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Cracks in the Edifice: Notes of a Native Daughter

PART 1- Introduction, tracing ideas from the region and my project

...when dealing with young independent nations, the nation is passed over for the race, and the tribe is preferred to the state. These are the cracks in the edifice ...
(Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 119)

On June 22, 2015, a podcast was posted online after an interview with US President Barack Obama, following the shooting deaths in the previous week of nine black people in a church in South Carolina. The shooter was a 21-year-old white man espousing racist ideology. The podcast interview with Marc Maron made headlines for many reasons, but mainly because then President Obama used the 'n- word' in the interview. Obama said this:

...race relations have improved significantly during my lifetime and yours, opportunities have opened up ... attitudes have changed. That is a fact. What is also true is that the legacy of slavery, Jim Crow, discrimination in almost every institution of our lives casts a long shadow and that's still part of our DNA that's passed on. Racism, we are not cured of it. And it's not just a matter of it not being polite to say 'nigger' in public. That's not the measure of whether racism still exists or not. It's not just a matter of overt discrimination. Societies don't overnight completely erase everything that happened 200 to 300 years prior...

Still, Obama insisted on the fact that we had made progress: "progress is real" he said, "and we have to take hope from that progress."

Obama knew that the "n" word's problematic epistemology would draw attention to the situation; provocation is always useful tool. But it was the idea of racism as being part of our DNA that was troubling, particularly in the racialized world of 21st century identity politics. I begin with this idea because in many ways it is salient to the problematics of our own history of racism and trauma and its enduring effects on our 21st century psyche.

America is not the Caribbean, and being black in America is not the same as being black in the Caribbean. Identity politics remain for the most part a localized phenomenon. An African-American and an Afro-Caribbean may share a past of slavery and colonialism and face racial, economic and class discrimination, but the distinctions that arise from complex socio-cultural contexts create particular and unique circumstances for each group and individual. It is all in the details. This is not a revelation to anyone and yet the conflation still occurs. Even the word African is a homogenization and a reduction of a continent that is diverse and complex. Again, this is not a revelation; but still, consider the reduction of the prefix: "Afro." In the US there are Italian- Americans, Irish-Americans, Polish-Americans and then there are African- Americans; no national or implied cultural distinction, no details, but instead an entire continent contained in a prefix. I would argue that the Caribbean is a more

racially sophisticated society than the US. But I would also argue that the legacies of colonialism and slavery are still very much part of the DNA of our 21st century Caribbean. This evening, I would like to look at some of these issues drawing primarily on the work of a young, black Martinican writer who wrote, in 1939, a long poem that would become a seminal work in Francophone Caribbean Literature and in the literary world as a whole. The poet is of course Aimé Césaire and the poem *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (*Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*) is as relevant today as it ever was in its exploration of the traumas that we face.

The Caribbean has long been a location of trauma. It is a region traumatized by a past that continues to haunt its present. Stuart Hall described the region's violent colonial history as "the trauma of transportation." As someone of Caribbean origin, as well as someone who writes both creatively and academically about the Caribbean, I have often felt the resonance of Frantz Fanon's words: "These are the cracks in the edifice." Fanon, Martinican psychiatrist, activist, writer and theorist (1925-1961), was talking about the pitfalls of a national consciousness that was inherently tribal; Fanon affirmed: "... when dealing with young and independent nations, the nation is passed over for the race, and the tribe is preferred to the state." But he also captured in this phrase, the indelible psychological scar left by the Caribbean region's history. Fanon is but one of many since it would be hard to signal creative and scholarly works from across the region that have not dealt in some way with the manifestations of these cracks. This ever-present past continues to be explored and exposed across languages, generations, genres and genders.

