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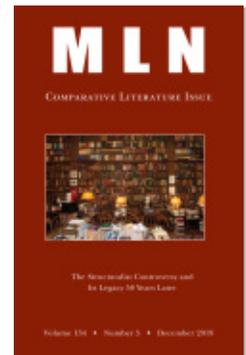
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Cabrera's Césaire: The Making of a Trans-Caribbean Zone



Katerina Gonzalez Seligmann

It is a little-known fact that Aimé Césaire's first book was Cuban.¹ In 1943, his poetic opus "Cahier d'un retour au pays natal" (Notebook of a Return to the Native Land) was published in book form for the first time in Havana. His first book in French, *Les armes miraculeuses* (Miraculous Weapons), would be published three years later by Gallimard in Paris, and in 1947 two later versions of "Cahier d'un retour au pays natal" would appear in book form: a French version by Bordas in Paris and a French-English edition by Brentano's in New York.² The limited edition Cuban book, printed as *Retorno al país natal* (Return

¹I would like to thank Esther Whitfield, Thangam Ravindranathan, and Paget Henry for their formative guidance in the conception and development of this essay and for reading several early drafts; Erika Renée Williams, Francés Negrón-Muntaner, Flora González Mandri, Michelle Clayton, Chana Morgenstern, Shaylin Hogan, Maria Gonzalez-Gil, and Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel for invaluable feedback on later drafts; Kora Verón and Alex Gil for collaborating with me on research and sharing primary sources and insights from their research on Aimé Césaire; Odette Casamayor Cisneros and Martin Tsang for organizing panels where I presented from this work and for their responses to it; Ana Cairo Ballester, Isabel Castellanos, Victor Fowler Calzada, and Lorenzo García Vega for providing key insights about Lydia Cabrera's intellectual and personal biography; Maria Moreno and Yu-jin Chang for confirming and enhancing my understanding of Césaire's use of "au bout de petit matin"; the Cuban Heritage Collection at the University of Miami and especially Lesbia Varona for supporting my research; the SDO Lam archive and especially Eskil Lam for research support.

²The 1947 Brentanos edition, which consists of a different version of the "Cahier" than both the 1939 *Volontés* edition and the 1947 Bordas edition in French, was translated by Yan Goll and Lionel Abel. For studies of this textual evolution, see Gil (2011), Laforge (2012), Verón Leble and Hale (2013), and Arnold and Gil (2013).

to the Native Land), featured a preface by French poet Benjamin Péret, illustrations by Afro-Chinese-Cuban painter Wifredo Lam, and a translation of Césaire's poem by Lydia Cabrera, the Euro-Cuban writer and scholar of Afro-diasporic religions and folklore in Cuba.³ Césaire had anticipated his text's pertinence to Havana by including the city along with other Caribbean locales in the first printing of the poem for the Paris-based literary magazine *Volontés* in 1939 ("Cahier" 24).⁴ The Havana printing thus consolidated the poem's presentation of Martinique as translatable, or comparable, into other parts of the Caribbean archipelago.

Although Césaire's 1943 Cuban book is crucial to his development as a pan-Caribbean poet, thinker, and politician, it has received very little critical attention. Emily Maguire has written the only other critical essay devoted to the translation, and it has also received limited attention in works by Lourdes Arencibia, Alex Gil, and Richard Watts.⁵ I am interested in the translation and its publishing history for two related reasons: they are key to pan-Caribbean discourse in their "*symbolic* articulation of a broader conceptualization of the Caribbean," and they enhance and challenge our understandings of the race and gender politics of translations and their circulation (Martínez-San Miguel, "Colonial and Mexican Archipelagos" 156). Cabrera's work as Césaire's first translator indicates that his poem did not merely cross between or over languages and places in her translation. Her translation of Césaire and its reception in Cuba offer great insight into the *poietic*—or generative—function of both circulation and translation in the conformation of geopolitical, historical, and social imaginaries.⁶ As I argue in this essay, Cabrera's translation of Césaire

³The book itself is undated, and although Péret's preface is dated for 1942, Lam's illustrations are dated 1943, and reviews of the book also date it for 1943.

⁴The first edition of Césaire's poem was published in the same issue of *Volontés* that featured work by his collaborator L. S. Senghor from Senegal; by César Vallejo, Octavio Paz, Pablo Neruda, and Miguel Otero Silva from Latin America; by Eugene Jolas from the U.S.; and by Raymond Queneau from France. Queneau would go on to bring Césaire's work to Editions Gallimard for his first French book publication, as Alex Gil and I found in our research at Editions Gallimard (Gil, "Breaking News: It was Queneau").

⁵Arnold, Verón Leblé and Hale, Laforge, and Noland also refer to the 1943 Cuban publication without dedicating analysis to it. Jovic-Humphrey also analyzes its preface by Benjamin Péret.

⁶See Naoki Sakai's definition of translation as "a *poietic* social practice that institutes a relation at the site of incommensurability" and Brent Hayes Edwards's dialogue with that definition in his own offering of the importance of studying translation to "guage the ensuing relation" (Sakai 75; Edwards, *Practice* 20). See also Pierre Bourdieu, "The Social Conditions of the International Circulation of Ideas" for a theoretical sketch of the generative role of international textual circulation.

effected another kind of crossing: her translation project crossed *with* his poem, transforming it for its Cuban reception while contributing to its production of a “trans-Caribbean zone.”

