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# Beyond the Great Camouflage: Haiti in Suzanne Césaire's Politics and Poetics of Liberation

Annette K. Joseph-Gabriel

Suzanne Césaire's legacy in Caribbean literature is characterized by an uneasy combination of homage and erasure. She is present in a small but growing body of scholarship that seeks to establish her as an important contributor to global twentieth-century literary and cultural movements. T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting's examination of Césaire's contributions to Negritude, Jennifer Wilks's analysis of her modernist impulses, and Kara Rabbitt's situating of Césaire's work in the pantheon of Caribbean literature, have all laid the groundwork for locating Césaire as a key figure in black internationalist thought.<sup>1</sup> Yet it is undeniable too that the paucity of her works—seven essays published between 1941 and 1945<sup>2</sup>—means that her memory has been overshadowed by that of her illustrious and prolific husband, Aimé. It might

1 See T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, *Negritude Women* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002); Jennifer M. Wilks, *Race, Gender, and Comparative Black Modernism: Suzanne Lacascade, Marita Bonner, Suzanne Césaire, Dorothy West* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008); and Kara M. Rabbitt, "The Geography of Identity in Suzanne Césaire's 'Le Grand Camouflage,'" *Research in African Literatures* 39, no. 3 (2008): 121–31, and "In Search of the Missing Mother: Suzanne Césaire, Martiniquaise," *Research in African Literatures* 44, no. 1 (2013): 36–54. All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

2 "Léo Frobenius et le problème des civilisations" ("Leo Frobenius and the Problem of Civilizations"), *Tropiques* 1 (1941); "Alain et l'esthétique" ("Alain and Esthetics"), *Tropiques* 2 (1941); "André Breton, poète . . ." ("André Breton, Poet"), *Tropiques* 3 (1941); "Misère d'une poésie" ("Poetic Destitution"), *Tropiques* 4 (1942); "Malaise d'une civilisation" ("The Malaise of a Civilization"), *Tropiques* 5 (1942); "1943: Le surréalisme et nous" ("1943: Surrealism and Us"), *Tropiques* 8–9 (1943); "Le grand camouflage" ("The Great Camouflage"), *Tropiques* 13–14 (1945).

seem, then, after “the ceding of Suzanne Césaire to the surrealist camp”<sup>3</sup> and her recuperation as a significant contributor to Negritude and black modernism, that there is little left to say about the “other” Césaire and her seven short essays.

Yet despite the important headway made in existing scholarship, Césaire's life and work raise more questions than answers. Even biographical information that would ordinarily be easily verifiable—such as her birthplace and employment history—becomes elusive.<sup>4</sup> The goal of this essay is not to offer a corrective, definitive biography of Césaire. Rather, my objective is to resituate her work in the context of a particularly elusive chapter of her life—her five-month stay in Haiti in 1944 with her husband. Given the well-documented influence of Haiti on Aimé's articulation of Negritude, how did Suzanne's time on the island impact her understanding of Caribbean identity? What role did she play in the political upheaval that followed her departure from Haiti?

Grappling with these questions requires foregrounding the political dimensions of Césaire's writings during World War II with a specific focus on her engagement with Haiti. There are still more questions than answers surrounding her work, for while her son Marc generously granted permission to view some of her personal letters cited here, he remained reluctant to share any information on her life. The biographical gaps therefore urge us to focus not only on her published works, as scholars have done to date, but also on her unpublished writings: rich, personal correspondence with intellectuals such as André Breton, Henri Seyrig, and Yassu Gauclère. These archival discoveries reveal her contributions to the overthrow of Haitian president Elie Lescot in 1946, in that hopeful and heady time when artists and writers led what has been called the “other Haitian Revolution.” Her private letters served as a more secure space in which to articulate her desire for a Caribbean cultural renaissance than the highly scrutinized pages of *Tropiques* would allow in the years of Vichy censorship.

Born in Martinique in 1915, Suzanne Roussi studied philosophy in France in the 1930s, where she met and married Aimé Césaire in 1937. In 1939, with war looming on the horizon, the couple returned to Martinique and would work in close collaboration until 1945. Notably, they cofounded the journal *Tropiques* with René Mênil, Lucie Thésée, and Aristide Maugée. After *Tropiques*, Césaire moved to Paris, where she taught French literature at the Collège Saint Estienne. She worked with her students to contribute to the school's renowned annual journal *Les Cahiers d'Estienne* in 1949.<sup>5</sup> She suffered from decades of ill health until her death in 1966, a situation that often limited the Césaires' possibilities for travel and employment. Notably, Aimé turned down French archaeologist Henri Seyrig's offer of employment as a cultural

3 Sharpley-Whiting, *Negritude Women*, 17.

4 It is unclear whether Césaire was born in Trois Ilets, as Sharpley-Whiting and Rabbitt note, or in Rivière Salée, as Wilks states. Did she teach alongside Aimé at the prestigious Lycée Schœlcher, as the scholars above state? Or rather at the markedly different vocational *lycée technique* Bellevue, as indicated in Roger Toumson's biography of Aimé Césaire as well as in archival documents made available by the Banque numérique des patrimoines martiniquais? See Roger Toumson, *Aimé Césaire: Le Nègre inconsolé; Biographie* (Châteauneuf-le-Rouge: Vents d'ailleurs, 2002); and Banque numérique des patrimoines martiniquais, “Césaire au fil des mois,” 30 November 2013, [www.patrimoines-martinique.org/?id=109](http://www.patrimoines-martinique.org/?id=109).

