

The political vitality and vital politics of Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism*: A reading in light of contemporary racism

The Sociological Review
2020, Vol. 68(3) 476–491
© The Author(s) 2019
Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/0038026119868654
journals.sagepub.com/home/sor



Mara Viveros-Vigoya

Faculty of Human Sciences, Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Colombia

Abstract

This article offers a contemporary reading from Latin America of *Discourse on Colonialism*, one of Martinican writer and political leader Aimé Césaire's most important works, which is not well known in the Latin American context, despite the great relevance that his politics have in that region. It is one of the strongest interpellations of colonialism and racism as inherent vectors of capitalism and Western modernity and even could be considered as a precursor to critiques of international development thinking and practices. The article includes a short biography of Césaire, and goes on to address how *Discourse* offers a non-Eurocentric reading of European history, arguing that Nazism is not an outgrowth of or an exception in European history but the ultimate effect of a civilization that justifies colonization. It then describes Césaire's post-war aspirations for decolonization as a possible third way forward for Europe, breaking with the binarism of capitalism/communism, and outlines questions involving the tensions in the demands for equality and recognition of differences, which stemmed from his involvement in the departmentalization of Martinique in 1946, and the problems that French universalism caused for this process. Rereading *Discourse* today, there is a distinct blind spot in its androcentrism, and in Césaire's ignoring of Black women thinkers who were his contemporaries. However, the text still offers original and creative proposals that subaltern groups in Latin America (racialized groups, women, LGBTQ+) can use to observe elements of reality that colonizers and dominant groups are reluctant to acknowledge.

Keywords

Aimé Césaire, decolonial thought, Latin America, racism, Southern feminist theory

Introduction

June 26, 2013 marked the 100th year anniversary of the birth of Aimé Césaire, a Martinican writer and political leader that never let the world forget how much courage

Corresponding author:

Mara Viveros-Vigoya, Escuela de Estudios de Género / Facultad de Ciencias Humanas, Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Sede Bogotá Carrera 44 No. 45-67, Unidad Camilo Torres, Bloque A5, oficina 502, Bogotá 111321, Colombia.

Email: mviverosv@unal.edu.co

is required to make others respect the dignity of an individual and that of an entire people. His prolific work, translated into many languages, and extensive literary and political influence in different contexts are, paradoxically, the fruit of his unwavering commitment to Martinique, his 'homeland', as he called it. While much is said about Césaire as an intellectual, poet and writer, his political thinking is less discussed. However, from the mid-1930s Aimé Césaire was one of the main driving forces of the Négritude movement and a lifelong fighter against colonialism.

In this piece, I will refer to one of his most important works, *Discourse on Colonialism* (1955/1972), which has been heavily influential in the French-speaking world, and more recently in Anglophone countries,¹ but is not as well known in the Latin American context, despite the great relevance and pertinence that his politics have in that region. I start by offering an account of Césaire's work that highlights how his response on behalf of the colonized peoples to the European civilizational project is at once situated in history yet also pertinent for and prescient of contemporary society, and go on to examine the tensions and dilemmas of his demands for an equality that recognizes differences. By engaging with these valuable contributions made by *Discourse on Colonialism*, I also acknowledge its failure to address issues of gender as part of the colonized voice and as one of the differences to be accepted and included. Within this criticism the piece contemplates what feminist movements, especially the Latin American decolonial movements, might be able to take from this reading and how they might work with and beyond Césaire.

The Spanish translation of his work was published in 2006 and provides an opportunity for the Spanish-speaking public to familiarize itself with the work of an author who anticipated many of the criticisms that would later come to be known as postcolonial theory and the decolonial turn. Indeed, in this book Césaire revealed early epistemological assumptions of Western universalism and raised one of the most devastating criticisms of the Age of Enlightenment and its forms of exclusion and hierarchies. Written just after the Second World War, *Discourse on Colonialism* is one of the strongest interpellations of colonialism and racism as inherent vectors of capitalism and Western modernity and even could be considered as a precursor to critiques of international development thinking and practices.

Césaire's work in *Discourse on Colonialism*, in its current light, offers an in-depth history and theoretical-political genealogy necessary for the understanding of current debates on colonialism and coloniality, Black identity and otherness. My goal here is not to propose an apologetic or nostalgic reading of his work, but rather to try and restore its assets in all their density, as one of the most insightful testimonies of the major events that took place during the last century and the product of one of the richest biographical and intellectual trajectories of that period. Césaire wrote *Discourse on Colonialism* at this pivotal time, and was, incredibly, able to anticipate the shape of this new world order marked by the fall of Europe and the rise of the United States.

Biographical and intellectual trajectory of Aimé Césaire

Aimé Césaire was born in 1913 on the small Caribbean island of Martinique, which had been a French colony for several centuries. Upon completing high school in Fort-de-France, an 18-year-old Césaire traveled to Paris where he studied twentieth century

topics in some of the most prestigious temples of knowledge in 1930s France, such as the *Lycée Louis-Le-Grand* and *l'École Normale Supérieure*. Aimé Césaire made himself an integral part of the intense artistic and intellectual life by which 1930s Paris was known. It was in interwar Paris where Césaire asserted his Négritude, in fertile circumstances for intellectual collaboration due to the presence of literary and artistic vanguards and transnational social movements in defense of the rights of Black people, such as the international proletariat and Pan-Africanism (Bonfiglio, 2012).

Upon his return to Martinique, Césaire wrote in 1939 one of his best known works, the poem *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* [Notebook of a return to the native land], which André Breton called 'the greatest lyrical monument of this time' (Louis, 2003, p. 16). In late 1945, Aimé Césaire returned to Paris as deputy to the French Communist Party. He excelled in this position as a fervent defender of the departmentalization of Martinique and three other French colonies, Guadeloupe, Guyana and Reunion Island, and managed to get a law addressing this issue passed by unanimous approval on March 19, 1946. During this effervescent period, following the devastations of the Second World War, Césaire, the parliamentarian, wrote incessantly. Between 1946 and 1950 he published four books, one of which stands out for its subsequent impact: *Discourse on Colonialism*.