My research interest in this area is by no means the first interrogation, much has been written about trauma in Caribbean fiction. One of the most recent critical studies is Paula Morgan's work, *The Terror and the Time: Banal Violence and Trauma in Caribbean Discourse* (2014). Two of Morgan's core questions are noteworthy, she asks: "To what extent are existing conceptions of trauma useful for analyzing the ruptures peculiar to Antillean history, with its attendant anxieties, identity crises and representational dilemmas? And secondly, "has trauma been normalized in Caribbean society?" The term "normalized" is of course part of the knotted problematic that trauma researchers attempt to unravel. Trauma scholars like Stephen Craps have argued that there is a problem with trauma studies and the lack of focus on disadvantaged groups. There is still a need to continue to decolonize definitions of trauma especially when we examine works from a Caribbean perspective. I am not a psychiatrist so my approach is literary. I look at the poetics of trauma to examine the ways in which it is expressed in our writings and to see what the writing reveals firstly about the world of the text and the world beyond; in the case of my research, that world is the Caribbean.

My focus in this lecture is on the writer Aimé Césaire but my wider project draws from a range of Caribbean texts written in both English and French. This cross-lingual perspective opens a new space to navigate the poetics and problematics of the selected narratives. A comparative reading also facilitates the formulation of new constructs of trauma by locating areas of convergence and divergence.

Apart from Césaire's *Cahier*, I also examine the poetics of Haitian-American writer Edwidge Danticat's collection of short stories, *The Dew Breaker* (2004). Danticat looks at the effects of the Duvalier dictatorship on diverse Haitian communities. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) by Dominican-American novelist Junot Diaz revisits historical accounts of another dictatorial regime, that of Rafael Trujillo, and Dany Laferrière's *L'Egnime du retour* (*The Enigma of return*) (2009) explores the loss of his biological father and his literary father,

Aimé Césaire. Laferrière's work, like Césaire's, focuses on the idea of a return to a homeland constructed from memory, imagination and his reality.

All of these authors, with unique poetics, probe the ways in which colonial, historical, insidious, and personal traumas transcend generations. My project begins and ends with the concept of return stressing the need for continual questioning. The aspiration of the project is that these creative expressions help to fill in some of the cracks. Some may feel that these old cracks or themes no longer serve to explain where we are now, but trauma does not go away, as psychiatrist and trauma specialist Mark Epstein asserts. It is something that we inherit from past generations, it may be in our DNA, to borrow from Obama, and we face these traumas each day. As Epstein states:

It [trauma] does not happen to only some people. An undercurrent of it runs through ordinary life... I would like to say if we are not suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, we are suffering from pre-traumatic stress disorder... There is no way to be alive without being conscious of the potential for disaster... The willingness to face traumas – be they large, small, primitive, or fresh – is the key to healing from them.

There is no denying that brilliant scholarly work has been done on the Caribbean but the region is young, still maturing politically, culturally and ontologically. Its dynamic, unpredictable and at times "adolescent" nature is both appealing and frustrating, especially to those trying to characterize, analyze and evaluate a location defined in paradoxical, ambiguous, and contradictory ways. Writers and intellectuals have described the region as a site of dislocation, destruction, and fragmentation and alternatively as a panacea and a template for multiculturalism and creolization.

One only has to turn to articulations from the Francophone-Caribbean, where writers and theorists have developed schools of thought that have probed these complex socio-cultural Caribbean narratives, building their theoretical framework on the region's traumatic past from the genocide of slavery and plantation atrocities to postcolonial destruction.

Francophone and Anglophone theorists and writers have always grappled with the effect of the past on the present. They recognize that the only constant is the need to constantly revise, re-examine and re-define the terms of engagement.

If we take a quick look back, please allow me to paint in broad strokes here, how a generation of writers and theorists spanning from Aimé Césaire (1913-2008) to Edouard Glissant (1928-2011) to Patrick Chamoiseau (1953) formulated ideas for three major literary and cultural movements of the Francophone Caribbean: Négritude, Antillanité and Créolité. Each school of thought acknowledging the traumas of the past, but also embracing an implicit notion of progress, of moving towards a greater collective understanding of who we are in national, regional and global contexts.

