

BRIDGING THE MIDDLE PASSAGE:

THE TEXTUAL (R)EVOLUTION OF CÉSAIRE'S *CAHIER D'UN RETOUR AU PAYS NATAL*

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40 INTRODUCTION

Though there has not been much discussion on the subject, Aimé Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* had an American life before it had an international or an African life. In fact, the poem was published in book form for the first time in America, first in Spanish translation in Havana in 1942, and then in English and French in New York in 1947. An important addition to the poem also appeared in *Tropiques* in the April, 1942 issue, later appearing in *Haïti journal*, on May 25, 1944. The evidence also suggests that issue no. 20 of the Paris journal *Volontés*, where the poem appeared for the first time, was also making the rounds in the Caribbean and the United States—much more so than in France, where it was originally published in 1939.

This American life can be characterized by many changes to the poem, which became increasingly static, almost monumental, by the time it enjoyed international fame. In the following study, I will look at these dynamic American beginnings with particular attention to the textual variations that define the *Cahier* during this period. In the first section, I will rehearse the history of the text as it has been handed down to us, correcting several misconceptions that have accrued along the way. In the second part, I will argue for the centrality of the 1939 *Volontés* text, both in its role as the first text that introduced Césaire to his American audience and as the textual center from which all other versions derive their coherence. Finally, I will look at the trajectory of the poem from Paris to Martinique to Cuba to New York, comparing the different versions which appeared in print during that period in order to paint a clearer picture of Césaire's involvement in the international surrealist movement during what, for all intents and purposes, we can call its inter-American phase. This

examination will provide a more precise sense of the changes in the *Cahier* from *Volontés* to Brentano's than we have found so far in the literature.

1. A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE HISTORY OF THE TEXT

“Sans une étude génétique du Cahier qui n'a cessé de se modifier le long des ans jusqu'à sa forme définitive, on ne peut prétendre à une lecture approfondie du poème”

Pestre de Almeida, “La cosmogonie césairienne, fête d'Eros”

Writing roughly two decades ago on the evolution of the poem from its 1939 appearance in a Paris journal to the 1956 *Présence Africaine* “édition définitive,” Thomas Hale acknowledged, with a finder's glee, that it had become “increasingly apparent that the *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* is the product of a complex dialectic between the poet and his text, between the poet and his experience” (“Two Decades”). The story of how this complexity became “increasingly apparent” serves as a paradigm for the critical attention that the history of the text has received. Furthermore, it is well worth examining as a form of history of the history of the text.

Already several years after his seminal “Bio-Bibliography,” Hale came across his ‘discovery’ through a fortuitous accident of the kind one perhaps hears described more often in popular accounts of scientific breakthroughs. In the course of editing an article by Gerard Pigeon, it became “increasingly apparent” that Hale, using the 1947 Brentano's edition, and Pigeon, using the 1947 Bordas edition, did not have matching references. Hale describes the episode thus:¹

Until recently, *it was assumed* that these two 1947 versions were identical. But in the course of editing [Pigeon's article] for *Cahiers Césairiens*, we discovered numerous discrepancies between his citations and our own text, the Brentano's edition. After a comparison of the two editions, Bordas and Brentano's, it became apparent that we had two different stages in the evolution of the poem. (“Two Decades” 190)

The identity of the two 1947 versions was not the only assumption made by scholars two decades ago, according to Hale. In retrospect of another project (“Structural Dynamics”), he confesses:

In our analysis, *we assumed* that there was really only one version of the poem, that published in 1956, the definitive edition, which contained a few modifications of the version published in 1947. Further, *we assumed* that what appeared in the Parisian review *Volontés* in 1939 were, *as many critics have suggested*, merely fragments of the later, definitive edition. (“Two Decades” 187)

I emphasize here Hale's avowed dependence on assumption to highlight a trend in the study of the poem, due in part to the lack of access to the 1939 text and in part to the privileging of the “definitive” edition. Hale was not the first to notice the dis-

crepancies, of course. In the second issue of *Cahiers Césairiens* in Fall, 1975, Rodney E. Harris had written a delightful piece on the permutations of the poem from 1939 to 1956, teasing out a Césaire fated to make constant changes “due to his desire to be scrupulous in his search for exact truth in details” (Harris 25-28). All the same, we can understand how Hale’s ‘discovery’ of the “two decades, four versions” was delayed. When the “definitive edition” came out in 1956, there were more pressing uses for the text than satisfying our genetic yearnings. Some decades later, when Hale published the account of his anagnorisis, he was riding the swell of an international Césaire reception which could now give itself the luxury of attending to structural concerns and intertextualities. As he suggested, it was the exchange of references over the Atlantic, prompted by the fourth (and last) installment of the *Cahiers Césairiens*, which led to the realization that the Bordas and the Brentano’s texts were different texts altogether.

