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Acknowledgment

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“Caine’s Stake”

Aimé Césaire, Emmett Till, and the Work of Acknowledgment

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History is littered with corpses, though these piles of corpses become difficult to discern and acknowledge for a variety of reasons. Despite his utterly racist disregard for non-Europeans in his philosophy of history and his philosophical project more generally, Hegel was right when he characterized history as a “slaughter-bench” we desperately want to avoid contemplating. One reason for this avoidance of death is that we naturally avert our gaze from death: it frightens us and we seek to avoid it (and avoid thinking about it) for as long as possible. Death is traumatic, and we try to avoid trauma if we can. Furthermore, modern life increasingly makes it possible for us to avoid contemplating death. I am writing this essay in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, and even under these dire circumstances the effort to avoid death remains pervasive. One of the consequences of this pandemic is that we can no longer nonchalantly avoid death, nor can we avoid reckoning with the disparities in life expectancy between white and black Americans.¹ Nevertheless, even in the face of all this evidence to the contrary, people still want to proceed as if death is not a part of life, which is why we remain so shocked when it inevitably affects them. We avoid death through the language we use: euphemism and allusion are employed to cleverly disguise the many ways that death renders us speechless. In addition to these various typical aversions to facing death in general and the particulars of the dead as they affect us personally, mass media and archives render death and its particulars difficult to discern. We avoid death as individuals, but we also avoid it as a society.

Although the news media provides consumers with a daily litany of death, each one seemingly more gruesome than the last, these recurring stories of death, destruction, and mayhem found in these news stories also serve to distance them from death’s immediacy, despite their capacity to

fascinate us.² Death's low hum is easily ignored, and a sameness obtains in these stories of death and mayhem. These stories are meant to fascinate and titillate viewers, but this fascination and titillation are themselves forms of avoidance. In these news stories death is always something that happens to other people in other places, and viewers can safely view these stories of the dead and remain serenely untouched by them. These deaths are rendered abstract and distant through repetition, something that sadly befalls other people but thankfully not us.

Archives house documents, and these documents may indeed relate various details regarding individuals who suffered and died, but such documentation is already to lose the immediacy of death. Words fail us in the face of death, and while archives may indeed document the deaths of individuals, they cannot capture the suffering inherent in these deaths. Statistics and documents dishonor the dead by rendering death manageable. Documents and statistics undeniably show us something through their abstractions and aggregations, but they are forms of mediation that blind us to the presence of the dead: this corpse, here and now, and the stake we have in it.

Another problem with archives is that they are designed to obscure the materiality of suffering and death. They serve to authorize official accounts of events, which is why Ariela Azoulay has claimed that archives are a key component of imperial technologies.³ The written accounts and visual documents that appear in archives overwhelmingly support the official version of things, supporting state-authorized narratives of history that glorifies those in power. Those who wish to use the archives to tell alternative stories are left with only ghosts and traces, and must tell their stories through these absences that haunt the official archives. The accounts and images of those individuals who can be said to have sacrificed themselves heroically for the state are much more likely to find a home in the archive than those enemies who opposed the regime. Hence on Azoulay's account, archives serve to authorize an official account of events that supports an imperial regime. Documents that contradict these various official accounts are typically not found in the archive. A double obfuscation, then: language works through abstraction, documentary language in particular. And imperial history, whose material basis is the archive, uses this abstract documentary language as the basis for its accounts of what happened and why these events matter. The archive's authority obscures another source of authority, that of the dead, and hence sanitizes death and renders it acceptable, official, and thereby makes its authority invisible.⁴

Our reasons for avoiding death are manifold, encompassing among others, motives that are personal, political, and historical. Still, are there ways that we might use words to overcome these common everyday aversions to death and the dead through another modality of language, that of poetry for example? Can the poetic word get us to acknowledge the particulars of death

despite the various reasons we have to disavow it? Might we use language not simply grasp death abstractly (or more accurately, fail to grasp it) but instead to realize what death means in its awful particularity? These questions are prompted by Aimé Césaire's poetry and his prose, and by his elegy for Emmett Till in particular. Through his writings and his political work, one of Césaire's key aims was to get people to acknowledge what they would prefer to avoid. Césaire's work, both his poetry and prose, urges readers to see the things they would prefer not to see and to show us how language stakes us to the world in all its terrifying awfulness and wondrous splendor, despite our desperate attempts to avoid this realization.