Not unlike their Francophone counterparts, the Anglophone writers and theorists also articulated visions of the Caribbean as models for multiculturalism. Pointing to our sameness and embracing our differences with a submarine unity, or as Glissant asserts, a "subterranean convergence." St. Lucian poet, Derek Walcott's 1992 Nobel Prize lecture also embraced a unifying metaphor with the shards of a broken vase, and with it the notion of healing as individuals and communities, to quote Walcott:

Break a vase, and the love that reassembles the fragments is stronger than the love which took its symmetry for granted when it was whole. The glue that fits the pieces is the sealing of its original shape. It is such a love that reassembles our African and Asiatic fragments, the cracked heirlooms whose restoration shows its white scars...Antillean art is the restoration of our shattered histories, our shards of

vocabulary, our archipelago becoming a synonym for pieces broken off from the original continent.

This emphasis on re-assembling fragments to create a stronger, albeit cracked whole has been echoed throughout the region. These were the aspirational sentiments of the group I call The Federation Generation; great writers and thinkers, born mostly in the 1920s and '30s many of whom came together in the 1976 Carifesta in Jamaica to celebrate Caribbean heroes including: Toussaint Louverture, José Martí, Simón Bolívar, Marcus Garvey. The 1976 festival also produced a journal with the title: *Carifesta Forum: An Anthology of 20 Caribbean Voices*. The journal was edited by the late writer John Hearne (1926-1994). In his introduction Hearne outlined the intellectual parameters of the Forum, which he felt should be, “a definition of the present state of culture in the Caribbean during a turbulent, complicated and often painful time of transition.” Hearne asked contributors to the journal to “confess” their relationship and respond to “one of the world’s most confused, cultural battlefields.”

The major preoccupation for these Caribbean writers was to be according to Hearne: “the individual’s voyage of discovery across the longitude, and down into the parallel of a history that has not yet happened.” Hearne’s other contributors included voices that would prove to be some of the region’s most influential and prescient: Aimé Césaire, Octavio Paz, V.S. Naipual, Wilson Harris, Gabriel García Márquez, Carlos Fuentes, Nicolas Guillén, C.L.R. James, Sylvia Wynter, Gordon Rohlehr and Edouard Glissant; Glissant was also the co-editor of the Anthology. Every time I look at this journal I am overwhelmed by the ideas and the voices; it is staggering and it has inspired much of my research in trying to understand and to come to terms with the glory days of this generation and where we are now. Did future Caribbean generations, especially my own, miss the mark in some way? Or was this collective ideal ever attainable?

I also share Hearne’s desire, as is the fundamental conceptualization of Carifesta, to have conversations across Caribbean islands to overcome our linguistic barriers. I chose to study French Literature but I have always felt that as Caribbean people we should all be fluent in at least three languages, but that is another story. Glissant said of that 1976 Carifesta festival that it “consecrated in a spectacular and massive way what had been until then nothing but a dream of intellectuals ... Carifesta conveyed to a collective consciousness the impulses of a few.” Hearne articulated the problematics of this popular collective impulse, “History,” Hearne said, “...is the angel with whom all we Caribbean Jacobins have to wrestle, sooner or later, if we hope for a blessing.”

These sentiments of regional unification are still heard today in academia, the UWI aspires to ONE University of the West Indies and in sport there is always the aspiration of a winning WI Cricket team. I would love to simply blame the politicians throughout the region for the demise of the Federation in 1962. But I believe that as a region we are more than the politics of the tribes, equally powerful are our poetries. I have a lot to learn from and about this generation and I hope to focus more on this area in my next research project.

I am interested in this fragmentation and I believe that more time should be spent scrutinizing the submarine dis-unity rather than attempting to reconstruct a romanticized whole. Apart from Fanon’s words for the title of my lecture I have also borrowed from James Baldwin’s work, *Notes of Native Son* (1955). Baldwin, a brilliant writer, captures in a deliberate yet eloquent way, the notion that in the end: “all theories are suspect and that the finest principles may have to be modified or even pulverized by the demands of life.”

There is a need to revisit and return to theories that perhaps also re-evaluate the cyclical nature of our condition of repeating questions in repeating islands.