42 For Hale, the textual evolution of the poem marked the movement from a personal to a collective consciousness. His history of the text astutely paralleled at the macro level what he had already pointed out elsewhere (in “Structural Dynamics”) as the internal trajectory of the poem. With this in mind, at the end of his piece he calls on scholars “to follow the signs in the four versions” (“Two Decades” 195). It is perhaps sad, but very telling, that Hale’s invitation did not guarantee a marriage between hermeneutical and textual analysis in the decades which followed his study; and what ultimately made his study paradigmatic was not even mere velleity for the scrupulous attention to textual transmission that the study calls for, but the fact that the study itself came in the wake of a series of assumptions. On the one hand, many subsequent critics continued to take for granted much that the work of Hale and Harris had already belied. In many of these studies, “the poem” became synonymous with a timeless 1956 text. On the other hand, many well-meaning and conscientious critics who heeded Hale’s call still managed to inadvertently promote some serious misconceptions. This is the case of Lillian Pestre de Almeida, for example, who in the 1980s became the leading advocate for a genetic² reading of the text.

In 1984, on the occasion of Césaire’s 70th birthday celebrations, two collections of essays were published with important contributions by Pestre. One of these studies, “*Les versions successives du ‘cahier d’un retour au pays natal’*” remains today the most complete and accurate published tally of textual variations in the poem. The other, “*La cosmogonie césairienne, fête d’Eros,*” recruits this kind of close attention to textual transformation in the service of a close hermeneutical reading of a popular passage (“*vienne le colibri...*”).

The former study is divided into two parts. In the first one, Pestre de Almeida examines variations in substantials (i.e., nouns, verbs, etc.) and accidentals (i.e., commas, dashes, etc.) regardless of changes in the stanza sequence, which as the reader will shortly see, define the evolution of the poem. In the second part she compares side-by-side, in three columns, the 1939 *Volontés*, the 1947 Bordas and the 1956 *Présence Africaine*, respectively. In order to compare the texts, Pestre de Almeida

distilled the stanzas into exiguous thematic descriptions. The first stanza of the 1947 Bordas became, for example, “*ouverture et proposition initiale*” (“Versions successives” 79). Although she included the 1947 Brentano’s in the first part, she excludes it from the side-by-side comparison without an explanation. We must look to her “*fête d’Eros*” piece for the reason. She explains:

Volontés et Bordas sont, sémantiquement et structurellement, beaucoup plus proches du texte définitif que Brentano’s avec de nombreux déplacements de strophes à l’intérieur du poème. De Volontés (1939) à Bordas (1947), de Bordas à Présence Africaine (1956), il y a soit des ajouts, soit des suppressions sans que l’ordre des passages subisse des modifications. Dans Brentano’s (1947), par contre, en plus des additions et/ou suppressions, on observe des déplacements d’épisodes et de groupes de strophes provoquant des infléchissements de sens importants.
(334)

Because she took the “*déplacements de strophes*” to be a feature of the 1947 Brentano’s text and not, as I will soon demonstrate, a feature of the 1947 Bordas, the former became an immiscible “anomaly” to be cast out from the conforming community. The *Volontés* and the Bordas were thus rendered canonical because they approached the ever-central “definitive edition.” As a result, sustaining the fiction of a definitive edition, Pestre de Almeida inadvertently gave rise to a few assumptions that have carried over to the present day.

In 2008, Pestre de Almeida revisits the problem posed by the Brentano’s edition in her book-length study of the poem and repeats and expands the same argument, adding another factual error along the way that further explains her conclusion that Brentano’s was an anomaly. In the book, she uses the passage that formed the center of her earlier “*cosmogonie*” piece as the example that supposedly demonstrates the anomaly:

Avec Brentano’s, au contraire, en plus des additions et/ou suppressions, on observe de nombreux déplacements d’épisodes et de groupes de lignes provoquant des infléchissements de sens importants. Un seul exemple suffira à nous convaincre: le passage de la cosmogonie rêvée (“vienne le colibri...”), dans Volontés, Bordas et Présence Africaine, se situe après la grande “révolution” intérieure du narrateur... (Pestre, Aimé Césaire)

The problem is, of course, that this passage is simply not present in *Volontés* as Pestre de Almeida adduces.

