

Review Essay

Suzanne Césaire, *The Great Camouflage: Writings of Dissent (1941-1945)*, ed. Daniel Maximin, trans. Keith L. Walker (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2012)

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Review Essay

Suzanne Césaire, *The Great Camouflage: Writings of Dissent (1941-1945)*, ed. Daniel Maximin, trans. Keith L. Walker (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2012)

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The publication of this slender but powerful volume is, I wish to suggest, a reason to rejoice for many but an especially important moment for the emerging field of Afro-Caribbean philosophy. We have in Suzanne Césaire, *née* Roussi (also sometimes spelled Roussy), a fascinatingly ambitious and adventurous philosophical mind, one that has too long been overshadowed by the just fame of her husband, Aimé Césaire. We have been beckoned for quite a while now to consider her writings by people like T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, whose excellent study of Mme. Césaire can be found in her 2002 book, *Negritude Women*. With this collection of her writings and complement of supplementary material, lovingly put together and published in 2009 by Guadeloupean writer Daniel Maximin and now very capably translated by scholar of French literature Keith L. Walker, we lose any remaining excuses for failing to engage with her thought.

What we have in Césaire (and I will henceforth always mean Suzanne, specifying Aimé if necessary) is not just a fascinating philosophical mind but a thinker particularly invested in grappling with, illuminating, and critically reshaping Afro-Caribbean identity. I, for one, am convinced that she deserves a very prominent place in the canon that those interested in developing Afro-Caribbean philosophy as an institutional reality must continuously strive to construct in order to generate contemporary work that properly builds upon the legacy of past philosophical thought arising out of and focused upon the Afro-Caribbean experience.¹ As a woman, she also represents a vantage point that must continuously be de-marginalized if Afro-Caribbean philosophy is to flourish, both in terms of its study of past thinkers and its creation of new debates. In the rest of this review, I will attempt, first of all, to explain more fully why Césaire is of such great

interest from the perspective of Afro-Caribbean philosophy. Secondly, I will comment on the book's supplementary material, its formatting, and Walker's translation.

Césaire was born in Martinique in 1915. She met Aimé during her time as a student in 1930s Paris, those exciting years and that special place during and in which Aimé invented the word *négritude* and played a key role in creating the artistic and intellectual movement taking that word as its name.² Suzanne and Aimé married in 1937 and, two years later, they returned to Martinique. They found employment teaching high school in Fort-de-France and it is with other teacher friends – most prominently, René Ménénil – that they co-founded the journal *Tropiques*, published from 1941 to 1945. All of Césaire's extant writing was published in *Tropiques* and all of it is collected and translated for us in the volume under review.³

Although it is nowhere mentioned in the book, Césaire's studies while in France were in philosophy, making it even more appropriate that I wish to treat her as a significant philosopher.⁴ But what is gained by treating her this way and viewing her, in particular, as a paradigmatically *Afro-Caribbean philosopher*? I wish to argue that what we are best able to see when we think of her this way is the broadness of her vision, the sophisticated manner in which she embeds concerns about what it means to be Martinican within general inquiry into the nature of art and the human being, understood as universal pursuits.

It is possible, as Walker points out in his "Translator's Note," to see the seven essays of Césaire's that appeared in the pages of *Tropiques* as building "sequentially" (xxi), and the sequence begins with three essays dedicated to exploring the ideas of three different influential figures in Césaire's world, essays in which the Martinican specificity of her work is muted. "Leo Frobenius and the Problem of Civilizations" (*Tropiques*, no. 1, April 1941) praises and builds upon the work of the German ethnologist who is a well-known influence on the Negritude movement. "Alain and Esthetics" [*sic*] (*Tropiques*, no. 2, July 1941) patiently explicates and critiques the conception of art propounded by the philosopher Émile-Auguste Chartier, also known as "Alain," who Maximin tells us was Césaire's professor. "André Breton, Poet" (*Tropiques*, no. 3, October 1941) exalts and exults in the poetry and ideas of the founder of Surrealism, a movement in which the Césaires were enthusiastic participants.

