Césaire's Claim: On the Retroactive Genesis of Free Verse

Nathan Brown

Abstract: In his "Reply to Depestre Haitian Poet (Elements of an *Ars Poetica*)," Aimé Césaire situates a claim upon the revolutionary content of free verse form amid a recollection of the Vodou ceremony at Bois-Caïman which sparked the Haitian revolution, linking both with an invocation of marronnage as poetic practice. Excavating the radical implication of this claim—that the Haitian revolution contains the origin of free verse—this article draws out the retroactive, untimely structure of its historical intervention, working through the relationship of Vodou and marronnage to written history, to the question of "national poetry," and to the entanglement of speech and writing in Césaire's free verse poetics. While Depestre views Césaire's claim, and the poetics of negritude, as exemplary of an irrational metaphysics, the article argues that Césaire's surrealism in fact entails a lucid recognition of the entanglement of reason and unreason in what I call the "historical metaphysics of race." The article concludes by situating the historical and poetic logic of Césaire's *Ars Poetica* as exemplary of the double function of the imagination as a faculty: to both synthesize the time of the present and to displace it through the representation of absent objects.

Keywords: Aimé Césaire, René Depestre, Negritude, Haitian Revolution, Free Verse, Vodou, Marronnage

> I think the problem is badly posed.
> – Aimé Césaire, "On National Poetry"
>
> There is no history of Vodou.
> – Willy Apollon, *Vodou: A Space for "Voices"*
>
> When reason and unreason come into contact, an electrical shock occurs. This is called polemics.
> – Friedrich Schlegel, *Athenaeum* Fragments

Aimé Césaire's polemical poem, "Reply to Depestre Haitian Poet (Elements of an *Ars Poetica*)," opens with a scene of imagined recollection:

> It is a Seine night
> and I recall as if drunk
> the mad chant of Boukman birthing your country
> with the forceps of the storm[1]

1 Césaire, 2017, p. 805-809. All subsequent quotations of Césaire's "Reply to Depestre" are from these pages.

It is a scene of *imagined* recollection because what is remembered was not directly experienced by the speaker who recalls it. Rather, it is a scene which has been spoken of, read about, mythologized, transmitted and transformed, claimed and reclaimed: the ritual oath led by maroon leader and Vodou houngan Dutty Boukman at Bois-Caïman on August 14, 1791, an event which marked the beginning of the Saint Domingue revolution and thus the birth of Haiti. From the banks of the Seine, in a state of poetic intoxication converting imagination into recollection, as if possessed by memory, Césaire's remembrance of the scene draws its taking place into the retroactive present of the poem. The "forceps of the storm" figure not only the torrential rains, thunder, and lightning said to have attended the ceremony at Bois-Caïman, but also the convulsive and rigid inscriptions of poetic language: that strange dialectic of inchoate determinacy that is the birth of poiesis itself.

Césaire's claim not only to imagine but to remember "the mad chant of Boukman" will also come to imply, as the poem unfolds, a retroactive claim upon the history of poetic form: a claim to the genesis of free verse in marronnage, in Vodou ritual, in the Haitian revolution, and a claim to the identity of negritude with this inauguration. The retroactive claim of Césaire's poem is that the ritual at Bois-Caïman gives birth to free verse at the same time as it gives birth to negritude and to Haiti, and it is from this compound event, generating poetic form through historical rupture, that the "Elements of an Ars Poetica" may be drawn. However, I will argue as well that this generative event can only be produced through a displacement of history by retroactive causality, such that the poem demands an understanding of how the retroactive determination of the significance of an event, by poetic language, can determine as well the significance of the poetic form in which that determination is inscribed. Toward such an understanding, I will excavate a series of retroactive determinations implicit in Césaire's poem, thinking through the dense and complex structure of its historical dialectic in order to situate, at its core, a very specific approach to the relationship between imagination, time, and form. This approach has important implications for how we grasp the relationship between poetry, philosophy, and history.

Césaire's poem is the crux of a controversy in the mid-1950s over the poetics of negritude, socialist realism, and national poetry.[2] In a number of programmatic texts, Louis Aragon had argued for a turn against the "individualism" of free verse and surrealist experimentation, calling for a return to classical French forms and meters in the interest of linking socialist realism to national tradition.[3] Aragon's dialectical

2 For a selection of articles from this debate, see the dossier published by *Présence Africaine*, 2002.

3 See Aragon, 1954a and Aragon, 1954b. Aragon's argument for suturing forms supposedly representative of "national poetry" to socialist realism is best understood in the context of a transition from the wartime French Resistance into postwar French communist politics.

argument was that the revolutionary content of committed poetry would be more politically effective and legible to the masses if it transformed, from within, the forms of traditional French verse, rather than breaking with those traditions altogether. Convinced by this argument, the Haitian poet Réne Depestre wrote a letter to Charles Dobzynski declaring his allegiance to "the decisive teachings of Aragon," which had helped him to cast off "the yoke of formal individualism."[4] Expounding "the interest that the new French movement of national poetry represents for any Haitian poet," Depestre positioned himself as follows:

> Since the French linguistic domain has expanded beyond the national and geographic borders of France, it is natural that any debate arising about matters of form become relevant also to those who have the honor, as a consequence of the ups and downs of history, to share with you French creators, the inheritance of prosody, the renewed continuation of traditional measures specific to the development of poetry in France.

Depestre's investment in Aragon's doctrine sparked a vigorous debate among black poets in the pages of *Présence Africaine,* amid which Césaire, following his poetic reply, offered a more severe rebuke in prose: "it seems to me that Depestre, under the pretext of aligning himself with Aragon's positions, falls into a detestable assimilationism."[5] Denouncing what he calls "a worthless and desiccating gymnastics," Moustapha Wade asks "what is the connection between us Negroes of 1956, and any kind of 'return to the sonnet', to the historically necessary change of some western aesthetic?"[6] Léopold Senghor acknowledges that Depestre is right to present Haiti as "historically founded upon a symbiosis, a crossbred civilization," noting that "this fact legitimates his quest, his will to make a synthesis of both traditions." Yet he argues that "the weakness of Depestre, to speak clearly, is that he grounded his debate on a realism invented by and made for the western world."[7] Addressing Depestre's aspiration to share the "traditional measures specific to the development of poetry in France," David Diop points out that the development of *vers libre* is itself specific to the development of poetry in France, such

4 Depestre's letter to French poet Charles Dobzynski (then living in São Paulo) would be published in *Les Lettres Française*. See Depestre, 1955a.