To illustrate how her influence has led other scholars to perpetuate this mythical history of the text, we need only open another, relatively recent book-length study dedicated to the poem, *Aimé Césaire: Cahier d’un retour au pays natal*, by Dominique Combe. In an otherwise able and comprehensive study of the poem—in the 1956 sense of the word “poem”—Combe publishes a series of misleading statements based on his reading of Pestre’s study: a) When introducing the 1947 Bordas edition after just having introduced the 1947 Brentano’s, he declares “*Les deux versions comportent peu de variantes.*” (39) The opposite is true: A simple word count reveals that there is a difference of 574 words between the two. This is a higher figure than if we were to

compare the 1947 Bordas with the 1956 *Présence Africaine*, for example, which yields 278; b) After pointing to Pestre de Almeida as his source, he notes:

Qu'il soit simplement noté que, dans l'ensemble, Césaire a revu son texte dans le sens d'un enrichissement: la version définitive est nettement plus longue que la version primitive de la revue Volontés, selon un mouvement d'amplification et non de restriction, qui va bien dans le sens de l'épique. (40)

This statement is misleading as well. Although it is true that the 1956 edition is far larger than the 1939, this “movement of amplification”³ has not been continuous. In fact, the largest of all the versions is the 1947 Bordas, tallying up to 9,873 words total.⁴ The 278 word difference we pointed out above between the Bordas and the 1956 *Présence Africaine* comes not from additions to the poem, but from the numerous deletions, or rather expurgations, which characterize the 1956 so-called “definitive edition.” In fact, these deletions contribute to the argument that the 1956 text represents not an enrichment, but an impoverishment.

44 Such an argument remains implied in James Arnold’s recent revitalization of the issues at stake for a genetic study of the poem, “Césaire’s ‘Notebook’ as Palimpsest: The Text Before, During, and After World War II.”⁵ Coincidentally published on the occasion of another Césaire anniversary, this time his 90th birthday, this study brings historical context to bear on the four different avatars of the poem we’ve discussed so far. While describing each of the editions, tracing out their different contexts and influences, Professor Arnold delineates a three-stage trajectory which goes from emphasis on spiritual/biblical language to the eruption of a surrealist poetics, to the erasure of spirituality/sexuality on a Marxian platform. Each of these stages corresponds to a particular moment in the poet’s development and affiliation. At the moment when the text approaches sanctification as a “definitive” edition and for reasons that Arnold suggests, “Starting in 1956, [Césaire] took a step backwards that opens the Cahier to a flat or literal reading by situating it in the context of the Cold War” (139).

We must add to Professor Arnold’s study by clarifying that by no means do these attributes, religious/surrealist/Marxian, constitute the central feature of these different versions, but rather their excess. In other words, these are the elements that a textual study such as ours highlights because they constitute the work’s temporal difference. We should not forget that the poem’s central theme and approach remain unchanged: a radical critique of colonialism, assimilation and amnesia developed through highly iconoclastic formal innovations.⁶

Having qualified it thus, Arnold’s historical analysis falls at the end of my history of the history of the text and serves as the point of departure for the rest of our work here. In the next section I will try to argue for the primacy of the 1939 text as a sort of gravitational center which gives coherence to the other versions. Following this, I will delve into a brief reevaluation of the trajectory from manuscript to the 1947 Brentano’s edition, tracing what we know of the production history of the poem

during this period, in order to open the possibility for a dynamic reading of the poem that belongs to no one version isolated from the rest.⁷

2. THE PASSAGE IN THE MIDDLE, OR WHY THE 1939 TEXT IS FUNDAMENTAL

Pluralitas non est ponenda sine necessitate

William of Occam

¿pa' qué complicase la vida?

Dominican idiom.

The correspondence between Césaire and Breton, and between Breton and Yvan Goll, the exiled Franco-German poet who along with Breton was instrumental in getting the poem published in New York, confirm what many critics already adduce based on circumstantial evidence and historical hearsay, mainly that the 1947 Brentano's, translated into English by Lionel Abel under the editorial eye of Goll, was drafted before the 1947 Bordas edition. The texts themselves provide us enough internal evidence that the 1947 Bordas is indeed a later text, to make the archival evidence hold. At the outset, it seems evident that the additions belonging to the 1947 Bordas were made in excess of the additions belonging to 1947 Brentano's. Some of them were even inserted between text that already constitutes an addition to the 1939 *Volontés*, the best example of this being the all-too-famous "*voum rooh oh*" chant, which comes in between a passage already inserted in Brentano's. (Fig. 1) If in our textual endeavors we prefer to follow the lesson of Occam's razor, which favors the simple solution over unnecessary complexity, we can agree that it is more likely that in the case of this passage we move from absence to addition, rather than from the absence of the passage, to the addition of the passage and on to the deletion of the passage. Furthermore, several corrections were made in the 1947 Bordas of "typos" which remained consistent between the 1939 *Volontés* and the 1947 Brentano's. Finally, the 1947 Bordas permanently deletes material present in both the 1947 Brentano's and the 1939 *Volontés*, including the whole line, "*Un nègre à la voix embrumée d'alcool et de misère.*"

Therefore, when Pestre ascribes "*nombreux déplacements de strophes*" to the 1947 Brentano's edition, she omits one crucial detail: The supposedly displaced stanzas in question are all additions, i.e., they are simply not part of the 1939 *Volontés* text. Once we agree on the simple line of succession between editions, the absence of the "displaced stanzas" from the 1939 implies that no part of the original 1939 text changes position in relationship to itself in the 1947 Brentano's, a fact which clearly suggests

that there is no displacement of stanzas in the 1947 Brentano's as Pestre de Almeida suggests, only additions.

