Best known as one of the foundational poets of the Negritude movement in the Francophone Caribbean, Aimé Césaire remains to this day a very influential voice in the colonial and postcolonial world. Beginning with the publication of *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal* (1939; rev. ed. 1956), his poetic masterpiece and de facto manifesto of negritude, Césaire cultivated poetry and drama, and produced significant nonfiction works that range from essays to speeches, prefaces, declarations, and even a major historical study. In addition to that distinguished career as a writer, Césaire also had an important career as a politician. From 1945 to 1993 Césaire held simultaneously the positions of Mayor of Fort-de-France and deputy to the French Assembly. He was also instrumental in the transformation of Martinique into an official “Département d’Outre-Mer” after World War II, although as time went by he became disillusioned with some of the restrictions and impositions of that status, and for many years he struggled for more local autonomy.¹

As a writer and as a political leader, Césaire explored and attempted to reconcile the needs of his people with the problematic and evolving relationship between his island and France. Such exploration entailed an unrelenting examination of the legacy of colonialism and slavery, which to this day inevitably mediates the interactions between Martinique and the metropolis. Césaire’s examination of that colonial legacy has made his
work intensely pertinent to other countries and regions that have shared aspects of Martinique’s historical experience, just as the experiences of other countries (from Patrice Lumumba’s Congo to Henri Christophe’s Haiti) have given Césaire rich material and examples in order to ponder questions of immense importance to himself and Martinique. Fundamental among Césaire’s works that explore the (anti)colonial experience of other countries are the two books he dedicated to Haiti in the early 1960s. As we will see below, Haiti remained an inspiring yet agonizing presence in Césaire’s thought from the beginning to the end of his career. However, it seems clear that, by the 1960s, political events—of which we must give priority to the wave of anti-colonial and independence movements throughout Africa and around the world—had brought to the foreground questions and anxieties that Césaire saw best embodied in Haiti’s history. Without lapsing too far into biographical criticism, one may ask then, what is the relationship between the struggle for nationhood in the Haiti of his historical study *Toussaint Louverture: La révolution française et le problème colonial* (1961), the newly independent Haiti of his first play, *La tragédie du roi Christophe* (1963), and Césaire’s concerns for his own island since he became the leading politician there in 1945. This chapter attempts an answer to that question by conducting a comparative study of both works and examining the diverse imperatives facing the poet and political leader, a man who, until his death in 2008, still met with visitors in his office in Fort-de-France and voiced strong opinions on political and cultural affairs.

Although separated by only two years, Césaire’s works on Toussaint and Christophe approach the Haitian Revolution from very different perspectives. In general terms, it may be argued that *Toussaint Louverture* attempts to explain the Revolution, and the figure of Toussaint Louverture, in terms of the “enlightened,” universalist ideals that shaped the French Revolution. *La tragédie du roi Christophe*, on the other hand, attempts a balancing act that is harder to sustain. On the one hand, it clearly displays Christophe’s despotism and the corrupting effects of power. On the other hand, the play attempts to highlight the tragic, albeit frustrated, nobility of the aspirations behind Christophe’s actions. For even in his authoritarian blindness the king is guided by an attempt to affirm the historical greatness of the black populations in Haiti (and by extension, everywhere). From that perspective, Louverture and Christophe emerge, both in severely partial ways, as forerunners of negritude, as Césaire conceives it. Christophe tries to reach the universal via a celebration of the particular (in his case, the black people of Haiti), rather than subordinating the particular to the claims of the “universal” enlight-
ened values upon which France, and other European powers, have justified their colonial enterprises. Louverture, on the other hand, departs from those “universal” values, as expressed by the French Revolution, and “concretizes” them in the Haitian context. Both the play and the essay offer Haitian history as a Caribbean embodiment of the colonial condition, with its multiple possibilities and contradictions. But even though it might seem that both works simply reach the same end from different perspectives, there are in fact considerable tensions between their approaches, which have very different ideological implications. Those tensions clearly reveal the diverse imperatives that the poet struggles with as a Caribbean intellectual and politician.

The Lure of the Universal

In referring to Césaire’s engagement with universalism and particularism, I am in fact addressing what Naomi Schor has aptly referred to as the oxymoron of “French Universalism.” As Schor clearly indicates, even though “universalism is defined as the opposite of particularism, ethnic, religious, national, or otherwise,” nevertheless “French national discourse has for centuries claimed that France is the capital of universalism” (43). Schor compellingly traces the evolution of “French universalism” from its religious origins based on France’s role as defender and purveyor of Catholicism, to its incarnation in claims to linguistic universalism (French as the language of reason and transparency), to the rational and ethical universalism of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. All of those conceptions of “French universalism” (or more appropriately, as Schor also names it, “the Frenchness of universalism” [“Crisis,” 43]), naturally carry with them the legitimization of France’s time honored “civilizing mission.”¹ I will return to such claims to universal reason at the end of this chapter. However, it is important to remember that, from the perspective of subjugated peoples whose cultures and natural resources were shattered by colonialism and by the shameful reality of the slave trade, France’s “civilizing mission” was a justification for, and therefore cannot be separated from, that nation’s colonial endeavors. It is that colonial framework that Césaire confronts in his works, even when he agrees with some of the tenets of “universalism” as presented by the French enlightenment.⁴

It may be useful to clarify that what is at stake here is not a philosophical discussion of the universal “as such,” in the abstract. One might concede the
need and inevitability of such a notion coming up in discussions of human affairs, and even its potential usefulness in discussions of human rights and global justice. However, what we are addressing here are the concrete discursive incarnations that the concept has taken in the long history of Europe’s global imperial expansion. In that concrete and ineludible context, the notion of universalism has frequently served as a justification for the domination of cultures that were deemed inferior or primitive, lagging behind a Europe (or France, or the West) that had the duty to redeem or civilize them. Inevitably, and beyond any potential value of the universal “as such” (if one may talk about such a thing), the history of the values and norms presented and often violently imposed as universal is full of self-servingly Eurocentric ideas.

The paradoxical nature of Césaire’s engagement with France’s claims as stronghold of universal values in *Toussaint Louverture* and *La tragédie du roi Christophe* is highlighted when we pay attention to the concrete historical moment when both the essay and the play were written. Césaire breaks with the French Communist Party in 1956 and creates his own party, the “Parti Progressiste Martiniquais,” in 1958: his well-known *Lettre à Maurice Thorez* explains his reasons, chief among which is the inability of the Communist Party’s framework to take into account the specific plight of black peoples in the colonial world. In 1958, Charles de Gaulle inaugurates the Fifth Republic, which Césaire supports on the assumption (based on promises by de Gaulle) that it would bring more autonomy to the French Overseas Departments: he is soon disappointed with the actual results. The events in France eventually lead to the Algerian crisis and the wave of independence movements in Africa; Césaire’s writings from this period, as well as his speeches in the French Assembly, show his support for those decolonizing developments. His literary works from that period are marked by a renewed emphasis on the history of the Antilles and on the topics of colonization and slavery from the perspective of those recent events. One can appreciate that renewal of the writer’s focus in poetry collections such as *Ferments* (1960), whose title plays on the French words “fers,” referring to the iron shackles that were put on slaves, and “ferments,” referring to the revolutionary ferments arising all throughout the colonized black world.

Césaire’s passionate interest in contemporary anticolonial movements also found expression in essays such as the preface to the writings of Guinean independence leader and first president Sekou Touré, where his praise for the Guinean president echoes the concerns that drive him to study the two heroes of the Haitian Revolution:
One sees many erroneous statements about him. Some of his French admirers say with satisfaction: “He is a product of our culture.” Others, the reactionaries, say: “Do not trust him, he has been formed by Prague and Moscow.” The truth seems altogether different to me. One only has to observe his style: abandonment of self and control of self, vehemence and wisdom, particularism and humanism—he has created in politics the African style, but it is Africa, its millenary past, that has taught him all that. (“Preface,” 6; my translation)

In Césaire’s preface, Touré becomes the embodiment of the balance between “particularisme et humanisme” that will also guide his exploration of Toussaint Louverture and King Christophe. An aspiration to a never fully achieved equilibrium between those two principles will guide Césaire’s political and literary output, shaping his compromises and spurring his rebelliousness. Of course, there is no reason why particularism should be opposed to humanism, except within a Eurocentric, colonial framework that regards the non-European as not fully human. As I will suggest below, Césaire’s inability to completely let go of that Eurocentric assumption (a valorization of the human over the particular that overlooks the particular “Frenchness” of France’s colonial version of “the human”), even as he dissects its racist premises, is one of the underlying dramas of his anticolonial activity.