After breaking ties with the French Communist Party,² in 1958 Césaire founded the Martinican Progressive Party, which dominated, throughout the remaining last half of the century, the island's political scene, and from this moment he devoted himself to Martinique's political life. In 1993, Césaire declined to renew his mandate as deputy in the National Assembly, after having served for 47 continuous years. From that date on he remained in Martinique until his death in April 2008.

This brief biographical sketch allows us to understand that the most important moments of his political life occurred during the final days of the colonial empires and during a time of great impetus by the national liberation movements which raised questions about equality, sovereignty, identity and the universal abstract ideal. I will talk below in more detail about *Discourse on Colonialism*, as I consider it to be, from a political perspective, his most important work. He moved away from the distinctive mark of his surrealist poems to adopt a more sober, rational and argumentative tone (Maldonado-Torres, 2006), but his writings were no less passionate and vehement. Indeed, I do wish to point out the strength and uniqueness of the poetic tone he employed when writing *Discourse on Colonialism*.

Césaire always used culture to fight colonialism and handled and molded the French language as few writers do, rescuing and resignifying archaisms, creating neologisms and exploring a rich and extensive vocabulary hailing from various cultural landscapes, poetics and histories, European, African and Antillean, depending on how or what he needed to express or to contest. On account of the difficulties I have encountered as a translator of this text, I am able to understand why the elements of the Césairean style are not only a form of emotional knowledge but also an alternative epistemology that seeks 'to criticize abstract reason and instrumental rationality, [without] reject[ing] reason as such' (Wilder, 2013).

There are three aspects which are present in *Discourse on Colonialism* and seem to have fundamentally contributed to his thoughts on colonialism and coloniality, equality and identity. The first is the critique of Eurocentrism, expressed in his analysis

and interpretation of European history from the mid-twentieth century. The second is the proposal of a theoretical policy of decolonization, as an alternative that becomes available in the post-war era, presented from the point of view of social groups that were excluded from 'the Modern Age'. The third is the relevance of his questions in relation to existing tensions and dilemmas about the demands for equality and recognition of differences.

A non-Eurocentric reading of European history

Discourse on Colonialism begins with a stark diagnosis of the devastating effects of colonialism on the colonizers: 'A civilization that proves incapable of solving the problems it creates is a decadent civilization' (Césaire, 1955/1972, p. 31). A few paragraphs later Césaire passionately writes that, 'Europe is indefensible' and he goes on to say:

First we must study how colonization works to *decivilize* the colonizer, to *brutalize* him in the true sense of the word, to degrade him, to awaken him to buried instincts, to covetousness, violence, race hatred, and moral relativism. (Césaire, 1955/1972, p. 35)

Based on these premises, Césaire highlights the close links between Nazism and the Western quest for modernity, built around modern/colonial European expansion. By doing so, he 'placed the issue of inherent coloniality in the capitalist world-system at the center of the interpretation of Nazism' (Grosfoguel, 2006, p. 148). The trauma of the Nazi discovery plays a revealing role about a kind of racism that begins to be recognized only when it results in genocide. The French tried to deflect upon other nations, namely the Germans, the guilt that arose from the crimes committed under Nazism, as they were an unbearable reality. But as Césaire analyzed, Nazism is not an outgrowth of or an exception in European history but the ultimate effect of a civilization that justifies colonization without perceiving the dangers involved in proceeding toward *savagery*.

European history could only see the shame, crime and humiliation inherent in Nazism when applied to the white European population's colonialist strategies which 'until then had been reserved exclusively for the Arabs of Algeria, the coolies of India, and the blacks of Africa' (Césaire, 1955/1972, p. 36). The hierarchies established between Europeans and non-Europeans, in force since the late fifteenth century, allowed for the disregard or absolution of these colonial racist procedures. Colonization, as a distant reality, allowed the violence that was exerted on non-European peoples, perceived as less human, to be symbolically hidden. Césaire, just as other American and Caribbean Black thinkers like W. E. B. Du Bois (1943) and C. L. R. James (1945), saw fascism and Nazism as applications of the techniques originally employed by colonial European peoples and thought racism to be a constitutive feature of the capitalist system. He was able to make 'this ferocious attack upon Western Civilization because he knew it inside out' (James cited in Robinson, 1983, p. 183).

Ramón Grosfoguel (2006) observes that Césaire and these thinkers were able to see and make heard the processes that remained invisible and imperceptible to European intellectuals, because their thinking came from 'the other side of the colonial difference' (in the words of Walter Dignolo, 2002) and from the clarity with which the colonized subject perceives the European idea of civilization. From this geopolitical and

body-political perspective, which alters the geography of reason (Maldonado-Torres, 2004), they were able to explain hidden areas of Eurocentric thought and correct historical biases produced by Eurocentrism. Thus, for these Black thinkers, what Europe described as Nazism was nothing but the boomerang effect of colonialism.

Césaire's analysis brings to mind the fact that the production of knowledge is not unrelated to a person's geographic and embodied location which in itself makes a statement, and that this connection allows for the questioning of the universalist myth which conceals who is speaking along with the epistemic location in the power structure from which this subject speaks. The concealment of this place of enunciation is what makes colonial expansion, domination and the construction of hierarchies among civilizations possible. *Discourse on Colonialism*, however, shows how the subjective experience of the enslaved and colonized subject is a source of knowledge that is necessary in order for Europe to gain clarity about the nature of its historical undertakings. In this sense, Césaire went ahead of what would later constitute the Black Feminist Standpoint epistemology. As Patricia Hill Collins argues in her article 'The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought' (1989), there are no thoughts without experience and it is those particular experiences of Black women that stimulate a Black feminist awareness: that is, a particular way of interpreting the lived realities.