Theorists such as Sharpley-Whiting and Jennifer Wilks have rightly affirmed the usefulness of viewing Césaire as carefully combining the twin primary influences of Frobenius and Surrealism in her expression of Negritude.⁵ What I wish to emphasize, once again, is the broadness of her vision and the theoretical fundamentality of her concerns. In the first paragraph of "Leo Frobenius," Césaire has already asked us to see civilization as a philosophical problem, demanding that we ask: "what is it

in its essence?" (3). Like Senghor, who praises Frobenius as highly as Césaire, she values Frobenius for his "study in greater depth of African civilizations" (4), but beyond this, she is interested in his ability to provide us with a metaphysical understanding of all of world history through his notion of *Paideuma*, the "life force" underlying the progress and decadence of civilizations (3). The metaphysical ambition of "Leo Frobenius" is matched by the epistemological boldness of "Andre Breton," in which she calls poetry a "supreme science" (19). Perhaps against what one would expect, Césaire claims that, through Surrealist practice in poetry, "the mind arrives at a more and more secure grasp of the world" (23).⁶ Metaphysical and epistemological questions in aesthetics are also at stake in "Alain," in which Césaire begins by telling us that her former professor's most enduring contribution is having "forcefully laid out the problem of art" through his systematization of the fine arts according to the kind of struggle to conquer matter and time involved (11). She describes this system eloquently and sympathetically before subjecting it to the critique that Alain attempts to acknowledge but is ultimately too afraid to embrace spontaneity, leaving him unable to appreciate the kind of artistic advance Breton represents and the power in the "voluntary abandoning and total relinquishing of the self" (18).

While the Caribbean specificity of her work is muted in these essays, it is not totally absent. Toward the end of "Leo Frobenius," Césaire writes of the picture of cultural evolution that she has outlined:

The fruitfulness of this admirable doctrine is that it poses to each of us the immediate problems from which it is impossible to shy away without cowardice. It is now vital to dare to know oneself, to dare to confess to oneself what one is, to dare to ask oneself what one wants to be. Here, also, people are born, live, and die. Here also, the entire drama is played out. (9-10)

This "here" is, of course, Martinique, and the last two lines of this passage are at once simple, subtle, and spectacular: black West Indians, on this particular island, are invited to see themselves as actors in world history as significant as anyone else and as emblematic, in their interior depth and breadth and turmoil of experience, of the great drama of all humanity. They are warned that to understand this is to recognize the necessity of exploring their cultural specificity in a spirit of brutal honesty and with a multidirectional scope of vision.

This type of seamless integration of a broad, global perspective with a deep concern for a certain spatiotemporally situated black experience characterizes each of the latter four essays published by Césaire. They are essays in which her Frobenian and Surrealist proclivities are critically brought to bear upon the cultural production and the identity of her people,

leading eventually to (in Walker's words) "the incomparable crescendo of the dissident lyricism of... social and political critique in her culminating essay" (xxii), that is, the title essay: "The Great Camouflage" (*Tropiques*, no. 13-14, September 1945). In between "Andre Breton" and "The Great Camouflage," we have, firstly, "Poetic Destitution" (*Tropiques*, no. 4, January 1942), in which Césaire pretends at first to be paying tribute to the French poet John Antoine-Nau in light of his Martinique-inspired verses but shifts calmly yet firmly to a harsh critique of Nau and others like him for their "[h]ammock literature," their "[l]iterature made of sugar and vanilla," their "[t]ourist literature" (26-27). She ends with an explosive, programmatic line that, in some ways, brings to mind the Black Arts Movement yet to come: "Martinican poetry will be cannibal or it will not be" (27).

Her next essay is a masterwork of Negritude thought: "The Malaise of a Civilization" (*Tropiques*, no. 5, April 1942). Raising the question of why Martinique is, according to her, only just beginning to produce "authentic works of art" (29), she argues that the problem lies in the fact that, over the course of her people's survival of slavery's horrors and their experience with various forms of statutory discrimination, the idea took hold that "*liberation means assimilation*" (31). Drawing upon the Frobenian notion of the Ethiopian type of civilization as vegetal, Césaire claims that the Martinican is, fundamentally and in the depths of consciousness, "plant-like," tending toward a state of abandon to "the rhythm of universal life" (30). The goal of assimilation to a cultural model based on values opposed to this tendency thus creates the conditions for failure, artistic and otherwise.