On the contrary, it becomes clear from an analysis of the sequence of texts that the 1947 Brentano's added several stanzas in a particular order, and only during the preparation of the 1947 Bordas, were these additions then transposed around a passage in the middle of the original 1939 text. I am calling this 1939 passage around which the exchange takes place, "The Bridge" (Fig. 1). Although we don't have direct evidence confirming whether Césaire himself was responsible for the order of stanzas in the Brentano's edition, we have textual and circumstantial evidence to suggest it was indeed him. After all, stanza sequencing is not such a negligible feature of a poem that an editor would take liberties with it.

The largest addition to the Brentano's, marked 1947 C in our Fig. 1, and beginning with the lines "O terre mer almée," comes almost in its entirety from the short poem "En guise de manifeste littéraire" published in the 5th issue of *Tropiques*, April 1942.

- 46 In the process of incorporating it into the *Cahier*, Césaire added three blocks of text to the short poem, one at the beginning, one at the middle and one at the end. A short passage was deleted from the short poem and several regularizations took place. The amount of changes made to this small poem on its way to being incorporated to the larger poem are disproportionate in comparison with the scant changes made to the *Volontés* text for the same edition. A reading of the additions to the short poem suggests Césaire made these changes to adapt the short poem to its new environment.

Then there is the matter of Césaire's penchant for transpositions. As you can see from Fig. 1, Césaire also shifted a small passage in the transition from the Bordas to the 1956 PA edition. Around the same time as he was working on the Brentano's, Césaire was also working on *Et les chiens se taisaient*. A comparison of the manuscript of this text with the first published version, that of the 1946 edition of *Les armes miraculeuses*, shows no less than 64 transpositions. It seems likely then, that Césaire moved around the text when preparing the Bordas edition years after the Brentano's text had been envisioned.

Why is this important? Once we have begun to describe the history of the poem more accurately, do we learn anything about the nature of the changes? How are these migrations, additions and deletions relevant to our reading of the poem? In the chart below, the reader may notice that the structural sequence of the 1939 text remains intact in relation to itself throughout the transformation of the poem. This is even the case—excepting small, albeit important deletions—for the 1956 *Présence Africaine* text. In this last text, the pattern of addition and displacement continues, with purgation playing a more prominent role than ever before, but ultimately leaving the 1939 unmoved. The relative stability of the 1939 base text contrasts sharply with the highly volatile additions, which migrate and decay throughout the latter versions.

We can conclude from the preceding that the 1939 text forms a veritable backbone or framework for the poem. Throughout the years, and apparently open to his

editors' suggestions, Césaire worked at the poem, trying out new sequences, adding material, etc., but never was the elder 1939 text "displaced." If there is a poem here, in the static sense of the word, it would have to be the unmovable bulk of the 1939 text—deletions and additions aside. Of course, the argument can be made that there is just no "Poem" here, just different texts sheltering under the useful myth of an umbrella title. No matter. Despite our base esemplastic tendencies to believe in the existence of a transcendental "poem" outside of its material manifestations, it remains clear that a re-evaluation of the 1939 text is in order. Once we have understood the relative instability of the additions in comparison to the first published text, even those of us who would still give primacy to the 1956 because it has been arguably the most widely read version and/or because it carried the author's final imprimatur, must agree that the 1939 text, still unmoved in the "final" version, forms what I would call a core of structural meaning.

Once we shift our focus away from the 1956 and back to the 1939 "backbone" text, we are well poised to start a reevaluation of previous critical attempts to analyze the poem's structure, most of which have relied on the "definitive" edition.