Maldonado-Torres asserts that *Discourse on Colonialism* should be read 'as a response from the colonized world, and particularly of the African Diaspora, to the European civilizational project' (2006, p. 179). For Césaire, the only possible redemption for Europe as a dying civilization is to revitalize itself through its interactions with the 'Third World'. Furthermore, as he points out, the disasters brought about by colonization have already been incorporated and even extended, and Europe finds itself drowning in the modus operandi of neo-imperialism and US capitalism. From today's perspective, in many ways, what Césaire feared has become reality, and in this context and from a place such as Latin America, it makes sense to return to the work of Césaire. One lesson among the many others we can take from *Discourse on Colonialism* is to understand that many of the effects of the crises of capitalism that the region suffers today: the financial, ecological and food sovereignty issues as well as the predatory energy model, were forged in the period described by Césaire.

Césaire challenged a vision of world history or global politics that had separate histories of slavery, imperialism, capitalism, republicanism and modernism. He stressed the ties that connected the metropolitan stories to the Caribbean and linked together the colonized peoples. Hence, their reluctance to criticize the history of France, modernity and modernism from the outside, as foreigners (Wilder, 2013). One of the peculiarities of this text is the combination of 'a variety of positions ranging from internal criticism and subversive complicity to the introduction of perspectives that are completely outside the European interpretative and epistemological framework when talking about the "crisis" of Europe' (Maldonado-Torres, 2006, p. 179).

Beyond polarization after the war

After the horror of the Second World War, from Césaire's perspective, came the chance for Europe to have learned valuable lessons and start to work toward its redemption, for

its own good but also for the benefit of the formerly colonized peoples. Notwithstanding, the post-war global dynamics held particular challenges that would see Césaire's vision, and the plight of the colonized that he represents, deprioritized.

The Zhdanov Doctrine of 1947 defined the world as being divided into two camps: the capitalist world (representing war and the military, economic and political expansionism of the United States, which not only was considered to be the defender of Europe, but replaced it as the new hegemonic power) and the socialist world (representing peace and the progressive democratic forces of the world, grouped around the Soviet Union). This analysis understood communism as a viable way of building a different future, outside a fascist or liberal Europe. However, by favoring and defending the USSR and other Eastern European countries, surrounded and threatened by the Cold War being unleashed by the United States, communism ignored another contradiction that coursed through the field of capitalism, namely the opposition between the colonized peoples of Asia and Africa and the imperialist nations, protected by the United States.

The reproach that Césaire formulated in response to this analysis was how the demands of colonized peoples were not given priority (Amin, 2006). The proposal of decolonization as an implied plan in *Discourse on Colonialism* represents an alternative method to the geopolitical options that emerged after the Second World War. This choice is what Nelson Maldonado-Torres, following Frantz Fanon, called 'the door of the wretched of the earth'. This door opens at the confluence of an internal and external catastrophe in Europe, evidenced in the Second World War, not only by evil Nazi forces from within Europe but by the hopeful horizon that opened with the decolonization of European overseas territories (Maldonado-Torres, 2006, p. 176).

Césaire's judgment of a Europe that hides from itself the truth of reality and that remains indifferent to violence unless it comes home, is drastic. For Césaire, the knowledge possessed by Europe's enslaved and colonized populations can open a third way, that of decolonization and of a new type of critical reasoning regarding the European civilizational project's lies and deceptions. Decolonization offers different horizons to both capitalism and communism and employs plurality as a political proposition that would see Europe join the cause of the Third World and become an awakener of countries and civilizations through a policy of nationalities which would be based on respect for peoples and cultures. This third door opens at the time of the defeat of Nazism, at a time when racism is 'discovered' and the concept of guilt is introduced into Western consciousness. It is also a time that coincides with the start of various wars for independence by colonized countries; and the period in which the colonized subjects began to be named, to be appointed and to impose on the colonizer a concrete image of themselves, irreducible to the fantasies that nourished the colonialist representations of the colonized (Guillaumin, 2002).

The colonized people's awareness of this singularity is what prevents the colonial question from being treated as part of a larger struggle as communism suggested. In this regard, the 1956 letter which Césaire addresses to then Secretary of the French Communist Party, Maurice Thorez, submitting his resignation to the party and pointing out some of the very visible defects of its members, is quite meaningful and instructive:

. . . their inveterate assimilationism; their unconscious chauvinism; their fairly simplistic faith, which they share with bourgeois Europeans, in the omnilateral superiority of the West; their belief that evolution as it took place in Europe is the only evolution possible, the only kind desirable, the kind the whole world must undergo; to sum up, their rarely avowed but real belief in civilization with a capital C and progress with a capital P . . . (Césaire, 1956/2010, p. 149)

In this letter, Césaire explains his decision as follows: ‘What I want is that Marxism and Communism be placed in the service of black peoples, not black peoples in the service of Marxism and Communism. That the doctrine and the movement would be made to fit men, not men to fit the doctrine and the movement.’ Further on he states: ‘I say that there will never be an African variant, or a Malagasy one or a Caribbean one, because French communism finds it more convenient to impose theirs upon us . . . even the anticolonialism of French communists still bears the marks of the colonialism it is fighting’ (Césaire, 1956/2010, p. 150). The alternative that opens the door for the decolonizing proposal stems from the observation that, ‘we cannot delegate anyone else to think for us [colonized peoples]’ (Césaire, 1956/2010, p. 149), as they do not recognize any doctrine which is not reconsidered by them and for them.