5 See *Les Cahiers d'Estienne* 15 (1949): n.p.

attaché in Algeria, citing Suzanne's ill health: "Pour ce qui est de la santé de ma femme, je vous en parlerai franchement. Un pneumothorax qui ne marche plus."<sup>6</sup> This description says less about Suzanne's health—a pneumothorax is itself a condition rather than a part of the body that can malfunction—and more about the overwhelming nature of her illness captured here in an incomprehensible diagnosis. Aimé also confesses to financial difficulties due to the tenuous nature of Suzanne's employment since "elle n'est pas fonctionnaire titulaire."<sup>7</sup> These details of Suzanne's life underline the great risk she took in producing work that was as politically charged as it was poetically engaged. Her vocal essays in *Tropiques*, her bold letter to Vichy representative Lieutenant Bayle on his censorship of the journal, and her well-documented habit of, in protest of Vichy's fascism, skipping her school's ritual of singing "La Marseillaise," were all dangerous acts whose consequences could quickly become a matter of life and death when taken in light of her ill health.

Throughout her life, Césaire remained a visionary and, in her writing, articulated an awareness of the complexity of Caribbean identity that was far ahead of her time. Sharpley-Whiting describes Césaire's "liberatory poetics" as the poet's ability to represent not just the beauty of the Martinican landscape but also "the island's history, pain, and exploitation."<sup>8</sup> Maryse Condé has in turn shown that Césaire was interested more in the Antilles as a space for the convergence of complex, multicultural influences and less in a return to an idealized African past as proposed by other Negritude writers.<sup>9</sup> This Caribbean focus would only come to be integrated into Antillean literary theory decades later in the works of Edouard Glissant, Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphaël Confiant.

Placing Césaire's unpublished writings alongside her published essays highlights the political rigor of her work and situates Haiti as central to the evolution of her focus from the relationship between Martinique and France to that between Martinique and the rest of the Caribbean. I argue that Césaire practiced a joint politics and poetics of liberation that expanded to become Pan-Caribbean in scope during her time in Haiti. I define her politics of liberation in the context of World War II: her focus on freedom from the oppressive policies of Vichy occupation and her dissident thinking and scathing attacks on fascism and racism were camouflaged as reviews of literary and ethnological studies in order to escape censorship. She also espoused a poetics that imagines authentic Antillean art forms that were no longer tethered to French literary representations of Martinique as an idyllic tropical paradise and consequently were able to articulate and represent the realities of the Caribbean. By examining Césaire's writing before, during, and after her time in Haiti, I will demonstrate the island's

6 "Concerning my wife's health, I will be frank. A pneumothorax that no longer works." Aimé Césaire, letter to Henri Seyrig, 16 July 1944, 1, Henri Seyrig, received letters, microfilm, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

7 "She is not a civil servant on a permanent contract." *Ibid.*

8 Sharpley-Whiting, *Negritude Women*, 97, 102.

9 See Maryse Condé, "Unheard Voice: Suzanne Césaire and the Construct of a Caribbean Identity," in Adele S. Newson Horst and Linda Strong-Leek, eds., *Winds of Change: The Transforming Voices of Caribbean Women Writers and Scholars* (New York: Peter Lang, 1998), 61–66.

tremendous influence in shifting her focus from the colonial relationship between Martinique and France to the Caribbean archipelago as a generative space within which an Antillean cultural and political renaissance could take place.

### Before Haiti: Literary and Political Liberation in Martinique

Vichy rule brought significant political changes to Martinique. The collaborationist government that ruled France from 1940 to 1943 appointed colonial officials sympathetic to the draconian laws of Marshal Philippe Pétain's National Revolution. As *vieilles colonies* (old colonies), Martinique and Guadeloupe had a long history of political engagement and representation in France, dating back to the 1848 abolition of slavery. Under Admiral Georges Robert, Vichy's high commissioner to the French Antilles, these limited freedoms disappeared.<sup>10</sup> Robert revoked universal male suffrage and replaced black mayors with white creole businessmen. He also implemented new measures increasing surveillance and curtailing movement. Arbitrary detention and deportation awaited dissenters. For many, the new political climate, with its attendant racial, social, and cultural oppression, bore a startling resemblance to slavery.<sup>11</sup> Pétain issued a call for obedience in a radio broadcast specifically addressed to the French colonies on 19 September 1942: "Je reste votre guide. Vous n'avez qu'un seul devoir: obéir. Vous n'avez qu'un seul gouvernement: celui à qui j'ai donné le pouvoir de gouverner. Vous n'avez qu'une patrie, que j'incarne: La France."<sup>12</sup> Any form of dissenting public expression at this time was therefore inherently a subversive political act.

It was into this setting of political repression that *Tropiques* was born, and it was in this context of truncated freedoms that Suzanne Césaire would hone the skills of literary evasion that allowed her to publish subversive essays. Much has been said about Césaire's fiery open letter to Lieutenant Bayle in response to his censorship and ultimate ban of the journal.<sup>13</sup> Yet open condemnation of political and artistic repression was not Suzanne Césaire's only strategy of resistance. In a private letter to French writer Yassu Gauclère, written from Haiti in 1944, she describes this period as "[le] moment où l'intolérable domination de Vichy exigeait l'évasion sous toutes ses formes."<sup>14</sup> "The Great Camouflage" is apt both as the title of her final essay and as a description of her entire body of work.<sup>15</sup> At a time when political evasion

10 See Eric Thomas Jennings, *Vichy in the Tropics: Pétain's National Revolution in Madagascar, Guadeloupe, and Indochina, 1940–1944* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001).