The area of literary-historical study opened up by a translation such as this one may productively be considered a “trans-Caribbean zone,” in dialogue with Emily Apter’s offering of the “translation zone” as “a broad intellectual topography that is neither the property of a single nation, nor an amorphous condition associated with postnationalism, but rather a zone of critical engagement that connects the ‘l’ and the ‘n’ of transLation and transNation” (5). The translation and intra-Caribbean circulation of Aimé Césaire’s most influential poem constitute just such a critically engaged intellectual topography between a colony (Martinique) and a neo-colonial nation (Cuba). Richard Watts has indicated that the Cuban edition of Césaire’s poem “situates the *Cahier* in the Caribbean” (101). Emily Maguire in turn suggests that the collaborative publication of Césaire, Cabrera, and Lam connected their “Pan-Caribbean avant-garde spirit” (126). I would add that Césaire’s Cuban book fomented an—albeit contested—Cuban locus of Caribbean regionalism and that Cabrera’s translation alters Césaire’s construction of the Caribbean in meaningful ways.

“Cahier d’un retour au pays natal” has been central to fomenting radical black consciousness in the Americas and in the world. In fact, the role in the poem of the black consciousness project referred to as “negritude” is its primary claim to fame. “Negritude” is Césaire’s term for blackness that linguistically reworks its French devaluation into a resistant formulation.⁷ Haitian poet René Depestre describes “negritude” as a revolt of the spirit against the degradation and “denaturalization of an entire category of people” (82).⁸

Less examined than the work of Césaire’s “Cahier” to poeticize and promulgate a resistant, decolonizing, and healing black consciousness has been its simultaneous and imbricated offering of a regional, Caribbean locus of enunciation: one that is as located in black subjectivity as it is in a transnational Caribbean, including but not limited to the

⁷See Natalie Melas, who explains, “the neologism *négritude* seizes the improper colonial name *négre* seeking to transvalue denigration and alienation” (569). See also Christopher Miller’s “The (Revised) Birth of Negritude: Communist Revolution and the ‘Immanent Negro’ in 1935” for an analysis of “negritude” the first time Césaire published the idea prior to the 1939 publication of the “Cahier d’un retour au pays natal,” in an issue of the Paris based journal he co-edited, *L’étudiant noir* (743–749).

⁸Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own.

poet's home of Martinique.⁹ Although the poem's transnational references exceed the Caribbean and establish a host of possible solidarity gestures with other locations, it explicitly hones in on an unnamed Antillean island as its primary setting, naming other Caribbean locations along the way, including Havana and Guadeloupe ("Cahier," 24, 32). Césaire also specifically references several Martinican locations, such as the "*rivière* Capot," "Trinité," and "Grand-Rivière," but his references to other parts of the region, along with references to the "Antilles" and the "archipelago," give rise to a broader, Caribbeanist reading of the poem (24, 25, 27, 32).¹⁰

The return highlighted in Césaire's title and featured in the poem is crucial to the role of revalorizing African heritage in the literary construction of the Caribbean. Christopher Miller makes a compelling case for reading the poem as an account of multiple returns *and* escapes from the logic of the Middle Passage's triangle. One such escape from this logic is "to go to Africa by going to France . . . and to come back to the Caribbean only in revolt, 'standing and free'" (96).¹¹ For Miller, the poem navigates out of the slave trade's imposed triangle by going through it and defeating it *en route*, so that it is possible for the return to the Caribbean to be characterized by freedom.

The trans-Caribbean zone charted by Cabrera's translation of Césaire is illuminated by Walter Benjamin's prescient metaphor for the social and political stakes of the practice of translation:

Fragments of a vessel which are to be glued together must match one another in the smallest details, although they need not be like one another. In the same way a translation, instead of resembling the meaning of the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original's mode of signification, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel. (80–81)

Césaire's poem and Cabrera's translation of it are both fragments of a vessel that indeed come together to form "a greater language," the literary Caribbean brought into view by intertextual encounters such as this one. Of course, the stakes of bringing together such fragments

⁹In my use of "locus of enunciation," I draw on Walter Mignolo's use of the term to examine the productive capacity of the location from which knowledge emanates.

¹⁰Martínez-San Miguel also situates Césaire's poem in a pan-Caribbean and archipelagic context, suggesting that his poem offers a "Caribbean lyrical subject" (*Coloniality* 77).

¹¹Miller also argues that negritude, which "is often misrepresented these days as a simplistic vision of a lost African paradise—was partially (but not entirely) an attempt to renegotiate a triangle that appeared to be so powerful that it could never be imagined out of existence" (*French Atlantic* 5).

are particularly high in the imperial and post-slavery diaspora context of the Caribbean. In his Nobel Lecture, Derek Walcott elucidates the high stakes of such work in his definition of Antillean art as a “restoration of our shattered histories, our shards of vocabulary, our archipelago becoming a synonym for pieces broken off from the original continent.” Although for most of Cabrera’s translation, she “lovingly and in detail incorporates the original’s mode of signification,” in key structuring sections of the poem she does not follow Césaire in good Benjaminian fashion, reproducing instead of overcoming the archipelago’s very fragmentation. In Cabrera’s translation, Césaire’s text and its construction of the Caribbean is effectively *crossed with* her distortions and disruptions.

Brent Edwards has proposed a model of “*décalage*” for understanding the gaps in translation in the “workings of race in the cultures of black internationalism” (*Practice* 14). As he explains, the “articulation of diaspora in such a model would be inherently *décalé*, or disjointed, by a host of factors” (14). In this model the connections established by translating race in diaspora pass through disjunctures or disarticulations (14–15). In dialogue with Edwards, Maguire has argued for this translation as a work of “*disarticulation*: both a gesture of connection and understanding, and an expression of nonequivalency and fundamental difference” (Maguire 127). In my own dialogue with Edwards and Maguire, I probe the relations established at sites of divergence or incommensurability in “Cabrera’s Césaire.” The translation reflects incommensurabilities of race and gender between writer and translator, between French and Spanish imperial projects, between Martinique as a colony and Cuba as a post-colony under U.S. imperial pressure, between the post-slavery status quo of each island. A thorough understanding of the relation between source and translated text would illuminate the interstices of these relations that bear on the textual production of the Caribbean. I argue that the translation evinces a poetic solidarity with limits and complications that are instructive for understanding the mode of production of intra-Caribbean textual circulations.

