

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture

ISSN 1481-4374 <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>>

Purdue University Press ©Purdue University

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture (ISSN 1481-4374), the peer-reviewed quarterly of scholarship in the humanities and social sciences, is published by Purdue University Press ©Purdue University online in full text and in open access. The journal publishes scholarship following tenets of the disciplines of comparative literature and cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies" in a global, international, and intercultural context and with a plurality of methods and approaches: papers for publication are invited to <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/submit.html>>; for the aims and scope of the journal consult <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweblibrary/clcwebaims>>; for the journal's style guide consult <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweblibrary/clcwebstyleguide>>. In addition to the publication of articles, the journal publishes review articles of scholarly books and publishes research material in its *Library Series* <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweblibrary/library>>. Work published in the journal is indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature, in the Arts and Humanities Citation Index, in Humanities International Complete, and in the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America. *CLCWeb* is member of The Council of Editors of Learned Journals <<http://www.celj.org>> and it is listed in the Directory of Open Access Journals. *CLCWeb* is mirrored on the website of the British Comparative Literature Association <<http://www.bcla.org/clcweb/>>, it is preserved at research libraries in the Stanford University lockss system <<http://www.lockss.org/lockss/>>, and it is archived in the *Electronic Collection of Library and Archives Canada* <<http://www.collectionscanada.ca/electroniccollection/>>. *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* is affiliated with the Purdue University Press hard-copy monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies and selected papers of the journal are published in thematic annuals in the series <<http://www.thepress.purdue.edu/comparativeculturalstudies.html>>. Contact: <clcweb@purdue.edu>

CLCWeb Volume 3 Issue 4 (December 2001) Article 4
Gary Leising, "Aimé Césaire and Gestures toward the Universal"
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol3/iss4/4>>

Contents of CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 3.4 (2001)
<<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol3/iss4/>>>

Abstract: In his paper, "Aimé Césaire and Gestures toward the Universal," Gary Leising argues that Césaire's *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* presents a speaker struggling with his own identity, torn between a double consciousness of his black African heritage and his French-European education. This dichotomy appears in the poem in terms of his perceptions of his ancestry as well as in symbols of the masculine and feminine in the surrounding landscape. For the speaker, the African appears as the "real" around him, while the European is an "absent presence," and he confronts the two at the poem's climax, when he encounters a comically stereotypical African-Caribbean man on a streetcar. As the poem moves from the climax toward conclusion, the speaker, it seems, reaches for something more universal than either the black or white races. This universal is cast in terms of paradox as the poem spins toward the concluding word, which is etymologically a paradoxical statement of eternity and limitlessness. In the end, the speaker has returned, but he finds that his journey is only at a starting point.

Gary LEISING

Aimé Césaire and Gestures toward the Universal

In *Notebook of a Return to a Native Land* (1983), Aimé Césaire presents a speaker who looks into himself, at the world around him, and into his ancestral past in attempts to discover his own identity. This speaker is in the process of becoming aware of his identity, and central to this awareness is his understanding of his African heritage as well as his relation to the white European world that has influenced him and his island community. He struggles for understanding and I see this struggle cast in terms of the speaker's sense of symbolic ancestry, of the figures in the world who act as fathers and mothers to the speaker through the symbols of masculinity and femininity surrounding the speaker. Césaire describes the land with images of femininity; the sky, the sun, and the material structures of the world seem masculine. The masculine in his ancestry, however, is split between the white, colonizing European and the black, subservient African. I suggest that these two divergent kinds of consciousnesses divide the speaker's attempts at self-understanding. The African appears more real to the speaker; it is easy to see the African presence in his life, his ancestry, and his world. The European, however, appears as more of an absent presence surrounding the speaker in his daily life. He recognizes these two forces particularly in the poem's most narrative scenes and in personal recollections. The most poignant and most often critically discussed moment occurs when he encounters a stereotypically comical-looking black man on the streetcar. Scenes such as this one cast the speaker as a black man looking through the eyes of a white man (or, to use Frantz Fanon's terms, wearing a white mask).