11 *Ibid.*, 89.

12 "I remain your guide. You have only one duty: to obey. You have only one government: that to which I have given the power to govern. You have only one fatherland, that which I embody: France." "Le Maréchal de France, chef de l'Etat s'est adressé aux Français," *Le Petit Marseillais*, 20 November 1942, 1.

13 See, for example, Romuald Fonkoua, *Aimé Césaire: 1913–2008* (Paris: Perrin, 2010); and Sharpley-Whiting, *Négritude Women*, 90.

14 "The moment when the intolerable domination of Vichy necessitated evasion in all its forms." Suzanne Césaire, letter to Yassu Gauclère, 25 July 1944, 3, Fonds Etiemble, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

15 See Suzanne Césaire, *Le grand camouflage: Ecrits de dissidence, 1941–1945*, ed. Daniel Maximin (Paris: Seuil, 2009); translated by Keith L. Walker as *The Great Camouflage: Writings of Dissent (1941–1945)* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2012). All quotes from Césaire's *Tropiques* essays are from these editions.

meant a steady stream of Martinican dissidents to Dominica and then on to New York to join de Gaulle's Free French Forces, Césaire employed literary evasion, that is, the skillful deployment of language that allowed her to publicly express her politics and poetics of liberation.

For Césaire, liberating Martinique required addressing cultural assimilation, the result of centuries-old racist colonial policies. In "Malaise d'une civilisation," she cites eighteenth-century ordinances that sought to stifle upward class mobility for slaves and *gens de couleur* (free people of color) by regulating dress and access to nonagricultural work. She argues that by barring slaves' entry into the middle and upper classes, the colonial status quo ultimately made freedom synonymous with assimilation into these classes: "On comprendra dès lors que le but essentiel pour l'homme de couleur soit devenu l'assimilation. Et qu'avec une force redoutable s'opère en son esprit la désastreuse confusion: *libération égale assimilation*."<sup>16</sup> Equating freedom with assimilation results in acute alienation particularly among middle-class Martinicans, a profound schism in the "moi collectif du peuple martiniquais."<sup>17</sup> In art, this alienation manifests itself in the dearth of poetry that truly captures a Martinican collective consciousness. Whereas folklore is a repository of rich images that convey the beauty and suffering of Martinique, literature produced by the bourgeoisie continues to mimic French literary representations of the island as an idyllic paradise. Césaire describes this literary style, popularized by Parnassian poets such as Leconte de Lisle and José-Maria de Heredia, as literary tourism that focused on descriptions of tropical fauna and flora and remained purposefully blind to the totality of Caribbean life.<sup>18</sup>

In order to repair this schism between the lived reality of Martinicans and artistic representations of the island, Césaire argues, it is important to fully understand and embrace Martinican cultural identity. Césaire reveals in a letter from Haiti that she read German ethnologist Leo Frobenius's *Histoire de la civilisation africaine* as Aimé wrote *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* and, like her husband, sought to apply Frobenian thought to the sociocultural realities of 1940s Martinique.<sup>19</sup> She uses Frobenius to answer the central question, "Qu'est-ce que le Martiniquais fondamentalement, intimement, inaltérablement?"<sup>20</sup> That Césaire poses this question at all is striking because she seeks to define the Martinican independently of the French or the European. Such a protonationalist project of collective self-definition would become controversial after departmentalization, a few short years after the publication of "Malaise d'une civilisation." Césaire goes on to define the Martinican as an *homme-plante* (a plant human or a plant man), described as one who does not seek to dominate nature but rather allows

16 Suzanne Césaire, "Malaise d'une civilisation," 72–73; "One will understand that from that point forward the fundamental goal of the colored man became assimilation. And with overwhelming force, a disastrous confusion takes place in his mind: *liberation means assimilation*" ("The Malaise of a Civilization," 31).

17 Césaire, "Malaise d'une civilisation," 73; "The collective self of the Martinican people" ("The Malaise of a Civilization," 32).

18 See Césaire, "Misère d'une poésie," 65 ("Poetic Destitution," 27).

19 Césaire, letter to Gaucière, 3.

20 Césaire, "Malaise d'une civilisation," 70; "What is the Martinican fundamentally, intimately, unilaterally?" ("The Malaise of a Civilization," 29). *Inaltérablement* is perhaps more readily translated as "inalterably."

himself to be possessed, moved along by the force of life.<sup>21</sup> The Martinican as *homme-plante* rejects the impulse to conquer and dominate and refuses the violent, destructive impulse that fueled the war machine of the 1940s.