Note, however, that Césaire envisions the necessary break with this assimilationist paradigm not as a simple return to an African past but as a matter of "the mobilization of every living strength brought together upon this earth where race is the result of the most unremitting intermixing; it is about becoming conscious of the incredible store of varied energies until now locked up within us" (33). What this means is that, for Césaire, as for the other Negritude thinkers, the goal is not to reject all that is not African but rather to stop rejecting and start cultivating Africanness in preparation for the ultimate task of fruitfully combining influences from all cultural sources. This cosmopolitan aspect of Negritude is expressed at one point in her next essay, "1943: Surrealism and Us" (*Tropiques*, no. 8-9, October 1943), in such a way as to sound in contradiction with the very idea of Negritude. Hailing Surrealism as a movement dedicated to "the greatest emancipation of humankind" and arguing that it has shored up a "revolutionary feeling for life" in the specific context of Martinique, she prophesies that, with the help of this movement, "[i]t will be time finally to transcend the sordid contemporary antinomies: Whites-Blacks, Europeans-Africans, civilized-savage" (35, 37, 38). Does this transcendence mean completely rising above – that is, *erasing* – racial difference?

Leaving that question open for the moment, let me say something about what makes “The Great Camouflage” such an undeniably powerful climax in the progression of Césaire’s essays. Firstly, in its mode of expression, the essay is Césaire’s most obvious move beyond reflecting on Surrealist poetic practice to actually practicing it and it is stunningly beautiful in its evocative lyricism. Secondly, in scope, it is Césaire’s most *Caribbean* essay, in the sense that, while she retains Martinique as a focal point, she goes beyond to draw in the region as a whole, moving in the first paragraph from Mt. Pélée in Martinique to “the highest plateaus in Haiti” and then, in the second paragraph, bringing to life a symbolic hurricane that starts off the coast of Puerto Rico and unites the region by its stormy path, “its beautiful tail sweeping rhythmically the semi-circle of the Antilles” (39). Thirdly, as a reflection on culture and politics, its thematic breadth is remarkable: race relations not only in the Caribbean but also in the US, different types of whiteness, the implications of racial mixture, class stratification within Martinican society, the impact of technology, the relationship people have with land, the significance of music and dance. Especially given its enigmatic poetic style, it is an essay that repays close re-readings.⁷

I believe we can draw on one of these beautifully poetic passages to address the question of Césaire on race. When “the tropical night swells with rhythms,” Césaire writes, “it is Africa herself who, from across the Atlantic and the centuries pre-dating the slave-ships, dedicates to her Antillean children the gaze of sun-filled desire that the dancers exchange” (44). She claims, furthermore, that “[t]heir cry exclaims in a husky and full voice that Africa is still there, present, that she waits, undulating, devourer of Whites, immensely virgin in spite of colonization” (44-45). It is important to keep passages like these in mind when commentators like Maximin veer toward making Césaire a thinker of *créolité* rather than Negritude, attributing to her “a genealogy that recognizes all ancestors without recourse to selective sorting procedures and without the need for roots in order to savor the fruits nor the need of very ancient branches to welcome hummingbirds” (xxx). There is a “selective” celebration of Africa in Césaire’s genealogy of Afro-Caribbean identity and this, in my view, is as it should be. My sense of the kind of transcendence of antinomies that Césaire is after in “1943” is the erasure of impenetrable boundaries, of isolation and antagonistic opposition, not of racial difference and the kinds of cultural differences Césaire associates with race. Like the other thinkers of Negritude, Césaire must be recognized as a passionate defender and promoter of *black cultural nationalism*.