That Césaire possessed a deep insight on the issue of particularism and universalism is clearly shown in his Letter to Maurice Thorez (1956), one of the documents that most clearly exposes his political philosophy. Beyond its immediate purpose of breaking with the French Communist Party, the letter presents Césaire’s mature positions on some of his most cherished political concerns. Toward the end of the text, Césaire states:

I shall anticipate an objection. Provincialism? Not at all. I am not burying myself in a narrow particularism. But neither do I want to lose myself in an emaciated universalism. There are two ways to lose oneself: walled segregation in the particular or dilution in the “universal.” My conception of the universal is that of a universal enriched by all that is particular, a universal enriched by every particular: the deepening and coexistence of all particulars. (“Letter,” 152)

In “Letter to Maurice Thorez,” Césaire displays a remarkable awareness of the universal and the particular as relative points of a spectrum whose main
characteristic is its continuity, none of whose points can be imposed as the summit that simply transcends those that come before and exist around it. In fact, the “universal,” as defined by Césaire in the letter, has a striking resemblance to Ernesto Laclau’s categorization of the universal (in *Emancipation(s)*) as an “empty signifier,” an ever receding horizon whose main purpose is precisely to always avoid and escape “walled segregation,” but whose content cannot be prescribed or imposed.  

My point here is that, in spite of Césaire’s insightful ideas on these issues, as revealed in the quote above from “Letter to Maurice Thorez,” in fact throughout his career he experienced the relation between the universal and the particular as a tension, a source of anxious concern. This, as I will show below, is most clearly seen in his two works on Haiti. And the reason for Césaire’s discomfort, I venture, is that he was trying to dismantle from the inside a colonial logic that ontologizes Europe’s claim as sole or main possessor of the universal and the human. In conjunction with the coloniality of power and knowledge, the coloniality of being operates precisely by racializing (essentializing) cultural differences that are also fitted neatly into Europe’s narrative of what Enrique Dussel calls the myth of modernity: everything non-European falls outside of, or at best comes before, Europe’s *universal* narrative toward its own modern self. Stuck in their colonial difference, Europe’s Others are condemned to perpetually aspire to that universal presence, while remaining eternally condemned to the partiality of their particularity. What we observe in Césaire is not only a critique of this model but also the drama of a colonial subject partially caught in it. This, I should clarify, I do not present as criticism of Césaire, but rather in order to insist on why his work remains so vital, so necessary, so engaging for us still today. Even at his most political, Césaire is never merely programmatic: his doubts, hesitations, and shifts reveal the humanity that makes him first and foremost a poet.

**Where Negritude Rose for the First Time**

The events of the late fifties and early sixties certainly made Césaire’s examination of the issues mentioned in the previous section particularly pressing (to the point of making him choose drama as his main literary medium of expression, in order to reach wider segments of the population). However, it is also true that the poet’s main preoccupations remained fairly constant
throughout his career, for his concern, from his very early works, was an exploration of (with a view to overcoming) the colonial condition. Thus, it is not surprising that Haiti is present in Césaire’s work from the very beginning.

Already in his foundational Cahier, Césaire refers to Haiti as the country “where negritude rose for the first time” (Notebook, 15), and in a well-known passage from the poem he evokes:

What is also mine: a little cell in the Jura,
a little cell, the snow lines it with white bars
the snow is a jailer mounting guard before a prison
What is mine
a lone man imprisoned in whiteness
a lone man defying the white screams of white death
(TOUSSAINT, TOUSSAINT LOUVERTURE)
a man who mesmerizes the white sparrow hawk of white death
a man alone in the sterile sea of white sand
a coon grown old standing up to the waters of the sky
Death traces a shining circle above this man
death stars softly above his head
death breathes, crazed, in the ripened cane field of his arms
..............................................................
Swellings of night in the four corners of this daybreak
convulsions of congealed death
tenacious fate
screams erect from mute death
the splendor of the blood will it not burst open?
(Césaire, Notebook, 16–17)

Those lines contain Césaire’s first literary allusion to Toussaint Louverture, the heroic “black Jacobin” who became the leader of the slave rebellion in Haiti, but who was ultimately betrayed by his own generals (including Christophe) and taken prisoner by Napoleon. Toussaint dies in solitary confinement in a prison in the Jura Mountains, and already in his lifetime he was considered by some what he is in Césaire’s poem: an emblem of an oppressed people who dared show their oppressors that, in oppressing them, they were betraying their own loftiest principles. As C. L. R. James made clear in The Black Jacobins, Toussaint was greatly inspired in his revolutionary actions by the very principles of the French revolution—liberty, equality, and fraternity—principles whose radical implications he could see more clearly than the empire that destroyed him in order to re-enslave his people. In Césaire’s
poem, Toussaint becomes a martyr of negritude, whose spilled blood awaits the moment when black peoples will burst toward freedom. Politically, that aspiration was a somewhat distant hope when the poem was first published in 1939, but it was well within reach at the publication of the poem’s final and definitive edition in 1956.  

In spite of that invocation of Toussaint as the founding hero of the country “where negritude rose for the first time,” already in the *Cahier* we can see the tensions that will also appear in Césaire’s later works on Haitian Revolution. In the lines quoted above, Césaire carefully constructs Louverture’s death through images of ominous whiteness, and the Haitian independence hero’s ordeal is presented as part of a more generalized battle against racism. To be sure, from its very origins the Haitian revolution was interpreted as a racial threat by European *racist* colonists throughout the rest of the slave-holding Caribbean. And indeed, one cannot deny the importance of the struggle against racism in Haiti’s slaves’ battle for emancipation, for it is clear that racism underlay and articulated the logic of European colonial domination at a global level. Racist essentialism is at the center of the coloniality of power and the coloniality of being that govern and order the colonial/modern world system of which Saint Domingue was an important node. The struggle against such racial logic implies, for Césaire, not simply the material struggle against slavery and colonialism but also the affirmation and celebration of African (and Afro-Caribbean) cultures, customs, and worldviews, which have been reduced to marginal status, at best, by the primacy of Eurocentrism.

However, throughout the *Cahier* Césaire is careful to balance his justified attacks on the colonial legacy of racism, and the resultant affirmation and celebration of the *particularity* and *specificity* of black experience, with exalted (and perfectly consistent with his antiracist stand) declarations that the liberation that he aspires to should be *universal*, that is to say, apply to all races. Thus, in a celebrated passage (one that Edward Said was particularly fond of [Said, *Power*, 220]) we read: “no race has a monopoly on beauty, on intelligence, on strength, and there is room for everyone at the convocation of conquest” (*Notebook*, 44). Interestingly, in that passage Césaire’s invocation of “universal” virtues (“beauty,” “intelligence,” “strength”) comes clothed in the militant (and military) rhetoric of “conquest,” a charged and provocative word in a colonial context. This new “conquest,” we must assume, will only target obstacles or challenges shared by the whole human race.  

My point here is not to minimize in any way the centrality of the struggle against racism and colonialism in Césaire’s work or in his portrayal of Haiti’s battle for emancipation. Rather, I am emphasizing that Césaire’s rhe-
torical strategy in the *Cahier* tends to alternate between Afrocentric pride and a somewhat abstract universalism in his attempt to ground his movement toward liberation. Thus, we find universalist passages like the one on everybody’s place “at the convocation of conquest” quoted above, and multiple passages like the following, in which the poet becomes one with a particularly African setting:

Who and what are we? A most worthy question!
From staring too long at trees I have become a tree and my
long tree feet have dug in the ground large venom sacs . . .
from brooding too long on the Congo
I have become a Congo resounding with forests and rivers
(Césaire, *Notebook*, 18)

The *Cahier* consistently alternates between those two approaches. Even as it invokes a collective encounter of all humanity at the convocation of conquest, it does not forget how Eurocentric definitions of the human have denied the humanity of black peoples (“I am of no nationality recognized by the chancelleries. I defy the craniometer. *Homo sum, etc.*” [ibid., 29]). In fact, at moments the poet flatly refuses to partake of the “achievements” associated with Europe’s aggressive culture: “my negritude is not a tower or a cathedral / it takes root in the red flesh of the soil / it takes root in the ardent flesh of the sky” (ibid., 35). Not surprisingly, Césaire’s ambiguous use of those two paradigms (abstract universalism and affirmation of his black specificity) has occasionally made him the object of criticism and misinterpretations. Negritude itself has been accused of essentialism (by critics like René Ménil), whereas Raphaël Confiant, from the *Creolité* movement, accused Césaire of being too disconnected from the specific realities of his native Caribbean in his constant attention to both France and Africa. On the other hand, in his famous essay “Black Orpheus,” Jean Paul Sartre, a supporter of negritude and its anticolonial claims, felt quite comfortable subsuming the movement under a universal dialectic that in fact reduced its specificity to a dialectical moment of negativity (Sartre *What is Literature*)—an approach that was later criticized by Fanon in *Black Skin*.