PART 2: Césaire's brief biography, Négritude vs Antillanité

Césaire's biography sets the landscape for his exploration of trauma in his writings. He grew up under French rule on the island of Martinique. Born in Basse Pointe, in the North of the island, on June 26, 1913. Césaire's father was a civil servant his mother Elenore was a housewife and seamstress. He had two sisters and three brothers. When Césaire was born, the French Caribbean island had 120,000 inhabitants; it was mostly rural and most people worked on the great sugar cane plantations, the *habitations*. Slavery had not long been abolished and Césaire's grandmother's parents were slaves, freed before the abolition in 1848. Saint-Pierre, the former capital, had been totally destroyed by the volcanic eruption of Mont Pelée in 1902 and everyone still remembered it clearly when Aimé Césaire was a little boy. This volcanic eruption was to later take on a symbolic and metaphorical value in his poetic works.

When Césaire was 10 years old, his family moved to Fort-de-France so that the children could further their education, as Césaire remembers: "In those days, our generation had only one thing in mind: make it in life – and to make it, we had to study." His grandmother, Maman Nini, was the one who taught him how to read. Césaire remembers her as: "a small black woman with eyes sparkling with intelligence and mischief." To him she was simply extraordinary. Césaire was a brilliant student and as a result was awarded a scholarship in 1931 to further his studies in Paris where he sat and was successful at the difficult entrance examination to the prestigious "L'Ecole Normale Supérieure."

In Paris he met students, artists, musicians and other writers. And it was in this city that he would meet Léopold Sédar Senghor, a poet from Senegal; Langston Hughes, the black American writer; Léon Gontron Damas, a poet from French Guyana; Pablo Picasso, who would later illustrate one of Césaire's poetry collections, and many more, as Césaire himself asserted: "I discovered Africa in Paris."

In Paris he also re-imagined a place in the world for his own race. He started the magazine "L'Étudiant Noir" (1935) and would become, along with Senghor and Damas, a founding member of the Négritude movement. Let us imagine for a moment Paris in the 1930s and what brought these three men of three varying backgrounds together to start a movement that would transform identity politics forever. All three were young poets, all three would become activists and politicians, and all three recognized the transformative power of poetics. As Césaire affirmed: "My poetry springs from my actions."

In Paris, amongst these fellow artists, writers, scholars, and great creative minds, they embraced a new vision of what was possible and expressed it in their poetics of engagement. They were black men in a foreign country united by their foreignness, united in their desire to redefine the black experience through a rejection of Western ideology that inherently saw blacks as inferior to whites. They were also inspired by the intellectual setting, finding themselves in the company of these influential black American writers from the Harlem Renaissance, like Hughes and Richard Wright who had taken up residence in Paris to escape racism and segregation in the United States. Négritude was thus conceived of as a way to combat the subjugation and reclaim the definition of what it meant to be black; it was envisioned as a universal concept to include all people of African descent.

Artistic expression of black culture was the means by which this redefinition and revalidation would take place.

Both Senghor and Césaire relied on their personal narratives and histories to define and express their Négritude. For Senghor, Négritude was a way to universally affirm the importance of African culture and by extension the black race; Africa symbolized the unifying motherland for all those “Africans” who had been brutally uprooted and dispossessed through the slave trade. The Négritude movement called for a cultural revolution placing Africa at the center. If Senghor had a more universalist approach with a view to giving those of African descent a sense of self and inheritance of a great cultural past, for Césaire, this idea of being African had to be translated into his French Caribbean context. The *Cahier*, was a way to record this return to his native land, empowered with the vision of the Négritude movement; it was also to articulate a return to the mythical homeland of Africa through his poetry. Beyond or perhaps alongside the poetics, there was also the question of political engagement for the founding members of the movement. Senghor (1906-2001) was to become the first president of Senegal, and remained president for 20 years; Senghor led his people to Independence in 1960. Damas (1912-1978), author of the famous collection *Pigments* (1938), was also involved in politics and was elected Deputy for Guiana from 1948-51.