Some may see no reason to resist this point but may also see it as diminishing her relevance to contemporary thought, since such race-based cultural nationalism is widely viewed as perhaps historically significant but ultimately untenable on account of its restrictive essentialism. I would respond that, yes, there is certainly good reason to be concerned about

Césaire's essentialism. Her heavy reliance on Frobenius and the questionable nature of his generalizations, especially, should worry us. What is needed, though, is close reading and careful analysis. To the extent that we end up seeing Césaire as encouraging us to just put our faith in race understood as a foundationally biological affair involving the differentiation of peoples by stable sets of physical, mental, and behavioral characteristics, we have reason to see her work as of historical interest but as adding little to contemporary debates. On the other hand, if what we find is that there is a more subtle and sophisticated picture of social and psychological conflict under colonial conditions at stake here, then it might be the case that Césaire has something special to say to us today and we ought to listen. I will not try to resolve this tough question of the extent to which Césaire does or does not point the way beyond simplistic racial essentialism here. I will simply state my belief that Césaire and the Negritude thinkers in general transmit in their work a message about the importance of black resistance to the cultural dimension of the system of white supremacy that remains relevant and can survive the removal of essentialist language and ideas.

What does not depend upon one's answer to that question, though, is one's estimation of Césaire's significance to the history of Afro-Caribbean philosophy. I have tried to suggest that this volume makes it absolutely clear that she is very significant in that regard and I will now say more about how it does this outside of Césaire's seven engrossing essays. Preceding those essays, we find: Walker's "Translator's Introduction: Suzanne Césaire and the Great Camouflages," insightfully organized around the idea that "the nodal concept of camouflage" (which appears, of course, most blatantly in the final essay) generates the questions animating the entirety of Césaire's work; Walker's "Translator's Note," a useful reflection on the challenges of translating Césaire and all the other distinct artistic voices in the book; and Maximin's "Editor's Introduction: Suzanne Césaire, *sun-filled fountain*," a masterful, appropriately poetic introduction and homage to Césaire, notable for its helpful historical contextualization, its warm portrait of Césaire's personality, and its discussion of the role of gender in the difference between the paths of the woman and her husband.

Following Part 1, in which we find the seven essays, Part 2 features a poem by Breton, a poem by Surrealist painter André Masson, a poetic dialogue between Breton and Masson, and a poem by Ménénil, all said by Maximin to be "inspired quite particularly by the person and thought of Suzanne Césaire" (50). The section helps us remember the interesting convergence of Surrealism and Martinique when, in 1941, Breton, Masson, and others stopped in Martinique while fleeing Vichy France for New York. What stood out most to me, however, was the way in which the dialogue between Breton and Masson offers us an example of the kind of Eurocentric cosmopolitanism that, I think, Césaire rightly criticized in order to replace it with the Negritude alternative. The two of them marvel at the Martinican

landscape, comparing themselves to Rimbaud and Gauguin, and when one admits that their words naturally bring to mind the term “exoticism,” he goes on to reject the charge by saying: “The entire earth belongs to us” (53). The intent, we might charitably strain to say, was to evoke the oneness and equality of humanity, but it is telling that these white men seem not to notice that the phrase sounds most like a reference to European imperialism.

Part 3 touchingly features poems by Aimé dedicated to Suzanne, a portion of a speech Aimé gave at a girls’ boarding school in Fort-de-France, and a memoir of her mother by one of the Césaires’ children, Ina. The quotation from the speech is intriguing, and perhaps also troubling, for its Negritudist appreciation of the way that “woman is less submissive to the tyranny of logic because she is more faithful to the cosmos” (59). The poems have all the power of imagery and all the mysteriousness that readers familiar with any of Aimé’s poetry will expect. The reflection by Ina Césaire is, however, the perfect way to end the volume, as it is a deeply moving tribute to a truly remarkable woman.

Having discussed the importance of engaging with Césaire’s thought and the contents of the rest of the book, I will end by discussing the book’s quality as a translation. Before looking at things like word choice, I must first point out that there are some unfortunate flaws in the book’s formatting. Firstly, the breaking up of Césaire’s original essays into different sections is inconsistently reproduced here, mildly but perceptibly altering the flow of text. There are also places where quotations from other people are not distinguished as explicitly as they could be. When this happens in an essay like “Andre Breton,” it is still easy to tell where Breton is being quoted, but in “Poetic Destitution” – especially given the decision to leave off the subtitle announcing the essay’s ostensible focus (“Misère d’une poésie: John Antoine-Nau”) – readers may not be aware at first when they have gone from reading Césaire to reading Nau. The most unfortunate error of this type, however, is the failure to identify the lines of poetry at the beginning of “1943” as a passage from Aimé’s “Batouque” (from *Les Armes Miraculeuses*). Readers unfamiliar with Aimé’s distinctive style may mistakenly think this is Suzanne’s poetry, robbing them of the invigorating romance of this deployment by Césaire of her husband’s work in the context of her apotheosis of Surrealism.

