
Gary Wilder. *Freedom Time: Negritude, Decolonization, and the Future of the World*. Durham: Duke UP, 2015. Pp. xvi, 384. US\$28.95.

Aimé Césaire from Martinique and Léopold Sédar Senghor from Senegal remain seminal figures in anti-colonial thought. As founders of the *négritude* movement with the French-Guyanese Léon-Gontran Damas, they directly confronted racism and imperialism in their literary and political writings and fostered pride and self-affirmation among peoples of African descent around the world with their proclamation that, as Césaire phrased it in his *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, “no race has a monopoly on beauty, on intelligence, on strength” (*Collected* 77). At the same time, Césaire’s and Senghor’s ideas have provoked controversy, and their political careers have led critics to point out the seeming contrast between their firm anti-colonial rhetoric and the compromises they supported in the relations between their native lands and the French metropolis.

Gary Wilder’s *Freedom Time: Negritude, Decolonization, and the Future of the World* is a fascinating overview of Césaire’s and Senghor’s careers at their most critical point: the moment right after 1945 when France, recently liberated from Nazi occupation, was compelled to redefine its identity as a nation and an empire. As such, the book can be read as an intellectual biography of these two figures during that important period. The book is also a reflection on the multifarious relations between anti-colonialism, nationalism, cosmopolitanism, and aesthetics. Wilder’s assertion, which he defends compellingly throughout the text, is that Césaire’s and Senghor’s positions on these issues, particularly their refusal to regard nationalism as the *only* alternative to colonialism, have much to teach us today in an increasingly globalized world.

Wilder's point of departure is that 1945 opened an "untimely" moment in which many possible futures could be imagined as achievable—that is to say, as already present immanent possibilities within the circumstances at the time. In France's case, the metropolis and its colonies could radically redefine their relations to one another based on how much the experience of empire had already altered the French republic (a topic that Wilder explores in his previous book, *The French Imperial Nation-State*). The notion that the colonies could challenge colonial domination only by achieving independence and becoming nation states of their own is, for Wilder, a narrative imposed retrospectively on what was, at the time, a much more fluid reality. Another possibility was for the colonies and France to regard themselves as one large French-speaking community, united by ties of culture, language, and shared history. If carried out in the spirit of the radical critiques of capitalism in which both Césaire and Senghor engaged, such a solution could have led the former colonies to actual "substantive freedom" (248). This would involve empowering people by addressing economic inequalities, racial prejudices, and other circumstances that limit individual and collective self-determination. Conversely, the merely "formal liberty" (248) that many of the colonies acquired as independent states converted them into impoverished neocolonial pawns in the Cold War. From that perspective, Césaire and Senghor "demanded not simply a full integration of overseas peoples with the existing nation state but a type of integration that would reconstitute France itself" (163).

In Césaire's case, the vision of a pluralistic, multicultural France led to his instrumental role, as member of the French Assembly, in transforming Martinique into a French overseas department. Through centuries of colonization, Antilleans had become, albeit in an intolerably subordinate role, legitimate participants in French history and culture. Now it was a matter of doing them justice by creating a frame that would allow them to participate as equals while at the same time reconstituting France in the light of the ideals of liberty and equality that were already part of its philosophical tradition and political rhetoric. In reality, Martinique's new status did not achieve Césaire's cosmopolitan aspiration for a reconfigured empire turned into a federal French republic. As a department, Martinique remained dependent, with policies decided in Paris and imposed without much regard for local conditions. Wilder does an excellent job describing how France, led by Charles de Gaulle, moved from being open to new political possibilities to attempting to recreate its former glory as a centralized imperial power. Once the French became engaged in their imperial wars in Algeria and Indochina, the dream of a federation of equals all but faded. Césaire never hid his

disappointment, and after the late 1950s he spent the rest of his political career struggling for more autonomy for Martinique.

Initially, Senghor followed a similar path, forcefully arguing against autarchic nationalism and envisioning a federation that could become the basis for new forms of post-imperial democracy. Senghor's "Union of French Socialist Republics" offered a humanistic alternative to both American-style capitalism and Soviet-style totalitarianism. In the process, Africans would actually redeem France on an imperial scale. However, Senghor collided with the political events that led to the demise of the French Fourth Republic, as well as with dissenting voices arguing for national independence in Senegal and other African nations. Senghor himself eventually became Senegal's first president, and while he never lost sight of his broader vision, his later career found him increasingly embroiled in national political conflicts, thus shifting his emphasis to statism and national unity.

Wilder's analysis readily acknowledges that Césaire's and Senghor's visions did not always match their political practices and pragmatic compromises. In spite of those limitations, they remain momentous thinkers today because the problems they tried to address—"the relation of state sovereignty to human freedom or the prospects for self-management, plural democracy and human solidarity in an interdependent world" (256)—remain as vital now as they were then. Inasmuch as they realized that "imperialism itself created conditions, in alienated form, for the kind of decentralized governance, legal pluralism, and disaggregated sovereignty" (257) that the contemporary world calls for, their invitation to look beyond territorialist nationalism remains pertinent.

Ultimately, the failure of Césaire's and Senghor's projects, at least in the radical forms envisioned by the two poets, raises questions about Wilder's interpretation. Did the vision of a reconstituted, pluralistic, decentralized French republic at an imperial scale ever have a real chance in a (post)colonial world still dominated by racist and essentialist categories and a globalized capitalist order that requires sacrifice zones for its perpetual growth? Of course, one cannot assert that it was impossible. But since Wilder's argument takes the form of an extended analysis of "what might have been" (248), one could respond that, based on *what was*—the history of colonial relations between Europe and its colonies—Senghor's and Césaire's aspirations may have always been more unrealistic than Wilder suggests. On the other hand, the tragic fate of most postcolonial nations in the neocolonial order of the Cold War and beyond raises valid questions about the currency of what Wilder calls "methodological nationalism" (130) as the only challenge to a colonial world order. This returns us to Césaire's and Senghor's passionate and

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conflicted but always stimulating attempts to grapple with these questions. As Wilder shows in this book, they remain essential thinkers as we address these issues in the present and foreseeable future. Thus, *Freedom Time* is an invaluable resource for students and scholars interested in Caribbean studies, postcolonial studies, and the political history of the twentieth century.

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Works Cited

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