Those accusations and interpretations of Césaire’s ideas may not always be fair, but they do point to tensions in his work, tensions that find clear expression in the two works on the Haitian Revolution and its aftermath that Césaire wrote in the 1960s. What I want to highlight here is that Césaire’s alternations between “universalism” and “particularism” are intimately related
to the colonial context in which he writes, which locates him, as a colonial intellectual, in a paradoxical situation: he condemns the exclusionary logic of Eurocentric colonial “humanism,” yet he is unable, and unwilling, to completely let go of paradigms learned from that colonial framework, and which are often used to justify colonial domination. Césaire constantly struggles to open up the notion of universalism, while at the same time using as his point of departure the tenets of “French Universalism,” which then force him to defensively proclaim and affirm his excluded particularity (in a way that seems too essentialist to his critics). Those tensions already form the cradle for that initial invocation of Toussaint Louverture in his first poem, and they will naturally come to the foreground in his subsequent explorations of Haiti’s history.

**Christophe’s Pride and Césaire’s**

*La tragédie du roi Christophe* is a play full of ironic humor. The object of its irony is the attempt on the part of Henry Christophe (as he spelled his name), former general in the Haitian revolution and self-proclaimed king of Haiti, to create a Haitian royal court in the French style. That attempt is accomplished at the expense of the working masses, who must support Christophe’s nobility, just as before they sustained the French colonialists. However, the play, as its title indicates, is supposed to be a tragedy, and its protagonist, Christophe, a tragic hero. What, then, makes Christophe a tragic hero in Césaire’s portrayal? As in the case of other tragic heroes, there is something noble and grand about him, even as the play reveals his tragic flaw and the way he oversteps his rightful boundaries in unrestrained hubris.

In order to better understand what makes Christophe tragic in Césaire’s eyes, therefore admirable in spite of his excess, we can turn to one famous scene of the play in which Christophe’s wife blames him for being too harsh on the Haitian people. Christophe responds:

> I ask too much of men? But not enough of black men, Madame. If there is one thing that riles me as much as slaveholders’ talk, it’s to hear our philanthropists proclaim, with the best of intentions of course, that all men are men and that there are neither blacks nor whites. That’s thinking in an armchair, not in the world. All men have the same rights? Agreed. But some men have more duties than others . . . Does anyone believe that all men, all I say, without privilege, without special exemption, have known capture, deportation, slav-
ery, collective reduction to the level of animals, the monstrous insult, the total outrage that we have suffered, the all-denying spittle plastered on our bodies, spat into our faces. We alone, Madame, do you hear me, we blacks . . . And that’s why I have to ask more of blacks than of other people, more faith, more enthusiasm, a step, another step, and still another, and never a step backward. (*Tragedy*, 41–42)

Here we see another version of the distinction between “humanism” and “particularism” that we saw above in the *Letter to Maurice Thorez*. Yes, all men have equal rights; but no, all men are not simply men. The disjunction between those two statements comes from the fact that one is an abstraction; the other one, an assessment of a long history of colonial domination in which Africans have been not only materially dominated by European empires but also relegated to a subhuman status, both culturally and existentially. Moreover, as Christophe bitterly points out (when he implicitly links the abstract humanism of philanthropists and the rhetoric of slave-owners), Western colonial powers have claimed to purvey the truth of the universality of the human just as they deny or minimize the humanity of their colonized subjects. Even more: knowledge of, and access to, “the human” is that which Europeans presumably bring to those dominated cultures, the white man’s burden, a justification of a colonial process that also keeps full access to “the human” perpetually out of reach for the colonized. It is the recognition of that twisted logic that makes Christophe noble in Césaire’s play, even if as readers and spectators we recognize the way in which he translates his insight into an occasion for his self-aggrandizement.

Christophe articulates the meaning of the Haitian Revolution and his own kingdom as a vindication of the black race. More than once throughout the play he affirms his identity as a black man with regard to both European whites and Haitian mulattoes and free people of color (*Tragedy*, 12, 26, 56, and others). Moreover, Christophe attempts to clarify the meaning of the new nobility titles and names, which could be easily misconstrued as simple imitation of Europe, in the following way:

These new names, these titles of nobility, this Coronation! In the past they stole our names, our pride, our nobility. They, I repeat, stole them. Pierre, Paul, Jacques, Toussaint. Those are the humiliating brand marks with which they obliterated our real names. I myself, your king, can you sense a man’s hurt at not knowing the name he’s called by, or to what his name calls him? Only our Mother Africa knows. Since we can’t rescue our names from the past,
we’ll take them from the future. With names of glory I will cover your slave names, with names of pride our names of infamy, with names of redemption our orphan names! (Tragedy, 25–26)

Thus, in the context of the slaves’ history of material and cultural disposses-
sion, Christophe’s obsession with nobility titles is more than mere personal vanity; it is an admittedly perverse way of restoring pride (recovering Africa) for his black people. Throughout the play, the link between the revolution’s victory and the recovery of that lost Africa is made explicit: during Chris-
tophe’s crowning ceremony we hear a song to Shango, the Yoruba god of thunder and lightning (Tragédie, 40), and the king himself says at one point: “Poor Africa! Poor Haïti, I mean. Anyway, it’s the same thing” (Tragedy, 36). Just before the rebellious masses take over his palace and he kills himself, Christophe invokes the African gods, and finally exclaims:

Africa! Help me to go home, carry me like an aged child in your arms. Undress me and wash me. Strip me of all these garments, strip me as a man strips off dreams when the dawn comes . . . Strip me of my nobles, my nobil-
ity, my scepter, my crown. And wash me, oh, wash me clean of their grease paint, their kisses, wash me clean of my kingdom. (Tragedy, 90)

Displaying the same Afrocentric sensibility that has exasperated some critics of Césaire among the members of the créolité movement in the Caribbean, Christophe’s final apotheosis finds him equaling his true identity with a pri-
mordial Africa rather than with Haiti. In Césaire’s imaginary, Christophe’s European trappings and even his Haitian history as mere temporary dis-
guises that cover his fundamental Africanness.

If I have insisted on these examples of Christophe’s Afrocentric vision, it is because that vision, that desire to exalt his oppressed race, is what redeems him in Césaire’s play, what makes him not simply a vulgar despot but a tragic hero. However, there is a paradox in Christophe’s attempt to vindicate Africa, a paradox that is at the heart of the tragedy. Christophe attempts to vindicate Africa in the Americas by mimicking the splendor of imperial Europe. Clearly, one explanation for this would be to accuse Christophe of simply drawing on a populist rhetoric of African pride in order to better impose his authori-
tarianism as an expression of the will of the masses. Indeed, there may be much truth to that reading, and one might find examples of similar conduct throughout the postcolonial world. But I would suggest there is something subtler is going on in this play. There are no indications that Christophe does
not believe his own rhetoric, and some of his most exalted moments of Afrocentric pride come clothed in a language that reminds us of the intensity of Césaire’s best poetry.

The point I am trying to make is that the play does not simply present the corruption of Christophe by power. It presents the blindness of a colonized subject who, even in his attempt to recover the dignity of an identity denied by the colonial condition, finds no other model on which to articulate his pride than the very colonial frame that deprived him of his dignity in the first place. Christophe looks for agency and greatness, but European splendor is the only available model of grandiosity in his (post)colonial environment. This tragic dilemma had already been articulated by thinkers like Frantz Fanon, who in *Black Skin, White Masks* writes, “Out of the blackest part of my soul, across the zebra stripping of my mind, surges this desire to be suddenly white” (63). The meaning of that desire is further clarified by Fanon: “I will compel the white man to acknowledge that I am human” (ibid., 98), because “all I wanted was to be a man among other men” (ibid., 112). By the desire to be white, Fanon means the desire to be a man, to be human, but if in the logic of coloniality only a white man has the material benefits and the ontological wholeness that come from being human, then Fanon’s black subject must become white, wear a white mask that puts him in an existentially and politically untenable situation, since it is the white man who has denied the humanity of the black man. And yet, the impulse to become white is compelling, for within the logic of coloniality the alternative is nonbeing.