Even the relation between writer and translator impinge on the relations of Caribbean textual production that make the region readable. Césaire was a French-educated Afro-Martinican poet, teacher, and politician. Cabrera was a French-educated Euro-Cuban writer and ethnologist. Her writing career launched in 1936 when she published her short story collection inspired by Afro-Cuban folk tales, primarily

of Yoruba origin, *Cuentos negros de Cuba* (Black Cuban Tales) in Paris.¹² Both Césaire and Cabrera “re-discovered” the Afro-Caribbean culture of their upbringing while spending time in Europe and became important cultural figures at home upon their respective “returns to the native land.”¹³ While Césaire studied literature in Paris and continued to write verse throughout his life, Cabrera studied ethnology in Paris and wrote tales inspired by her fieldwork with a poetic flair, as well as trailblazing ethnographic volumes. She is credited for tracing the ethnic roots of Cubans of African descent and for revealing in her publications otherwise secret African religious and cultural practices as they proliferated in Cuba. Her stories and essays were published widely, including multiple appearances in one of the most influential journals of Cuban high modernism, *Orígenes*. Soon after the publication of his Cuban book, Césaire too included one of her tales, “Bregantino, Bregantín” in *Tropiques*, the literary magazine he co-edited in Martinique.¹⁴

Wifredo Lam was responsible for bringing the poem to Cuba after meeting Césaire in Martinique on a stopover from France in 1941.¹⁵ During his Martinican sojourn, Lam witnessed a reading of the poem by Césaire and was deeply moved (Benítez 5). Before Lam’s departure to Cuba, Césaire dedicated a special edition copy of the poem published in *Volontés* magazine to him. Césaire would go on to dedicate poetry to Lam, and Lam would go on to continue illustrating Césaire’s poetry and referring to Césaire’s work in his painting.¹⁶ Lam would also go on to collaborate with Lydia Cabrera and work alongside her.¹⁷

¹²This book was translated by French writer and translator of Cervantes and Miguel Angel Asturias, Francis de Miomandre. French writer Paul Morand edited it. For a biographical study of Cabrera, see Rosario Hiriart. For comprehensive studies of Cabrera’s work, see Emily Maguire’s *Racial Experiments in Cuban Literature and Ethnography* and Flora González Mandri’s *Guarding Cultural Memory*.

¹³Césaire in fact penned the first draft of the poem traveling in the Balkans with his friend, Petar Guberina. See Anja Jovic-Humphrey for an analysis of this event and the relationship between Césaire and Guberina.

¹⁴I examine how Césaire in turn frames the pan-Caribbean significance of this tale in *Tropiques* in “Governing Readability or How to Read Césaire’s Cabrera.”

¹⁵Lam was on the same boat from Europe as André Breton and Claude Lévi-Strauss, who after their three week stay in Martinique would go on to New York (Lévi-Strauss 26–31).

¹⁶The first poem Césaire dedicated to Lam was “Simouns” (Simoons), included in the 1946 Gallimard book, *Les armes miraculeuses* (Miraculous Weapons).

¹⁷According to the anthropologist Isabel Castellanos who is the custodian of Lydia Cabrera’s archive, Lam produced his famous painting “La junga” alongside Cabrera’s writing of her opus, *El Monte*. The painting should have carried the same name, but its transport to the Museum of Modern Art brought up the problem of translating “el monte,” which continues to haunt critics and translators of Spanish-language Caribbean culture. The never-used term “la jungla” was easier to translate (Castellanos).

It is very likely that the typescript of Césaire's poem located in Lam's archive may be the one Cabrera used to translate it.¹⁸

Cabrera's work was dedicated to preserving African traditions in Cuban discourse. Maria Zambrano, the Spanish philosopher in exile in Cuba during the 1940s and 50s, explained the way that Cabrera re-located the relationship between African traditions and the island: "the life and landscape of the island must have been imprinted onto African tradition, a subtle weaving of influence so delicately captured by the poetic knowledge that never ceases to assist Lydia Cabrera" (15). Zambrano attests to the transformative nature of Cabrera's "poetic knowledge" by stressing that African culture *is written on* the island in Cabrera's work. Césaire also highly valued poetic knowledge and defined its exercise as "splattering the object with all of its mobilized riches" ("Poésie et connaissance" 170). This definition implies mobilizing the associative logic of signification. For Césaire, the freedom implied in this kind of poetic practice also requires abandoning one's work to the will of the universe: "Because in each true poem the poet plays the game of the world, the true poet wishes to abandon the word to all of its free associations, sure that this means to definitively abandon it to the will of the universe" (164).¹⁹ When Césaire's poem was thus bequeathed onto Cabrera, she applied her own poetic knowledge to it, altering the poem's terrain of signification, giving rise to new associations altogether.

Anaphora Distorted: From Dawn Obscure to Dying Dawn

The trans-Caribbean zone extended by Cabrera's translation of Césaire's poem was structured by an image of a dying dawn she crosses *into* the poem.²⁰ Edwards identifies anaphora, or the repetition of words or phrases at the beginning of two or more successive verses or clauses, as the greatest legacy of the "Cahier." Césaire's use of anaphora is powerful and influential because his "anaphora does not install regularity, but instead introduces transformation and even contradiction" (Edwards, "Syntax" 8). Anaphora (from Greek *ana* + *phora*) means "to

¹⁸Esquil Lam found this typescript in his father's archive while I conducted research there. In 1942 Cabrera also published a profile on Lam and his painting ("Wifredo Lam" 2).