5 Césaire, 1955. Depestre would later abandon this "renewed continuation of traditional measures," most conspicuously in *A Rainbow for the Christian West: Voodoo Mystery Poem*. In that work, containing a long section titled "Epiphanies of the Voodoo Gods," Depestre would suture a Haitian epic to the role of Vodou in the revolution. See Depestre, 1967.

6 For a pithy distillation of the debate and a summary of its contributions, see Joachim, 2002. Wade qtd. in Joachim, p. 214.

7 Qtd. in Joachim, 2002, p. 215.

that "limiting 'national character' to the use of fixed forms amounts to denying the value of those experiments which, arriving at free verse, have incontestably contributed to injecting new blood into french letters."[8]

Indeed, when Mallarmé announced the advent of *vers libre* to an audience at Oxford in his 1894 lecture on "Music and Letters," he spoke as a Frenchman arriving with tidings from his native land: "I do indeed bring news. The most surprising kind. Such a thing has not been seen before. — Verse has been tampered with." Moreover, Mallarmé suggested that this transformation of verse had an asynchronic, inapparent, and ironic relation to the transformation of the nation: "Governments change; prosody always remains intact: either because, in revolutions, it goes unnoticed, or because the barrage does not impose upon opinion that this last dogma could vary."[9] In "Crisis of Verse," Mallarmé specifically contrasts this crisis of the late nineteenth century with the revolutionary crisis of the late eighteenth century: "we are witnessing, in this fin-de-siècle, not—as it was during the last one—a revolution, but, far from the public square: a trembling of the veil in the temple, with significant folds, and, a little, its rending."[10] The crisis of verse is not a revolution that takes place in the public square, but it may be an aftershock, an asynchronous trembling in the wake of an earlier rupture, an underground relay between history and culture that went previously unnoticed. Such is the recessed implication of Mallarmé's recondite prose.

This is the field of speculative and historical problems, in the background of a conjunctural debate, into which Césaire's "Reply to Depestre Haitian Poet" intervenes. Césaire will transform that field by positioning the persistence of fixed forms as remainders of slavery, and by positioning free verse not as a trembling of the veil in the temple subsequent to the upheaval of the French revolution, but rather as a storm inaugurating and perpetually erupting from the Haitian revolution. The central section of Césaire's poem develops the speculative logic of this intervention through an appeal to Depestre to leave aside the "cadged melody" of predetermined forms:

> Leave it Depestre leave it
> the solemn beggary of a cadged melody
> leave them
> the droning of the minuet blood the stale water trickling down
> along the pink steps
> and as for the gruntings of the schoolmasters
> enough

8 Qtd. in Joachim, 2002, p. 214.

9 Mallarmé, 2007b, p. 183. Translation modified.

10 Stéphane Mallarmé, "Crisis of Verse" in *Divagations*, trans. Barbara Johnson, Harvard: Belknap Press, 2007, 201.

let's maroon on them Depestre let's maroon on them
as in times past we marooned on our slave drivers

Depestre I indict the bad manners of our blood
is it our fault
if the squall blows up
and suddenly unteaches us how to count on our fingers
to do three turns to salute

Or rather it comes to the same thing
blood is something that comes goes and comes back
and ours I suppose comes back to us after lingering
at some macumba. What is to be done? Truly
blood is a powerful vodun

It is true that this season they are turning out nicely rounded sonnets
for us to do that would recall far too well
the sugary juice that back there drool the distilleries in the mornes
when the slow thin oxen circle round to the buzzing of the mosquitoes

Ouch! Depestre the poem is not a mill to
grind sugar cane certainly not[11]

To turn out nicely rounded sonnets would recall the distilleries of the plantations, but the poem is not a mill to grind sugar cane; therefore, the *ars poetica* of negritude entails a call to maroon on the grunting schoolmasters as slaves once marooned on slave drivers. The abandonment of fixed forms is attributed to "the bad manners of our blood"—opposed to "the droning of the minuet blood" of schoolmasters and slavedrivers—due to which "the squall blows up / and suddenly unteaches us how to count on our fingers." The squall that unteaches quantitative form recalls the forceps of the storm associated, at the beginning of the poem, with the Vodou ceremony at Bois-Caïman—and thus blood is described as "a powerful vodun." The circulation of blood, which comes goes and comes back, takes on the significance of a retroactive temporality through which the past returns "after lingering / at some macumba."[12] The primary "elements" of Césaire's *ars poetica* are thus as follows: marronnage is aligned with the formal escape of free verse from fixed forms that recall slavery, while such poetic marronnage itself recalls and indeed re-enacts the storm at Bois-Caïman relayed by

11 In these two lines I modify the translation of Arnold and Eshleman: the French is "le poème n'est pas un moulin à / passer de la cane à sucre ça non."

12 The sense of "macumba" here is glossed by Arnold as "A syncretic Afro-American religion of Brazil; by extension, a ritual ceremony analogous to vodou." Césaire, 2017, p. 924.

the vodon of "the bad manners of our blood," constituting a collective bound not only by blood but also by the flaring up of history against the night of an intoxicated present tense, possessed by memory, wherein the revolution is itself reborn.

Before proceeding, let me note that the intricate play of irony in this passage, and throughout much of the poem, amounts to a kind of implicit free indirect discourse. The "voice" of the poem, and the focalization of its cultural and political perspective, fluctuates with such subtlety that it not only mimics but effectively *sublates* the sensibility of the "them" to which its "I," its "us," and its "our" are opposed. "J'accuse les mauvaises manières de notre sang": the line appropriates *their* perspective on improper manners and affirms it as *ours*—within the framework of Césaire's address to a fellow black poet—thus excluding the white reader from very perspective such readers are implicitly assigned when they read the word "us." Indeed, this is the basic rhetorical and psychological operation of negritude: the claiming of that for which blackness is blamed, thereby negating the white world's perspective by subsuming and transforming it through an ironic, though nevertheless wrenching, affirmation. The speaker "plays dumb" so as to implicitly indict white condescension in its own voice, though now speaking for an "us" designating a collective black subject:

> is it our fault
> if the squall blows up
> and suddenly unteaches us how to count on our fingers