Similarly and in a more farcical key, Christophe’s mimicry of the signs of European power becomes for him the only (yet untenable) means of recovering a dignity that has been denied. The grammar of colonial authority and power remains oblique and malleable: for Christophe, it becomes a sign of black greatness when a black man uses it. Thus, one could argue that he is sincere, even righteous, in his desire to reinstate black greatness, but blind in attempt to attain it through the white masks of a Eurocentric aristocracy. That aspiration and that blindness make Christophe tragic, not merely evil, in Césaire’s play.

Throughout the play, Césaire portrays clearly enough how Christophe has overstepped his legitimate boundaries, but the poet cannot help being moved by the emperor’s commitment to glorifying his African roots in Caribbean soil. We can see the basis for this fondness in an important interview from 2004, in which Césaire commented on the play and read sections from it, emphasizing how aspects of the Haitian drama in fact remain
relevant to the rest of the Caribbean. At one point Césaire reads Madame Christophe’s objections to her husband’s relentless ambition: “Christophe! I am only a poor woman, I am queen, but I have been a servant at the Crown Inn! A crown on my head will not turn me into anything other than a simple woman, a good black woman who tells her husband: beware!” (Tragédie, 58; my translation). Then the interview presents Césaire’s comments: “Isn’t that very Martinican? I can almost see the person I have just described,” at which point the interviewer adds: “Césaire continues reading Madame Christophe’s part with a “woman’s” voice” (Nègre je suis, 60; my translation). After finishing his reading, using a “woman’s voice” to imitate Madame Christophe that the interviewer carefully registers, Césaire observes: “Madame Christophe is calling on us to use our common sense. My grandmother expressed herself in that way. I have written from what I knew. Imagine, at that period, a woman who had been a slave. She could be tempted by acceptance [“résignation”], by caution [“prudence”]. That is quite understandable. In fact, it is an old tragedy” (Nègre je suis, 63; my translation). Interestingly, Césaire’s words acknowledge the tension between Christophe and his wife’s positions (his violent pathos and her cautious call to prudence) as a source of tragedy, which implies that, as in any truly tragic conflict, both characters present legitimate claims. However, the poet cannot stop himself from describing Madame Christophe’s position as a “temptation” that comes from a woman who had been a slave. In Césaire’s language, “bon sens” (common sense), “résignation” (resignation, acceptance) and “prudence” (prudence, caution) become weak, “feminine” temptations, in spite of their legitimate claim in the face of Christophe’s brutality. For a few moments Christophe’s manly strength, however violently applied, is worthier than feminine resignation.

Here we must highlight that, as indicated in the introduction, gender has been one of the dimensions of coloniality that is often neglected in theoretical formulations and literary critiques. Given Césaire’s long fascination with the rhetoric of tragic “masculine” heroics (as expressed most vehemently, perhaps, in his early dramatic poem Et les chiens se taisant, whose protagonist is simply called “the rebel”), it is not surprising that such language is most valued in the poet’s assessment of his Christophe tragedy. However, for us as contemporary readers such masculinist rhetoric becomes a revealing example of what María Lugones has called “the modern/colonial gender system.” The point here would not be merely to criticize Césaire for that rhetoric (although there is no reason not to do that), but also to highlight the pervasiveness, within the thought of a writer clearly committed to anti-colonial politics, of a language that ultimately legitimizes “the naturalizing
of the identities and relations of coloniality” (Lugones, “Heterosexualism,” 192) when it comes to gender. Thus, the cautionary call here is for all of us engaged in decolonial thought and action.

In spite of Césaire’s proud affirmation of Christophe’s masculinist heroics, it is clear that he is also aware of the fact that his play portrays a historical character whose excesses he cannot condone (in the same interview, he refers to Christophe’s monarchy as “grotesque” [Nègre je suis, 57]). However, it remains revealing that Césaire does feel that Christophe’s passion for Africa’s glory, as portrayed by Césaire himself, still brings something to an anticolonial struggle that no criticism of his excesses can deny. And in spite of Césaire’s universalist rhetoric, Christophe’s flaw is not the particularism he fiercely tries to embrace. In fact, his violence is partially linked to the fact that he is not particular enough, since he invokes his hurt pride but seems to find no other way to repair the hurt than embracing Europe’s oppressive colonial models.

Regarding Christophe’s court, Césaire states: “All of that is grotesque; but behind the etiquette, behind that man, there is a tragedy that poses very deep questions about the encounter of civilizations. These people take Europe as a model. And yet, Europe frantically mocks them” (Nègre je suis, 57–58; my translation). Césaire’s comments perfectly illuminate the tragic intensity of his play. And yet his words do not fully capture his literary achievement, for Christophe’s tragedy is not simply that of a “mimic man” who is convinced that anything European is better. As suggested above, Césaire’s Christophe is actively engaged in recovering the dignity of his black people but cannot find any other way of doing it than imitating Europe’s models. He is not trying to be European, but rather to be black (which in the play ambiguously stands for both African and Haitian) through European means. His tragedy is that of the victims of the coloniality of power, which goes well beyond colonialism itself—the double bind in which the colonized thirsts after a fullness of presence that remains perpetually out of reach yet always enticing. Ultimately this logic implies, as Maldonado-Torres reminds us, a coloniality of existential being itself. Later in the same interview, Césaire comments: “One must liberate the black man, but one must also liberate the liberator” (Nègre je suis, 63; my translation). His Christophe stands out as an exemplary representation of that recurrent figure in all anticolonial and emancipation movements: the liberator in desperate need of liberation. This clearly implies for Césaire not a rejection of the West (no one can really accuse Césaire of that), but rather a rejection of the West’s claim to ontological, essential superiority: the coloniality of power and the coloniality of being.
Toussaint’s Compromises and Césaire’s

Césaire’s other work on the Haitian Revolution is the historical essay, *Toussaint Louverture: la révolution française et le problème colonial* [Toussaint Louverture: The French Revolution and the Colonial Problem] (1961). The alert reader may pause at the book’s subtitle: surely Césaire means the Haitian Revolution? Not quite, for in this book Césaire’s approach to the events in Haiti is dramatically different from that of the *Tragedy*. (By contrast, C. L. R. James’s *Black Jacobins*, which Césaire lists among his references, is subtitled “Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution.”) There is certainly no question about the close relation between the French and the Haitian Revolutions: as Césaire compellingly demonstrates and C. L. R. James had shown before him, the full implications of neither revolution can be thoroughly understood without considering the other. However, the way Césaire arranges his material in this book has significant implications for what his priorities are. As a noteworthy detail, one should notice that, in a 345-page book titled *Toussaint Louverture*, Toussaint himself does not appear as a central actor until page 194, more than half way through. Thus, the whole text is organized as a progression of increasingly radical reactions not only to the events of the French Revolution but also, and more importantly, to its guiding principles, particularly the ideals of liberty, fraternity, and equality, and the Declaration of Rights of Man and of the Citizen. As we suggested in the introduction when commenting on Hayden White’s ideas, the way writers *structure* their events matters; in Césaire’s book on Toussaint, universal principles radiate from France, and France’s others follow suit.

The first part of the book, titled “La fronde des grands blancs” (“The White Uprising”), focuses on the French colonists in Haiti, and their demands for autonomy and fuller control of their own commercial interests, until that moment subordinated to those of metropolitan France. As Césaire clearly indicates, the white colonists claim rights for themselves while at the same time trying to exclude not only the slaves, who are considered property, but also the growing class of free people of color. The second part, titled “La révolte mulâtre” (“The Mulatto Revolt”), shows how mulattoes and free people of color, realizing they cannot expect anything from the racist whites, decide to take matters in their own hands. Before the free people of color finally have to resort to an armed revolt, Césaire fills many pages with debates in the French National Assembly, debates that revolve around the fact that people of color are free citizens, many of them landowners, but are not receiving the same rights as the white landowners. It should be clear,
however, that the free people of color wanted the same “universal” rights that white men enjoyed: they also regarded slaves as property. It is in the third part, titled “La révolution nègre” (“The Black Revolution”), that the obvious (for our contemporary eyes) question is asked: if all men have equal and natural rights by virtue of being human, how can some human beings be slaves? Not surprisingly, only the slaves “get” that simple point; they rebel, and soon find their leader in Toussaint Louverture, a former slave who could read and write, and who had absorbed the main ideals of the French Revolution.