A kind of paradox works in such a scene where the speaker needs to see through white eyes, attitudes, and prejudices in order to look more meaningfully at what defines the black individual and the black community. Both positions -- black perspective and white perspective -- offer the speaker definitions of his "race" that are essentializing. What the speaker discovers in the course of the poem is that having moved through both positions allows him to accept more than one definition; he is able from a third position, one that is between these two and, even as the poem concludes, unformed and undefined, to view himself in complex ways that allows the poem's ending -- his return -- to be a beginning and a future potential for his identity. *The Notebook* consists, as Annette Smith and Clayton Eshleman's introduction to Césaire's *The Collected Poetry* describes, of three movements. The opening of the poem consists of descriptions of the "sprawled flat" topography of Césaire's Martinique in prose-like sections linked structurally by use of anaphora. The second movement introduces the speaker's desire to go away from his homeland while using techniques of surrealist juxtaposition to describe the horrors of Martinique's colonized past and present. This section contains the poem's crucial scene in which the speaker encounters - and mocks -- a stereotypically comic black man on a streetcar. Finally, the third movement of the poem gestures toward a universal sense of identity as it suggests a future hero who will emerge from the past. In this section, the poem's topography seems to lift from the flat earth into the stars and heavens, and the speaker searches for a collective sense of identity that is, paradoxically both black and white while being neither black nor white.

In her attempts to discuss the feminine and the masculine imagery in the poem, Hedy Kalikoff (1995) sees the two genders existing on two axes in the poem. The horizontal is feminine in both positive and negative aspects: "At its lowest point, the female is the city, the impoverished hybrid of urban modernism and colonized squalor -- flattened, sprawled, prostrated. In its antithesis, the female represents fertility. Both of these extremes are on a horizontal axis, whether positive or negative, whether they signify fertility or passivity" (496). On the other axis we have the masculine, and Kalikoff's reading focuses on the sun as its primary image. Both feminine and masculine images are in motion, as we see them changing their meanings throughout the poem. At the poem's opening, the sun is "cursed and venereal, a force on high, looking down on the colonized island" while later the sun "has the capacity not to infect but to fertilize, to turn golden that which is under its light" (496). I would like to extend Kalikoff's reading briefly to include the idea of these complexes of gender imagery as maternal and paternal images. We can see the maternal early on in the poem as Césaire describes the mornes which are, as Clayton Eshelman

and Annette Smith's notes tell us, "Green with the richest vegetation" (401). They are, ironically, naturally fertile and beautiful while also the locations of the slums of Martinique. These volcanic formations are both sensual and suggest a mother's nurturing: "this most essential land restored to my gourmandise, not in diffuse tenderness, but the tormented sensual concentration of the fat tits of the mornes within an occasional palm tree as their hardened sprout" (39). The metaphoric "fat tits" suggests the overabundance of the nutritious mother's milk. This breast image is transformed into the phallus of the palm tree -- the vertical masculine? -- and "the jerky orgasm of torrents and from Trinité to Grand-Revère, the hysterical grandsuck of the sea" (39). The sum of this image resists clear explication because the reasons for leaving what could be a fertile -- and mothering -- homeland are multiple, confusing, and unclear. It may be a point in the poem where the feminine is pushing the land upward in an attempt at growth, at change. I suspect Kalikoff would explain this image as a point of intersection between the horizontal axis of the feminine and the vertical of the masculine. What I think it implies, however, is that some force that has called, pulled, or led the speaker across the sea, has sucked him away from his mother-land to learn in French schools and "adopt" -- or be adopted by -- a new culture.

Later in the poem, Kalikoff claims, these gendered axes switch positions. Early in the poem, however, it seems that the genders reach toward contact with each other. While the sun is, on the poem's first page, "a cursed venereal sun, it later becomes fertilizing" (35). After the speaker has left and considers a possible return to his native land -- and, not insignificantly, after he has seen the sun from a different perspective, "that other dawn in Europe" (43) -- he tells us, "I would have words vast enough to contain you earth taut earth drunk / earth great vulva raised to the sun / earth great delirium of God's mentula" (45). The earth and the sun copulate, and the speaker hopes to have words to contain them both. In this sense of speech and words as a way to contain the world -- including the masculine and feminine aspects of it -- we see how the white, European world has insinuated its beliefs and its sense of domination into the speaker's mindset. In opposition to the flattened town where the teacher's "voice gets lost in the swamp of hunger," the speaker wants a voice and words to contain the earth's creative process (37). He wants his voice to be the opposite of this Martinician teacher's earth-consumed voice. Paradoxically, though, this may not be a European desire for the imposition of a linguistic symbolic order; it may be a longing for the kind of magic in the words that could be found in the African conjuring rituals, as we see in the speaker's "voum rooh oh / to charm the snakes to conjure / the dead" (53). The third possibility (and resolution of this paradox, if such is possible) may be that the speaker searches for a new language or symbolic system which can contain dualities, masculine and feminine or black and white, for example.