Thus the act of subversive black agency the poem prescribes—poetic marronnage—is ironically attributed to an involuntary cause and a natural source: the bad manners of our blood within and the rising storm without, as if corrupting the relation between the Kantian moral law and the starry heavens. Yet this very attribution of causality to natural, reflexive sources itself recalls and instantiates the fusion of voluntary and involuntary causes connoted by "the mad chant of Boukman" and "the forceps of the storm." August 14, 1791 re-enters the poem at the crux of the relation between nature and will, and also at the crux of the relation between "their" perspective and "ours." In the very *act* of attributing agency to involuntary causes, the poem sublates those into voluntary claims upon a present tense—indeed upon the form of the poem as it unfolds—and these claims are fused by imagination and will with a revolutionary past and channeled into a clarion imperative: "marronons-les Depestre marronnons-les." The Leninist question—"What is to be done?"—is absorbed into the rhetoric of negritude through the ironic sublation implied by the reply: "Truly / blood is a powerful vodun." What can we do? What is to be done about the nature they have assigned us—unreasonable, unteachable, ill-mannered, superstitious—except to take

it up within the medium of our own will, making of the rising storm our own political and poetic force, as lucid as inebriated? That is the question implicitly posed to Depestre by Césaire's poem in the voice of a would-be poetic Lenin, of an Aragon, which now speaks in the insinuating and subversive voice of negritude, as sly as it is direct.

Later Césaire will inquire (with no question mark), "did Dessalines actually mince about at Vertières," tying the knot between the beginning of the revolution at Bois-Caïmon and the end of the revolution with Dessalines' victory over Napoleon's army in 1803. Here the implied answer is "no," answering Lenin's question (1902) with Dessalines' defeat of the French (1803). A negative imperative to stop "mincing around" (mignonnait) with fixed forms is indirectly delivered by a rhetorical question before being directly delivered by blunt instructions:

> and for the rest
> whether the poem turns well or badly on the oil of its hinges
> screw it Depestre screw it let Aragon talk.

The poem then *does* let Aragon talk, but in a voice at once his own and another's:

> Comrade Depestre
> It is assuredly a very great problem
> the relation between poetry and Revolution
> content conditions form
> and if we took into account the dialectical detour
> by which form taking its revenge
> like a strangler fig suffocates the poem
> but no
> I won't assign myself the report
> I'd rather regard the spring. Precisely
> it's the Revolution

Here we have a complex mode of parody, wherein the sincerity of Césaire's discourse emerges through ironic mimicry of Aragon's. The passage implicitly mocks the officious discourse of Communist Party disputation, as well as the argument that revolutionary content will transfigure traditional forms through a dialectical detour, comically transforming this into a revenge of form on content represented as a strangler fig suffocating the poem. Yet Césaire *does* think that revolutionary content conditions form, indeed that revolution is the *ground* of form ("le fond condition la forme"). He says this in Aragon's voice even as he affirms it in his own. This duplicity *makes* his argument, as he doubles the content of Aragon's discourse with the emergence of his own in an incisive free verse, then casting off this mimicry to

speak more directly from the position of a first person pronoun: "I'd rather regard the spring. Precisely / it's the Revolution." The content of revolution is the creative immanence of making, indivisible from the coming into being of form. As Senghor notes in his assessment of the Depestre/Césaire controversy, "the strength of the Césairian argumentation lies in the fact that it is without presumption. It rests soundly upon the self-evidence that content is what makes the container and the form."[13] Yes, content conditions form, but it only does so in a revolutionary manner if form does not pre-exist content but is coeval and coextensive with its coming into being: if the form conditioned by content is itself an activity.

Césaire's deployment of an ironic, dialectical mode of free indirect discourse (who speaks?) in the medium of lyric address, shifting between imperative mood, rhetorical question, parodic mimicry, and figurative image is essential to the poem's retroactive logic, to its speculative claim upon history. Let us reconstruct the associative relations at the core of this claim, unfolding from the present tense in which the poem begins ("It is a Seine night"), and resulting in a particular determination of form by content:

1) Amid a Seine night in 1955, the speaker recalls the night of August 14, 1791 in Saint Domingue, "the mad chant of Boukman birthing your country."

2) The genesis of the Haitian revolution is thus associated with marronnage and Vodou ritual.

3) Marronnage and Vodou are associated with free verse, which is positioned as stemming from their revolutionary content.

4) The genesis of free verse is thereby situated not as subsequent to the French Revolution (as in Mallarmé's account), but rather as coeval with the genesis of the Haitian revolution, with the chants, the drums, and the storm of the ceremony at Bois-Caïman

The implicit claim at the heart of Césaire's poem is thus that the inaugural source of free verse is not Rimbaud's "Marine" or "Mouvement" in 1872-3,[14] nor Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* in 1855, but rather "the mad chant of Boukman" in 1791. The form of the claim upon this revolutionary content, in the present, is the inscription of the poem itself, its existence on the page. Because it does not pre-exist the making of its marks (as would

13 Qtd. in Joachim, 2002, p. 215 (translation modified).

14 For a list of the first published examples of *vers libre*, see Scott, 1990, p. 63-74.

the form of an Alexandrine, the sonnet, or a traditional rhyme scheme), the form is *nothing other* than that inscription, the content inscribed.[15] The retroactively determined meaning of history inscribed *in* the poem comes to exist *as* the poem by which that meaning is determined, and this immanence of form and content is enabled at the same time by the inscription of the poem in free verse and the argument of the poem for the revolutionary genesis and significance of free verse. But how are we to understand this "meaning," the series of determinations I outline above? In particular, how should we understand the centrality of marronnage and Vodou to Césaire's claim upon the revolutionary content of free verse?

As Colin Dayan notes, "vodou enters written history as a weird set piece: the ceremony at Bois-Caïman. The story is retold by nearly every historian, especially those outsiders who enjoyed linking the first successful slave revolt to a gothic scene of blood drinking and abandon." But as Dayan also points out, "what matters is how necessary the story remains to Haitians who continue to construct their identity not only by turning to the revolution of 1791 but by seeking its origins in a service quite possibly imagined by those who disdain it."[16] Any reference to Bois-Caïman thus involves the absorption of event and oral transmission into a complex entanglement of writing, history, imagination, and retroactive construction. The stakes of this absorption and this entanglement are high, because they are bound up with the distribution of facts and values perpetually renegotiated by accounts of, and claims upon, the Haitian revolution and its legacy. "Could the Haitian revolution be told in the language of France?",[17] Dayan asks, and later she situates the relevance of Vodou to this question as follows:

15 As Charles Olson would put it, borrowing from Robert Creeley in his treatise on "Projective Verse" (an essay central to Amiri Barka's poetics): "FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT." Olson, 1997, p. 239-249.