If she turns to Frobenius to define Martinican identity, it is because for Césaire World War II necessitated that Martinique take its place on the global stage: “Il est maintenant urgent d’oser se connaître soi-même, d’oser s’avouer ce qu’on est, d’oser se demander ce qu’on veut être. Ici aussi, des hommes naissent, vivent et meurent. Ici aussi, se joue le drame entier.”<sup>22</sup> Césaire emphasizes Martinican agency in this project of self-definition through both the reflexive pronoun *se* and the self-referential *soi-même*. Camouflaged by the seemingly benign summary of Frobenius’s ethnographic works is a call to autonomous and therefore dissident thinking, a call that flies in the face of Pétain’s emphasis on unquestioning obedience. Admiral Robert’s obsession with surveillance, censorship, and suppressing mobility meant that this was a dangerous time for Martinicans to embark on a project of self-definition. Embedded therefore in Césaire’s urgent call is both a poetics of liberation—to free Martinique’s cultural and artistic expression from the limitations of assimilation, and a politics of liberation—to recognize and acknowledge that Martinique too, despite its small size and seeming global insignificance, was an arena in which fascism and freedom were in direct conflict.

## In Haiti: Suzanne Césaire and the Surrealist Revolution

Examining Césaire’s radical deployment of surrealism as a revolutionary tool in Admiral Robert’s Martinique is important for understanding surrealism as a trigger for the 1946 revolution in Haiti, a revolution that expressed both a poetics and politics of liberation. The Césaires’ encounter with André Breton in Martinique in 1941 was a source of poetic and political inspiration for them. In the third issue of *Tropiques* published that year, Suzanne contributed the essay “André Breton, poète . . .” She argues in this work that Breton’s surrealism is concerned not only with art but with all aspects of human existence: “André Breton—en même temps . . . l’initiateur de la plus extraordinaire révolution qui soit, puisqu’aussi bien elle engage plus que l’art, notre vie tout entière.”<sup>23</sup> For Suzanne, surrealism was not solely a literary aesthetic. It was also a politically engaged movement that condemned imperialism worldwide. In *What*

21 Marie-Agnès Sourieau and Jennifer Wilks point out that Césaire’s overreliance on Frobenius’s ethnography in her early works results in some of the conceptual limitations of essentialism. It also renders her early works Manichean in outlook, reducing cultures and civilizations to stark binaries: Ethiopian/Hamitic, *homme-plante/homme-animal*. See Marie-Agnès Sourieau, “Suzanne Césaire et *Tropiques*: De la poésie cannibale à une poétique créole,” *French Review* 68, no. 1 (1994): 69–78; and Wilks, *Race, Gender, and Comparative Black Modernism*, 119–21.

22 Suzanne Césaire, “Léo Frobenius et le problème des civilisations,” 40; “It is now vital to dare to know oneself, to dare to confess to oneself what one is, to dare to ask oneself what one wants to be. Here, also, people are born, live, and die. Here also, the entire drama is played out” (“Leo Frobenius and the Problem of Civilizations,” 9–10).

23 Suzanne Césaire, “André Breton, poète . . .,” 61; “[André Breton] is the originator of the most extraordinary revolution that ever was, since it also involves not just art, but our life in all its entirety” (“André Breton, Poet,” 23).

*Is Surrealism?* Breton cites the surrealists' protest of the Moroccan war in 1925 as a deciding moment in the cohesion of surrealism as an artistic, social, and political movement.<sup>24</sup>

Césaire continued to draw on the political and poetic innovations of surrealism as an avid reader of *VVV*, the surrealist journal edited by Breton and other French writers in exile in New York. Aimé Césaire and Wifredo Lam contributed poems and illustrations, respectively, to each issue. *VVV* states as one of its goals victory "over all that is opposed to the emancipation of the spirit, of which the first indispensable condition is the liberation of man."<sup>25</sup> In his essay, "Situation du surréalisme entre les deux guerres" ("Situation of Surrealism between the Two Wars"), published in *VVV* in 1943, Breton argues, "D'une guerre à l'autre, on peut dire que c'est la quête passionnée de la liberté qui a été constamment le mobile de l'action surréaliste."<sup>26</sup> Liberation was both poetic and political. Breton describes surrealism's rejection both of Pétain's politics and of the stylistic and linguistic rules governing French literary production.<sup>27</sup>

Although Césaire did not write for *VVV*, she read the essays and poetry by Breton, Pierre Mabille, Roger Caillois, and René Etiemble as creative resistance. She viewed their work in reviving social and political freedoms through art in a period of historical crisis as clairvoyant. For Césaire, a poet is a prophet of sorts, one who is able to see patterns in world political events and articulate those patterns through poetry. We now know that Césaire taught nineteenth-century French literature and was most likely influenced by the work of Arthur Rimbaud. Her emphasis on the poet's clairvoyance recalls Rimbaud's *Lettres du voyant*: "Il faut être voyant, se faire voyant. Le Poète se fait voyant par un long, immense et raisonné dérèglement de tous les sens."<sup>28</sup> Like the surrealists, Césaire embraces Rimbaud's *dérèglement*, the rejection of restrictive rules of logic as the only way to apprehend reality. Like the surrealists, she recasts the *voyant* as an explicitly political figure, one who through this *dérèglement* is able to access knowledge not available to others, in order to perceive the political reality of the world he inhabits.

Returning to her Rimbaldian roots, she proposes designating the politics and poetics of the French writers in exile a "communion des voyants" whose poetic clairvoyance provides the needed clarity to see and imagine new political futures.<sup>29</sup> She finds in their articulation of surrealism the possibility for political and artistic liberation in the Antilles. Yet Césaire is also attentive to the power dynamic at work when a subset is charged with representing, in art and

24 André Breton, *What Is Surrealism?* (1934; repr., London: Faber and Faber, 1936), n.p.

25 *VVV: Poetry, Plastic Arts, Anthropology, Sociology, Psychology* (New York: s.n., 1942), inside cover.