Abstract universalism, concrete universalism: equality and difference

The third point I would like to emphasize about Césaire’s proposal is the relevance of his questions involving the tensions and dilemmas present in the demands for equality and recognition of differences. One of the first major political acts of Césaire was the demand for the departmentalization of Martinique in 1946. This demand has been explained in various ways by pointing out different elements: the desire to participate in the new social security system established in France after the war; moreover, the desire of most to escape the political, economic and social domination of the local white minority, the *Békés*. Nevertheless, other reasons play a fundamental role for this unique approach to the problems of colonialism after the war. First, Martinique citizens voted for assimilation because ‘they identified France with transcendent culture and human principles that was above the regime of “colonialism jackals” claiming to represent France in Martinique’. Second, departmentalization would safeguard the island from American designs, a new post-war colonial power associated with racism and *Békés* (Childers, 2006, pp. 284–285).

In an interview in 2003, Césaire justifies this request in the following manner: ‘I asked for the departmentalization of Martinique because this idea was more social than political. What Martinicans wanted as a whole, at that point they were literally starving to death, was to obtain wages which were on par with those of the French in France. There were social laws that were applied in France, voted on but not implemented in Martinique. It was this entire social package to which Martinicans aspired’ (Louis, 2004, p. 51). The law of March 1946 which put an end to the colonial status of Martinique, Guadeloupe, Guyana and Reunion Island, turning them into departments, was quickly emptied of its meaning. First, because the enforcement of the law

and the social improvements it entailed were delayed on multiple occasions. Equal social rights, for example, were not fully acquired until the end of the 1990s and the large general strike of 2009 in Guadeloupe pointed out the persistent inequalities and the social and economic cleavages between the Mainland and the Outremer territories (Bonilla, 2009, 2013).

However, it was also because of cultural assimilation policies practiced by the French Republic, which ignored the historical and cultural particularities of these localities. The failure to fulfill the law of 1946 refers to a hidden side of democracy, to the difficulties the French Republic experienced in confronting the diversity of its population. Césaire was one of the first to want to dispel the opacity surrounding the presence in France of those citizens, both men and women, who had been forgotten and ignored because they were descendants of enslaved or colonized subjects. To make their presence visible meant revealing a diversity and otherness which called into question an ethnic-racial nationalism.

For an entire generation, the 1946 law is recalled as a shameful event. Some Martinican intellectuals like the writer Raphaël Confiant have criticized the law as embodying a betrayal of the promises and expectations that led to its enactment. For Confiant, this law weighs upon the West Indies as an ‘original sin’ (Confiant, 1994, p. 32). This reproach is accompanied by disappointment and frustration, that of having to live in a country which has been permanently subjected to a logic over which one has little control because it is determined elsewhere (Vergès, 2005). However, regardless of these criticisms, it is important to clarify that Césaire’s proposal was not assimilationist. Césaire attempted to pursue what Gary Wilder (2015) calls an ‘untimely vision’ of self-determination without state-sovereignty. This plan, which he called ‘abolition through integration’, transformed over time – from the quest of political assimilation through departmentalization to the pursuit of political autonomy through cooperative federalism.

Nonetheless, in each occasion his predominant political goals were similar: fundamental emancipation for Antilleans in the new post-war Cold War order based on self-management, political autonomy and economic self-sufficiency as well as full French citizenship and financial solidarity with the metropole. For pragmatic and principled reasons, he determined that a territorial national state was not the best way to realize these aims at that period. As he stated multiple times, ‘we didn’t ask to become the other, we asked to be their equal, to attain the same equal rights as citizens’. In making this demand, Césaire brought to light the contradictions inherent in the French republican model and the difficulties that occurred when trying to translate this abstract universalism into action. For Césaire, a true universalism would have to be a concrete or situated universalism, anchored in the Antilleans’ ‘lived experience’. His vision of universalism takes into account not just abstract equality, but material socio-economic parity (Bonilla, 2013).

The law of 1946 and its nearly impossible implementation allowed all to witness the difficulties faced by the French Republic in melding equality and otherness and the ambiguities associated with coloniality. The questions raised by the 1946 law are of great relevance even today; they ask the question of whether it is possible to be equal and yet different while living in the same territory; whether the French Republic can accept as equals the men and women whom it colonized; or in order to be equal and

different, 'is it necessary to follow the path laid by the nationalist doctrine, that is to say, finding that it is impossible to build a partnership if two different territories are not built' (Vergès, 2005, p. 115)? These are also questions that numerous researchers and activists are now asking the French Republic in light of the recent debates on the memory of slavery and colonialism.

What was being requested with the law of 1946 was to fill with real and concrete content a citizenship that these previously colonized people were only able to marginally exercise. For Césaire, this economic emancipation would lead to significant social reorganization within the Antilles and a reconfiguration of a French State (Wilder, 2013). However, as political scientist Françoise Vergès (2005) noted, the republican conception of citizenship is universal because it requires the disappearance of particularism; but this universality is founded on an idea of reason, tainted by racial ideology that says that certain human beings are more endowed with reason than others. Some would be considered to be more of a citizen than others, a contradiction that colonized populations continue to underscore. These limits have persisted until the present day, as can be seen by acts such as the ban of the veil (Scott, 2010).

Césaire defended a society where being Black is possible without any negatively associated connotations. Not like a plus sign, but as a demand for a true history, one that involved the slave trade and the enslavement and dispersal of Black people throughout the world. In his speech at the First Hemispheric Conference of Black People in the Diaspora held in Miami in 1987, at Florida International University, Césaire defined Négritude during a tribute to him, as follows: 'Négritude is a way of living history within history: the history of a community whose experience appears to be, to tell the truth, unique in its deportation of populations, its transfer of people from one continent to another, its distant memories of old beliefs, its fragments of murdered cultures' (Césaire, 2006c, pp. 86–87 [my translation]).