¹⁹I also examine Césaire's essay in "Productions of Cultural Combat in *Tropiques*" (501–503). The translation I use here is by Richardson and Fijalkowski.

²⁰There were only 300 editions of this special edition book published, so this translation likely did not travel far beyond the Cuban intelligentsia in its time, but it was revived by Lourdes Arencibia's 2007 expanded edition.

bring back.” Bringing back—or *returning*—previously used words or phrases, anaphora is the rhetorical device of return par excellence, quite fitting for a poem that stages a return voyage home. Because anaphora involves repeating words or phrases at the beginning of successive verses or clauses, each time the repeated segment returns, it attaches to new material, thus altering its meaning by altering its context. Although Césaire utilizes anaphora throughout, one clause in particular, “*au bout du petit matin*,” repeats for most of the poem, serving to structure it. As Lourdes Arencibia indicates, the clause is repeated so often that it functions as a leitmotif for the poem (83–4). The anaphora shows up time and again to introduce a new angle on the status of the island setting, the legacy of slavery, and a personal confrontation with the history of racist colonial ideology. In Cabrera’s Césaire this leitmotif appears both distorted and disrupted.

In the 1939 edition (the version Cabrera translated), Césaire inaugurates the poem with successive repetitions of “*au bout du petit matin*.” A look at the first lines of the first five stanzas will demonstrate how each iteration of its structuring anaphora introduces, more than an emphatic reinforcement, a shift in perspective:

Au bout du petit matin bourgeonnant d’anses frêles les
Antilles qui ont faim,
 At the end of first light burgeoning with frail covets the
 hungry Antilles,

Au bout du petit matin, l’extrême, trompeuse désolée
eschare sur la blessure des eaux;
 At the end of first light, the extreme, deceptive desolate
 eschar on the wound of the waters;

Au bout du petit matin, cette ville plate—étalée, (“Cahier” 23–24)²¹
 At the end of first light, this town sprawled—flat, (*Original 1939*
Notebook 3)²²

Most of the poem presumably takes place in that repeated time, “*au bout du petit matin*.” Yet each time the repeated segment returns, it is

²¹Cabrera’s Spanish introductory verses read: “*Al morir el alba, de frágiles enseñadas retoñando, las Antillas ham-/brientas . . . Al morir el alba, la extrema engañadora, desolada pústula sobre la he-/rida del agua . . . Al morir el alba, esta ciudad chata-expuesta . . .*” (*Retorno 5*).

²²I have adjusted the line breaks of Arnold and Eshelman’s edition throughout to more closely approximate the 1939 edition of the poem. I have consulted the line breaks in the typescript and manuscript of the poem housed at the Library of the French National Assembly, courtesy of Alex Gil, and my copy of the typescript kept by Wifredo Lam from the SDO Lam, and they both coincide with the 1939 *Volontés* version.

met with a new clause that in turn introduces a new spatial location to the temporal setting of the poem. Emulating the voyage home enunciated in the poem's title, each repetition indicates a traveling perspective, one that is progressively closer and closer to the island, culminating in a view of disembarking upon the voyager's destination. It begins with a distant view of the Antilles as a hungry body; then, moving closer, the island comes into view first as the eschar of a wound, and finally, the town itself becomes visible, that unnamed town that will go on to be the central location for various close-up descriptions throughout the poem. The anaphora both unites each of the scenes it introduces in time and differentiates between them in scope, so that each recurrence marks the progressive movement of return narrated in the poem.

The repeated clause "*au bout du petit matin*" is as sonorously sublime a choice as it is difficult to translate. First of all, "*bout*" translates to "end" but not "the end" of a time the way that "*fin*" clearly does. Its primary meaning refers to the ends of continuous spaces or objects ("Bout"). The use of "*bout*" in Césaire's leitmotif anaphora, instead of the more obvious choice of "*fin*," therefore indicates the temporal location in space (and not exactly in time) of the poem's setting. But this time *on* the end (which end?) of "*petit matin*," is a more amorphous, or uncertain, time than it would be if it had been expressed with "*fin*." "*Bout*" allows the temporal location of the poem to be as uncertainly multiplicitous as its unnamed primary geographic location, suggesting the poem may occur at any "end" of "*petit matin*." "*Bout*" is also a form of the verb, "*bouillir*," to boil, indicating that this indeterminate time is also boiling.²³ As for the rest of the clause, although "*petit matin*" is associated with dawn, the two are not interchangeable; the continuous nature of "*petit matin*" engulfs the time of dawn without directly referring to it. The "*au bout du petit matin*" clause marking the poem's time thus figures something like the precipice of a time that is itself a continuous, intermediary point between night and day, or the edge of an amorphous duration somewhere between a risen and not yet risen sun.

Cabrera's choice for translating "*au bout du petit matin*" is nowhere near a good faith effort. She turns "*au bout du petit matin*" into "*al morir el alba*" (at the dying of dawn, or as dawn dies). In so doing, Cabrera shifts the temporality of most of the poem and intervenes poetically into the trope of death that is also germane to the poem's critique of colonialism and slavery. Césaire's anaphora hinges on a dawn at the

²³Yu-jin Chang suggested to me the pertinence of "bout" to "bouillir."

poem's climax, and in Cabrera's version of it, the temporal relationship of the poem's setting to its climactic daybreak becomes more determinate.