26 "From one war to the other, one may say that it is the impassioned quest for liberty that has constantly motivated surrealist action." André Breton, "Situation du surréalisme entre les deux guerres," *VVV*, nos. 2-3 (March 1943): 49.

27 Breton does not make reference here to a particular school of thought or literary genre. Rather, he takes issue with the very idea of *formes fixes* (fixed forms) of any kind, arguing that a writer renders himself unworthy of liberty once he is no longer in a constant struggle against the prevailing literary norms of his time.

28 "One must be a seer, must make oneself a seer. The Poet makes himself a seer by the long, immense, rational derangement of the senses." Arthur Rimbaud, *Lettres du voyant*, in *Poésies* (Paris: L. Vanier, 1895), 95. Césaire's engagement with Rimbaud in her letter to Gauclère may also be attributed to her awareness of the interests and expertise of her interlocutor, who coauthored a book on Rimbaud's writings with René Etiemble in 1936 and engaged deeply with the nineteenth-century French author's ideas.

29 "Communion of seers." Césaire, letter to Gauclère, 3.

in politics, the whole. She confides in Gaucière, “Il y a dans ce numéro des pages consacrées à la recherche d’un mythe moderne, et je pense que c’est une chose émouvante que la rencontre autour de cette quête d’hommes comme Breton, Mabille, Etiemble, Caillois. Et si je n’aime pas le mot ‘les forts,’ j’aime celui de ‘communion,’ comme celui de ‘voyant.’”<sup>30</sup> Césaire rejects the top-down model of political and artistic representation and advocates instead a collective, communal deployment of surrealism to counter wartime oppression.

In the Caribbean too, proponents of surrealism were deeply implicated in revolutionary political movements, including in Haiti, barely a year after the departure of the Césaires from the island. Testimonials from the leaders of *Les cinq glorieuses*, the five-day revolution, affirm that while the causes were rooted in long-term dissatisfaction with dictatorship and the American occupation of the island, Breton’s provocative speeches, delivered during his two-month visit to Haiti, directly triggered the events of the movement that toppled President Elie Lescot.<sup>31</sup>

The zealously pro-American Lescot became president of Haiti in 1941 under decidedly undemocratic conditions. Appointed by a specially selected parliament on the departure of his predecessor, Sténio Vincent, Lescot took advantage of the political climate of World War II to suspend the constitution, extend his mandate, and establish handpicked military tribunals. It was in this atmosphere of suspended political rights that Breton arrived in Haiti in 1945 at the invitation of Mabille, then French cultural attaché in Haiti. Breton delivered the first of his eight speeches at the Rex Hotel to a crowd of seven hundred people, under the watchful eyes of the military. Notable audience members included Lescot and his cabinet, as well as armed Haitian students with bullets meant for the president. Two in particular would become central figures on the Haitian literary and political scene: René Depestre and Jacques Stephen Alexis.

Although they aborted the assassination attempt, Depestre, Alexis, and Haitian painter and photographer Gérald Bloncourt heard in Breton’s words a call to mobilize and end Lescot’s dictatorship. Breton made a particular impression on his listeners by grounding his speech in Haitian political history and closing with a strategic quote from Jacques Roumain’s novel *Gouverneurs de la rosée*, which powerfully evoked the Haitian proletariat as the ultimate catalysts of political change and social justice. By channeling Roumain, whose death barely a year prior had deeply affected Haitians, Breton established a strong link between national literature and the national liberation struggle. Despite Lescot’s obvious displeasure, Depestre and his collaborators reprinted Breton’s speech in a special number of their journal, *La Ruche: Organe de la jeune génération*, dedicated to Breton. Alexis, writing under the pseudonym Jacques la colère, contributed the incendiary “Lettre aux hommes vieux” (“Letter to the Old Men”) in which he condemns the moral and political corruption of the elites and announces a

30 “In this volume there are pages dedicated to the search for a modern myth, and I find it moving, this meeting around a shared quest by men like Breton, Mabille, Etiemble, Caillois. And while I do not like the word ‘the best,’ I do like ‘communion’ and ‘seer.’” *Ibid.*, 4.

31 For firsthand accounts and original documents, see Gérald Bloncourt and Michael Löwy, *Messagers de la tempête: André Breton et la révolution de janvier 1946 en Haïti* (Pantin: Temps des cerises, 2007).

new era, characterized by awareness and lucidity of the masses. Alexis closes his letter with the ominous postscript to the ruling class: “P.S. à bientôt.”<sup>32</sup> Lescot’s mounting displeasure with the surrealist-inspired student editors of *La Ruche* culminated in his order for police to immediately seize all copies of the journal. On 2 January, the editors were arrested and imprisoned. Striking students took to the streets of Port-au-Prince to demand the editors’ release. In the coming days, the protestors’ numbers increased to include workers, farmers, and other citizens demanding an end to Lescot’s dictatorial regime. In the days following Breton’s speech, the island was immobilized by general strikes and protests. On 11 January, protesters imprisoned Lescot in the presidential palace. His tenure as president effectively over, he was whisked off into exile aboard a US military plane.