Négritude for Césaire is a concept that emphasizes loyalty and a duty to remember, as he told Patrice Louis in his 2004 interview, when he talks about how many Antilleans he met in France who felt ashamed to call themselves Antillean, Martinicans or Guadeloupeans, and how many of them were still ashamed of Africa. This aspect of inheritance, neglect, debasement and scorn is exactly that which Césaire discussed, seeing it necessary to establish historical accuracy.

Rereading *Discourse today*

Rereading *Discourse on Colonialism* today is a way of participating in a kind of genealogical work of Anticolonial and Decolonial Thought. This text foreshadowed the current debate on how to bring about a more just world without racism; it proposed what is now known as the decolonial turn and decoloniality, understood as 'the dismantling of relations of power and conceptions of knowledge that foment the reproduction of racial, gender, and geopolitical hierarchies that came into being or found new and more powerful forms of expression in the modern/colonial world' (Maldonado-Torres, 2006, p. 175).

Nevertheless, like any temporary political context, this work also contains some statements that have become obsolete. It is true, for example, that Césaire gave in to the illusion of describing decolonization, with some sense of angelism, as a heavenly possibility

that lay in a future where all the evil, incarnated by colonial power, would be defeated by all the good, embodied by colonized peoples. In *Discourse on Colonialism*, he consistently counterposed the innocence and greatness of colonized peoples with the criminal brutality of the colonists. There is a certain idealization in assertions like the following, regarding economies of precolonial African societies, as if these were not subject to internal conflict and power relations:

They were communal societies, never societies of the many for the few. They were societies that were not only ante-capitalist, as has been said, but also *anti-capitalist*. They were democratic societies, always. They were cooperative societies, fraternal societies. (Césaire, 1955/1972, p. 44)

It is also true that Césaire, unlike many of his time, was critical of Eurocentric bias and toward the hegemony of the ‘Western’ *episteme*, but he could not find a name, like many men of his time, for the androcentric character of European thought nor for gender hierarchies within Black communities. And even in his own work he did not recognize the contributions of his partner, Suzanne Roussi Césaire, to his decolonial thinking. She was co-founder in 1941, alongside Césaire and René Menil, of the journal *Tropiques*, the most important literary magazine of the Indies, despite its limited circulation and duration. Suzanne Roussi Césaire was a progressive and committed intellectual, a militant convinced of the Antillean identity and a talented writer. She was Aimé Césaire’s greatest inspiration and a mediator of subtle and profound stimulating political and intellectual meetings and exchanges, such as those given with André Breton, Michel Leiris, and Wifredo Lam during this period.

The time that she spent in Haiti had a great influence on her moving from examining the colonial relationship between Martinique and France to thinking of the Caribbean islands as a whole, and its potential to give birth to an Antillean cultural and political renaissance, being ‘interested more in the Antilles as a space for the convergence of complex, multicultural influences and less in a return to an idealized African past as proposed by other Negritude writers’ (Joseph-Gabriel, 2016, p. 3). Surprisingly, after *Tropiques* magazine and the writing of her play *Aurore de la Liberté* [Dawn of Liberty] in 1955, Suzanne did not return to writing; the reason why still remains an enigma. While she never explained why, it is very likely that the priorities imposed by political circumstances and the duties entailed as a mother of six children influenced her situation. Three years after the separation from her husband, Suzanne Césaire, that shooting star that so few knew, died in Paris in 1966, a victim of brain cancer.

Personally, I am disappointed that the ‘Discourse on Negritude’ neglects to explicitly recognize the contribution of women who are considered ‘the memory of a species’ and as a culture’s *potomitan*³ as well as its failure to acknowledge the place of Black women like Jeanne and Paulette Nardal in the creation and evolution of the Negritude movement.⁴ It cannot be unnoticed that Paulette Nardal played an important role as an intermediary between Black American intellectuals, particularly those active within the movement known as the Harlem Renaissance, and the French-speaking movement, and circulated ideas in both directions. She also founded *La Revue du Monde Noir*, a theoretical, cultural and bilingual publication in French and English, with the Haitian

writer Léo Sajous, in 1931 (Louis, 2003, p. 130). Their magazine gave the Black elite of Paris the opportunity to discuss specific topics such as gender issues, interracial relationships and the links between race and class. But, in fact, Césaire never frequented the literary salon of the Nardal sisters, nor did he write in their magazine, described by him as ‘a rather mundane magazine, a little superficial and directed by people a little bit snobbish’ (Louis, 2003, p. 131).

Otherwise, one cannot ignore that – despite all the criticism that Césaire made of assimilationism as an ideology that seeks to integrate citizens into a homogeneous set, a thought shared equally by socialists and communists, at the risk of erasing the specificities of these citizens – its critical perspective did not include the particularities of gender as differences of power and source of social inequalities. His ‘Discourse on Négritude’, as ‘awareness of difference, as memory, as fidelity and as solidarity’ (2006c, p. 87), does not question the idea that the masculine gaze is universal, and can make generalizations for all humanity, without distinction of gender. Although there is reference to identity in many sections of this discourse, it never enters into dialogue with the reflections of thinkers and Black women activists – ‘some known, like Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Frances E. W. Harper, Ida B. Wells Barnett, and Mary Church Terrell, and thousands upon thousands unknown – who have had a shared awareness of how their sexual identity combined with their racial identity make their whole life situation and the focus of their political struggles unique’.⁵

Like other thinkers of his time, Césaire was not able to perceive how logic of different oppressions are imbricated, nor how race, sexuality and gender intersect, and only made reference to one type of difference, colonial, as the model par excellence of the production of the difference – that is to say as being the marking that makes explicit the function of all other markers. Probably this absence can be related with the difficulties at that time to think about differences from an intersectional perspective; in other words, about the differences as mutually constituted. In spite of this blind spot, which may dissatisfy us in relation to our expectations raised by their analytical insight, it does not dissuade us from reading his work in light of all this and allow us to more deeply ponder, and use as described below, the notion of coloniality (of power, of knowledge and of being), going beyond his understanding for approaching the questions about the place of racism in contemporary societies. In the current context, ongoing racism has taken on new forms, setting aside the biological foundations and, instead, it has essentialized and radicalized any and all differences that might exist.