Near the end of Césaire's poem, the indeterminacy of "*au bout du petit matin*" breaks into an image of dawn superimposed with the destruction of a slave ship:

*Je dis hurrah! La vieille négritude progressivement se cadavérise
l'horizon se défait, recule et s'élargit
et voici parmi des déchiquètements de nuages la fulgurance d'un signe
le négrier craque de toute part . . .* ("Cahier" 48)

I say hurray! The old negritude progressively cadavers itself
the horizon breaks, recoils and expands
and through the shredding of clouds the flashing of a sign
the slave ship cracks from one end to the other . . . (*Original 1939*
Notebook 53)²⁴

The passage stages three simultaneous moves in a catachresis, or a mixing of metaphors, in which all elements of the mixture bear on each other and produce something new among them. The old negrifying negritude—that imposed "negritude" of slavery persisting beyond slavery's end, born from the *négrier* (*negrero* in Spanish), or slave ship, becomes a cadaver as the horizon breaks.²⁵ Where the sun would break out of the horizon at sunrise, a cracking slave ship appears. The broken-down ship figures the defeat of slavery and the racist, imposed "negritude" left in its wake. This is the image "*au bout du petit matin*" foreshadows again and again, where the horizon breaks and recedes, giving way to the breakdown of slavery and its legacy. It is here that Césaire's poem culminates, in an image of defeating slavery.²⁶

This climactic dawn merged with the destruction of a slave ship relates ambiguously to the temporality of the rest of the poem. The

²⁴Cabrera's translation follows suit with: "*Grito hurra! La vieja negrura progresivamente/ se cadaverisa /el horizonte se desvanece retrocede y se ensancha/ y he aquí entre las nubes despedazadas el fulgor de un signo/ el negrero reviente por todas partes . . .*" (*Retorno* 26). Cabrera translates "*négritude*" to "*negrura*," the Spanish word for "blackness." Much later, in her essay, "Notas sobre Africa, la Négritud y la actual poesía Yoruba" (Notes on Africa, negritude and contemporary Yoruba poetry), she would refer to negritude in Césaire as "*negritud*," a term that has more recently been adopted in Spanish to affirmatively locate the Spanish-speaking African diaspora. Although "*negrura*" does not carry the inventive, symbolic charge of Césaire's neologism, it is the extant word for blackness whose valence would depend on context.

²⁵In my use of "negrifying," I draw on Paget Henry's elaboration of this term.

²⁶About this stanza F. Abiola Irele explains, "It is as if the poet's cry of triumph produces a change of scene, to a dramatic presentation of an insurrection on board a slave ship during the Middle Passage" (141).

broken-down ship is a beacon that promises to usher in a new day, but is the dawn it portrays in the past, present, or future of the rest of the poem? Because “*au bout du petit matin*” is an indeterminate point around dawn, Césaire’s poem withholds a direct answer to that question. The result is that Césaire locates most of the “Cahier” ambiguously around this dawn of the defeat of slavery—either before or after it. The historical sense of that ambiguity would be that slavery proper has ended but its legacy destructively lives on, its wounds festering, the persisting racism it generated continuing to structure Caribbean life.

The poetic sense of that ambiguity would be that the poem exhumes the cadaver of slavery in order to reformulate a future “negritude” historically grounded in the resistance to slavery. The weight of slavery’s legacy falls heavily on the poem, even if it takes place after the end of slavery proper: if it is not clear whether the poem occurs in the wake of slavery or before its true end—it is because both are true. The force of the poeticized revolt/sunrise seems to suggest that the future liberation from the legacy of slavery requires a similar kind of action—destroying the infrastructure of slavery and producing out of the wreckage something like a vessel for carrying free people.

Cabrera’s translation of the anaphora, “*al morir el alba*” (at the dying of dawn) redirects the logic of the poem as it relates to its climactic dawn—*al morir* indicates the occurrence of death. If dawn is the promise of day, the death of dawn would mean the foreclosure of that day, the breaking of dawn’s promise. The setting and mood of Césaire’s poem—the devastated landscape, the inertia, the scenes of death and misery—suggest something similar to this foreclosure, but in his text, the coming of a new day remains possible as an open question. In her translation, however, Cabrera answers the question: the dawn of this new day is dying. The poem thus undergoes a distortion-in-transformation, or an *anamorphosis*, when she translates it. Cabrera effectively crosses an image into Césaire’s poem, refracting his poetic apparatus for its Cuban addressees. Although, as Naoki Sakai explains, translators cannot be held responsible for what they *say* in translations, since, as translators, they are not allowed to make meaning in the text, Cabrera alters Césaire’s signifying field enough to modify the poem’s construction of the Caribbean (74).²⁷ Although Cabrera’s solution to the problem of translating the poem’s structuring anaphora is elegant

²⁷As Efraín Kristal’s work has demonstrated, Jorge Luis Borges also significantly transformed the texts he translated. In his own essay on translation, Borges himself rejected the ideal of translation in favor of the vast and productive histories of actual, un-ideal translations.

and resourceful, it exacerbates the pessimism in Césaire's text, one he mediates ambivalently with futurism. The choice is purposive, and it constitutes a subtle but meaningful poetic appropriation of Césaire's political interpretation of Caribbean coloniality, or the persisting racial hierarchies constituted by empire and slavery.

The dying dawn of emancipation rendered in Cabrera's Césaire may be legible to a Cuban context in which the ideal of racial democracy was fractured by persisting forms of racial discrimination and violence. As Afro-Cuban poet and chronicler Nicolás Guillén explained as early as 1929, in his article, "The White Man: This is the Problem," racism in Cuba during this period was "*de facto* and not *de jure*" (193). But even that distinction is difficult to make, for as Guillén explains, the law *recognized* "the equality of all Cubans," but there remained in the legacy of slavery a distinct division between black and white Cubans. Slavery created, as Guillén argues, two distinct legal categories of people, one of which—those of African descent—was subsumed beneath the category of the "white dominators." Even if Cubans had been legislated to be equal before the law, these previously stipulated legal categories persisted in many practices. Like Martinique at this time, Cuba had not eradicated the power structures embedded in plantation slavery when it was extinguished as a practice. The Cuba Guillén portrays is one in which the racism born of slavery continued to pervade life and interfere regularly with the life course of Cubans of African descent.