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Apart from Lyllian Kesteloot's relatively complex structuring of the poem, the tendency has been to divide the poem in three. Peter Guberina, in his preface to the *Présence Africaine* edition already calls the poem "a poetic drama in three acts." A range of other critics, from Thomas Hale ("Structural Dynamics" 166) to Maryse Condé (33), has also recognized in the poem a three-tiered trajectory. Notwithstanding differences in critical outlook, the formal breakdowns overlap substantially; usually, the conceptual structure of the poem ends up looking something like this: 1) Rediscovery, 2) Identification with the (African) Past, and 3) Metamorphosis and revolt. It is both this tendency to triangulate and its inherent vulnerability to condensation that has led many critics, starting with Sartre in "*Orphée Noir*" (1948), to invoke Hegel's dialectical movement from thesis, antithesis to synthesis as a privileged structure when discussing the poem.⁸

While tripartite readings might arguably work for each version taken in isolation, the linear/teleological narratives of the Hale and Condé variety lose their explanatory power once we look at the history of the text. This is so for two preliminary reasons: 1) The sequences expand or reconfigure with the different editions, and; 2) Linearity or linked seriality is excluded from the geometries of the poem in all of its versions. This much can be deduced from Jérôme Game and Jean Khalifa's study⁹ of the formal properties of the poem, where linearity itself is variously gainsaid or exorcised by the curvatures and involutions—spirals, pustules, volcanoes, etc.—sculpted by the poem into its own duration. Although Game and Khalifa make no distinction among the different editions, their argument holds for all of them, starting with the 1939 text.

If we were to structure the poem according to its textual variations, on the other hand, we would notice that the large additions introduced in 1947 Brentano's, and subsequently rearranged for the 1947 Bordas, effectively divide the later versions of the poem into five large segments, while retrospectively dividing the 1939 into three

‘stationary’ textual segments (Fig. 1). These three ‘stationary’ segments, which I here label ‘textual’ to contrast them with the familiar ‘hermeneutical’ divisions of others, serve as the best possible argument that indeed the text (and only the 1939 text) could be divided into three parts. The difference is that these parts are not to be read as a teleological whole, but rather as the textual blocks that remain relatively unchanged (only three small additions and no major deletions) throughout the history of the poem and around which most deletions, additions and migrations take place. From an examination of these three segments, the argument could indeed be made that they provide the foundation for the ‘hermeneutical’ divisions of the critics, further proving the centrality of the 1939 text, but it doesn’t follow that the other versions simply adjust to the conceptual model provided by the early text.

48 Few will dispute the variations in style that came as a result of historical pressures made to bear on Césaire’s poetic practice. The large segments that surface in the 1947 Brentano’s—labeled 1947 A, B, C and D below—begin the process of transformation by opening the poem to a surrealist reading that was just not there before. As Arnold, Daniel Delas, and others have already pointed out, this “poetic revolution” was linked directly to Césaire’s involvement with Breton and the New York surrealists during and immediately after the war, bringing context to bear on the creative process (“Palimpsest” 136). As a result of the additions, what critics have generally understood as the prophetic voice of the poem suffers a radical change from a more biblical to an overtly surrealist mode. By the time we reach the 1956 expurgations, a time in which Césaire was already grounded in the political climate of the Cold War, the movement to mainstream the poem would be complete.

Of the surrealist material, the overt sexual references bore the brunt of the attack, but many subtle lines survived censure. The strange communion of the Christian (albeit anti-clerical) and the surrealist, and all the shared material, together under the final ‘sober’ shell, makes the 1956 version a veritable congeries of discourses, which perhaps accounts best for the variety of interpretational onslaughts which the text has provoked and withstood over the years: from Jungian universalism to Senghorian Negritude, from Bachelardian dreaming to post-structural dismantling, from Marxist inquest to Créoliste insurrection, et cætera. Paradoxically, it is what I called above the core of structural meaning, the bulk of the unchanged 1939 text, which provides these disparate discourses their center and their coherence.

Despite these efforts to move away from both catholic and surrealist love, the later editions could not sweep off all traces of the 1939 text without damaging the integrity of the poem. After the poet and his editors had refigured or disfigured preceding published versions, the illusion that ‘it’ was still the same poem could only be sustained so long as the “original,” i.e., the 1939 sequence was preserved. The end-result is clear: The “definitive” edition still bears most of the 1939 base-text in the same sequence (in relation to itself) as it was when it was originally published.

In the section which follows, I will return to the source, to our “backbone” texts, starting with the surviving manuscript and its first appearance in 1939 in the Paris

journal *Volontés*, to trace the first strand of this “strange communion”—perhaps the most curious strand once we consider it has been the least studied. From there I will move through to Brentano’s, focusing on the production history with the hope that, as our picture of the poem’s evolution becomes clearer, we become more capable of distinguishing those discursive disparities which belong to the historical changes of the text proper and thus lay the groundwork for a holistic reading of the poem that avoids the old Augustinian trap of an a-historical reconciliation of manifest dissonances which has marked previous readings of the poem.