Other unwanted differences between the translated book and the original include the absence of a photo of a Surrealist gathering at the home of Pierre Matisse, in which we find Aimé, Suzanne, Breton, Marcel Duchamp, and a number of other notables. Then there are absences that it might be too harsh to call flaws, but which are keenly felt nonetheless. I think the book would have been greatly improved, for instance, had Walker included notes identifying the sources of all of Césaire’s quotations (from Frobenius, Alain, Breton, Nau, etc.).

All that being said, we must be very grateful to Walker not merely because this is the first time that all of Césaire's work has been translated but also because he has translated her work quite well. The two venues through which English-speaking audiences are most likely to have encountered her writing before are the translations of "The Malaise of a Civilization" and "The Great Camouflage" in the appendix to Sharpley-Whiting's book or the translations of these pieces plus "Leo Frobenius" and "1943" in Michael Richardson and Krzysztof Fijalkowski's anthology *Refusal of the Shadow: Surrealism and the Caribbean*.⁸ My comparison of translations suggests to me that, while none are bad, Walker's has a fair chance of coming out on top. Having first been exposed to Césaire through Sharpley-Whiting, I am especially impressed by some improvements in comparison with her translations. There is, first of all, a footnote on Martinican architecture in "The Malaise of a Civilization" that was simply left out of Sharpley-Whiting's version. Moving to choices of expression, however, the best example of an improvement is the final line of "The Great Camouflage," a long, complex, imagery-filled sentence expressing the beauty of the Caribbean but doing so precisely in order to evoke our ability to consequently miss the terrible drama of racial and class-based hierarchy and struggle characterizing Caribbean life. The sentence ends this way: "si mes Antilles sont si belles, c'est qu'alors le grand jeu de cache-cache a réussi, c'est qu'il fait certes trop beau, ce jour-là, pour y voir."⁹ Sharpley-Whiting translates this: "if my Antilles are so beautiful, then it's because the great game of hide-and-seek has succeeded, and certainly that day would be too enchanting for us to see."¹⁰ The last clause here is simply confusing (which day?). Walker translates: "if my Antilles are so beautiful, it is because the great game of hide-and-seek has succeeded, it is then because, on that day, the weather is most certainly too blindingly bright and beautiful to see clearly therein" (46). This is much better and unsurprisingly so, given Walker's belief that the concept of camouflage is the key to Césaire's oeuvre. Note how he takes his time here, not merely getting it right but fleshing out the language ("beau" => "blindingly bright and beautiful") in order to drive the point home.

This is, of course, not to say Walker never makes bad choices, but I did not come across any that struck me as so problematic that I should take the time to discuss them here. Some choices are, of course, inherently tough: in "The Malaise of a Civilization," Sharpley-Whiting translates "moi" in phrases like "notre moi collectif" as "ego."¹¹ This is understandable given that "moi" is indeed used in French for that Freudian term, there is a clear Freudian influence on Césaire through Surrealism, and the very title of the essay appears to be a play on the French title of Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents* (*Malaise dans la civilisation*).¹² And yet, Walker's choice of "self"

(i.e., “our collective self”) seems attractive for its ability to express the non-Freudian connotations of the term “*moi*” (28).

How, also, does one translate Frobenian terms like “l’homme-plante”? Walker opts for “plant-human” (30), Sharpley-Whiting for “human plant,” Richardson and Fijalkowski for “plant-man.”¹³ The last of these may clearly sound like the worst choice, as it is the one that sounds like a silly-looking superhero in a comic book. That being said, I wish to note that I worry about the effort to use less sexist language in translating terms like “homme” since, it seems to me, sexism in language of this type is symbolic of the fraught nature of women’s intellectual work in contexts like the ones inhabited by Césaire. Why, indeed, is there so little sustained discussion of gender in Césaire’s writing? Ina Césaire calls her mother an “active feminist *avant la lettre*” (65). What are some of the ways, if there be any, that we might more clearly see forms of feminism in her writing? On these pertinent questions, I will close, reiterating once again that the publication of this book is an event to be celebrated and the writings of Suzanne Césaire collected in it need to be widely read, appreciated, and critically discussed.