In *Aimé Césaire* (1997), Gregson Davis reads the various parts of this poem as rehearsals of a return in which the speaker tries on different masks. The above section provides an instance of the speaker wearing the mask of vocal empowerment, and "The poet imagines himself as articulating powerful utterances" (Davis 29). The speaker offers to go to his land and say, "Embrace me without fear ... And if all I can do is speak, it is for you I shall speak" (45). Davis interprets this scene as the poet setting himself up as "spokesperson for all the oppressed," only to be disillusioned when his return "supplants the imaginary" (30, 31). The speaker abandons the mask of spokesperson when he sees "this life hobbling before me, what am saying life, this death, this death without sense or piety, this death that so pathetically falls short of greatness, the dazzling pettiness of this death, this death hobbling from pettiness to pettiness" (Davis 45). The question, then, is how he moves from his desire to speak for the oppressed in a fraternalized earth where the sun infuses the world with goldenness to a vision where life is characterized as dazzlingly petty with death. I suggest that the speaker is, at this point, looking through the eyes of the white, European world.

Applying my earlier description of the European as absent presence here is tricky because it is a paradox. The European world as ancestral consciousness to the speaker is not physically evident (neither in the world of the poem or genetically in the speaker) and yet it is everywhere, influencing his attitudes and behavior. The speaker's relationship to the European world is a paradox as its influence is both that of a father-figure to him and something external and foreign

to him. Most notably, the poem's French language is the European presence, though the speaker does not directly acknowledge that he writes and speaks in a European tongue. Perhaps we can interpret the speaker's relation to the Europeans through Frantz Fanon's sense of language as expressed in his *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967). For Fanon, to speak "means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization" (17-18). In the chapter "The Negro and Language," Fanon suggests that as a black man from the Antilles begins to speak French he becomes whiter, renouncing his blackness and his "jungle" heritage. In Césaire's poem, though, the speaker seems intent on recovering and describing his ancestral black heritage. If the European has seemed privileged in the poem's opening half, it is because of the long history of white domination. The speaker, however, wants to discover an alternative to this heritage. Perhaps because the speaker lives in a world dominated by the white colonizer, he cites many racial stereotypes while attempting to define himself and his black heritage, as Davis notes. These stereotypes, however, are only "masks" which the speaker discards: "The stereotypes, which are images of the self projected by the other, are also brought into the evanescent limelight, only to be discarded in their turn along with the others. Throughout Césaire seems to be cataloguing the various forms or guises that the black identity has assumed in its interaction with the European colonizer. In subjecting them to uncompromising scrutiny he is not so much concerned with repudiating them outright (though exorcism is certainly part of his plan) as with exploring the nature of racial identity, which is always constructed in relation to the other; for it soon becomes painfully clear, as the poem progresses, that certain negative self-images are, or have been at one time, internalized by the first-person narrator" (42).

It is at this point in his discussion of the *Notebook* that Davis examines what critics commonly refer to as the streetcar scene. Davis offers a common reading of this scene as a "moving self-revelation, [in which] the distance the speaker had earlier maintained between himself and his prostrate country is made to collapse abruptly, and the abject condition of the latter becomes one with the moral abjection of the former" (46). Here it is because he sees someone else possessing the stereotypical qualities that he is able to realize that he has internalized the white way of looking at a black man. I suggest that the self-revelation here includes the speaker's realization that he is, to use Fanon's terms, seeing the black man through the eyes of a white mask. Césaire as poet, however, is acutely aware of this fact. If gender is constructed in the poem, so too is the self-revelation and self-awareness in the streetcar scene. In particular, the scene is self-aware through literary (and linguistic) allusion as Mireille Rosello notes in her 1993 essay, "'One More Sea to Cross': Exile and Intertextuality in Aimé Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*." Rosello explains how, in French, the repeated phrase "comical and ugly" is a reference to Charles Baudelaire's poem *The Albatross*. She calls this scene "a moment of awareness in which the narrator becomes hyperconscious of manipulating a language and a culture which also manipulate him" (181). After a stereotypically amusing description (and one expects that we, as readers, should be ashamed of finding the humor in this description just as the speaker is ashamed), the speaker tells us, "And the whole thing added up perfectly to a hideous nigger, a grouchy nigger, a melancholy nigger, a slouched nigger, his hands joined in prayer on a knobby stick. A nigger shrouded in an old threadbare coat. A comical and ugly nigger, with some women behind me sneering at him. He was COMICAL AND UGLY,/ COMICAL AND UGLY for sure./ I displayed a big complicitous smile.../ My cowardice rediscovered!" (63).