16 Dayan, 1995, p. 29. The most important example of a report on the ceremony by "those who disdain it" is Antoine Dalmas's account, written in 1793 and according to David Geggus "by several decades the earliest description of what many Haitians regard as the foundational event of their national history in the belief that Vodou played a central role in the Haitian Revolution's success." Here is Dalmas's account: "The elements of this plan had been worked out a few days before by the main leaders on the Lenormand plantation at Morne Rouge. Before carrying it out, they held a sort of celebration or sacrifice in the middle of an uncultivated, wooded area on the Choiseul plantation called Le Caïman, where the Negroes gathered in great number. An entirely black pig, surrounded with fetishes and loaded with a variety of bizarre offerings, was sacrificed to the all-powerful spirit of the black race. The religious ceremonies that accompanied the killing of the pig were typical of the Africans, as was their eagerness to drink its blood and the value they placed on getting some of its hairs as a sort of talisman that they thought could make them invulnerable. It was natural that such a primitive and ignorant caste would begin the most terrible attack with superstitious rites of an absurd and bloodthirsty religion." Antoine Dalmas, *Histoire de la révolution de Saint-Domingue*, qtd in Geggus, 2014, p. 78-79.

17 Dayan, 1995, p. 7.

> The emblems of heroism or love recuperated in written histories of Haiti often seem to be caricatures or simulations of French "civilization." In this recycling of images, as in the case of Louis Napoleon and Soulouque, we are caught in a mimetic bind. The heterogeneity of vodou syncretism, however, offers an alternative to such blockage. Vodou does not oppose what we might call "Western" or "Christian" but freely associates seemingly irreconcilable elements, taking in materials from the dominant culture even as it resists or coexists with it.[18]

It is because of this "heterogeneity of vodou syncretism" that the culture of Vodou can be properly aligned with a synthetic cultural movement that is a specifically modern, revolutionary *beginning*: drawing elements of African religion together with "seemingly irreconcilable elements," it displaces the cultural hegemony of French colonialism while also sublating the lineage of African and precolonial origins.[19]

The integral relation between Vodou and marronnage is central to this specificity, as it is to Césaire's poem. In her outstanding history of the revolution, *The Making of Haiti: The San Domingue Revolution from Below*, Carolyn E. Fick explains the fusion of Vodou and marronnage into a revolutionary force:

> reciprocal relations existed between marronnage as a mode of slave resistance, in itself, and other forms of resistance for which marronnage provided conditions that allowed these to pervade. Among them was voodoo. As one of the first collective forms of resistance, it was both a cultural and, in its practical applications, a politically ideological force. Since it was severely outlawed in the colony and therefore forced into clandestinity, its development and proliferation were reinforced in the general context of marronnage. The maroon leaders of African origin were almost without exception either voodoo priests or, at least, voodoo devotees. And, of course, the case has generally been made for the perpetuation, or at least reconstitution within a New World context, of African ways in marronnage.[20]

Fick will further elaborate on the specific manner in which Vodou ritual, both enabled by and motivating marronnage, also enabled and motivated revolutionary conditions of possibility:

18 Dayan, 1995, p. 51.

19 Carolyn E. Fick notes, "one distinguishes in voodoo both a horizontal and a vertical syncretism; that is, a syncretism between Dahomean Vodu and other African cults, as well as between voodoo (comprising the diverse whole of these cults) and Catholicism." Fick, 1990, p. 290.

20 Fick, 1990, p. 57.

> And so, a popular religion on the one hand, voodoo constituted, on the other, an important organizational tool for resistance. It facilitated secret meetings, as well as the initiation and the adherence of slaves of diverse origins, provided a network of communication between slaves of different plantations who gathered clandestinely to participate in the ceremonies, and secured the pledge of solidarity and secrecy of those involved in plots against masters.[21]

The most important such pledge of solidarity was the ceremony at Bois-Caïman, prior to the well-planned and coordinated slave uprising that began a week later on the night of August 22.[22]

Sparking and sustaining revolt, the organizational cohesion and spiritual solidarity afforded by the combination of Vodou and marronnage established the revolutionary conditions under which Touissant L'Ouverture would come to lead the process of liberation through its long military phase, prior to his arrest on Napoleon's orders in 1802 and his death in 1803, followed by Dessalines' conclusive victory over the French at Vertières. Not only, then, does Vodou involve a syncretic combination of elements traversing African, precolonial, and Catholic traditions, and not only does the inauguration of the revolution involve an organizational and spiritual synthesis of Vodou and marronnage; the longer revolutionary process itself, from 1791-1804, also involves an entwining of Vodou religion with military discipline and what we might call Toussaint's Catholic rationalism, suffused with Jacobin principles.

But according to reports of his oration at Bois-Caïman, "the mad chants of Boukman" were already accompanied by an appeal to the principle of liberty experienced, importantly, as a corporeal voice:

> The god of the white man calls him to commit crimes; our god asks only good works of us. But this god who is so good orders revenge! He will direct our hands; he will aid us. Throw away the image of the god of the whites who thirsts for our tears and listen to the voice of liberty which speaks in the hearts of all of us.[23]

Whatever the veracity of this account or its degree of exactitude, what is striking about its centrality to the lore of the Haitian revolution is the

21 Fick, 1990, p. 59.

22 For a concise but relatively detailed chronology of the revolution, see Nesbitt, 2008, p. 199-206. On marronnage and "slave agency," see Roberts, 2015. Roberts engages with Césaire's "Reply to Depestre" in his Introduction.