Somewhere between changing laws and persisting discriminatory practices, the dawn of emancipation may very well have appeared to Cabrera to be dying in Cuba.²⁸ Guillén's chronicle was part of a series of editorials he wrote about problems facing black and mixed race Cubans for the Cuban newspaper, *Diario de la Marina*, between 1928 and 1930. This series of chronicles plunge through and re-write the view upheld by white elites that black Cubans were to blame for the difference between racial groups in post-slavery Cuba. While Guillén's critiques elucidate the nuances of Cuban racism during this period, they also indicate an active and anti-racist black public sphere.

In "The White Conquest," Guillén explains the perspective prevalent among the white elite that racism was a black problem: "Some educated whites, referring to black aspirations in Cuba, smile with benevolence

²⁸In her lecture, "Translating Culture: Lydia Cabrera's Liminal Worlds," Marial Iglesias Utset noted that growing up in the mixed neighborhood of Centro Habana, Lydia Cabrera grew up wealthy and in close proximity to many poor and working class black Cubans.

and drop a phrase that summarizes their position regarding people of dark skin. ‘The problem of the black Cuban,’ they say, ‘is simply cultural’” (191). Here, the cultural problem perceived is one that has been foisted *onto* black Cubans (De la Fuente 34). In these articles, Guillén transforms the notion that it is “lack of culture” that keeps blacks from equal footing with whites in Cuba into a critique of the racist culture that refuses to allow for black and white equality.

The dawn of legally stipulated equality in Cuba thus failed to usher in the promise of lived equality. In the tradition exemplified by Cuban independence leader José Martí, the denial of racism alongside its denunciation persisted in the Euro-dominant public sphere. When Martí proclaimed, “There is no racial hatred because there are no races” in his famous text, “Our America” (1891), he attempted to erase the history of racial differentiation and racism.²⁹ Vera Kutzinski understands Martí’s words as working to “soften the racial differences and conflicts that threatened to divide Cuba,” but also notes that his writings on racial difference were “at best problematic” and “at worst hypocritical” (6). Indeed, Martí participated in a trend that has persisted in Cuba perhaps until the present day: that is, to officially ignore the extent of racism’s violence, allowing it to persist alongside a denial of its existence. This persistence *in denial* most certainly inflects the intellectual climate unto which Cabrera’s crossing of Césaire was received.³⁰

In 1943, the state-sponsored *Anuario de la cultura cubana* (Yearbook of Cuban Culture) included a review of the *Retorno* that was both positive and distancing. Gaston Baquero, the mixed race poet associated with high modernism, reviewed Césaire’s poem as “*Para todo amante de la poesía contemporánea, este ‘Retorno al país natal’ de Aime Césaire [sic] constituye uno de los puertos indispensables de parada y admiración* [For all lovers of contemporary poetry, Aimé Césaire’s ‘*Retorno al país natal*’ constitutes an indispensable port at which to stop and admire the view]” (282). He recommends the poem as an object to consume in literary tourism, as if, instead of a poem from a neighboring island with a comparable history and present, it was an “exotic” object from a faraway place.

²⁹Although this may be Martí’s most famous refusal to acknowledge racial hatred on the basis that biological concepts of race had been scientifically debunked by the end of the nineteenth century, the view was reinforced in his other writings as well. See also, for example, José Martí, “My Race.” José Buscaglia links this moment in Martí to the notion that racial difference made the nation an impossibility (xi-xiii).

³⁰Alejandro De la Fuente also argues that United States control over Cuba supported and fueled racist discourse and policies that co-existed with the Cuban state’s propagation of “racial democracy” (40–43).

Baquero's distancing of Césaire from the Cuban poetic geography is reinforced in his review of a poem by Euro-Cuban writer Virgilio Piñera, "La isla en peso" ("The weight of the island") that was also published in 1943. Piñera's poem demonstrates a clear influence by Aimé Césaire. Like Césaire's "Cahier," Piñera's "La isla en peso" is set on an unnamed but obviously Caribbean island. It critiques longstanding colonial structures in Cuban society with a special emphasis on the role of European conquest, slavery, and Catholicism in overdetermining the taboos of Cuban sexuality. Piñera intertextually engages many of Césaire's motifs with a focus on the colonization of sexuality in Cuba. Baquero's review distances Piñera's poem by likening its un-Cuban location to that of Césaire's poem. As he argues, Piñera's poem is "*en desconexión absoluta con el tono cubano de expresión, es Isla de una antillanía y una martiniquería que no nos expresan, que no nos pertenecen* [absolutely disconnected from the Cuban tone of expression, an Island of an Antilleanness and Martiniquery (*Martiniquería*) that do not express us, that do not belong to us]" (278–9). Baquero, as official gatekeeper of the Cuban literary field, resists a critical portrayal of Cuba assimilable to Césaire's portrayal of Martinique so much that he disqualifies Piñera's poem from the realm of Cuban literature. Even as it was distanced, however, Piñera's highly influential text confirms the link between the two islands that Cabrera's distorting translation also suggests. When considering the migration and translation of Césaire's poem to the Cuban context, what emerges is a Cuban locus for Caribbean affiliation, decolonization, and to some extent, black consciousness, even if—or precisely because—that possibility was disavowed by official critics like Baquero.