The phrase "comical and ugly" (in French, *comique et laid*) refers to the line from Baudelaire's *L'Albatros*: "Lui, naguère si beau, qu'il est comique et laid!" translated by Richard Howard as "How weak and awkward, even comical" (14). In her discussion of the purposes of allusion (or appropriation) in this instance, Rosello suggests that the repetition of the phrase both highlights it as an appropriation and allows us to see the narrator's awareness of this scene's meaning develop. At first, the adjectives "infiltrate the poem without the narrator noticing they are a 'ready-made,' part of the language and culture; the Baudelairean reference appears ... without distance, irrevocably absorbed by the word that the poet thinks he is speaking, but that in fact speaks him" (186). In other words, the speaker does not have power over the language and culture; rather, the French, the European white world, has been insinuated into his modes of thinking and

speaking. He contrasts the comical-looking man with the sneering women; he also positions this man as representative of "a whole group of wretched and grouchy 'niggers' to which he absolutely refuses to belong" (Rosello 186). When repeated and capitalized, the phrase establishes "a distance, a difference between the one who blames the 'grouchy nigger' and the speaking subject" (Rosello 188).

Rosello argues that the speaker realizes that he is quoting; in this way, he sets himself apart from the world of the comical and ugly man, and he positions himself as someone whose discourse originates from the canonized French poet. Because of the repetition and the source-poem, Rosello claims, the passage's meaning is altered and "the nigger suddenly becomes a positive image, that of a free and majestic bird, misunderstood by the crewmen who 'to pass the time' have exiled it far from the natural habitat to which it was marvelously adapted" (189). The comical and ugly man is like the poet, "an exiled 'winged traveller' who has crossed the seas on the decks of boats of men" (189). The third repetition of "COMICAL AND UGLY" highlights the irony of the speaker's distancing himself from this man: "The 'for sure' can be read as an ironic illumination. ... It is not only because he makes himself the accomplice of the colonizers that the narrator may regret his laugh, but also because without knowing it, he has been making fun of himself" (191). The scene's irony cuts deeper because of the reference: the adjectives the speaker uses initially to ridicule the "comical and ugly nigger" come from a poem that pleads for the exiled Poet, misunderstood by the crowds around him. Here the poet realizes he has been misunderstanding himself by thinking he differs from this poverty-stricken man.

Kalikoff also refers to this scene as the crucial point in the poem, for similar reasons. Of the speaker, she writes, "Once he realizes his complicity with the disdain of the white gaze, he is as low as he can go, mired in self-hatred" (497). As with Rosello's discussion of the speaker's relation to the world through language -- particularly through the language of literature -- Kalikoff is also concerned with the symbolic order (that of gender) through which the speaker relates to the world: "He becomes completely prostrate, identifying for the first time in the poem with the horizontal position which has up to now been gendered as female" (497). This shift is important for several reasons. First, perhaps, because it represents the speaker's attempts at adopting other perspectives. Just as the streetcar scene shows him as the exiled poet who realizes he has been seeing the black world through white eyes, a fact of which he is ashamed, it is now that he may be giving up his previous posturing: "My heroism, what a farce!" (63). He further rejects the mask of speaking hero; he rejects his claim that "My mouth shall be the mouth of those calamities that have no mouth, my voice the freedom of those who break down in the solitary confinement of despair" (45). Now we see the speaker breaking down in the solitary confinement of his own cowardice, and, like the man on the streetcar, who -- though sitting -- seems to be prostrate and flat as he tries to make himself small. The speaker relates to him as a solitary poet (in contrast to a poet who speaks for the masses), flattened both physically and spiritually: "my soul is lying down. Lying down like this town in its refuse and its mud. / This town, my face of mud" (63). If the flattened town is a feminine image, a mother-figure, here he may be accepting his role as his mother's son. Perhaps he sides with the female mother as prostrate in regards to the superior father. This may be so, but only momentarily, as Kalikoff sees the speaker's identification with the female as only temporary, "until the imagery of the poem starts to signal the advent of a new order" (497).