23 Qtd. in Fick, 1990, p. 93, translated from a French translation of the creole in Pauléus Sannon, *Histoire de Toussaint Louverture* (1920). On the history and veracity of accounts of Boukman's oration and the Bois-Caïman ceremony, see Appendix B in Fick, p. 260-266.

contradiction between the universal and the particular constructed by its closing formulation (*Couté la liberté li palé nan coeur nous tous*).[24] The whole passage develops an opposition between "the god of the white man" and "our god." Yet the status of "the hearts of all of us"—the extension of "all of us" with respect to the opposition between "the white man" and "us"—is perfectly ambiguous, and this ambiguity encapsulates the dialectical *depth* of the contradiction of universality and particularity that Césaire will famously articulate in his 1956 letter to Thorez: "I'm not burying myself in a narrow particularism. But neither do I want to lose myself in an emaciated universalism....My conception of the universal is that of a universal enriched by all that is particular, a universal enriched by every particular, the deepening of the coexistence of all particulars."[25] In a profound inversion of what Césaire calls "emaciated universalism," it is *the whites* who are positioned as particular in the transmitted text of Boukman's oration, while "our," "us," and "all of us" are positioned as that universal which is the enrichment, the deepening, and the righteous violence of the particular—universality as black power, as black religion, as the Vodou god Amiri Baraka will invoke at the end of his great poem, "Black Dada Nihilimus":

> (may a lost god damballah, rest or save us
> against the murders we intend
> against his lost white children
> black dada nihilismus[26]

The signifier *Boukman* comes to incarnate the dialectical contradiction between Vodou and Jacobinism, French and Haitian revolutions, "the god of the white man" (particular) and "our god" (particularization of the universal/universalization of the particular). And the locus of this contradiction in Boukman's reported oration, the site its depth, is the negation and sublation of *image* by the *voice* lodged in every heart: "throw away the image of the god of the whites"; "listen to the voice of liberty which speaks in the heart of all of us." It is *speech* through which universality is enriched and deepened by the particular, through which image is corporealized as voice.

This brings us to the problem of the absorption and transmission of orality by writing—a problem already signalled in the passages we have cited from Dayan (who refers to "the emblems of heroism or love recuperated in written histories of Haiti") and a problem inherent to any discussion of Vodou and its role in the revolution. The most compelling

24 On the politics of universality in the context of the Haitian Revolution, see Nesbitt, 2008.

25 Aimé Césaire, 2010, p. 152.

26 Jones, 1946, p. 64.

effort to address this problem is Willy Apollon's extraordinary book, written as a dissertation under the direction of Gilles Deleuze, *Le Vaudou: Un espace pour le "voix"* (1976).[27] Whereas Derrida developed a critique of the metaphysics of presence implicit in phonocentrism, Apollon develops a critique of "the imperialism of writing" as that which founds the numerable and its order of calculation.[28] In Apollon's account

> writing is an instrument of conquest and a system of counting at the same time. On the one hand it conquers by bringing into a signifying (and thus conventional and profitable) unit. On the other hand it names and numbers. It counts. It makes multiplicities, innumerable and without remainder, pass into measurements where the infinitely repeatable unary trait introduces a controllable and exchangeable plurality.[29]

The grounding of writing in the unary trait (an iterable mark forming a unit) numbers, counts, and calculates the innumerable of the voice while also producing it as a remainder, which is then situated as the cause of writing itself. Thus, for Apollon, "the refusal of writing-voice dualism means not turning the voice into a remainder of writing which could then be thought as its cause."[30] In this sense Apollon, like Derrida, produces a critique of phonocentrism as a form of "writing-voice dualism" which posits voice as the origin of writing, yet he does so as if from the opposite perspective, insisting upon "the innumerable of the voice" as itself refractory to presence and to the inscription of discrete marks, as an uncountable "Other."

Within the colonial operation of writing as an instrument of conquest, which "works to regulate the sign to such a degree as to substitute it for the voice,"[31] Apollon situates Vodou as "a space for the

27 Apollon is a psychoanalyst of Haitian descent who, since 1977, has established and sustained a practically innovative and theoretically influential practice in Quebec City, focused in particular on the treatment of psychosis. For a selection of theoretical writings see Apollon, Bergeron, Cantin, 2002. For other writings and information on the clinical practice developed by Apollon, Bergeron, and Cantin, see http://www.gifric.com

28 Apollon, 1976, p. 268. I quote here from a draft translation by Heidi Arsenault and Cynthia Mitchell.

29 Apollon, *Le Vaudou*, 267. It is notable that the work of Alain Badiou, in which iterable mathematical signs are shown to enable the thinking of untotalizable multiplicities, constitutes a significant rejoinder to a theory of writing's introduction of the infinitely repeatable unary trait as a production of controllable plurality. See Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham, London: Continuum, 2005. See also Badiou, "One, Multiple, Multiplicities" in *Theoretical Writings*, trans. Ray Brassier and Alberto Toscano, London: Continuum 2006, 68-82. An account of the relation between Badiou's work and Apollon's theory of writing would be well worth pursuing, especially considering that both inherent and transform aspects of Lacan's teaching.

30 Apollon, 1976, p. 267, my translation.

31 Apollon, 1976, p. 240. I quote here from the translation of Apollon's chapter on "The Crisis of Possession" by Canning and McNulty, 1999.

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voices." In particular, the crisis of possession—displacing not only the personality but also the voice of the one possessed—makes manifest the voice of a "stranger" irreducible to writing and refractory to individuality. "In the formation, as well as the historical reconstruction of Haitian Vodou," writes Apollon, "the loas remain strangers, the cultural and historic figures of the voice."[32] Apollon thus acknowledges the paradox encountered by any written commentary upon Vodou:

> What we are able to see of the 'voices' within the spectacle of possession runs the risk of being dissolved by the act of interpretation, in which writing reduces it to the sign....Indeed, the particular difficulty presented by the attempt to put Vodou in writing is an effect of this function of writing, which consists in stifling the multiplicity of the 'voices' by imposing on them a single meaning: that which is upheld by the dominant classes and social groups.
>
> The question, then, is "how can possession be made to pass through writing?"[33]

Before considering how Césaire's poem implicitly answers this question, and how the question bears upon the dispute between Césaire and Depestre, we must also note Apollon's consideration of the significance of this question for any understanding of the Haitian revolution. If the crisis of possession is the opening of a space for exterior voices, Apollon likewise considers marronage as the intrusion of an outside puncturing the time of slave labor (*un dehor troue le temps de la production esclavagiste*).[34] Indeed, marronnage opens an outside which will be the exteriority of "the revolution" itself to historical narrative, of event to representation, of act to justification, of revolutionary activity to revolutionary principles, of the history of the masses to the history of their leaders—we might add, of "the mad chant of Boukman" to the *story* of Bois-Caïman. For Apollon, "there is no history of Vodou,"[35] just as, with respect to written narrative, the movement of the revolution "persists upon its margins, at the edge of its interstices, forever letting itself be carried along by what traverses the movement of denial and/or misunderstanding or misrecognition that (through which) history institutes (itself)." Any *description* of the revolution must therefore be cognizant of its own potentially repressive function:

32 Apollon, 1976, p 269, draft trans. Arsenault and Mitchell.

33 Apollon, 1976, p. 240, trans. Canning and McNulty.

34 Apollon, 1976, p. 61, my translation.

35 Apollon, 1976, p. 107, my translation.

> The description of the de-rangement that traverses the old world and destructures it may leave completely censored this wild and incendiary errancy of blacks/drives that afflicts, *from elsewhere*, the colonial order. This has another duration. It has no place in the space-time of the social formation of Saint Domingue. It is already...Haiti, unnameable, uncanny, unspeakable and shameful. Vodou, once again. A word made apt by the very strangeness of its dissonance.[36]

But if the dissonance specified here is unassimilable to historical description, fracturing the sense of the very word through which it is articulated, what the inscription of that dissonance nevertheless connotes is the untimely genesis of an errancy at the crux of marronnage, Vodou, and revolutionary power:

> In fact, it is the formidable errancy of the maroons that opens another time and space in the colony at the same time that it accounts for what must be called the birth of Haitian Vodou at the same time that it sets to work what would erupt in the great insurrection of August 1791 as an apocalyptic march towards independence.[37]

Marronnage, an exterior time and space puncturing the temporal economy of slavery; Vodou, a space for the voices of strangers; Haiti, an unavowable future already deranging the colonial world of Saint Domingue. These find their simultaneity ("at the same time") in mythic time of unverifiable certainty: the victory of maroons become revolutionaries was not only made possible but inevitable through their possession by invulnerable loas, brushing aside the cannonballs and the numerical superiority of Spanish, British, and French armies. "This story," writes Apollon,

> repeated to me many times with its dreamy allure, its surrealist accents, its delirious beliefs and its hallucinatory convictions, obviously has nothing to do with official writing. But it was the fecund instance of a suspicion that undermined everything else for us. This crazy story producing the real, the subversion of colonial space, the rupture of its language, at that point the only one, and the absence of words that mark the impossibility of saying the inadmissible.[38]

36 Apollon, 1976, p. 65, my translation.

37 Apollon, 1976, p. 75, my translation.

38 Apollon, 1976, p. 51, my translation.

In Apollon's vertiginous book, we find marronnage, Vodou, and revolution sharpened into the single point of a mythic history infiltrating writing as the impossibility of what is written, as what could only make sense *somewhere else* than amid the admissible.

Now this is the field of impossibility within which Césaire inaugurates his poem: the recollection of what has never been experienced, a mad chant giving birth to a country, a storm functioning as forceps—the speculative elaboration of a literal-figurative history graspable only through the identity of fact and fiction, the certainty of their indistinction, the *confidence* of their coincidence. This elaboration will come to include a claim upon free verse as the form adequate to this content, and we are now in position to understand how this claim involves, as well, an inscription of writing within the space of voices. For this is indeed the project at issue: not to inscribe the voice within the space of writing, but to inscribe writing within the space of voices. Crucially, we must understand that Césaire's claim is not at all a *general* assertion that free verse is the adequate form of revolutionary content, but rather a *particular* claim upon a *singular* relay between the Haitian revolution, Vodou, marronnage, and free verse—and moreover, a relay that is retroactively established, skewing the linearity of history, negating the authority of verified record, and displacing the precedence of origin. The singular origin of this relay is Césaire's poem itself, which begins in the present tense, "C'est une nuit de Seine." The past intoxicates the present, which re-enters the storm of revolution through the medium of a chant recollected as a birth, such that the birth of a country *then* becomes the production of an *ars poetica* now. "Haiti where negritude rose for the first time," (29) Césaire had written in *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, staking there as well a retroactive claim upon the genesis of the present in the first poetic inscription of the word "negritude." The "Reply to Depestre" may be understood as a retroactive claim upon this earlier retroactive claim as well, now elaborating, in free verse, a speculative argument for the negritude of free verse ("the poem is not a mill to / grind sugar cane") which the earlier poem had made manifest without elaboration. It is now the possession of the poetic present by "the mad chant" of the revolutionary past that inscribes free verse within Vodou's space of voices, via the imperative of marronnage (marronnons-les Depestre marronnon-les).

Free verse will be Césaire's answer to the question, "how can possession be made to pass through writing?" What I mean to emphasize, however, is that the apparently "formal" nature of this answer is inseparable from the speculative "content" of the poem by which it is articulated. The poem establishes its address to Depestre through a rhetorical question:

DEPESTRE

valiant rider of the tom-tom
is it true that you mistrust the native forest
...
is it possible
that the rains of exile
have slackened the drumskin of your voice

It is the drums of Vodou ceremonies that figuratively bind Depestre's former poetic voice to his native forest, while his recent alignment with Aragon's position on traditional French forms suggests a slackening of the drumskin by the rains of exile. The poem thus ends with a syncretic exhortation toward rhythmic recovery:

Depestre
from the Seine I send you my greetings to Brazil
to you to Bahia to all the saints to all the devils
to those in the favellas
Depestre
Bombaya Bombaya
believe me as in former times beat for us the good tom-tom
splattering their rancid night
with a succinct rutting of moudang stars.

"Bombaya Bombaya" is the site of the poem's valedictory inscription of free verse within the space of voices. The word refers to a drum "known from Puerto Rico to Venezuela," but in his Glossary to *The Complete Poetry of Aimé Césaire* James Arnold notes as well: "No historical confirmation exists for the gloss 'a Haitian rallying cry associated with Boukman's voudou ceremony at Bois Cayman on the eve of the 1791 revolts,' which has been repeated by Diop and Hénane."[39] Here Arnold qualifies the gloss provided, in another volume, by his co-translator Clayton Eshleman—yet the correction itself, through negation ("no historical confirmation exists...") indicates a chain of unconfirmed transmission that has itself entered into the associative field of the poem. Moreover, Césaire's repetition of the word, emphasizing its sound, is inscribed in an incantatory interpellation ("Depestre...Depestre... Bombaya Bombaya") which recalls the earlier repetition of "marronnon-les Depestre marronnon-les." The repetition does indeed suggest the function, in the poem itself, of a rallying cry, both accompanying and calling for the beating of drums—and this rallying cry is associated with the opening invocation of Boukman by the poem's closing return to its

