

Allen-Paisant, Jason. *Engagements with Aimé Césaire: Thinking with Spirits*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2024, x + 144 pp.

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Aimé Césaire is remembered primarily as a poet, secondarily as an anti-colonial essayist. He was also a politician, serving in the French National Assembly and as mayor of Fort-de-France, the capital of Martinique, for more than fifty years. Jason Allen-Paisant makes the case that we also ought to remember Césaire as a philosopher.

Allen-Paisant is himself a poet, and his book on Césaire consists in a series of poetic meditations. He claims that we ought to think of poetry and philosophy, at its best, as deeply entangled. The appropriate way to do philosophy is poetically; similarly, poets are doing philosophical work when they write. To read Césaire as a philosopher, then, does not mean searching for Césaire's arguments, or for the concepts on which Césaire meditates. It means reading Césaire's poetry in a particular way – reading it for how it makes us see self, community, and world anew. There is a dimension of recursivity here: according to Allen-Paisant, one of the primary philosophical claims to be found in Césaire's poetry is that philosophy is entangled with poetry. Moreover, Allen-Paisant is a poet writing about the poetic nature of philosophy by studying the work of a poet – and essentially embracing and amplifying the philosophical commitments he finds in the work of that poet.

Many writers, most famously Heidegger, have attended to the entanglement of poetry and philosophy. Allen-Paisant is aware of this tradition, and he embraces elements of it. Like Heidegger, whose work he discusses, Allen-Paisant sees poetry “freeing language from the mathematical circle of objects, opening it up to the full vibration of things through rhythm, sound, and the image, [enabling] us to *dwell* and to know in the flesh, to know by being a dweller” (73). This is what Allen-Paisant finds in Césaire's poetry: language that explores what it would mean to encounter the world not as a subject grasping an object but as a being who resonates with the particular land, sea, and sky, the particular animals and people, among which a being lives – dwells. For Heidegger, reaching this sort of encounter with the world requires the destruction of the tradition of European metaphysics. Allen-Paisant thinks Heidegger could have simply looked to the Caribbean, where the artificiality of European thinking, imposed in colonialism, is self-evident, and where the destruction of such thinking accompanies the political project of destroying colonialism.

Allen-Paisant finds two elements in Césaire's thought that are missing from Heidegger's thought. First, drawing on Caribbean experience, Césaire notes that poetry not only connects self and world, present and past, but does so by means of possession. While the *ekstasis* of which Heidegger writes is suggestive of possession, with its sense of a surging beyond the self that shatters the self and breaks the orderly division of time and space, Allen-Paisant suggests that meditating on the specific experience of spirit possession yields additional insights. As he writes, “[i]n many African/diasporic cosmologies, Spirit appears as the plenitude that is wholly in the here-and-now of each earthly thing; it may denote the acting power of the universe itself” (16) – a view which Allen-Paisant contrasts with Hegel's account of Spirit as ultimately tethered to human subjectivity. In traditions such as Vodou, Candomblé, and Santería, Spirit manifests as a pantheon of spirits which take over or “mount” practitioners, making them at once self and more-than-self, filling the present with an embodied connection to past times unrecorded in history, to a network of rela-

tionships irreducible to the sociologist's charts. Allen-Paisant tracks the way that Césaire's poetry resembles spirit possession, both in its language and its form, and speculates about the insights that a poetics of spirit possession might reveal.

The second way that Allen-Paisant's account of poetry moves beyond Heidegger is by the former's focus on Blackness. In this, Allen-Paisant is in close dialogue with recent developments in the field of Black Studies, which has been rejuvenated by the effort to analyze the ways Blackness is distinctive, unlike other racial categories. Black Studies scholars such as Fred Moten, Saidiya Hartman, and Frank Wilderson argue for the distinctiveness of Blackness in a way that links the empirical experience of Black people in the Americas with philosophical claims about Blackness. In one version of this project, the argument goes: it becomes plausible that Black people ought to be enslaved when Black people are excluded from the concept of the human, or, more strongly, when Blackness is associated with nothingness (with no concept legible from the perspective of European thought). Here again, Allen-Paisant develops his thought in dialogue with Heidegger, from whose work he concludes that Western metaphysics is essentially concerned with managing Nothingness, because Nothingness signals the limits of human mastery. For Heidegger, Nothingness remains abstract; for Allen-Paisant, Nothingness is enfleshed in African diasporic people. Allen-Paisant argues, further, that thinking Nothingness by thinking Blackness is the philosophical project of Césaire's poetry.

While Allen-Paisant engages with the Western philosophical tradition, his writing stretches the conventions of Western philosophy. His introduction consists in eighteen "epigrammatic notes," each speculative reflections on philosophy, poetry, and race, ranging from one sentence to a few paragraphs to a poem. As the title *Engagements with Aimé Césaire* suggests, the book's chapters consist in a constellation of essays. These include close readings of some of Césaire's poems as well as reflections on contemporary theorizing in Black Studies. One of the refreshing features of Allen-Paisant's book is that he engages with a wide range of Césaire's texts in French, including poems, essays, and interviews. Much Anglophone writing on Césaire focuses on the small fraction of Césaire's writings that have been translated into English.