For Kalikoff, as for many critics, the new order that we find as the poem moves toward conclusion is ambiguous and she sees the poem aiming "to explode colonial discourse, the phallogocentric system on the other side of which lies a new map of the world, a different Imaginary. When the speaker of the poem associates himself with the masculine sun, he is filling in the role the colonizer had played. He is not upsetting the structure, but changing the players" (502). I suggest that there is an essentially Freudian struggle between the disempowered black speaker and the empowered white colonizer which takes place in the realm of language. We can see this struggle as Césaire uses and subverts the words of Baudelaire, for example. However, we must also consider this struggle in the broader context of the poem, perhaps in terms of the three principles of negritude which Michael V. Angrosino sees established in the *Notebook* in his "Identity

and *Escape in Caribbean Literature* (1993)": "First, there was his personal identification with blacks everywhere and with their heritage of slavery. Second, there was his rejection of white civilization, because it was the progenitor of slavery and racism. Third, there was his hope for a future of universal fraternity" (124). It seems the colonized man struggles to establish his own identity and sense of self (and self-government) by overthrowing the colonizer. But here I suggest moving back to Angrosino's first point, Césaire's identification with blacks because of their shared heritage. Since this identification is important, the speaker's struggle to establish a new order is not as simple as "overthrow white colonizers." The concept of universal fraternity, since it does not exist in the speaker's symbolic order, cannot be stated clearly. Here we can return to Kalikoff's premise that after the streetcar scene the gendered images of horizontality and verticality "are reversed, changed back again, and then upset completely, plunging the poem into periods of instability and culminating in a profoundly obscure ending" (Kalikoff 497).

Early in the poem, Césaire frames his words as weapons. For example, he describes his community's voice as "our spear point" (49). Perhaps he is suggesting a way to overcome the colonial father-figure through the use of weapon-like words. The violent images here are more complex than just acts directed in revolt. As Daniel M. Scott III notes, "violence creates as it destroys; it enables both oppression and liberation; it circulates from extreme to extreme, resolving apparent contradictions" (143). If the speaker intends acts of destruction as creative acts, then we should look at how he attempts to "destroy," symbolically, that which is African in his identity. The speaker has been addressing his African ancestry and his black society with the vision of a European education, and it shows him the comical and ugly, stereotypical black as a possible obstacle to his success in the world. Because of the speaker's complicity in stereotyping (and thus limiting) the man on the streetcar, he cannot embrace his sense of negritude, his blackness. I suggest that the speaker must symbolically destroy the man on the streetcar in order to assure his likeness to an African, his identity as a black man. In this way, the speaker can eradicate from his own consciousness those European prejudices which make him see only the comical and ugly. The speaker, having returned from France as the French-speaking black man who Fanon tells us is outcast from Martinique society, searches for a place in that society from which to speak and to act in a way that will allow him and his community to advance. However, he cannot if he is aware of himself as being like the man on the streetcar.

On the one hand, that the speaker's European education, as well as the sense of whiteness in the world, acts a block or prohibition to his exploration of his African ancestry. He must destroy or overcome this prohibition in order to reinforce his likeness to his African heritage. Both white and black consciousnesses, however, are present in the speaker's sense of identity and he must accept both of them in order to survive in his world. If it seems he is destroying "whiteness" within himself, this is because he must prevent his European education from destroying the Africanness in his heritage. The speaker must wear different masks as he attempts the balancing act that will help define a fraternal universal. The problem with searching for this universal balance in the speaker's exploration of himself is that he does not equally contain all parts of the world. Although he hints toward an all-inclusive vision of the world at the poem's end, he cannot find equal parts of both "races" in his ancestry and in his life. Instead, I think, he wants the freedom to explore his own as a complement to what is European and white in the world. In this way, he attempts to overcome, to circumvent the white "father," the way of seeing the world that stands between him and his African ancestry in the streetcar scene.