For Depestre, Alexis, and the other contributors to *La Ruche*, surrealism was primarily a tool for political liberation. Depestre, in the *La Ruche* editorial that would land him in jail, echoes Suzanne Césaire’s affirmation of surrealism as both literary aesthetic and political awareness when he affirms that Breton “a rallié nos sympathies pour le surréalisme qui est non seulement une entreprise de libération des richesses psychiques du cerveau humain, mais aussi un mouvement anti-fasciste qui n’a jamais manqué d’affirmer sa foi dans les aspirations légitimes de l’homme vers la justice sociale et la liberté.”<sup>33</sup> Surrealism provided a tool for imagining and articulating resistance to Lescot’s dictatorship in Haiti and Vichy’s oppression in Martinique.

If Breton influenced student activists in Haiti in the 1940s, the Césaires served as important precursors to the movement. In separate testimonies, the student leaders of *Les cinq glorieuses* affirm that Aimé’s conferences in Haiti introduced them to surrealist thought and paved the way for Breton’s visit. Suzanne, although ignored in this genealogy of political action inspired by surrealist poetics, also played an active role in laying the groundwork for the events of 1946. She describes her role in Haiti as that of a cultural emissary: “On nous avait confié, (je suis plus ou moins en mission, moi aussi) la formation des futurs professeurs de lycée. . . . Cours privé, du 17<sup>e</sup> au 19<sup>e</sup> siècle, cours public sur les modernes. C’est ainsi que j’ai fait pour aider Aimé, qui avait un travail très dur, 2 ou 3 explications de textes classiques et 2 corrigés de dissertation, avec comme auditeurs libres, des journalistes, des avocats, un sénateur.”<sup>34</sup>

The composition of Suzanne’s students reminds us of the closely intertwined nature of politics and poetics in her work. If, as the leaders of *Les cinq glorieuses* attest, Aimé’s teachings were instrumental in preparing them for Breton’s ideas, then it is important to acknowledge also Suzanne’s contributions to this project of laying the groundwork for the politics

32 “P.S. See you soon.” Quoted in Bloncourt and Löwy, *Messagers de la tempête*, 171.

33 “[Breton] rallied our sympathies for surrealism, which is not only about the liberation of the psychic riches of the human brain but is also an antifascist movement that has never failed to affirm its faith in man’s legitimate aspirations to social justice and liberty.” René Depestre, quoted in Bloncourt and Löwy, *Messagers de la tempête*, 101.

34 “We have been charged with (I am more or less on assignment also) training future teachers. . . . Private class on the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries and public class on the moderns. Thus in order to help Aimé, whose work was very difficult, I prepared two or three *explications de textes* and two dissertation corrections. My students were made up of journalists, lawyers, and a senator.” Césaire, letter to Gaucière, 3.

and poetics of liberation from the Lescot dictatorship. Precious little information remains on Suzanne's time in Haiti. However, her only published work after Haiti, "Le grand camouflage," confirms Haiti to have been a pivotal experience because it reveals an expanded focus from her initial work centered on Martinique to a larger vision of the Caribbean.

### After Haiti: Seeing the Caribbean Archipelago

Suzanne Césaire's politics and poetics of liberation took on a more Caribbean outlook as she grappled with the possibility of authentic art forms in the Caribbean to express, indeed call into being, a society free from the stranglehold of racism and fascism. She is at her most poetic and arguably at her most political in her final essay for *Tropiques*, "Le grand camouflage," published on her return from Haiti. Here her voice finds a new lyricism that is largely absent from the manifesto style of her previous essays. She focuses on the geography of the Caribbean in terms that contain the germ of what Michelle Stephens would later articulate as an archipelagic approach to Caribbean studies, an approach that "would begin to understand the ways the unit of the 'island,' as a political and discursive construct, is actually not a part of an archipelago but rather its very antithesis." "It is the archipelago," Stephens argues, "as opposed to the island, that offers a vision of bridged spaces rather than closed territorial boundaries."<sup>35</sup> Césaire in "Le grand camouflage" reads the Caribbean as interconnected space rather than as a series of discrete islands. Blurring both spatial and temporal boundaries, her authorial voice situates itself simultaneously in Haiti, Martinique, and Puerto Rico. "Le grand camouflage" is best characterized in Césaire's own words as "le grand jeu de cache-cache," a text that almost playfully weaves between veiling and revealing the geography, history, and social reality of race relations in the Antilles.<sup>36</sup> Césaire deftly juggles the images of lucidity and what Keith Walker, in his introduction to the English translation of her collected works, describes as "the wilful blindness . . . the work it takes not to see."<sup>37</sup> It is in "Le grand camouflage" that Césaire finally fully takes on the role of the seer, that quality of the poet as voyant that she had until now only admired in others.

Césaire reveals herself as seer in three movements, focusing on sight as the principal sense for apprehending or misapprehending the Caribbean. First, she sees the blinding beauty of the Caribbean: "Il y a sous mes yeux la jolie place de Pétionville, plantée de pins et d'hibiscus. Il y a mon île, la Martinique et son frais collier de nuages soufflés par la Pelée."<sup>38</sup> In this first movement, to behold only the Caribbean's beauty is to be but a passive onlooker.