A Latin American understanding of Césaire

Reading Aimé Césaire from a Latin American, or, for that matter, a Colombian perspective, is to make oneself aware of the original and creative proposals that colonized peoples and subaltern groups (racialized groups, women, LGBTQ+) can offer based on their epistemic privilege to observe elements of reality that colonizers and dominant groups are reluctant to perceive, thereby exposing their blind spots, silence and racism. From the very beginning, decolonial Latin American thought welcomed Césaire’s invitation to think of colonialism and racism as consubstantial vectors of oppression of both capitalism and Western modernity. And now, decolonial Latin

American feminism takes this reflection further by proposing a revision of the same concept of gender in its claim to universality, and by criticizing a linear perspective of history that frames the emancipatory struggles of women in modernity, as has been pointed out by, for example, Nigerian philosopher Oyèrónkẹ Oyěwùmí (1997), Native American writer Paula Gunn Allen (1986/1992) and Argentine feminist academic Maria Lugones (2005).

Continuing this reflection of universality of the category of gender we can see that in the case of Colombia, women such as Avelina Pancho – an Indigenous leader from the Nasa people, an advocate for the Indigenous University project and Indigenous peoples' right to higher education in Colombia – suggest that 'the category of gender has no equivalent term, at least with the same meaning and nuance, in the Indigenous languages originating on the American continent' (Pancho, 2007, p. 60). What is important for her, is to take advantage of Indigenous women's potential, though often invisible, to generate harmonious and balanced relations between the communities.

But how can women contribute to the decolonial project? The counterhegemonic potential of their input requires a further step in its symbolic expansion: it must collect the contributions of community knowledge of diverse women – Indigenous, Afro-descendent and urban women that have emerged on the margins of modern Western epistemologies and Eurocentrism. Also, it must consider the kind of political act that they carry out, from 'power-resistant' circles, at all levels of oppression, race, sex and class, and develop coalition identities through creative dialogues that allow thoughts, tasks and communal sentiments that colonialism had destroyed to be reconstructed (Lugones, 2005, p. 70). These women also question the anthropocentrism that ignores the interdependence of living beings and affirms the centrality of the human as an ideology that legitimizes the exploitation of nature (Mellor, 2000).

These collectives demand that the cultural, linguistic, spiritual and worldview dimensions of Indigenous and Afro-descendent groups be incorporated as processes of enrichment and expansion to the struggle for the rights of women of all ethno-racial belongings. The decolonization of feminism has involved recovering the organizational experiences, stories and strategies of Indigenous resistance and Afro women in different parts of the American continent, and destabilizing both the Eurocentrism prevalent in the academic world and the racial and class hierarchies that sustain patriarchy in Indigenous and Afro communities and in mestizo societies (Hernández Castillo, 2013). In addition, neoliberal policies and the new capitalist extractivism⁶ imposed the need to include the defense of territory, biodiversity, cultural rights and ancestral knowledge in these initiatives (Mina, Machado, Botero, & Escobar, 2015).

Armed conflict and capitalist depredation have meant that Indigenous, Afro-descendent and poor women in Latin America have paid heavier costs, in terms of displacement, sexual violence, selective assassinations and political persecution, because of their active participation in the defense of their ancestral lands. The impact these phenomena and the capitalist intrusion have dramatizes the importance of considering the specificities of these women's experiences (Viveros-Vigoya, 2018). Returning to Césaire's reflection on the forms of barbarism, subalternization and appropriation that colonized bodies and peoples have suffered during the centuries of constitution of the Western world, we can understand the historic links between

colonialism and the widespread discrimination and violence inflicted on women based on these forms of social appropriation of women's bodies that Colette Guillaumin (1995) would call *sexage*.

The contemporary problem of extractivism in Latin America and elsewhere in the Global South is exactly what Césaire feared would emerge post the Second World War and yet it was received at the time as a militant assertion rather than a theoretical analysis – this partly because he was a minority theorist. Césaire brought colonized subjects into the field of theory and in the same vein Colette Guillaumin (1995) introduced women as an appropriated category to which specific nature was attributed. In her analysis women were understood as interchangeable individuals similar to slaves and colonized subjects. Today, Latin American feminisms are working with perspectives that bear the imprint of the reflections made by authors such as Césaire and Guillaumin on the material-corporeal relationships seen in the appropriation of bodies, work and territories of colonized subjects and women.

As Indigenous and Black women's movements develop, a promising convergence can be seen between feminist policy agendas and the field of 'decoloniality studies', which focuses on understanding the 'colonial matrix of power' (Bidaseca & Vásquez Laba, 2011). With this prospect in mind, a decolonial feminist perspective has developed throughout Latin America, reinterpreting history whilst being critical of modernity, not only because of its androcentrism and misogyny – as classical feminist epistemology has done – but because of its intrinsically racist and Eurocentric character (Espinosa Miñoso, Gómez Correal, & Ochoa Muñoz, 2014). This decolonial feminism is plural and feeds fundamentally on the contributions of Indigenous and Afro-descendent women, who 'from academia, political activism or their daily and grassroots participation, are developing their own theories about collective rights of their peoples and the rights of women, as well as the construction of new imaginaries around the ways of expressing what social justice is that . . . serve as a compass to guide new paths of resistance and rebellion' (Red de Feminismos Descoloniales, 2014, p. 456).