There is indication after the streetcar scene of an act of cannibalism (in word), as the speaker uses a refrained reference to "this former dream my cannibalistic cruelties" (65). The speaker describes this dream: "I was hiding behind a stupid vanity called me I was hiding behind it and suddenly there was a man on the ground, his feeble defenses scattered, his sacred maxims trampled underfoot, his pedantic rhetoric oozing air through each wound. There is a man on the ground and his soul is almost naked and destiny triumphs in watching this soul which defied its metamorphosis in the ancestral slough" (65). This man on the ground, the speaker, watches his soul in this dream, as he beats and destroys himself. The question is which part of himself is he killing here? The white part? The black part? The point of this dream is withdrawal from his "stupid

vanity," which suggests that he must kill that part of himself which is overly proud. Perhaps that is the part -- whether white or black -- which tends to be exclusionary. This scene seems to keep with the kind of narrative Fanon offers of a French-educated black man returning to Martinique as an outcast because he seems vain and thinks himself elevated to a higher status than the Creole speakers. The speaker, however, realizes that there is a metamorphosis which he must undergo. He can "live for the flattest part of my soul," but, as Kalikoff suggests, the masculine axis must return to the vertical (65).

After the streetcar scene, the poem begins a rapid movement towards its rather obscure conclusion. Kalikoff reads the poem's ending as "the attempt to constitute a decolonized subjectivity under a different Imaginary scheme" (501). Fundamentally, I agree. I would qualify this, however, with Davis's discussion of the poem's temporal setting (the "wee hours" of the opening repeated line): "the locution suggests a 'liminal' state, if I may use a spatial, rather than a temporal metaphor" (24). The speaker's liminal state, Davis tells us, positions him between such oppositions as day and night, dream and reality, absence and presence. Might we add black and white, African and European to this list? In attempting to establish this new Imaginary, that of the liminal state, the speaker must overthrow the old systems, perhaps both the European and the African sensibilities and gesture toward a universal fraternity. He must embrace both of them, as the reference to Baudelaire discussed above partially demonstrates. The speaker was a French student, and the streetcar scene demonstrates that he must also be a person of African descent. It is because he has gone through both of these positions that he is ready to move toward the new -- albeit uncertain -- symbolic order suggested in the poem's conclusion.

As a sense of the new order -- and a new consciousness -- approaches the speaker experiences a sense of exuberance as the poem works toward its conclusion. Eia's fill the poem, the "Eia for joy / Eia for love" that celebrate the speaker's feelings (69). Besides the cheers, the speaker also must accept that part of his ancestral past which is horrible: the slavery and its accompanying "flogged nigger saying: 'Forgive me master' / and the twenty-nine legal blows of the whip / and the four-foot-high cell / and the spiked iron-collar / and the hamstringing of my runaway audacity" (73). After accepting all of his ancestral past, the speaker is able to redefine its relation to his present, with hope. He is returning to his native land by ship just as the slaves were transported to the West Indies, but he revises the images of an African on the ship: "the seated nigger scum / unexpectedly standing.... / standing / and / free" (81). The freedom that concludes the poem (which follows the all-inclusive dances of freedom, which I read as further signs of the festive celebration of post-totem-devouring) can be described as a kind of ascent. Kalikoff presents this as a restoration of and movement up the masculine axis. Fanon describes this as the logical conclusion of *Negrohood*: "In effect, what happens is this: As I begin to recognize that the Negro is the symbol of sin, I catch myself hating the Negro. But then I recognize that I am a Negro. There are two ways out of this conflict. Either I ask others to pay no attention to my skin, or else I want them to be aware of it. I try then to find value for what is bad -- since I have unthinkingly conceded that the black man is the color of evil. In order to terminate this neurotic situation, in which I am compelled to choose an unhealthy, conflictual solution, fed on fantasies, hostile, inhuman in short, I have only one solution: to rise above this absurd drama that others have staged round me, to reject the two terms that are equally unacceptable, and, through one human being, to reach out for the universal. When the Negro dives -- in other words, goes under -- something remarkable occurs" (197).