35 Michelle Stephens, "What Is an Island? Caribbean Studies and the Contemporary Visual Artist," *Small Axe*, no. 41 (July 2013): 11.

36 Suzanne Césaire, "Le grand camouflage," 94; "The great game of hide-and-peek" ("The Great Camouflage," 46).

37 Keith L. Walker, introduction to Césaire, *The Great Camouflage*, ix.

38 Césaire, "Le grand camouflage," 84; "There is before my eyes, the pretty square in Pétionville, planted with pines and hibiscus. There is my island, Martinique, and its fresh necklace of clouds buffeted by Mount Pélée" ("The Great Camouflage," 39).

Notice that here Césaire does not employ verbs relating to sight, such as *voir* (to see) or *regarder* (to look), as she will later in the essay. The onlooker is not the active subject. Rather it is the space of the Caribbean archipelago that controls what is to be seen. Second, she sees the exploitation and degradation wrought by colonialism in the Caribbean: “Mon regard par-delà ces formes et ces couleurs parfaites, surprend, sur le très beau visage antillais, ses tourments intérieurs.”<sup>39</sup> In this moment she becomes the seer whose desire to apprehend the Caribbean in its totality propels her to uncover what lies beyond the great camouflage. Seeing is an active process of engagement with the space. Césaire is the subject whose gaze does the work of seeing the pain of colonial exploitation and erasure camouflaged by the images of the Caribbean as an idyllic tropical paradise. Finally, she goes on to reveal camouflage as resistance in her poignant closing lines: “Si mes Antilles sont si belles, c’est qu’alors le grand jeu de cache-cache a réussi, c’est qu’il fait certes trop beau, ce jour-là, pour y voir.”<sup>40</sup> The seer and the space remain entangled in the dynamic interplay between camouflage and discovery.

Césaire recognizes the difficulty of the seer’s role. She writes from Haiti, “Je suis, je veux être tout à fait lucide. Je crois pouvoir affirmer qu’il n’y a pas trace chez moi de bovarysme ni d’aucune autre espèce de rêverie. Je ne rêve pas d’un mythe nouveau.”<sup>41</sup> Césaire rejects the gendered charges of escapist daydreaming that Gustave Flaubert attributes to his heroine Madame Bovary. Daring to dream means daring to create, daring to bring into being an imagined Caribbean civilization through art, culture, and politics, and Haiti is at the heart of this dream for Césaire. She shares her hope that the generative “feu du cosmos” would recreate viable art forms that permeate all aspects of Antillean culture:

J’ai été assez folle pour rêver d’un retour ou d’une récréation aux Antilles d’un style de vie moderne où se jouerait cette unité de l’homme-non-séparé. Je voulais trouver des (non pas faire revivre une tradition comme dans ‘le Serpent à plumes,’ mais créer, susciter) formes d’art viables, des objets, des vêtements. . . . Mais comme je ne veux pas parler de politique je vous renvoie à ce texte de Schœlcher . . . sur le destin des Antilles. Avec ce rêve et d’autres revendications plus précises nous avons essayé de bâtir ce que Ménéil appelle le mythe de l’antillais nouveau.<sup>42</sup>

Although Césaire writes specifically for and about Martinicans in *Tropiques*—a move for which she is criticized by some of the Guadeloupean characters in Daniel Maximin’s novel

39 Césaire, “Le grand camouflage,” 87; “My gaze, over and beyond these shapes and these perfect colors, catches, upon the very beautiful Antillean face, its inner torments” (“The Great Camouflage,” 41).

40 Césaire, “Le grand camouflage,” 94; “If my Antilles are so beautiful, it is because the great game of hide-and-seek has succeeded, it is then because, on that day, the weather is most certainly too blindingly bright and beautiful to see clearly therein” (“The Great Camouflage,” 46).

41 “I am, I want to be completely lucid. I believe I can affirm that I have no trace of *bovarysme* or any other form of reverie. I do not *dream* of a new myth.” Césaire, letter to Gaucière, 5 (emphasis in original).

42 “Cosmic fire”; “I was mad enough to dream of a return or a re-creation in the Antilles of a modern way of life in which this unity of the non-separated-man would play out. I wanted to find (not to revive a tradition as in ‘Le serpent à plumes,’ but to create, spark) viable forms of art, objects, clothing. . . . But since I do not want to talk about politics I will refer you to Schœlcher’s writing . . . on the destiny of the Antilles. With this dream and other more specific demands we have tried to build what Ménéil calls the myth of the new Antillean.” *Ibid.*, 4.

*L'isolé soleil*—she expresses here a vision for the Antilles as a whole. She seeks a unification of the Antillean being with the Antillean way of life. Rather than a return to the cultural artifacts and traditions of a real or imagined African past, as most Negritude writers argued for, Césaire looks forward to a modern way of life that takes into account all the elements that make up Antillean identity. She expresses this project as an explicitly political one, in line with French abolitionist Victor Schœlcher's project for the Antilles. Césaire is most likely evoking here Schœlcher's unrealized vision of, in Gary Wilder's words, "abolition . . . accompanied by full citizenship, socioeconomic equality, and proper integration into the republic."<sup>43</sup> Her Caribbean renaissance therefore comprises both artistic and political transformation.