It is important to emphasize that, in Césaire’s structuring of his narrative, the revolting slaves do not bring anything fundamentally different or new to a revolutionary movement that starts in France. Their contribution, and Toussaint’s in particular, is to radicalize it, to push it to its logical consequences (the abolition of slavery). As Césaire indicates: “The abolition of slavery was within the logic of the [French] revolution; but it was necessary to brutally shake up that historical actor, so that he would consent to play his role” (Toussaint Louverture, 215–16; my translation). In a rhetorical move that reveals the poet behind the historian, Césaire personifies the French Revolution in a theatrical metaphor, turning it into a historical actor that leads the march towards freedom, with the other human characters, including the Haitian revolutionaries, following behind (one is reminded of Delacroix’s similarly structured “Liberty Guiding the People”). It is not surprising that in a later interview Césaire refers to “my book about Toussaint Louverture, which in reality is a book about the French Revolution” (Louis, Conversation, 66; my translation).

Of course, whether the liberation of the slaves was within the logic of the French Revolution is itself open to debate, and that statement may be regarded Césaire’s concession to a frame that he is struggling to preserve. One might equally argue that the French Revolution unfolded within a colonial logic that, while breaking some untenable social barriers in the metropolis, left untouched the divide of the colonial difference between white Europeans and racialized Others from around the world. In the abstract, Césaire is right: to state that “men are born free” (as the first article of the 1789 Declaration states) logically includes all men. The question is what does this mean for slaves whose very humanity is in question.

In the conclusion of his essay, after still another extended reflection on the French Revolution, Césaire rhetorically asks, as if foreseeing a query from a confused reader: “Mais alors, où est la part de Toussaint-Louverture dans tout cela?” (Toussaint Louverture, 343) (“But then, what is Toussaint’s role in
all of that?” [my translation]). It is then that Césaire conveys his views on Toussaint’s quite significant contribution to the whole emancipating process:

When Toussaint arrived, it was to take the declaration of Human Rights literally; it was to show that there is no pariah race; that there is no marginal country; that there are no excluded people; it was to incarnate and particularize a principle; that is to say, to bring it to life. In the history and the realm of the rights of man, he was, on behalf of blacks, the agent and intercessor. That is his place, his true place. Toussaint Louverture’s combat was for the transformation of a formal right into a real right, a combat for the acknowledgment of man, and that is why he, and the black slave revolt in Saint Domingue, are inscribed in the history of universal civilization. If there is a negative side to his character—which is hardly avoidable given the situation—it lies precisely there: above all he attempted to deduce the existence of his people taking an abstract universal as his point of departure, rather than seizing the singularity of his people in order to promote it to universality. (Toussaint Louverture, 344; my translation)

Here we see again the tension between the “universal” and the “particular,” a tension that Césaire occasionally acknowledges as an untenable, deconstructible fiction (as in the quote from his Letter to Maurice Thorez presented above in section II), but which recurs in his work as a source of considerable anxiety.

In Césaire’s reading, the Declaration of Rights of Man leads, and Toussaint concretizes its abstract ideals; that process gives Toussaint his true place in history. However, Césaire’s discomfort with his own assessment is clearly revealed in his immediate criticism of Toussaint. While Toussaint’s “true place” in history comes from his incarnation of an abstract principle, Césaire is clearly uncomfortable with the gesture of “deducing” the existence of the Haitian people from “an abstract universal,” rather than departing from the people’s concrete singularity in order to elevate it to the universal (while at the same time insisting that the Haitian leader could hardly avoid his behavior “given the situation”). Césaire does not elaborate on how the second gesture would differ from the first, but one may assume that the result would look more like the universal as he defines it in his Letter to Maurice Thorez: a confluence of particulars. However, the point I want to emphasize here is that the conundrum that Césaire describes comes, to a large extent, from his own structuring of the narrative as that of universal principles that
find their first and most complete articulation in France. By subordinating Toussaint to that dialectical development (for it is a dialectic between France and the former slave that clearly invokes Hegel’s dialectic of the master and the slave), Césaire subordinates the Haitian Revolution to a teleology that is anchored and has its origin in France’s relation to its colonial others. Paradoxically, as he subordinates the Haitian slaves’ revolt against France’s brutal imperial regime—which was also linked to an emerging global system of colonial capitalist accumulation—to an abstract dialectical process, Césaire in fact reproduces the deductive gesture he criticizes in Toussaint (as portrayed by him).23

Another consequence of Césaire’s presentation of Toussaint as a leader who incarnates universal principles appears in chapter 10 of the third section of his essay. In an extended comparison of the revolutionary leaderships of Toussaint and Lenin, Césaire attempts to explain and contextually justify Toussaint’s authoritarian moves when he forces former black slaves to work in their plantations while respecting the rights of white land owners: “the ideas were good, the method much less so” (Toussaint Louverture, 269; my translation). We may remember here that in Christophe’s tragedy we find a parallel situation, with the playwright also keenly aware of flaws in the king’s methods, even if those flaws are somewhat softened by his grand vision. Toussaint was engaged in his own tragic dilemma, which operates as a mirror image of Christophe’s tragedy: Toussaint is too involved with the universal at the expense of the concrete, even though that involvement constitutes his glory; Christophe is too involved with his attempt to make his particular people glorious, seemingly at the expense of universal values.

It is of course not coincidental that Césaire presents these two characters as mirror images of the same conflict, since they represent two poles that he himself felt compelled to pay homage to throughout his career, even as he showed keen awareness of their eminently deconstructible character. Just as Christophe tries to celebrate his “particularity” within a colonial frame that a priori rejects the worth of that particularity, Toussaint clings to a universal that (as portrayed by Césaire) is little more than Schor’s “French Universalism”—the universality of Catholic religion, the transparency of the French language, and later the self-evidence of French enlightened secularism. To this we could add the Western Universalism of Capitalist global production, whose first waves Toussaint was trying to remain part of, in his attempts to preserve the colonial plantation system. In other words, each from an opposite end of the same spectrum, both Christophe and Toussaint are still partially operating within the logic of coloniality.
I should emphasize again that, in describing Césaire’s portrayal of these two foundational characters as still operating within the logic of coloniality, I do not necessarily mean a criticism of the Martinican poet. In fact, the point I am trying to highlight is Césaire’s lucid representation of the colonial intellectual’s (or revolutionary’s, or politician’s) struggle with the lure of the universal as defined by the coloniality of power. As indicated above in the section on Christophe, Fanon has provided a masterful description of this condition. In his depiction, the white mask does not simply promise to make the black man white—it promises to make him a man. Both Fanon and Césaire excel in the presentation of the affective dimension of the colonial condition, wherein social, economic and political conditions, disguised as a natural ontology, are internalized as structures in the cognitive and behavioral patterns of the colonial subject. Even the struggle for liberation, then, must unburden itself of seemingly self-evident colonial assumptions. Existentially, the liberator must be liberated.24

The question here is not the desirability of universalism as such, in the abstract, and in fact a case could be made for the usefulness of such a concept along the lines of Césaire’s statements in his Letter to Maurice Thorez, quoted above. The issue is how Western universalism developed historically in conjunction with colonial projects, more often than not providing a justification for such projects. For universalism, as conceived by the logic of coloniality, is not an ever-expanding addition of particularities, but the transcendence of all particularities, which naturally translates into the universalization of one particularity, whether that of Hegel’s Prussia in the 1830s or global hegemony of neoliberal capitalism today. In Césaire’s representation, both the glorification of the particular (Christophe) and the appeal to the universal (Toussaint) must purge themselves of the colonial frame that has produced the better-known versions of those concepts.

**Behind the Times, or Too Far Ahead?**

As I indicated earlier, the dilemmas that Toussaint and Christophe incarnate touched Césaire very closely as an intellectual and as a politician, at a moment when he attempted to redefine Martinique’s relation to France in a context of global anticolonial movements. Regarding Christophe, Césaire has said: “In The Tragedy of King Christophe, I have described the difficulties of a man who must lead a country like Haiti, a very complex country, and one can certainly find that in the Caribbean” (Nègre je suis, 53; my translation). While
Césaire is being disingenuous in his concise description of what he is doing in a play about a man who virtually re-enslaved his people, it is clear and accurate that in the context of a postcolonial Caribbean still operating within a global neocolonial logic, Haiti’s case becomes exemplary in an extreme manner, both as luminous example and as cautionary tale. Christophe’s luminosity, in Césaire’s portrayal, is his commitment to négritude.