Perhaps there needs to be a sublimation of that which is "Negrohood" to the exploration of the depths of one human being as the speaker must rise with the Dove to explore the black hole in himself. Fanon goes on to state that "the Martinician is a Frenchman, he wants to remain part of the French Union, he asks only one thing, he wants the idiots and the exploiters to give him the chance to live like a human being" (202). This is what Césaire wants, and there is a sense that this can only be accomplished by looking inward. The difficulty in comprehending this may be that the speaker does not only look into himself, but he also looks into his ancestral past, which paradoxically includes both his European education and his African and slave heritage. The poem concludes with the speaker following the image of a Dove, "you who are imprinted on my ancestral

white cornea. / rise sky licker / and the great black hole where a moon ago I wanted to drown it is there I will now fish the malevolent tongue of the night in its motionless veerition!" (85). The concluding word, a neologism, makes it difficult to simplify the poem's end. I would link it to the passage from Fanon above. Davis links the concluding ascension to the traditional motif of epic journeys where the hero descends into an underworld (here the speaker's self) in order to ascend at the conclusion. I don't find this completely satisfying, because it seems that the poem does not suggest a completed ascension, nor has it described a completed journey.

In my view, the concluding neologism is frustrating, perhaps because it defies definition beyond the paradoxical sense of a "still sweeping" suggested by its Latinate roots. The problem Césaire has set for himself here is one of how to describe a single point on a journey of self-discovery. The poem ends with a speaker who still struggles with his sense of self. It is stronger than it was the poem's beginning, but it is not complete, perhaps because it is a new sensibility that is liminal, between European and African. It reaches toward the universal, though conceding that its goal is beyond its reach. I have suggested that the speaker has overcome and accepted his African ancestor in the person of the man on the streetcar in order to be identified with him. However, Fanon claims that Césaire, "once he had laid bare the white man in himself, he killed him" (198). If both of these aspects of his identity have been destroyed, what, then, is left? Perhaps the ending of the poem reaches beyond the solitary speaker and beyond essentializing, single meanings. To draw from Kalikoff's reading, he looks for a new image, neither feminine earth nor masculine sun, but the ephemeral wind, which he commands, "devour and encoil yourself" (83). He tells the wind to bind his "black vibration to the very navel of the world," to strangle him with its "lasso of stars" (85). All of these images seem larger, more universal than previous images of, say, the town sprawled flat. They share suggestions of strangulation, of enclosure and, paradoxically, of expansion, enlargement. This is what the "motionless veerition" also suggests: the speaker wants freedom, wants to be unfettered, but within the very bounds of the world to which he wants to be connected. It is a limiting vision of what the self can be. Paradoxically this self is limitless and thus the poem ends, but the speaker's return has only begun.

Works Cited

- Angrosino, Michael V. "Identity and Escape in Caribbean Literature." *Literature and Anthropology*. Ed. Philip Dennis and Wendell Aycock. Lubbock: Texas Tech UP, 1989. 113-32.
- Baudelaire, Charles. *Les Fleurs du Mal*. Trans. Richard Howard. Boston: David R. Godine, 1982.
- Césaire, Aimé. *The Collected Poetry*. Trans. Clayton Eshelman and Annette Smith. Berkeley: U of California P, 1983.
- Davis, Gregson. *Aimé Césaire*. Cambridge: Cambridge U, 1997.
- Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Trans. Charles Lam Markmann. New York: Grove P, 1967.
- Kalikoff, Hedy. "Gender, Genre and Geography in Aimé Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*." *Callaloo: A Journal of African-American and African Arts and Letters* 18 (1995): 492-505.
- Rosello, Mireille. "'One More Sea to Cross': Exile and Intertextuality in Aimé Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*." Trans. Robert Postawsko. *Yale French Studies* 83 (1993): 176-93.
- Scott, Daniel M., III. "*Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*: La Poétique de la Violence." *Romance Notes* 34 (1993): 143-54.

Author's Profile: Gary Leising teaches in the Department of English and Comparative Literature at the University of Cincinnati. His main areas of interest are twentieth-century American and British poetry and poetic theory. Currently, Leising is working on a volume of poetry for his Ph.D. dissertation as a creative text. Leising has published poems in journals such as the *Southern Poetry Review* (2001), the *South Carolina Review* (1999), *Apostrophe* (1999), the *South Dakota Review* (1998), and *Whiskey Island Magazine* (1996), and his reviews have appeared in the *Chicago Review* and the *Black Warrior Review*. Leising is winner of the 1996 Whiskey Island Poetry Contest. E-mail: <leisingf@email.uc.edu>.