Harkening back to her use of Frobenian theory to define the Martinican as *homme-plante*, Césaire expands her focus now to encompass a broader definition of Caribbean identity. In Haiti, the landscape and language provide her with the tools for this expanded analysis: "Pour en revenir à notre communauté mort-né—qui est sous le signe de la plante pour le nègre—(retrouvé ici, en Haïti cette expression typique: laissé grainin, c.a.d laisser 'grainer' laisser faire, laisser porter) je ne sais ce qui se passe."<sup>44</sup> Césaire's description of Antillean society as "mort-né"—stillborn—reminds us of her scathing critiques in *Tropiques* of assimilation as a manifestation of slavery's legacy and a stifling of creativity and expression in Martinique. Yet we hear too a tinge of hope as she finds in this Creole expression a plant metaphor that will allow her, in "Le grand camouflage," to articulate a more nuanced identity rooted in the Caribbean archipelago as a viable space within which this identity can originate and thrive. Indeed, Césaire's use of Creole is significant because it reveals Haiti's role in her articulation of a creolized poetics. At a time when Martinican writers relied heavily on the French language as the vehicle for imagining a global black identity, Césaire reads Frobenius through the lens of a popular Creole expression in Haiti in order to articulate a more nuanced Caribbean ontology.

Césaire's clearest expression of this ontology comes in the opening paragraph of "Le grand camouflage": "Il y a les plus hauts plateaux d'Haïti, où un cheval meurt, foudroyé par l'orage séculairement meurtrier de Hinche. Près de lui son maître contemple le pays qu'il croyait solide et large. Il ne sait pas encore qu'il participe à l'absence d'équilibre des îles. Mais cet accès de démente terrestre lui éclaire le cœur: il se met à penser aux autres Caraïbes, à leurs volcans, à leurs tremblements de terre, à leurs ouragans."<sup>45</sup>

Césaire draws on a set of rhetorical influences perhaps not often encountered in French Antillean literature: Greek mythology. The highest plateaus of Hinche in central Haiti are

43 Gary Wilder, "Untimely Vision: Aimé Césaire, Decolonization, Utopia," *Public Culture* 21, no. 1 (2009): 111.

44 "To return to our stillborn community—which is under the sign of the plant for the Negro—(I have found here in Haiti this typical expression: laissé grainin, meaning, let it seed, let it be, let it bear fruit) I do not know what is happening." Césaire, letter to Gauclère, 4.

45 Césaire, *Le grand camouflage*, 84. "There are the highest plateaus of Haiti, where a horse dies, lightning-struck by the age-old killer storm at Hinche. Next to it, his master contemplates the land he believed sound and expansive. He does not yet know that he is participating in the island's absence of equilibrium. But this sudden access to terrestrial madness illuminates his heart: he begins to think about the other Caribbean islands, their volcanoes, their earthquakes, their hurricanes"; Césaire, *The Great Camouflage*, 39.

reminiscent of Mount Parnassus, home of the Muses, and here in the Caribbean a vantage point from which the Haitian man as seer and therefore as poet contemplates the land. For Césaire, the politics of creating a Pan-Caribbean identity in the immediate postwar moment remain intricately bound up in the poetics of articulating this identity. The Haitian man accesses poetic inspiration atop the mountain in order to see—recalling Césaire’s earlier definitions of the seer as poet—not just his island but also the Caribbean as a whole. Here too Césaire’s private letters provide the key to parsing out Haiti’s role in her political and poetic vision for a Pan-Caribbean civilization. In a curious move in her letter to Gauclère, Césaire declares on one page her desire to build the myth of the new Antillean and on another that she does not dream of creating a new myth.<sup>46</sup> Rather than read these moments as contradictory, we may understand Césaire as engaged in a dual process of mythmaking and demythologizing. She draws on Greek mythology to articulate a new myth of origins for the Caribbean. Yet this myth does not center on supernatural beings but rather on the everyday man. Pegasus (Césaire’s horse on the mountaintop) is dead, and it is the peasant, whom Césaire later describes as leaning against a *mapou* tree with his toes rooted in the earth, as well as the “femmes aux quatre races et aux douzaines de sang” who embody the rhizomatic nature of a composite Caribbean identity.<sup>47</sup> It is moreover significant that the *mapou* is central to some Vodun ceremonies. Césaire moves away from her earlier assertion of Caribbean civilization as stillborn to envision the Caribbean space as fertile grounds for generating a viable civilization characterized by systems of belief and nuanced racial and cultural identities.

Aimé Césaire famously described Haiti as the birthplace of Negritude, as the origins of a global black identity rooted in a shared African past. For Suzanne Césaire, Haiti is the birthplace of a Caribbean civilization that bears seed through the Antillean peasant. The Caribbean itself is the site of its own myth of origin, rather than a space that is solely grappling with its beginnings in the terms of displacement, deracination, and fracture that will come to characterize Caribbean intellectual traditions from *antillanité* to *créolité* and beyond. Through Césaire’s pen, “*laissé grainin*” becomes a viable model for seeing the generative forces at work in the Caribbean. Juxtaposing Césaire’s private letters with her published works reveals Haiti to be at the center of this archipelagic vision and opens up new possibilities for seeing the Caribbean as interconnected space.

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<sup>46</sup> Césaire, letter to Gauclère, 4, 5.

<sup>47</sup> Césaire, “Le grand camouflage,” 86; “Women of four races and dozens of bloodlines” (“The Great Camouflage,” 40).