's and men's capacities totally negated, their opinions matter not.

Let us think about the benefits of hate: "I imagine one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense, once hate is gone, they will be forced to deal with pain," James Baldwin wrote. He said, "We must not allow their fear to control us, and, indeed, we must not allow it to control them. Rather, we should attempt to release them from their panic and their unadmitted sorrow."¹ If we look at current politics of fear ravaging Europe today—fear of immigrants, of Islam, of "Roma," of LGBT—what could we do to release Europeans from their panic and *unadmitted sorrow*? The fear of imagined suffering controlling one's life echoes what [Sigmund] Freud said about pain: "The process of bringing this unconscious material to light is associated with pain, and because of this pain the patient again and again rejects it." In other words, xenophobic attitudes represent an unconscious tradeoff in exchange for the sufferer being spared other, experientially worse, displeasures.

To create new politics of decolonization, a struggle against power and its formidable machine of consent is necessary.

1. *The Cross of Redemption* (New York: Vintage, 2011), p. 272.