3. AMERICAN SURREALISM: FROM *VOLONTÉS* TO BRENTANO’S

The journal *Volontés* ran 20 issues from December 1937 to August 1939, under the direction and financing of the controversial Georges Pelorson (Giroud 227). Though contributions by Pelorson himself tended towards fascism, the general tone of the journal was eclectic, with regular contributions by Raymond Queneau, Eugene Jolas and Henry Miller. A letter from Césaire to the editor, in all probability Pelorson himself, already tells us that Césaire was very open to editorial suggestion, so much so that he was willing to change the whole ending of the poem from an original we no longer have to the one we are familiar with today. In his letter dated 28 May 1939, which was returned with the copy-edited typescript of the poem, Césaire declared the new conclusion “*plus vertigineuse, plus finale*” (See Fig. 2). Césaire’s openness to revision and editorial suggestion will become very important when we consider the transition from *Volontés* to Brentano’s below.

The last issue of *Volontés*, where the *Cahier* appears in print for the first time, was peculiar for the uncanny number of future American luminaries, including poems by Octavio Paz, Pablo Neruda and Cesar Vallejo. As the reality of war became imminent, Césaire left Paris for Martinique in August, perhaps taking a few copies of the issue home with him to America. This we believe is the text—either a copy of the journal itself or a faithful facsimile—that his friends read and admired, and eventually helped disseminate on this side of the Atlantic.

Indirect proof for this comes from Lydia Cabrera’s translation of the poem, which reproduces the *Volontés* pre-original almost word for word (only two lines of the original are missing from the Cabrera text), many times even preserving the French grammatical structure. According to Helena Holzer Benitez, Césaire sent her and Wifredo Lam a copy of the poem for translation. Benitez and Lam came together to America, and even though her training was in biology, she was quite at home around Lam’s artistic acquaintances. Despite her command of the French language, though, the scientist thought herself unqualified for the task and passed the text along to Cabrera, a dear friend of the Lams who had already earned her credentials as a writer

with the publication of *Contes Nègres de Cuba* in Paris in 1936.¹⁰

Césaire had met Wifredo and Helena during those fateful weeks between the end of April and May 1941, when Martinique received Breton, Levi-Strauss and many other important expatriates aboard the “*Capitaine Paul Lemerle*.” Breton, who had become friends with Lam in Marseille the previous year and who had already collaborated with Lam on *Fata Morgana*, enthusiastically introduced the painter to Césaire, only a few days after he had met the local teacher himself. During a reading of some fragments of the *Cahier* organized by Aimé and Suzanne in honor of their new friends, Helena Benitez remembers translating some fragments “to a troubled and very moved Wifredo, who admired Aimé’s poetic observations and descriptions of life as a black man in an environment of white dominance” (56). This impromptu translation and the affinity with a fellow Caribbean artist, returning home from Paris to his own pigmentocratic society, may have encouraged Césaire to envision his poem in other Caribbean contexts and languages.¹¹

50 Cabrera’s translation is easily available to American audiences in the collection *Páginas Sueltas*, edited by Isabel Castellanos, where one can also find her translations of other poems by Césaire, Senghor and Damas. In this study, though, I am using a photographic reproduction of Roberto Fernández Retamar’s copy of the original 1942 edition. As I suggested above, Cabrera’s translation was extremely faithful to the original. Furthermore, parallel indentation, parallel stanza breaks and parallel line breaks suggests that she had a copy of the journal issue in front of her, as opposed to a typescript.¹²

The missing lines are brief and come toward the end of the poem: “*tam-tams inanes de plaies sonores*” and “*véritablement les fils aînés du monde*.” Considering that these lines appeared in all subsequent versions of the poem and that they have no politically unsavory content, we attribute these omissions simply to the translator’s oversight. As far as the vocabulary choices are concerned, Cabrera decided to keep only a couple of “untranslatable” words from the original, the Martinique French “*morne*” and the English “*in-tourist*.” Apart from these examples, Cabrera tries to find equivalences in Spanish. A curious example is her transliteration of “*tam-tams*” to “*tám-táms*,” emphasizing the word’s sonority and rhythm over their meaning.

Worthy of notice for our map of the American surrealist circuits of the poem is the introduction by Benjamin Péret, “*en este año de 1942*,” when we may assume he was already in Mexico. We learn from an exchange between Kora Leblé and Wifredo Lam’s son that Péret was visiting Cuba when he became involved with the project.¹³ The fact that he did attests to the imminent internationalization of surrealism in its American phase.

The pre-publication history of the 1947 Brentano’s edition brims with interesting anecdotes, most of which we cull from the archives of Yvan Goll.¹⁴ According to Albert Ronsin, former curator of the Goll archives, Breton carried with him from Martinique to New York, “un exemplaire imprimé à petit tirage du *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal*” (64). Although I cannot verify Ronsin’s source for this declaration, it is

very likely that Breton brought with him to New York in 1941 a copy of the original 1939 text.