*Toussaint Louverture* presents still another aspect of the “complexity” of the Caribbean that was very close to Césaire’s personal experience. Throughout the text, one can clearly notice Césaire’s ambiguous position toward the fact that Toussaint never tried to turn his revolution into an independence movement. While at one point Césaire recognizes, following C. L. R. James, that it was probably a mistake on Toussaint’s part (304–307), he is very understanding of Toussaint’s desire to retain the ties with France, provided that France would live up to its own ideals: “There is a magic word that Toussaint always refused to pronounce: the word *independence* . . . Did he think it was premature? In that case, he was behind with regard to the masses” (ibid., 304–5; my translation). But Césaire’s assessment at that point of the book comes after a slightly different one with regard to Toussaint’s 1801 constitution. Commenting on the plans that Toussaint seemingly had for an autonomous Haiti with French representatives who would operate almost as ambassadors, Césaire states: “Genial intuition. The idea of a French Commonwealth was there in seed. Toussaint was wrong in only one count: he was ahead of his times by a good century and a half” (ibid., 283; my translation). Toussaint was either behind his times or too far ahead of them—Césaire in the 1960s does not seem quite sure, just as he seems uncertain of where to find the right balance between his anticolonial positions and his prudent (to use the word he uses to describe Madame Christophe) pursual of political compromises. Martinique’s situation as a French “Département d’Outre-Mer” already seemed stagnant to Césaire, and in fact, some sort of “French Commonwealth” (*not* independence) was precisely what he proposed as a possible solution to the disappointments and failures of that status throughout the years: the development of more autonomy for the island within the context of political union with France. Thus, Césaire’s portrayal of Toussaint clearly reflects his anxiety about his own role in Martinique’s political history: a man behind his times at a moment when so many colonial territories around the world were seizing the opportunity of independence, or a visionary who realized that Martinique’s economic stability and decolonized future could both be achieved without independence, in union with France? Indeed, it could be argued that while the structure of the essay on Toussaint is pecu-
liar as a portrayal of the Haitian Revolution (no other text examined in this book spends as much time in the meetings of the French Assembly), it is a structure that coincides with Martinique’s relation to France at the time Césaire was writing. It was a France-centric structure that Césaire in many ways dreaded, but also hoped could be turned around for Martinique’s benefit.

As was indicated earlier in the chapter, La tragédie du roi Christophe and Toussaint Louverture are by no means irreconcilable works, and one may find ways to make them complementary in spite of their differences in tone, emphasis, and implications. Taken together, they both tackle the issues of particularism and universalism discussed above, and the fact that they come at it from different directions is a sign of Césaire’s keen (if agonistic) insight into their interplay in colonial societies and subjectivites.

Edward Said, a great admirer of Césaire, emphasized the complementary character of both approaches when he stated, commenting on a passage by C. L. R. James in which the Trinidadian writer quotes Césaire’s Cahier:

“There’s room for all at the rendez-vous of victory” [C. L. R. James quoting Césaire]—is a very important phrase for me. It’s impossible to talk about the sides of the opposition between Oriental and Occidental separately. I talk about what I call overlapping areas of experience. The whole point is that imperialism was not of one side only, but of two sides, and the two are always involved in each other. That’s where the contrapuntal method comes in. Instead of looking at it as a melody on top and just a lot of silly accompaniment down here, or silence, it’s really like a polyphonic work. In order to understand it, you have to have this concept of overlapping territories—interdependent histories, I call them. That’s the only way to talk about them, in order to be able to talk about liberation, decolonization, and the integrative view, rather than the separatist one. I’m totally against separatism. (Power, 220)

In referring to the “melody on top, silly accompaniment down here” perspective, Said is certainly describing the cultural logic of the coloniality of power. His musical metaphor also brings to mind Enrique Dussel’s notion of colonized territories and peoples as constituting the “underside of modernity,” always there as marginalized and repressed part of official histories (Dussel, Underside). Said’s concept of “interdependent histories” attempts to correct that exclusivist historical narrative, even if its suggestion of mutuality fails to highlight the violent power disproportion between the different sides of those interlocking histories.
Said is right in invoking Césaire as a champion of the “integrative” perspective that does not seek to essentialize the distinctions between “the West” and its colonial territories throughout the world. What Said does not emphasize, by quoting just one phrase from the *Cahier*, is the degree to which that “integration,” which also entails the interaction between universalist abstract ideals and particularist affirmation of identity, is a site of tension and anxiety in Césaire’s work. The anxiety is, as we have seen, understandable, since in practice there has been little universal in the Western colonial export of universalism, and Césaire’s limitation has often been his willingness to take Western universalism at face value, even as he acknowledges the colonial violence that has been exerted in the name of that universalism.

The complexity and paradoxical character of Césaire’s engagement with Western universalism are probably best appreciated in an interview offered late in his life (the same one in which he revisits his *Tragedy of King Christoph*), in which he confronts the subject, and his own critics, directly. The Martinican poet states:

> It matters little to me who wrote the text of the Declaration of the Rights of Man; I couldn’t care less, it exists. The criticisms against its “Western” origin are simplistic. Why would that bother me? I have always been irritated by the sectarianism I have found even in my own party. We must appropriate that text and we must know how to interpret it correctly. France did not colonize in the name of the rights of Man. One can always invent something about what happened: “Look at how unhappy they are. It would be a kind deed to bring them civilization.” Besides, Europeans believe in *Civilization*, whereas we believe in *civilizations*, in plural, and in *cultures*. (*Nègre je suis*, 69–70; my translation)

Césaire’s words clearly indicate his allegiance to what Said would call the “integrative” approach. Like the “rendez-vous of victory” that so enthuses Said, the Declaration of the Rights of Man becomes for Césaire a neutral space of encounter for all peoples, regardless of origin. In this view, the Declaration is eminently valuable in itself, in the abstract, independently of the specificity of its origin (for example, the fact that France was a slave holding country when the document was produced), and any attempt to reduce it to the limitations of its historical context becomes an irritating sectarianism.

However, the tensions that underlie Césaire’s defense of the document and the universality of its ideas are quickly revealed in his attempt to immediately qualify his statement. The document is European, affirms Césaire,
and yes, Europe colonized much of the planet, but Europe did not colonize “in the name” of the principles of the Declaration (but rather, we must assume, in spite of them, out of greed and other base motives). Except that perhaps they did use those principles as justification (as in the notion of the white man’s burden of “civilizing” natives): “it would be a kind deed to bring them civilization.” But those justifications are excuses provided after the fact (in order to, we must again assume, justify the greed that motivated conquest and colonization). Then, in just a few sentences, Césaire moves from insisting on how unimportant the European origin of this document is, to the need to clearly and sharply distinguish his position from that of Europeans—Europeans believe in civilization (singular, universal), whereas “we” (nonwhites, non-Westerners, formerly and currently colonized peoples, we must assume) believe in plural civilizations. In the end, Césaire’s “integrative” perspective is so carefully qualified by his corrections to the Western model that, although the necessity to integrate universalism and particularism is not questioned, their conjunction can only be proposed as an unfulfilled aspiration, as a space of hardly reconciled conflict. I would suggest that both Césaire’s aspiration to fulfill the dream of universality and his anxious misgivings about its potentially lethal effects on a true ethos of pluralism are a reflection of his location as a colonial subject.

Césaire’s words in the interview bring to mind Said’s own assessment of Toussaint Louverture as presented by C. L. R. James in The Black Jacobins: “James shows Toussaint’s sincerity and also his latent flaw, his willingness to trust European declarations, to see them as literal intentions rather than class and history-determined remarks of interests and groups” (Culture, 246). In spite of his devotion for the rhetoric of Western universalism, it would not be accurate to suggest that Césaire suffers from the naïveté that Said, rightly or not, attributes to Toussaint. His works remain in often-precarious balance between a universalism which is boldly declared (and seemingly trusted as Europe’s “literal intention”) and a fundamental mistrust of a “universalist” rhetoric that, at best, did not stop the march of colonialism and slavery, and, at worst, often served as their ideological justification (in Europe’s civilizing mission). Here we must remember that Césaire always refuted the accusation that his idea of negritude implied any sort of essentialism, and always found his way back to a universalism that attempts to include all particularities, as when he suggests in an interview with the Haitian poet René Depestre: “We bore the imprint of European civilization, but we thought that Africa could make a contribution to Europe” (Césaire, Discourse, 92). However, he consistently returned to topics and figures (like Christophe) whose purpose
is to poetically embody an Afrocentric defense of the oppressed populations of the Caribbean and Africa, celebrating a particularity that does not need to justify itself in universalist terms, and that indeed should look suspiciously at all demands for such justification.²⁷