Anaphora Disrupted: Masculinity Interrupted

The translation's forging of a trans-Caribbean zone was subject to both Cabrera's work on Césaire's readability and on the fissures of the Cuban context of reception. Her translation also crosses a subtle critique of gender dynamics into the poem through interruptions of the same structuring anaphora. For most of the poem, Cabrera translates Césaire's anaphora with rhetorical compliance, consistently employing "*al morir el alba.*" In three instances she disrupts this regularity, however, by substituting this clause with "*al fin del amanecer,*" or "at the end of sunrise."³¹ These disruptions of the anaphora occur precisely

³¹This example is not the only anaphora that she disrupts in the poem; its disruption is just the most egregious case.

at moments when the poem's male-identified narrator addresses or invokes his masculinity. In the example that follows, Cabrera ruptures the anaphora by introducing "*al fin del amanecer*" when the narrator reflects on his state of being in gendered terms:

*Au bout du petit matin,
la mâle soif et l'entêté désir,
me voici divisé des oasis fraîches de la fraternité . . .* ("Cahier" 32)

At the end of first light,
the male thirst and the desire stubborn,
here I am, severed from the cool oases of brotherhood . . . (*Original
1939 Notebook* 19)

*Al fin del amanecer,
una sed de macho y el testarudo deseo,
me dividen los frescos oasis de la fraternidad . . .* (*Retorno* 12)³²

Césaire's "*au bout du petit matin*" marks the introduction of a new scene using the same uncertain time that is the setting of the majority of the poem. In his iteration of the anaphora, what follows are verses connected to each other only through the space they share in the stanza and the temporality it introduces. First, "male thirst" and "obstinate desire" enter the scene, followed by a narrator who locates himself as divided, or severed, from a brotherhood figured as "cool oases." Here, the "male thirst" and desire may or may not belong to the lyric subject of the poem, but they are separate or alienated from him. They may or may not enact his alienation from the fraternity that follows. The narrator goes on to be overtaken by two images, one of a "modest nothing" that pierces like splinters and one of an unstable but arrogant horizon imprisoning him like a jailer ("Cahier" 32). F. Abiola Irele reads the stanza overall as articulating "the desire for a greater destiny, sharpened by [the narrator's] confinement within the narrow limits of his little island and by his acute sense of separation from his own people . . ." (69). Desire, entrapment, and isolation converge on this stanza, but a gendered tension is also woven into the images, one highlighted and amplified by Cabrera's disruption of the anaphora and translation choices (*Retorno* 12).

Cabrera also translates out much of the passage's ambiguity. In her version, "male thirst" and "obstinate desire" themselves divide the narrator from the "oases of brotherhood." Spanish by no means necessitates her shift; it would have been simple for her to mirror the

³²Whereas the Arnold and Eschelmann translation mirrors the indentation of Césaire's source text, Cabrera's translation does not.

French almost literally here. Furthermore, what in Césaire is a “modest nothing” that “bristles” (*rien pudique frise*) becomes in Cabrera’s Césaire an “immodest frieze” (*impúdico friso*) (“Cahier” 32; *Retorno* 12). In dialogue with the gender dynamics of Césaire’s poem, she transforms the mobility of the bristles into the immobility of a frieze. What remains a latent possibility in Césaire’s poem—that male thirst and desire are causally linked to a failed brotherhood—becomes the manifest meaning in Cabrera’s Césaire: male desire interrupts *fraternité*, which, even when it implies universal community, is the signifier of unity between men. In her version, the arrogant “horizon jailer” that shudders to end the stanza becomes inextricably linked to this “male desire” at fault for the failure of fraternity. As if to clarify this connection, she mistranslates “*frise*” with its false cognate “*friso*” and turns Césaire’s proclaimed modesty into a frieze of immodesty.

Cabrera’s interruption of Césaire’s anaphora and subsequent licentious translating crosses into the poem a manifest critique of masculinity that otherwise remains latent. This is only one example of her disrupting this anaphora, however. In two other instances, one in which the narrator’s political desire is frustrated and another in which he introduces a “virile prayer,” Cabrera inserts “the end of sunrise” instead of “as dawn dies,” to introduce the passages, drawing special attention to them and their gendered and sexualized images (*Retorno* 5, 22). Rupturing the anaphora and indicating an end point at these moments, Cabrera’s translation at best draws attention to, and at worst interrupts, the masculinism of Césaire’s poem.

Césaire’s gender politics have not gone unquestioned by critics. For example, in the introduction to her English translation of the last version of the “Cahier,” Mireille Rosello notes “the remarkable absence of women” in it (36). Indeed, as she notes, the only working woman described in the poem is the narrator’s mother who is portrayed pedaling the night away at her “Singer” in order to feed her family (“Cahier” 29). The references to women in the first edition “Cahier” Cabrera translated are few. As the town featured in the poem is introduced, it is compared to two women: one is described in reference to “the lyrical cadence of her buttocks,” a reference that Césaire notably excised from the poem by the 1956 edition. The other, a peasant woman (*une paysanne*) urinates standing, her legs spread apart (“Cahier” 24). Several stanzas later, a woman appears to be floating in the river Capot, but she swiftly disappears into refuse (“Cahier” 25).³³ When Cabrera

³³Cabrera uses “playa Capot” [Capot beach] to translate “rivière.” The “mistake” is curious for it is unlikely that Cabrera lacked this knowledge in French. A river does

“ends sunrise” and interrupts the anaphora as the poem’s narrator both asserts and doubts the force of his masculinity, perhaps she marks these points for future reflection. Thus mutating the poem, Cabrera’s interruptions and transgressions anticipate feminist critiques of the masculinism in anticolonial Caribbean discourse.