With this article, I have furnished a reading of key themes within Césaire from a contemporary Latin American, and specifically Colombian perspective. In doing so, I hope to have provided some new ways to approach and work with Césaire's thinking today, this being a rewarding task considering its political vitality. The recognition of the lack of attention to gender and to women's scholarship emerges from a contemporary engagement with Césaire from a point in time where understanding of oppression is much more complex; however, by tackling this issue with *Discourse on Colonialism* head on, I intended to start a conversation where Césaire's theory and current Southern feminist theory could interact. From Colombia, we can accept the invitation that *Discourse on Colonialism* offers to 'anyone who wants to travel intellectually to the Global South to find elements there which are key for decolonization' (Maldonado-Torres, 2006, p. 192) and for the building of a new society where everyone can find their place. We can also hear his call to make the universal pluriversal, and propose a Colombian-ness (*una colombianidad*) that includes all features, without exception and allows each feature to again take root and deepen its individuality, 'not to sink into communal solipsism or resentment', as Césaire

says in his ‘Discourse on Négritude’, but to unfurl all of life’s opportunities and advance in the ‘conquest of a new and broader fraternity’ (2006c, p. 91 [my translation]) and sorority, as many of us, as women, would like to read.

Acknowledgements

I thank Gurminder Bhambra, and the two anonymous reviewers of this article for their careful reading and pertinent comments on the preliminary version. I extend my acknowledgment to Mariana Calderón Jaramillo and Grace Acosta for their support during the writing process in English. Each of them helped me hone my formulations in this article. I am grateful to Didier Fassin and to my colleagues who took part in the School of Social Science at the Institute for Advanced Study (Princeton) in 2013–2014 for their comments on a very first version of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. See among others Gary Wilder (2015).
2. Césaire wrote his famous ‘Letter to Maurice Thorez’ (1956/2010), secretary of the French Communist Party, presenting his resignation from the party. This letter is considered by Immanuel Wallerstein as ‘the sole document that best explains the intellectual rift that spread throughout the world during the 1960s between the global communist movement and the various national liberation movements’ (Wallerstein, 2006, p. 8).
3. Potomitan (Fr. poteau-mitan) is a West Indian expression. It refers to the central pole in the voodoo temple, the oufo. The term can also be used to refer to ‘family support’, usually the mother. This term refers to the one in the center of the home, the individual around whom everything is organized and supported.
4. Years later, in 1985, he paid tribute to Paulette Nardal and named a town square in Fort-de-France, Martinique in her honor.
5. As it was pointed out by ‘The Combahee River Collective Statement’: <http://circuitous.org/scrap/combahee.html>
6. Extractivism refers to the economy of a country being based on a high dependence on intensive extraction, in high volumes, of natural resources with very low processing and intended for sale abroad. The new forms of extractivism imply a social and political aspect to the entire process, which before was neither noticed nor discussed (Matthes & Cnrcic, 2012).

References

- Amin, S. (2006). De la crítica del racismo a la crítica del eurooccidentalismo culturalista. In Aimé, C., *Discurso sobre el colonialismo* (pp. 95–146). Madrid, Spain: Akal.
- Bidaseca, K., & Vázquez Laba, V (Eds.). (2011). *Feminismos y poscolonialidad: Descolonizando el feminismo desde y en América Latina*. Buenos Aires, Argentina: Godot.
- Bonfiglio, F. (2012, Mayo 7–9). *Está de pie la negra: Aimé Césaire, entre el détour africano y el retorno al país natal*. Paper presented at VIII Congreso Internacional de Teoría y Crítica Literaria Orbis Tertius, Centro de Estudios de Teoría y Crítica Literaria – IDIHCS/ CONICET, Facultad de Humanidades y Ciencias de la Educación, Universidad Nacional de La Plata, Argentina.