39 Arnold, 2017, p. 920.

opening scene: "from the Seine." The determinate contingencies of free verse form—drifting from the left margin, fracturing the stanza, separating words from their grammatical context as resonant invocations and as visual/phonemic material—quite precisely *space* the poem in such a way as to open the field of voices inhabiting it, their sarcastic inflections, their solicitations, cries, and urgent whispers (Depestre...Depestre...). The last two lines weld free verse form to surrealist content, the "rut sommaire" of warrior/stars splattering *their* rancid night ("éclaboussant leur nuit rance") as Depestre is asked to beat the tom-tom for *us*. Surrealism and free verse fuse into the content-form of a revolutionary community constituted by a retroactive claim to temporal *simultaneity* with events that, supposedly, preceded the French advent of free verse and surrealism, and also a claim to geographical *coextension* with the site of marronnage, a diasporic exteriority now including the Seine, the favellas, Bois-Caïman, Bahia, Vertières, and distant stars identified with the moudang tribes of Chad. It is on the condition of *this* content, its inscription *as* free verse, that free verse becomes the poetic form of the revolution, becomes "the spring" sublating the doctrinal "report" ("content conditions form"). The voices of the revolution circulate through their diasporic traces, suffusing and displacing their doctrinal reincorporation, soliciting associations that evade "historical confirmation," isolating signifiers upon the space of the page as if to cast a spell through their phonemic construction of repetitive singularities. And who, reading the surrealist free verse epic Depestre would publish twelve years later, *Rainbow for the Christian West: Voodoo Mystery Poem*, would deny that Césaire's spell worked, at least temporarily—that the incantatory interpellation of Césaire's claim would eventually have its intended effect?[40]

Yet Césaire's poem is also, of course, a well-calibrated argument, a rhetorically subtle polemic fusing pedagogical admonition and ventriloquial irony with figurative power. "When reason and unreason come into contact," writes Friedrich Schlegel, "an electric shock occurs. This is called polemics."[41] The figurative and rhetorical point of contact between reason and unreason is precisely the polemical site of Césaire's poem, its synthesis of argument and incantation, possession and pedagogy. When Depestre replies at length to Césaire's poem, in his "Response to Aimé Césaire (Introduction to a Haitian Poetic Art),"[42] he will criticize his interlocutor as a romantic metaphysician caught in the thrall of Hegelian idealism and religious mysticism, and thus badly in need of a materialist inversion. Césaire's dialectic walks on

40 Depestre, 1977.

41 Schlegel, 1968, p. 147.

42 Depestre, 1955b: 42-62. Reprinted in *Présence Africaine*, 2002, p. 207-269, from which pages I quote hereafter. My translation.

its head and must be set back upon its historical feet.[43] Where Césaire describes blood as "a powerful vodun," Depestre replies "it seems to me Césaire adopts in these lines a contemplative and fatalist attitude with respect to religious alienation."[44] Aligning Césaire's allusion to Vodou with the "beautiful souls" of Haiti, Depestre "would emphasize the danger of either accepting or denying altogether, without critical examination, outside of class contradictions, these religious and folkloric manifestations."[45] Referring to the wider debate on "national poetry" in the pages of *Présence Africaine*, Depestre notes that "One speaks above all of 'black poetry', of national poetry 'among blacks' [chez les noirs], of 'black formalism' opposed to 'white formalism', of 'negritude', of 'black cultural alienation'," and he finds that these are "all elusive categories."[46] "To speak of 'black poetry' in general," he writes, "is a myth as confused as the metaphysical notion of negritude."[47] According to Depestre, these errors in determining the conditions of poetic realism (which he views as the matter at issue) derive from an incomplete mediation of the complexity of the national question, and thus, from an insufficient understanding, still at an idealist stage, still Hegelian (and in some cases existentialist) of internal relations among the indices (linguistic community is one of these) defining the historical category of the nation.[48]

Accordingly, Depestre will go on to offer a reconstruction of "the national question" in Haiti, "placing the problem in its historical frame,"[49] outlining its linguistic complexity, noting the transformed historical circumstances under which Vodou functions as much as a means of ideological manipulation as of spiritual liberation, and arguing for the critical assimilation and deployment of a compound history of formal traditions. All of this is quite reasonable, if stemming from a rather doctrinaire species of historical materialism that may itself suffer from incomplete mediations, and indeed Depestre's response elaborates a series of now familiar objections to the putative essentialism, nativism, idealism, or vitalism of negritude.[50]

43 Depestre, 1955b, p. 227.

44 Depestre, 1955b, p. 236.

45 Depestre, 1955b, p. 237.

46 Depestre, 1955b, p. 227.

47 Depestre, 1955b, p. 228.

48 Depestre, 1955b, p. 237.

49 Depestre, 1955b, p. 233.

50 See the chapter "On National Culture" in Fanon, 2004, p. 145-180. For a critique of Césaire's book on Touissant L'Ouverture, see Dupuy, 2014, p. 33-51. "On the "vitalist foundations" of negritude see Jones, 2010. For a superb theoretical consideration of the Fanon/Césaire relation, see Marriott, 2018.

But Césaire will begin his own prose reply, "On National Poetry," as follows: "I think the problem is badly posed."[51] We can see why he would think so. From the perspective of Césaire's retroactive claim upon the revolutionary inauguration of free verse at Bois-Caïman, there can be no grounding of "national poetry" in the elaboration of a more detailed history or anthropology of linguistic hybridity, Vodou culture, or relevant verse forms. The problem of "national poetry" is "a false problem" because the production of poetry is not something subsequent to and situated by the production or empirical predicates of a nation.[52] Beyond and before the reasonableness of Depestre's effort to elaborate the mediations defining the historical category of the nation, Césaire situates poetic rupture in revolutionary event, such that the project is to *instantiate* revolutionary rupture in writing, and such that "free verse" is not one poetic form chosen among others, according to the occasion or the hybrid affordances of compound cultural determinations. What goes by the name of free verse is the immanence of form to the making of content and content to the making of form, and in the field of Césaire's poem formal determinations are thus experienced as *simultaneous* and *coextensive* with the revolutionary rupture of an apparent past possessing an apparent present, wherein the unfolding determinations and co-implications of time are themselves at issue in the unfolding of the poem.