The Contours of Solidarity in Crossing

Many years later, in Cabrera’s “Notes on Africa, Negritude, and Contemporary Yoruba Poetry,” she hails Césaire’s “Cahier” as “the deep, vigorous, spine-chilling cry of the African vindication heard around the world” (478). In this reading, she imbues the poem itself with a redemptive quality that acts on the history of the slave trade. Perhaps she is reaching here: does the poem incite future redemptions or is it a vindication itself? Her view emerges in the course of a text denouncing the history of slavery in Hispanic history and its persistent byproduct of denigrating African heritage in diaspora. She may not have shared Césaire’s vision, but to a certain extent, we may assume her solidarity with Césaire, and as such, it is worth considering her translation’s disruptions and distortions as problems that bear on the kind of agency enacted by the lived (though not ideal) practices of both translation and solidarity.

It is crucial that the poem for the most part consists of Cabrera’s total and loving poetic complicity with Césaire. In fact, as Alex Gil has indicated, most of her “faithful” translation preserves even the syntax of Césaire’s French (23). Usually, the closeness of the translation would simply indicate a job well done, but in a translation, which, as we have seen, contains pointed disruptions and distortions, “good” translation reveals something more. The translator’s linguistic-rhetorical compliance in cases like this one suggests the kind of “surrender . . . to the linguistic rhetoricity of the original text” with “larger political consequences” that Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak calls upon translators to undertake (377). For Benjamin, the translator’s job is to traverse between languages, carrying the language of the original *as it is worked upon* by its author (80–81). Spivak in turn calls that work the original text’s “linguistic rhetoricity,” identifying rhetoric, over logic, as the would-be terrain of a translator’s focus. For Spivak, translating well at the level of rhetoric constitutes an ethical achievement that foregrounds more than the reciprocity between languages: it also indicates

in fact empty onto a beach at Capot in Martinique, and a floating body in the river would conceivably enter that beach.

the possibility of reciprocity between writer and translator, a relationship that the translator establishes by way of her work, which I would like to call in the case at hand, her poetic solidarity (370–374). When Cabrera surrenders to Césaire, or matches (to bring back Benjamin) the rhetorical work of his language, she aligns poetically with him, demonstrating her solidarity.

It is precisely because of the heightened stakes of Césaire's poetic refashioning of the history of slavery and racism, and because of the role of gender in this process, that solidarity becomes a valuable framework to interrogate for a translation such as this one. Cabrera's three disruptions of Césaire's anaphora, calling the dawn's end (*fin*) at moments in which the speaker invokes masculinity, signal what we might consider the limits of her solidarity with Césaire. She may be infusing the poem with a proto-feminist critique of the masculinism embedded in his emancipatory discourse. Ending the dawn at these moments, however, she may also be limiting Césaire's gendered agency in the production of his critique. Solidarity, like translation, has its limits.

The work of her distortion, on the other hand, seems to indicate a different kind of solidarity move altogether. Instead of detracting from Césaire's uncertainly placed edge of dawn, in an appropriative solidarity, Cabrera pushes his critique further, articulating a foreclosed dawn. It is as if she says, either to Césaire or to her Cuban audience through Césaire: *Have no doubt; the promise of freedom in the dawn of emancipation is not just uncertainly located—it is dying*. This is the kind of solidarity that pushes a critique forward and extends it, in this case, to a new location. In her version of Césaire's poem, the entreaty to an ambivalently conceived liberation becomes, instead of the possibly foreclosed dream of forging a new day, the project of reversing the death of emancipation. Liberation from the colonial legacy of slavery in Cabrera's Césaire requires an even more potent move than it does in Césaire's rendition: un-dying the dawn, or un-doing the death—or foreclosure—of dawn (itself the ultimate image of hope and renewal). In other words, like the descent into the various levels of racist hell performed by the poem, retrieving the dawn demands a momentous plunge into all of the forces that would have it die.

Even in its nodes of divergence, Cabrera's translation demonstrates that Césaire's critique of post-slavery racism in colonial Martinique translates into the persisting racist climate of neo-colonial Cuba, increasing by way of her crossing the readability of the Caribbean's existence as a location of shared pasts and horizons. C. L. R. James

extends the Caribbeanist dimensions of Césaire's "Cahier" in his take on it in the 1963 appendix essay to his monumental work, *The Black Jacobins*, "From Toussaint L'Ouverture to Fidel Castro." James cites from Césaire's poem extensively, but he draws attention to one passage in particular as the "centre of the poem" (401). The passage is indeed crucial, for it points to the *kind* of inclusivity Césaire's poem invited:

*et il reste à l'homme à conquérir toute interdiction immobilisée
aux coins de sa ferveur
et aucune race ne possède le monopole de la beauté, de l'intelligence, de la force
et il est place pour tous au rendez-vous de la conquête . . .* ("Cahier" 46–47)

and it remains to man to conquer all
the violence entrenched in the recesses
of his passion
and no race possesses the monopoly of beauty,
of intelligence, of force, and there
is place for all at the rendezvous
of victory . . . (James 401)

*y al hombre le queda por conquistar toda prohibición inmovilizada
en los rincones de su fervor
y ninguna raza posee el monopolio de la belleza,
de la inteligencia, de la fuerza
y hay espacio para todos en el lugar de reunión de la conquista . . .* (*Retorno*
24)

In this passage Césaire points the way, and Cabrera closely follows, towards undoing the old "negritude." Césaire offers an alternative conquest to the one that resulted in slavery and colonialism—the conquest of all "immobilized prohibitions." In Cabrera's rendition, the "immobilized prohibitions" or "immodest friezes" that exclude women from masculinist liberation projects need also be conquered. Against the thesis of black inferiority Césaire posits the thesis of black revolt, figuring a new meeting place of conquest. Out of this ambivalent space that is potent but not quite a "victory," an intertextual Caribbean imaginary proliferates.

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