In 1939 Aimé Césaire returned to Martinique to become a teacher at the only secondary school in the island, the prestigious Lycée Schoelcher. Apparently, and I cannot confirm this, but I will say it anyway, he was nicknamed the green lizard by his students because of the bizarre color of the suit he wore. Some of Césaire’s students included Frantz Fanon and Edouard Glissant. In 1941 Césaire met André Breton, the French surrealist poet, who was passing through Martinique at the time and the painter Wilfredo Lam, a lifelong friend of Césaire’s. In terms of his political career there are many events that could be discussed here: including his time spent in the communist party or that in 1956 he founded the Martinican Progressive Party (PPM) choosing the balisier as the party symbol. Césaire was elected Deputy to represent Martinique in France from 1946 to 1993. The year 1946 was also the year in which Martinique, along with Guadeloupe, French Guiana and the Indian Ocean island colony of Réunion were assimilated into the *mère-patrie*, becoming fully-fledged departments of France, and henceforth to have the same laws and rights applied to their peoples as to all other French citizens.

In practice, the majority of laws and benefits were not extended to the Antilles until well into the 1950s and 1960s, with many not being extended until the 1970s and 1980s. Although these islands were certainly well-off in relation to some of the other Caribbean islands who had gained their independence from European colonial powers, the French overseas departments, despite the rhetoric of assimilation and equality, were/and are much worse off in relation to France itself. Departmental status may have allowed some measure of political autonomy but the political policies of these islands continued to be informed by the French government. To this day the Departments rely on France for their economic survival. The French Caribbean islands’ Caribbean location, their colonial history and even the hardships encountered in the French metropolis, have created an ambivalent and complex “relationship” with France. This relationship has shaped many of the cultural arguments and literary movements. Edouard Glissant was one of those who since the 1960s argued for an independent Martinique.

The division that came between Glissant and Césaire was profoundly ideological; both men had different visions for their country’s political and cultural identity. Glissant wanted

independence from France, but Césaire believed that the departmental status was a better economic option for his country's survival. It needs to be emphasized that this political status is a distinguishing factor between the English-speaking Caribbean islands and the French. Cultural theorizing in the Francophone islands is often linked to political ideology. And cultural identity has always been at issue for the Francophone Caribbean islands; defining nationality within the socio-cultural context has been a daunting task. Glissant summed up this desire for Antillanité or Caribbeanness in this way: "One is not Martinican because of wanting to be Caribbean. Rather, one is really Caribbean because of wanting to become Martinican."

It was the racial and cultural exclusivity that Glissant rejected, arguing that the focus on Africa was self-limiting and reductive. Frantz Fanon also criticized the movement in *Peau Noire, Masque Blanc (Black Skins, White Masks, 1952)*, arguing that true power came from economic and social status. Although Négritude was fundamentally anti-assimilationist, the Négritude notion of Africa could not completely or ultimately define the complexity and diversity of the Antillean experience. Glissant saw a way to creatively exploit the region's fragmented history, cultural diversity and differences through his vision of Antillanité or Caribbeanness. Like Négritude, Antillanité asserted difference with the notion of "Le Divers." Glissant advocated diversity, but unlike Négritude, the difference was not only African. Antillanité was defined instead as complex, heterogeneous and dynamic. Glissant drew on the root metaphor to describe the different ways of articulating this identity. In *Poétique de la relation* he opposed the notion of a "root-identity" (*identité-racine*) to a "relation-identity" (*identité-relation*). Root-identity suggested a single origin, whereas relation-identity was one of complex, multiple origins. Critic Richard Burton underlined the importance of Glissant's contribution emphasizing the major epistemological shift. Burton noted that identity was no longer imagined as a single tree rooted in the landscape as with Césaire's *Cahier*, but as a tangled proliferating growth, without beginning or end, as Burton summarized: "Négritude's concept of identity was ontological, that of Antillanité ecological."