In this regard, it is important to mention the poem “Le verbe marroner” (“The Verb ‘Marroner’”), published in the 1976 collection Noria, and dedicated to his friend and younger colleague, the Haitian poet René Depestre. The poem was written when Depestre and Césaire were engaged in a debate on the character of political art and literature. Depestre, assuming the more orthodox approach prescribed by Louis Aragon in France, leaned toward the need for straightforward, clearly committed Marxist poetry. In his poem, Césaire invites Depestre not to allow himself to be subsumed under such doctrinaire models, and to pursue his own unique way, just like the old maroon slaves used to do. “Marronerons nous Depestre marronerons nous?” asks Césaire (Collected, 368) [“Shall we escape like slaves Depestre like slaves?” (ibid., 369)]. In the poem, Césaire invokes Boukman, the Vodou priest and initial leader of the slave revolt in Haiti, and Dessalines, proposing them as models of revolutionaries who did not take instructions from their enemies. “En verité le sang est un vaudoun puissant,” he declares (ibid., 368) [“Blood is truly a powerful vodun” (ibid.)]. The paradox I want to highlight in this poem is that maroon slaves, Vodou priest Boukman, and fierce enemy of whites Dessalines play little to no role in Césaire’s two main accounts of the revolution. Even more, when he introduces Toussaint to his readers in his historical study, he establishes a clear contrast between him and those other leaders. About the famous Vodou ceremony at Bois Caiman presided by Boukman he states that it was “moving and picturesque” (Toussaint, 196; my translation). It is Toussaint who brings “what neither Boukman nor Mackandal had: a political head” (ibid., 205; my translation), by which Césaire means, evidently, a mentality steeped in the enlightened ideals of the French Revolution. Once again we see Césaire vacillating, here between Toussaint’s appeal to an abstract universal order and the particularist ethos of maroon rebelliousness.

The point here is not to indict either of the two “poles” in Césaire’s critique of colonialism, or to suggest that he actually had the alternative of giving either up. My emphasis is on the fact that they do not merely coexist in his work, or even less come together to form a harmonious whole. They coexist in tension, in conflict, as the expression of mutually exclusive yet unavoidably linked historical perspectives and aspirations. That tension, which might be considered a contradiction or a weakness from a purely programmatic
political reading (and Césaire’s works have often been read in such a manner), are not a problem or limitation in Césaire’s work, but rather the opposite: they are an example of the extreme lucidity of his exploration of the colonial condition and its discontents, and of his own position within that colonial context. The white mask is always available for the colonial subject as the clear marker of a humanity that grants access to the universal; the black (or any similarly constructed shade of nonwhite) skin is always already a sign of irredeemable (picturesque and folkloric at best, barbaric and subhuman at worst) particularity. The fact that these poles are constructed by the logic of coloniality does not make them any less real in their effects, and their deconstruction and eventual overcoming often imply multiple visitations of their dead-end promises and enticements.\(^{28}\)

It is a struggle with, and an expression of, those unavoidable tensions that I see lucidly expressed in Césaire’s “Haitian” works. The black Martinican poet recognizes himself in the universal aspirations of European enlightenment, as expressed in the oxymoronic notion of French universalism, but as a product of Europe’s imperial endeavors he inevitably recognizes his exclusion from that project. Césaire clearly expresses the colonial subject’s relation to French universalism when he writes about the colonial society in Saint Domingue: “Such was the colonial society: more than a hierarchy, an ontology. Above, the whites—being in the fullest sense of the term—below, the blacks, without juridical personhood, chattel; a thing, which amounts to saying, a nothingness; but between that all and that nothingness, there was a formidable in-between category: the mulatto, the free man of color” (\textit{Toussaint}, 33; my translation). The ontological dimension that Césaire highlights in his description dramatically captures the dynamic of what Walter Mignolo has called the “colonial difference.” The logic of coloniality does not simply regard the difference of the colonial other as merely one of civilizational degree, even if it uses that argument to justify Europe’s civilizing mission; when the colonized subject attempts to join the colonizer “at the rendezvous of victory,” the racialized essentialism of the difference comes to the foreground, creating what Césaire describes as a hierarchy/ontology. Homi Bhabha has aptly described this tension when he suggests that the colonial subject is condemned to be “almost the same but not quite” as the European, a formula that he then astutely translates as “almost the same but not white” (\textit{Location}, 89). Because, as we saw in the introduction, the “colonial difference” is grounded on that ontological dimension, the subaltern is trapped in a sinister double-bind: either (s)he becomes a “real” subject within the European framework, thereby making no distinctive contribution and effectively
disappearing, or (s)he refuses to participate, thereby losing any claim to any real, or legitimate, “being.” We find that “double bind” expressed—not simply criticized—in Césaire’s attempts to capture both the legitimacy of the universal and the self-evidence of the particular in his works.

The fact that Césaire’s works embody those colonial contradictions and tensions does not deny their rebellious and emancipating thrust. That liberating impulse is still central to both La tragédie du roi Christophe and Toussaint Louverture. But like Césaire’s other literary writings, his “Haitian” works should not be considered simply (programmatically) as confrontations of the Caribbean’s colonial legacy but also as performances of that very colonial condition, which certainly includes the struggles for emancipation, but also false starts, dead-end streets, and sheer exhaustion at the constraints imposed by the coloniality of power. The books do not come together to offer a simple, coherent anticolonial strategy or vision, but they offer a compelling and relentless illumination of the complex and often contradictory location from which they arise.²⁹

Caribbean Existential Anguish

It is not surprising that the role of Haiti in Césaire’s works reveals so clearly some of the gaps and paradoxes in the poet’s self-articulation as a Caribbean intellectual, for Haiti itself, with its tragedy and its rebelliousness, has become throughout the Caribbean an emblem and embodiment of the colonial condition and its discontents, past and present.³⁰ In the 1960s, Haiti’s struggle for nationhood allows Césaire, who at that point was Martinique’s leading writer and political leader, to examine the colonial problem in its philosophical depth and historical breadth, particularly at a moment when global anticolonial movements seemed to be moving in a different direction from his chosen path of departmentalization for his country. Haiti offers concrete examples of the virtues and limitations of Afrocentric particularism and universalism in the French tradition through the figures of Christophe and Louverture, each construed by Césaire as an embodiment of one of those poles. Césaire clearly saw his path as a middle ground, a third way, between both extremes—and that still seemed to be his position when he died in 2008.

Haiti’s history shows a spectrum of roads taken and not taken that, observed from Martinique, offers both a model to imitate and a cautionary tale to avoid. Haiti’s proud affirmation of its own culture should be imitated,
but Christophe’s disregard of the means to achieve such an end must be avoided. Louverture’s awareness of the practical usefulness of retaining links to the old metropolis should be imitated, but it must be complemented with a proud defense of one’s culture and autonomy. All of those issues were of paramount importance to Césaire at a moment when France was redefining its relation to its former colonies, and it seemed as if Martinique might be able to find a middle way between total assimilation on the one hand, and independence, with the economic consequences of the total withdrawal of French aid, on the other. Such a balanced middle way did not come to fruition, but it was Césaire’s ideal until the end, and his last interviews still reveal an intellectual, and a politician, deeply attached to the principles that both Christophe and Louverture incarnate for him.

In concluding this chapter, I want to refer to still another late interview with Césaire, in order to highlight the fundamental but agonistic role that Haiti’s history plays in his thought. In 1993 the Puerto Rican novelist Edgardo Rodríguez Juliá interviewed Césaire. Rodríguez Juliá is himself interested in the Haitian Revolution and in what it might mean from the perspective of Haiti’s almost polar opposite in Caribbean history, Puerto Rico. In fact, in the 1970s he wrote a series of novels that deal with fictional slave revolts (not unlike the nonfictional revolution in Haiti) in eighteenth-century Puerto Rico. These novels explore the symbolic importance of events like the Haitian Revolution in an island where, to the chagrin of some of its most radical anticolonial thinkers, such a decisive break with colonial domination never happened.

In his interview with Césaire, Rodríguez Juliá was very aware of similarities that link Puerto Rico and Martinique in spite of their evident differences (Caribeños, 275–90). Particularly similar is each island’s protracted connection with its colonial metropolis, France in Martinique’s case and the Unites States in Puerto Rico’s. Not surprisingly, in his chronicle of his visit to Césaire, Rodríguez Juliá connects the Martinican poet’s role to that of Puerto Rico’s Luis Muñoz Marín, the architect of Puerto Rico’s status as a “commonwealth” (Estado Libre Asociado) (ibid., 277). In spite of the differences between that status and Martinique’s departmentalization, both islands and their populations remain in a vague anxious limbo regarding their ultimate destiny. Yet it is also true that both Martinique and Puerto Rico, in spite of formidable and ever increasing economic difficulties, have relatively high standards of living when compared to the rest of Caribbean.