¹ The kind of canon-building I am describing here is clearly among the central goals of Paget Henry’s *Caliban’s Reason: Introducing Afro-Caribbean Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2000), the book that remains the most significant instance of someone self-consciously aiming to develop the field of Afro-Caribbean philosophy.

² Sharpley-Whiting has, of course, rightly warned us that the focus on Aimé and his friends Léopold Sédar Senghor and Léon-Gontran Damas as the founders of Negritude has obscured the crucial roles of women like Césaire and the Nardal sisters, also from Martinique. In connection with this, it is worth noting that Sharpley-Whiting assumes that “Roussy [as she would have then been called] did not publish in *L’Étudiant Noir*,” the journal that launched the Negritude movement. See T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, *Negritude Women* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 80. She assumes this, however, partly because she believes the common myth that only one issue of the journal - the March 1935 issue - was ever published. This has been definitively disproven with the publication of Christian Filostrat’s *Negritude Agonistes, Assimilation Against Nationalism in the French-Speaking Caribbean and Guyane* (Cherry Hill, NJ: Africana Homestead Legacy Publishers, 2008), which features a facsimile of *L’Étudiant Noir*, vol. 1, no. 3 (May-June 1935). Filostrat suggests that a total of five issues were published and this

means that it is distinctly possible that there are currently unknown works by Césaire that appeared in the journal.

³ She is known to have also later written a play, *Youma, aurore de la liberté*, but - though a production was staged in Fort-de-France - the work is now considered lost. Her extant work is thus the seven articles she published in *Tropiques* over the duration of its existence as well as the brilliant and bravely provocative response she composed on behalf of the journal's editorial team in response to a letter from a Vichy regime censor informing them of his decision to suppress the journal. The letter is quoted in its entirety in Maximin's introduction (xxix).

⁴ See Sharpley-Whiting, *Negritude Women*, 80.

⁵ See chapter 3 in Jennifer Wilks, *Race, Gender, and Comparative Black Modernism: Suzanne Lacascade, Marita Bonner, Suzanne Césaire, Dorothy West* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2008).

⁶ It is interesting to wonder what kind of mutual influencing occurred between the Césaires, as the epistemological preoccupations of "Andre Breton" foreshadow Aimé's brilliant essay, "Poésie et connaissance," which appeared in the January 1945 issue of *Tropiques*. A translation ("Poetry and Knowledge") is available in Michael Richardson and Krzysztof Fijalkowski (trans.), *Refusal of the Shadow: Surrealism and the Caribbean* (London: Verso, 1996), 134-146.

⁷ As a Du Bois scholar, I cannot resist mentioning my thought that we might be encountering a deliberate reworking of parts of the famous passage on double consciousness from *The Souls of Black Folk* in "The Great Camouflage" when Césaire speaks of "the Antillean, great-grandson of a White colonizer and a slave Negress" as possessing "double strength and double ferocity, in a dangerously threatened equilibrium: he cannot accept his negritude; he cannot whiten himself" (43).

⁸ See notes 2 and 6 above.

⁹ Suzanne Césaire, *Le grand camouflage: Écrits de dissidence (1941-1945)*, ed. Daniel Maximin (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2009), 94.

¹⁰ Sharpley-Whiting, *Negritude Women*, 140. Note that Sharpley-Whiting draws upon this line when ending her chapter on Césaire (see 102). Although I believe the translation is erroneous and that this is therefore unfortunate, she is arguably still able in that instance to nicely evoke Césaire's point.

¹¹ Sharpley-Whiting, *Negritude Women*, 130.

¹² Sharpley-Whiting, *Negritude Women*, 155.

¹³ Sharpley-Whiting, *Negritude Women*, 131; Richardson & Fijalkowski, *Refusal of the Shadow*, 91.