Glissant's concept of diversity and his Antillanité was a unifying force that influenced in no small way the third most important literary movement in the Francophone Caribbean, Créolité. Patrick Chamoiseau, Raphael Confiant and Jean Bernabé, are forever indebted to Glissant for his formulation of relation-identity and cross-cultural poetics. They saw the potential of the Creole language and Creoleness as a way to define and articulate the complexities of Caribbean identity formulation. In *Eloge de la Créolité (In Praise of Creoleness, 1993)* Chamoiseau, Confiant and Bernabé criticized, like Glissant, the reductive nature of homogenizing theories of sameness: "Neither Europeans, nor Africans, nor Asians, we proclaim ourselves Creoles." For the authors of *Eloge* this opening line proclaimed their project of inclusion. They would not deny the relevance of Césaire for it was they stated: "Césaire's Négritude that opened to us the path for the actuality of a Caribbeanness... We are forever Césaire's sons." The Créolité movement embraced, like Antillanité, the complexity of Caribbean identity to include all indigenous groups. It would encompass not only people of the Caribbean region but all cultures that had experienced a history of slavery, colonization, assimilation and *métissage*. Créolité was to go beyond the Caribbean archipelago. If Négritude emphasized the racial problematic, Glissant the cultural, the Créolistes situated their debate in the linguistic. As Burton stated: "Créolité located the key to Caribbeanness not in "race" nor even in "culture" but in *language*."

Of the three movements, I can say that I feel most closely aligned to Glissant's vision of Caribbeanness, or Antillanité. But I also still see great value in the problematics of Négritude within the Caribbean context. The movie *Black Panther*, even if it is seen as a strategic Hollywood venture, based on the response and its overwhelming financial success, points to a need to celebrate representation albeit in the mythological Wakandan utopia.

Part 3: The Cahier's Streetcar scene and conclusion

The *Cahier's* story of return is one of the earliest examples of trauma poetics in Caribbean literature; it exposes the effects of insidious racial trauma on the Caribbean psyche. The *Cahier* is also an account of a poet's personal trajectory from self-hatred to self-acceptance. It is the poetics of Negritude and the expression of the politics of institutionalized racism through cultural and political domination. Césaire's poetic journey of trials also echoes, in many ways, the Homeric arc of an Odyssean return. As with Odysseus, the poet must face his internal demons that manifest themselves in different forms. These battles also expose an ontological crisis, and forces the poet to plunge, like the French 19th century poet Arthur Rimbaud, into the unknown, into the big black hole, "le grand trou noir." Césaire's surrealist esthetics allows for this plunge into the darkest areas of his imagination. This notion of a journey is alluded to in the first words of the poem: "Au bout du petit matin" – at the end of daybreak – just before sunrise, just before the day begins. At the end of day break the poet must also face a tortured Antillean landscape described in the poem as traumatized, diseased, hungry, beaten and abused.

The trauma of the streetcar:

One of the most dramatic and powerful scenes described in the *Cahier* exposes the poet's fundamental traumatic struggle with his own self-acceptance, his Négritude. In this scene in the *Cahier* the poet-personage finds himself next to another black man in a streetcar. It begins this way:

One evening on the streetcar facing me, a nègre.

A nègre big as a pongo trying to make himself so small on the streetcar bench. He was trying to leave behind, on this filthy bench, his gigantic legs and his trembling famished boxer hands. And everything had left him, was leaving him. His nose, like a peninsula adrift and his negritude discoloured...

He was a gangly nègre without rhythm or measure

The poet who is also on the streetcar with this figure tries to distance himself from this image and symbol of misery. He adopts a racist gaze because this is not the type of nègre that the poet wishes to identify with, instead, the poet places himself in the personage of the onlooker; othering himself from this man. As the poet aligns himself with the other people in the streetcar, he wants to say to them that he is not like this nègre, that he is closer to their values, their culture, their idea of beauty and their civilization. In short, he wants to say: I am more like you. The result of the poet's desire to distance himself from this ugly, caricature of his Négritude is summed up in the line: "And the entire thing added up to a perfectly hideous nègre." The women on the streetcar were sneering at this nègre because, as the poet says: "Il était COMIQUE ET LAID, / COMIQUE ET LAID pour sûr." He was COMICAL AND UGLY /COMICAL AND UGLY for sure.