In Allen-Paisant's third chapter, he turns to his own poems and his process of writing poetry. Like Césaire, Allen-Paisant is Afro-Caribbean, and his own poetry aspires to be "a way of listening to what things might tell us about themselves, on their own terms and in their own language" (77), "opening up to sound and relinquishing the authority of the ego" (76). This is an instinct Allen-Paisant believes that he shares with Césaire, and he evocatively juxtaposes his own poems and the stories behind their creation with Césaire's poems, using the concept of "resonance" to analyze both, presenting the poetics involved as closer to the mode of representation characteristic of music than that characteristic of prose, or of Western philosophy.

One thread that runs through *Engagements with Aimé Césaire* is the imperative to encounter the natural world in ways that do not center the human. Allen-Paisant argues that, if we read Césaire as a philosopher by attending to his poetics, when we hear Césaire extol the "primitive," he is not indulging in Afrocentric nostalgia or in a strategic inversion of values. Césaire is attempting "to re-enchant the world," to "re-create a system in which community and the ties between the human and the living world were primary" (51). Allen-Paisant suggests that ecological injustice presents itself as a novel problem from a European perspective, but it has been obvious in the Caribbean that humans have been devastating the environment for centuries. The plantation is a mechanism of environmental transformation and dehumanization – and the plantation is inextricable from transnational flows of capital. This is the context in which Césaire writes: one in which developing new modes of attending to the natural world is thus a project with ecological, racial, and economic dimensions.

Allen-Paisant succeeds the most when he is presenting the background for some of Césaire's perplexing language. A crucial line in Césaire's most famous poem, the *Notebook of a Return to a Native Land*, includes a puzzling phrase about being "seized" by the essence of things (or "captivated," in another translation). This line occurs after hope seems to be lost: both European learning and African mythology prove fruitless. Césaire urges his readers to embrace this hopelessness, to forsake ambition, and instead simply to dwell. Understanding this line – which is in many ways the climax of the poem, the presentation of Césaire's positive vision – in terms of spirit possession is deeply illuminating. It reminds us that Césaire should not be read as a Stoic, that he seeks to be filled with Spirit. Thinking about the claims involved in this line as connected with Heidegger's account of poetry is certainly evocative.

History, for Allen-Paisant, is a shapeless past that rushes into the present, undivided by European calendars and clocks. Remembering that history has this side, which often goes overlooked, is important, but it also risks muddying analysis. Césaire rewrote his *Notebook* multiple times as his political views and political context shifted. Césaire's own thought, as expressed across his oeuvre, shifted over time as he encountered surrealism, Communism, nationalism, and electoral politics. These are changes that go largely unremarked by Allen-Paisant, but which potentially put pressure on his argument. Might it be that the philosophy implicit in Césaire's poetry involves a dialectical engagement with his context and his own earlier commitments rather than a quest to wallow in a mystical connection with land, people, and past? Indeed, this is a point at which Césaire and that other champion of Négritude, Léopold Sédar Senghor, differ. Senghor was optimistic about the redemptive possibilities of recovering African lifeways and rhythms whereas Césaire toyed with but never settled on the valorization of the "primitive." Allen-Paisant presents Senghor and Césaire as philosophically indistinguishable.

In a sense, Allen-Paisant's book represents both the promise and the perils of the resurgence of Black Studies as a field that aspires to speak philosophically. Black Studies introduces powerful new concepts, such as anti-Blackness, and methods, such as interrogating the links between the empirical realities of domination and metaphysical claims. It demonstrates how some of the most profound insights of the Western philosophical tradition can already be found, and deepened, in Black cultural production. But Black Studies also has a tendency to favor conversation-stoppers, settling on a network of concepts that are bad (racialization, colonialism, capitalism) and a set of practices for escaping them (fugitive poetics) in a way that erases the complexity of judgment and the dialectical nature of philosophy.

In a sense, Allen-Paisant's book asks a provocative, and as yet unanswered, question: once we have accepted the need to identify and escape from a set of problematic concepts that authorize unjust institutions and practices, and once we have further accepted that poetry is a means of pursuing this goal, how do we judge poetry? If the power of poetry is to replace the power of argumentation, on what scale do we measure the former? Surely not all of Césaire's poetry was of the same quality, but with equal certainty we can say that such quality cannot be measured by audience response or individual feeling. There must be something about poetic rigor that parallels philosophical rigor, that has to do with how a poem grows out of and responds to a tradition and, at the same time, grows out of and responds to contemporary conditions. Allen-Paisant's book will prod readers to pursue generative lines of inquiry such as this.