To judge from the considerable attention being paid to Césaire both by Goll's *Hémisphères* and by David Hare's journal *VVV*, we can safely claim that the surrealists were intent on making Césaire a household name among the New York intelligentsia. It was certainly Breton who introduced Césaire to Yvan Goll, who seems to have started translating the poem around the same time that he was editing the no. 2/3, double issue of *Hémisphères*, dedicated to the tropics. The piece opened with Breton's famous piece "*Un grand poète noir*," followed by Césaire's "*Les pur-sang*," and an advertisement for AIME CESAIRE: CAHIER D'UN RETOUR AU PAYS NATAL, édition bilingue en français et en traduction anglaise. Introduction D'ANDRE BRETON, trois illustrations de WIFREDO LAM.

In a letter dated January 20, 1944¹⁵ from Breton to Goll, we learn of the existence of "*une autre version corrigée par Césaire*," which Breton wants Goll to incorporate in the upcoming edition. An interesting detail we learn from this letter is that the revised manuscript was sent originally to Henri Seyrig, who then passed it on to Breton, who finally passed it to Goll some time later. A letter to Robert Lebel from Breton, dated June 20th, confirms that Césaire has given his approval for the publication of the bilingual edition, perhaps suggesting that he has seen the current state of the text.

51

Through a series of mishaps surrounding the publication of the *Cahier*, the already-strained friendship between Goll and Breton suffered its final blow. When Goll was almost finished preparing the text, Brentano's informed him that they might be interested only in the French version of the poem, which was to be kept under the imprint of *Hémisphères*. Breton, who seemed to be intent on enlarging Césaire's audience, did not agree, and Goll almost dropped the project. Relations between the two deteriorated rapidly following these difficulties. According to a letter dated June 15, 1944, Breton informs Goll through the mediating pen of Robert Lebel that he was not opposed to the publication of the poem by Brentano's as long as it was bilingual, and he asks Goll to return the manuscripts in his possession. Another letter from Lebel, dated July 20, 1944, reminds Goll that he has still not returned the Césaire manuscripts in his possession. After this, the letters don't tell us much more about the fortunes of the *Cahier* other than that a set of proofs was lost in the mail shortly before publication. A set of last-minute galley proofs without corrections still survives at the Goll archive.

This brief account of the correspondence between Goll and Breton confirms for us that a new version of the text came from Césaire in the middle of producing the New York edition in 1944. It also reminds us that the production of the text, of most texts, lies beyond the total control of the author. In the case of the *Cahier*, we have started to piece together the clues of its production history, but much work remains to be done. It cannot be emphasized enough that, without a marriage between rigorous textual analysis and keen historical research, any hermeneutical reading of the

poem and all appropriations to support this or that account of the birth of negritude will fall flat. Experience has shown us that the reception history of a canonical work is not the simple proliferation of opinions around a fixed text. Rather, the accretion of critical attention—more often than we would like to believe—serves to generate and perpetuate a false history of the text that can only be corrected by a constant striving to rescue the fragments of history, as Walter Benjamin would have it.

The *Cahier* may have been written in France, but it was not until it came to America that it disseminated and in a sense came to life. Because of the welcome it received in America, thanks largely in part to the surrealists who had relocated from Europe, Césaire became more open to the ideas of surrealism and his poetry gravitated in that general direction. We must not forget, though, that as these influences played out, the 1939 text remained the bedrock around which the poem built and shifted its layers. Furthermore, as we suggested above, it was this same text that won the respect of his peers this side of the Atlantic. Finally, we must start giving the Brentano's text its due.

- 52 It is not the monster text it has been made out to be, and no reading of the text can continue to assume that it is not a genuine transition between the poetics of the 1939 text and those of the Bordas edition.

It remains for future Césaire scholars, then, to acknowledge and explore further the circuits, both American and surrealist, that constitute Césaire's early career and the first fortunes of his work as a poet.