Rodríguez Juliá reflects: “In Martinique you find an anxiety similar to ours: how economically viable would Martinique be if France gave it its
independence? Uncertainty about the future is an obsession that Martinique shares with Puerto Rico” (ibid., 278; my translation). Curiously, in his conversation with Césaire, Rodríguez Juliá does not ask about the relationship between these two islands, but rather about Cuba first, and then about Haiti, two islands that share histories of successful revolutionary struggles. Césaire avoids a direct answer with respect to Cuba, which prompts Rodríguez Juliá to ask about Haiti, thus drawing a revealing albeit vague answer from the old poet: “Is there any hope for Haiti?, I ask him when I see him avoid the topic of Cuba . . . Césaire lowers his voice, folds his hands, places only his fingers on the desk and turns somber: he points out that big racial divisions—blacks and mulattos—and the big class differences have not allowed democracy to emerge in Haiti . . . It is a primordially peasant county . . . given to Vodou . . .” (ibid., 289; my translation). We must trust here Rodríguez Juliá indirect representation of Césaire’s words (the ellipsis in the quote are in the original), but his description captures elements we have already observed in Césaire’s works on Haiti. Most problematic is the apparent link between Haiti’s problems (tremendous racism and economic inequalities) with the fact that many of its inhabitants are peasants (“campesinos”) who practice Vodou (“entregado al vudú”). Concrete material and cultural problems whose cause is certainly (though not exclusively) linked to Haiti’s long colonial and neo-colonial history are subtly connected to forms of livelihood that do not fit into the mainstream globalized capitalist model of the West, and to belief systems that deviate from the Western standard of secularism or Christianity. Thus, the diagnosis of the ills of colonialism still partakes of the logic of coloniality.

Césaire’s cautious critique not simply of Haiti’s problems but also of some of the practices and existential outlook of its inhabitants (thus, his sympathetic but firm rejection of an island whose great claim to history lies in its successful slave rebellion) is certainly connected to Rodríguez Juliá’s questioning of his political compromises, his rejection in real life of a great revolutionary tradition that his writings celebrate. When asked about Martinique’s political status, Césaire insists that “the difficulty of this relation [with France] consists of defining by themselves a relation to their own Martinicanness, while remaining within the French state of law, which guarantees them security and liberty” (Caribeños, 287; my translation). Yet he insists that the struggle for more autonomy must continue (ibid.). Rodríguez Juliá concludes:

It seems that in the Caribbean all complex formulas of relation to the metropolis (Commonwealth, a Federated Statehood that preserves Puerto Rican
cultural identity, more autonomy within the frame of union with France proposed by Césaire) acquire a ghostly, rarefied, overly complex aura. Only the mention of one word—indepen
dence!—makes the discourse more sober and categorical. When I ask him about the possibility of an imposed indepen
dence, he repeats again that Martinique has no economic foundation. It is impossible to compete with Africa and Central America in the sale of sugar and bananas . . . Besides, Martinicans fear independence . . . He repeats the word ‘fear’ (peur) with an insistence that borders on anguish . . . And they fear it, he adds, because Martinicans live well above their economic possibili
ties, above their real means. In this moment the Martinican economy is going through a crisis . . . (ibid.)

For the old poet, no amount of celebration of Haiti’s symbolic role as “the country where negritude rose for the first time” can overcome the necessary caution about its tragic history—in which he highlights the ignorant practice of Vodou (remember the characterization of Boukman’s Bois Caiman cer
eremony as “picturesque”), but not (at least in his conversation with Rodríguez Juliá) details like the crippling effects of Haiti’s debt to indemnify its former colonial metropolis. Martinicans fear independence for good reason, since their standard of living is higher than that of most of the Caribbean; France (again the purveyor of a particular brand of universality) guarantees security and, most paradoxically, liberty.

Towards the end of his chronicle on Césaire, Rodríguez Juliá dramatically comments:

There is for Césaire a tragic conception of the Caribbean, because we were born from “historical violence, racism, slavery” . . . However, one could talk about a re-encounter of sorts with hope, in spite of that Caribbean existential anguish . . . I am fascinated by that last phrase. I repeat it in Spanish and he repeats it in French. We look at each other with the sorrow of acknowledg
ing ourselves as children of the same illusions, the same defeats. (Caribeños, 288–89; my translation)

Against the ghostly presence in the horizon of Haiti and Cuba—roads that were deemed too perilous to follow, and which in any case it may be too late to follow now—Martinique and Puerto Rico remain suspended in a relative privilege whose long-term sustainability both writers suspect. Equally impor
tant, both islands remain linked to metropolitan centers whose respect (the respect one reserves for an equal) they can never count on.
Caribbean existential anguish is certainly what *La tragédie du roi Christophe* and *Toussaint Louverture* are about. The phrase—so characteristic of Césaire, the poet engaged with the thought of Nietzsche, Sartre, and other thinkers of the alienation of modern man—loses its abstract quality when one considers its historically and geographically specific referent, the Caribbean. In that concrete realm, generated by the forces of “historical violence, racism, and slavery,” we find colonialism and its exclusionary logic crippling not only the development of oppressed masses but also that of would be liberators. This is the realm of the coloniality of being, which Maldonado-Torres vividly describes as “racist/imperial Manichean misanthropic skepticism” (“On the Coloniality,” 245). In Césaire’s representations, Christophe and Toussaint are very different men, but they share a fatal inability to see themselves beyond the models offered to them by the logic of coloniality. In this regard, they incarnate tensions, contradictions and aspirations that Césaire shared with them, even if clearly in a more lucid way.

Ultimately Césaire’s invocation of existential anguish (sympathetically shared by Rodríguez Juliá) brings to mind Lewis R. Gordon’s seminal discussions of Africana existential thought. Following Sartre, Gordon reminds us that “anguish is a confrontation with the self; it is a confrontation with one’s responsibility for making choices in one’s situations” (*Existencia*, 124). In that case, Césaire’s doubts may be related to Gordon’s discussion of Frederick Douglass’s narrative of his own education, as he learned to read against his master’s will. As Gordon indicates, through Douglass’s act of transgression:

He became aware that there was nothing inside him that precluded reaching beyond his circumstance. His self became, as Sartre would put it, a project. He faced himself in existential anguish. But this realization, that disobedience raised an anguish-riddled relation to the system of oppression, also raised the question of how far he should go. Being secretly disobedient draws the weight of existence onto the self. Public disobedience needs to be waged at some point as absolute disobedience. (ibid., 51)

As we have seen, Césaire always struggled with that question: how far should he go? As one of the leading writers and intellectuals against colonialism in the 20th century, he cannot be accused of merely being “secretly disobedient.” However, as a politician he was definitely haunted by that possibility of moving closer to some form of “absolute disobedience,” whether expressed as the struggle for Martinique’s political independence or in some other way, and much of his anguish resided precisely in his keen ability to imagine him-
Between Louverture and Christophe

self “beyond his circumstance,” while remaining unable or unwilling to actually translate those possibilities into concrete political action. Regardless of how we evaluate Césaire’s ambivalences, it seems clear that they were a deep source of existential anguish for him.

In conclusion, I insist one last time that my assessment of Césaire’s Haitian heroes as black leaders who, in spite of their extraordinary achievements in the Haitian emancipation project, were unable to fully articulate their freedom and humanity beyond the white masks offered by the logic of coloniality (with Toussaint somewhat naively assuming the neutrality of the white mask, and Christophe tragically assuming the white mask in an effort to affirm his blackness) is not presented as a criticism of Césaire. Not that Césaire is beyond criticism, for he certainly is not, and has received it from early colleagues like René Menil to more recent figures like Raphaël Confiant. However, what I am emphasizing here is his keen examination of the existential (by which I mean psychological and sociological, internal and external) constraints faced by those whose outlook was shaped by the logic of coloniality. If his works on Haiti are regarded in this way (and not merely as programmatic texts), they show themselves to be as insightful phenomenological descriptions of the coloniality of being as Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* is, and they are clearly diagnosing the same condition, the same impasse—that of the *colonial difference*. It is a condition that clearly touched Césaire closely, up to the end of his life, as can be seen when he states about his first visit to Haiti: “In Haiti I saw above all what one should not do! A country that had supposedly acquired its freedom, that had conquered its independence, and which I saw more miserable than Martinique, a French colony!” (*Nègre je suis*, 56; my translation). One could hardly find better words to describe the paradoxical, even tragic tensions that face an intellectual confronting the coloniality of power and the coloniality of being. That Césaire assumed those tensions and conflicting imperatives not passively, but rather as challenges that spurred him to keep on re-examining what freedom meant for him and his people, is why he remains one of the truly necessary names in decolonial thinking.