- Bonilla, Y. (2009). Guadeloupe, labor protest. In I. Ness (Ed.), *International encyclopedia of revolution and protest* (pp. 1468–1471). Oxford, UK: Blackwell.
- Bonilla, Y. (2013). Césairean transcripts. Counter-response by Yarimar Bonilla [Prompt: Whither or whether postcolonial sovereignty?]. Retrieved from <http://cesairelegacies.cdrs.columbia.edu/political-legacy/thinking-with-aime-cesaire> (last accessed 25 July 2019).
- Césaire, A. (1972). Discourse on colonialism. In *Discourse on colonialism* (pp. 29–79). New York, NY: New Monthly Press (Original work published 1955).
- Césaire, A. (2006a). Discurso sobre el colonialismo. In *Discurso sobre el colonialismo* (pp. 13–44). Madrid, Spain: Akal.
- Césaire, A. (2006b). Carta a Maurice Thorez. In *Discurso sobre el colonialismo* (pp. 77–84). Madrid, Spain: Akal.
- Césaire, A. (2006c). Discurso sobre la negritud. Negritud, etnicidad y culturas afroamericanas. In *Discurso sobre el colonialismo* (pp. 84–91). Madrid, Spain: Akal.
- Césaire, A. (2010). Letter to Maurice Thorez. *Social Text* 103, 28, 145–152 (Original work published 1956). Retrieved from <http://abahlali.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/153945859-Aime-Cesaire-Letter-to-Maurice-Thorez-1956.pdf> (last accessed 25 July 2019).
- Childers, K. S. (2006). Citizenship and assimilation in postwar Martinique: The abolition of slavery and the politics of commemoration. *Journal of the Western Society for French History*, 34, 282–299.
- Confiant, R. (1994). *Aimé Césaire. Une traversée paradoxale du siècle*. Paris, France: Stock.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. (1943). Reconstruction, seventy-five years after. *Phylon* (1940–1956), 4, 205–212. Retrieved from www.jstor.org/stable/271431 (accessed 17 April 2015).
- Espinosa Miñoso, Y., Gómez Correal, D., & Ochoa Muñoz, K. (Eds.). (2014). Introducción. In *Tejiendo de otro modo: Feminismo, epistemología y apuestas descoloniales en Abya Yala* (pp. 13–41). Popayán, Colombia: Editorial Universidad del Cauca.
- Grosfoguel, R. (2006). Actualidad del pensamiento de Césaire. Redefinición del sistema-mundo y producción de utopía desde la diferencia colonial. In C. Aimé, *Discurso sobre el colonialismo* (pp. 147–172). Madrid, Spain: Akal.
- Guillaumin, C. (1995). *Racism, sexism, power, and ideology*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Guillaumin, C. (2002). *L'idéologie Raciste*. Paris, France: Gallimard.
- Gunn Allen, P. (1992). *The sacred hoop: Recovering the feminine in American Indian traditions*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press (Original work published 1986).
- Hernández Castillo, R. A. (2013). Comentarios a: Mujeres Mayas-Kichwas en la apuesta por la descolonización de los pensamientos y corazones. In G. Méndez, J. López Intzin, S. Marcos, & C. Osorio Hernández (Eds.), *Senti-pensar el género: perspectiva de los pueblos originarios* (pp. 63–72). Guadalajara, Mexico: Red-IINPIM, Red de Feminismos Descoloniales, La Casa del Mago.
- Hill Collins, P. (1989). The social construction of black feminist thought. *Signs*, 14, 745–773.
- James, C. L. R. (1945, May). The lesson of Germany. *New Internationalist*, 102–106. Retrieved from www.marxists.org/archive/james-clr/works/1945/05/lesson-germany.htm (last accessed 25 July 2019).
- Joseph-Gabriel, A. K. (2016). Beyond the great camouflage: Haiti in Suzanne Césaire's politics and poetics of liberation. *Small Axe*, 20, 1–13.
- Louis, P. (2003). *A, B, C...ésaire. Aimé Césaire de A à Z*. Martinique: Ibis Rouge Editions.
- Louis, P. (2004). *Aimé Césaire: Rencontre avec un nègre fondamental*. Paris, France: Arléa.
- Lugones, M. (2005). Multiculturalismo radical y feminismos de mujeres de color. *Revista Internacional de Filosofía Política*, 25, 61–75.
- Maldonado-Torres, N. (2004). The topology of being and the geopolitics of knowledge: Modernity, empire, coloniality. *City*, 8, 29–56.

- Maldonado-Torres, N. (2006). Aimé Césaire y la crisis del hombre europeo. In C. Aimé, *Discurso sobre el colonialismo* (pp. 173–196). Madrid, Spain: Akal.
- Matthes, S., & Crncic, Z. (2012). Extractivism. Retrieved from www.uni-bielefeld.de/cias/wiki/e_Extractivism.html (last accessed 25 July 2019).
- Mellor, M. (2000). *Feminismo y ecología*. Ciudad de México, México: Siglo XXI Editores.
- Mignolo, W. (2002). The geopolitics of knowledge and the colonial difference. *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 101, 57–96.
- Mina, C., Machado, M., Botero, P., & Escobar, A. (2015). Luchas del buen vivir por las mujeres negras del Alto Cauca. *Nómadas*, 43, 167–185.
- Oyèwùmí, O. (1997). *The invention of women*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Pancho, A. (2007). Participación de las mujeres nasa en los procesos de autonomía territorial y educación propia en el Cauca, Colombia. In A. Ulloa, G. Méndez, L. Pisquiy, A. Pancho Aquite, E. Huitraqueo Mena, M. López, & A. Gutiérrez, et al. (Eds.), *Mujeres indígenas, territorialidad y biodiversidad en el contexto latinoamericano* (pp. 53–62). Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia.
- Red de Feminismos Descoloniales. (2014). Descolonizando nuestros feminismos, abriendo la mirada. Presentación de la red de feminismos descoloniales. In Y. Espinosa Miñoso, D. Gómez Correal, & K. Ochoa Muñoz (Eds.) *Tejiendo de otro modo: Feminismo, epistemología y apuestas descoloniales en Abya Yala* (pp. 455–464). Popayán, Colombia: Editorial Universidad del Cauca.
- Robinson, C. (1983). *Black Marxism: The making of the black radical tradition*. London, UK: Zed Press.
- Scott, J. (2010). *Politics of the veil*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Vergès, F. (2005). *Aimé Césaire: Nègre je suis, nègre je resterai. Entretiens avec Françoise Vergès*. Paris, France: Albin Michel.
- Viveros-Vigoya, M. (2018). Race, indigeneity, and gender: Lessons for global feminism. In J. W. Messerschmidt, M. A. Messner, R. Connell, & P. Y. Martin (Eds.), *Gender reckonings: New social theory and research* (pp. 90–110). New York: NYU Press.
- Wallerstein, I. (2006). Introducción. Aimé Césaire: Colonialismo, comunismo y negritud. In Aimé, C., *Discurso sobre el colonialismo* (pp. 7–12). Madrid, Spain: Akal.
- Wilder, G. (2013). Thinking with Aimé Césaire. *Response by Gary Wilder*. Retrieved from <http://cesairelegacies.cdrs.columbia.edu/political-legacy/thinking-with-aime-cesaire/> (last accessed 25 July 2019).
- Wilder, G. (2015). *Freedom time: Négritude, decolonization and the future of the world*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.