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NOTES

1. My italics in all quotations unless indicated otherwise.
2. We must observe that my use of the word genetic does not bear directly on the French school of thought that gave birth to "genetic criticism" in so far as they restrict themselves to the creative process related to the "avant-texte." The 1939 text, although mostly unexplored, still counts as the pre-original published text. We only have one "avant-texte" available to us, the BAN ms., and therefore cannot study the creation process that led to the first published version with the same thoroughness as, for example, the average ITEM/CNRS project does. What I mean then by genetic is essentially the series of transformations that led to the so-called definitive edition, i.e., the history of the text.
- 54 3. The language of a continuous enrichment strangely parallels the teleological readings of the poem, which see in it a gradual build-up of intensities culminating in the slave insurrection at the end of the poem. The biographer M. a M. Ngai even goes so far as to map this ideal crescendo onto the life of the poet as a young man. "Sa poésie, en effet, est constituée par une sorte d'élargissements progressifs: un mouvement linéaire semble porter le poète de la 'petite maison qui sent très mauvais', située à Basse-Pointe, vers le lycée Schœlcher" (19).
4. To arrive at the total number of words digital editions of the poems were run through a word processor word-count feature.
5. This text is also available in French as "Le 'Cahier d'un retour au pays natal', avant, pendant et après la guerre."
6. We should not equate this radical critique with what we call today a post-colonial critique. Although the post-1956 text frequently serves as the foundation for several varieties of post-colonial criticism and theorizing, it is evidently anachronistic to peg Césaire as a post-colonial thinker. On the other hand, we should feel justified in using such broad categories as religious, surrealist and socialist to talk about the textual excesses, because these lead us in more specific directions. On this last point see Arnold, "Beyond Postcolonial Césaire." <http://fmls.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/content/full/cqn012>.
7. Many critics have still not seen the 1939 text which this study makes central; thus I choose to follow in the footsteps of critics such as Pestre de Almeida, Hale and Arnold in my attempt to describe the relevant textual features. The limitations, short of reproducing the poem itself, are those that print technology will allow.
8. Some Hegelian readings have also been supported because of the supposed dialectic of reason/madness which can be found in several stanzas added in the 1947 Bordas. This reading would evidently be hard to sustain when applied to the 1947 Brentano's or the 1939 *Volontés* text.
9. "Pustules, Spirals, Volcanoes: Images and Moods in Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*." See also Khalifa's "The Discrete and the Plane: Virtual Communities in Caribbean Poetry in French."
10. For this and other anecdotal evidence, see Herzberg.
11. James Arnold suggested in conversation (26 Oct. 2008) that the poem may have made it to Cabrera's hands through Péret, who in turn may have received a copy from Césaire. I prefer to believe Benitez's story which creates a more plausible link between Cabrera and Césaire. Benitez had already done French-Spanish translation work for Lam, who needed to understand Breton's *Fata Morgana* before he could provide illustrations for it. This would have made her a perfect candidate for Césaire's aspirations.

12. There are a few cases of variations in the breaks which can be attributed to Cabrera's interpretations of difficult-to-read breaks in the original rather than to a different source.
13. Thanks to Kora Leblé for this piece of the puzzle and many more insights on Césaire. Her invaluable bibliographic work remains the backbone of mine.
14. I owe the discoveries of these archives to the work of Albert Ronsin. I had the opportunity to travel to St. Dié des Vosges recently under the auspices of the AUF to examine these archives. Albert Ronsin had, sadly, passed away in July of 2007, but I was warmly received by Mme. Ronsin who now curates the collection.
15. Correspondence addressed to Yvan Goll. Fonds Yvan et Claire Goll, Bibliothèque Municipale de Saint-Dié des Vosges, n° 510.513 (dossier A. Breton) Ms. 604

APPENDIX: FIGURES

Fig. 1
Stanza Displacement, Addition and Deletion Diagram

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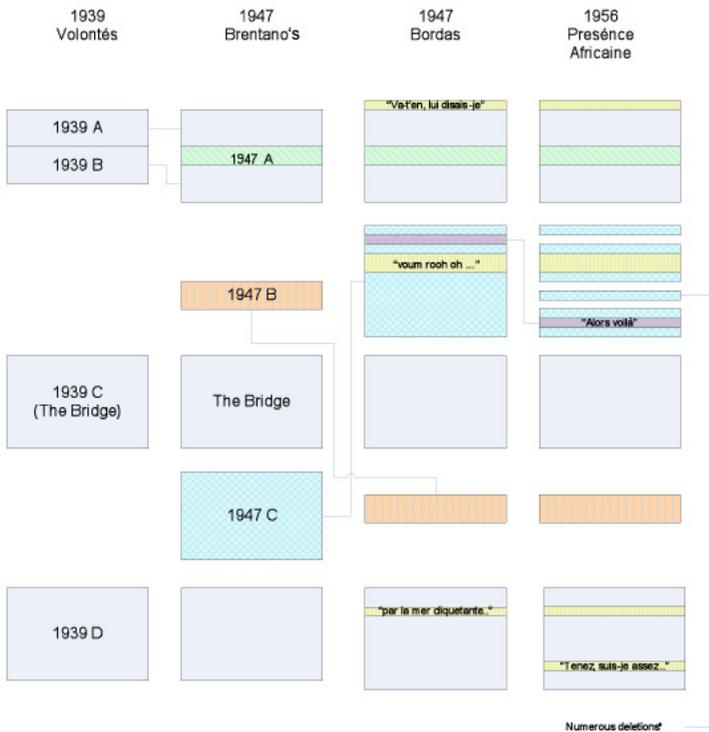


Fig. 2
Letter to the editor of the journal *Volontés*.

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