But just as the poet states this he quickly acknowledges the shame he feels as a result of the big complicit smile he has displayed: this "grand sourire complice." He is aware of his cowardice, and fraudulent, disingenuous stance as hero, saviour and voice of his people. Something that he proudly proclaimed at the beginning of the *Cahier* when he said: "My

mouth shall be the mouth of those who have no mouth, my voice the voice of freedom.” Now he must confess that his heroism is a farce and that this town fits him to a t (“Mon héroïsme, quelle farce! / Cette ville est à ma taille.”). He is no better than the people he has come home to save. This confession, a turning point in the *Cahier*, recalls Fanon’s often cited account of encountering racial fear with a white child. Fanon brings to light in his analysis the detrimental harm done to marginalized groups by continuous exposure to as Fanon says: “a galaxy of erosive stereotypes” causing these groups to develop feelings of inferiority, inadequacy, and self-hatred. This insidious trauma can be passed on from one generation to the next, like our DNA.

Two words in this scene on the streetcar, COMIQUE ET LAID/COMICAL AND UGLY, are taken from a poem by the 19th century poet Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867). Baudelaire’s poem is entitled “L’Albatros” (The Albatross). The poem is also about mockery, ugliness and identification. In Baudelaire’s poem the bird, the Albatross, is king of the skies but once he lands on the deck of the ship, the sailors, like the women in the streetcar, make fun of him for their own amusement: “This voyager, how awkward and weak! / Once so handsome, now comical and ugly.” But in the Baudelaire poem, unlike in the *Cahier*, the poet immediately identifies with the mocked bird:

The Poet is like this prince of the skies
Who seeks out storms, and scoffs at archers;
Exiled on the ground, amongst the booing crowds
His giant wings prevent him from walking

In Baudelaire’s poem, the poet knows, that like the bird, he too has a space where he thrives, where he is free; it is the aerial, creative space of the imagination; that is the poet’s kingdom. But there is also a major difference in the two poems; in Baudelaire there is no question of complicity, cowardice and distancing as there is in the *Cahier*.

So why does Césaire reference Baudelaire? Césaire’s referencing of Baudelaire’s “L’Albatros” emphasizes both the similarities and the differences faced as a poet and a black man. In the creative space, Césaire is a poet like Baudelaire, but on the ground, on the “deck” of the ship, he is mocked, like the Albatross, like the nègre in the streetcar.

After this streetcar episode, Césaire’s poet-personnage can now begin to face the difficult process of acknowledging and decolonizing his internalized colonial gaze. Only then can he say: “J’accepte...j’accepte ...entièrement, sans réserve...ma race.” / I accept... I accept... unconditionally ...my race.” His Négritude must also include this streetcar “nègre,” this symbol of misery.

Césaire believed, like Rimbaud did for a time, that the poet could be a *voyant*; that the poet had “a capacity for vision.” “Vision more than sight” Césaire said, for: “Sight can be narrow, but vision is wide.” Although before and even after his death Césaire has been, as Ronnie Scharfman reminds us, “the subject and the object of culture wars and political contestation in his native Martinique...In his later years, he recognized the nefarious side effects of *départ-mentalisation* vote.” But Césaire never changed his fundamental poetic identity, crafted through his poetry: “Nègre je suis, nègre je resterai,” Césaire asserted in a series of interviews in 2004.

By studying the poetics of these writers and the different traumas or cracks that they expose and explore in their works, I believe that we as individuals and communities are ultimately engaged in a hopeful endeavour. For writing itself is an act of creation even when the subject is dis-unity, fragmentation, even destruction. Shards may lead us to further understanding of latent aspirations. So this evening I would like to end with the words of

James Baldwin who simply offered this: "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced."

THANK YOU