In 1955, so it would seem, Depestre finds only an irrational metaphysics in such a claim. But the challenge is to understand why and how it makes sense, at the polemical point of contact between reason and unreason. The history of blackness is itself charged with unreason and is replete with metaphysical determinations, since any act of racial ascription or any affirmation of racial identity will inevitably be in excess of any physical trait, and since the meaning of race—its sense—is overdetermined by phantasms, complexes, and identifications in excess of rational self-reflection. What we might call the *historical metaphysics* of race is the locus of profound psychological and political derangements, of which the irrational phantasms and psychosexual complexes of the racist imaginary are an obvious example. Yet race is also the locus of rational claims upon world historical transformation and political principles, as in Fanon's clarion formulation: "The colonial context, as we have said, is characterized by the dichotomy it inflicts on the world. Decolonization unifies this world by a radical decision to remove its heterogeneity, by unifying it on the grounds of nation and sometimes race."[53] This is precisely what happened in Saint Domingue. Yet again, as Fanon shows in *Black Skin, White Masks*, the rationality of such political thought and action

51 Césaire, 1955, p. 221.

52 Césaire, 1955, p. 222.

53 Fanon, 2004, p. 10

is inextricable from the irrationality of "the grounds" of race, from the fact that racial ascription or identification are bound up with and contaminated by racist ideology, unconscious representations, and affective states that cannot be completely integrated within a coherent unity of either selfhood or historical process.[54] From a critical perspective, this is perhaps most obvious in racially purist fantasies of white supremacy, predicated upon modes of identification and belonging requiring not only genocidal histories but also their disavowal or rationalization, propping up the pretended legitimacy of the fantasy itself. But in the context of negritude, as a literature and politics of the affirmation of blackness, the derangements of race are also conveyed by the surrealism of such exemplary works as Césaire's *Cahier*, Baraka's "Black Dada Nihilismus," Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, or indeed Depestre's *Rainbow for the Christian West*. The force of such works lies in the *depth* of their immersion in the irrational dimension of black identity and belonging, mediated by brutal histories, that cannot be divided from rational assertions of black power and the project of emancipation. Critiques of negritude as an irrational metaphysical essentialism miss the point of its dialectical truth: that the irrational dimension of racialization, racial ascription, racial identity, and racial community cannot be effectively engaged only through analysis, critique, or demystification. That irrational dimension requires a mode of imaginative and political reconstruction able not only to acknowledge but also traverse, inhabit, and thereby immanently transform the surreal facticity of the production of blackness, the metaphysics of its history. It requires a polemics and a politics situated at the point of contact between reason and unreason.

It is the *untimely* ontology of Césaire's "Reply to Depestre" that makes it central to such a polemics and politics, displacing the historicism of Depestre's rejoinder.[55] And we can be precise about the rational sense of the terms "untimely" and "ontology" in this formulation, about the philosophical rigor the temporal construction of the poem both implies and subverts, which we can provisionally clarify through a Kantian framework. The imagination, for Kant, is the faculty that synthesizes concepts and intuitions, enabling the application of transcendental time determinations and thus making experience possible in and through the unity of understanding and sensory receptivity.[56] Yet the imagination is also the faculty capable of presenting intuitions in the absence of an object,[57]

54 On the "rational resort to unreason" in Fanon's politics, see Ciccariello-Maher, 2017, p. 79.

55 For an account of the significance of the untimely in the work of Aimé and Suzanne Césaire, see Wilder, 2015. On the specifically *modernist* significance of the untimely, see Lehman, 2016.

56 See Kant, 1998, A137/B176 - A158/B197.

57 Kant, 1998, B151: "Imagination is the faculty of representing an object even without its presence in intuition."

thus making possible the displacement of sensation as the medium of experience. Imagination synthesizes empirical givenness through time determinations, yet it may also displace the receptivity of givenness, and therefore the determination of experience as sensory presentation. The untimely potential of the imagination lies in the capacity of its synthetic power to both constitute and displace the present.

In his reconstructive reading of Kant, Heidegger will return to Kant's implication, in the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, that the imagination is the root of both the faculties of intuition and understanding, of receptivity and conceptual determination.[58] In this account, the temporality of imagination is prior to the stability of the "I" itself, or what Kant calls the transcendental unity of apperception. Thus the unity of the subject must be thought as itself involved in the synthetic productivity of temporalization, not as an atemporal unity providing the ground of temporal synthesis. Heidegger's existential analytic, thinking the being-there of the subject as exterior to its unity, always at once behind and ahead of itself, may be understood in terms of his fundamental rereading of Kant, situating the temporal productivity of imagination at the very root of an "I" that is never self-identical.

If this seems to take us beyond the field of Césaire's poem, it also enables a more serious engagement with its "existential" dimension, to which Depestre refers in passing. In the poem, the voice is not the site of a metaphysics of presence securing the subject, but rather the exteriority of a possession taking place at the crux of imagination and intoxication: the recollection of that which was never experienced, the infiltration of "one" time by "another." The untimely possession of the poem by "the space of voices" infiltrates the written word in such a way as to disturb, derange, and subvert the historical function of writing itself—its production of official histories—and this is registered through a polemical argument for the codetermining significance of marronnage, Vodou, and free verse as revolutionary content-form. Approaching the untimely function of imagination in Césaire's poem through the philosophical relay between Kant and Heidegger enables us to grasp the philosophical rationality of its apparent unreason—the temporal instability of a subject forever constructing its coherence in the medium of an absent presence—and also the unreason of such rationality: the temporality of subjective experience is not a mere application of logical categories to sensory receptivity, but an ungrounding of the present by a faculty that may present what is not there even as it synthesizes the presentation of what is.

The epochal significance of Césaire's "Reply to Depestre" is thus that it decisively situates this function of imagination, its ungrounded production of the time of a riven subject, in the field of black politics, even as it specifies the temporality of black politics as the revolutionary

58 See Heidegger, 1997a, p. 137-138 and Heidegger, 1997b, p. 188-190.

ungrounding of historical continuity, and even as it inscribes an argument for "free verse" as the adequate poetic form of this political content—not insofar as it is a form that pre-exists it, but insofar as it is generated *by it*. Such is Césaire's claim. The present of poetry, according to this claim, can never only be that of a Seine night in 1955 or of the mad chant of Boukman in 1791, but is rather a spatio-temporal exteriority possessed by traces of an untimely genesis only registered by a form that comes into being with the content inscribed, discharging an electric shock of polemic at the point of contact between reason and unreason. "Should I stop there?" Mallarmé asks amid his Oxford account of the birth of free verse in 1894. "Or why do I get the feeling I've come here about a vaster subject, perhaps unknown even to me, than such a renovation of rituals and rhymes?"[59] Displacing the historical frame of Mallarmé's question, Césaire answers it with perfect clarity.

59 Mallarmé, 2007b, p. 185.

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