Contrary to the claims made by various aesthetic formalists, we cannot simply ask these questions of the work in isolation, apart from concerns of politics, history, and knowledge: art does not exist in a vacuum, and we cannot analyze it apart from the various contexts that give it meaning. Césaire knew this, and he attempted to show throughout his work that the claims of poetry could not ultimately be separated from the various claims of politics, history, and knowledge. Furthermore, he sought to show through his work and his life that art is not a rarefied realm available only to the elect, but instead ought to be understood as a vital part of our lives.

This essay is divided into two main parts. The first part looks at how this problem of alienation and the need to acknowledge this alienation motivates Césaire's writing more generally, focusing on the ten years between 1945 (when his essay "Poetry and Knowledge" is published) and 1955 (when the second edition of his *Discourse on Colonialism* is published). In order to consider how alienation and acknowledgement work in *Discourse on Colonialism*, I must consider related works and their contexts from this period, including his famous letter of resignation from the French Communist Party. This sets the stage for the reading of Césaire's *Ferraments* provided in the second section. Hence it is intended for readers less familiar with Césaire's work, though it provides an important context for understanding the analysis of Césaire's poem. The second part examines how and why Césaire sought acknowledgement for Emmett Till's brutal murder through his poetry, focusing specifically on his poem ". . . On the State of the Union" from his 1960 collection *Ferraments*. I conclude by briefly comparing Césaire's meditation on history and American identity in ". . . On the State of the Union" with Claude McKay's own meditation on American identity in his 1921 poem "America."

Alienation and Acknowledgement: Between *Poetry and Knowledge* and *Discourse on Colonialism*

Discourse on Colonialism is undoubtedly Césaire's most well-known work. An initial version appeared in 1950 and an expanded version that became the basis for the English translation was published in 1955. Within the context of

decolonization, these dates are important. In 1950 the world remained under the long shadow of the death and destruction wrought by the Second World War, and the book is no doubt shaped by these events. During World War Two, Martinique was governed by a military government installed by the Vichy regime that sought to reimpose colonial restrictions on the people of Martinique, restrictions that served to remind the people of Martinique that they had always been viewed as racially and culturally inferior by the French. Robin D. G. Kelly writes that "The effect was startling; any illusions Césaire and his comrades might have harbored about colorblind French brotherhood were shattered when thousands of French sailors arrived on the island. Their racism was blatant and direct."⁵ By 1955, the forces of decolonization and the Cold War had left their mark. The Bandung Conference was held that year in Indonesia, and it marked the first meeting of representatives from newly independent nation-states in Africa and Asia who sought to remain aligned with neither the United States nor the Soviet Union, in other words those newly independent states that did not wish to be pawns in a geopolitical chess match.

The following year witnessed Césaire's break with the French Communist Party over Krushev's revelations about Stalin's genocidal tendencies and the Soviet repression in Hungary. In his letter to the General Secretary of the French Communist Party Maurice Thorez, he details his various reasons for leaving the Party, and they bear on this question of how we ought to acknowledge the dead. "Lately," he writes, "the harvest [of grievances or disagreements with both the French Communist Party and the Communist International] has been particularly bountiful: Krushev's revelations concerning Stalin are enough to have plunged all those who have participated in communist activity, to whatever degree, into an abyss of shock, pain, and shame (or at least I hope so)."⁶ He continues:

The dead, the tortured, the executed—no neither posthumous rehabilitations, nor national funerals, nor official speeches can overcome them. These are not the kind of ghosts one can ward off with a mechanical phrase.

From now on, they will show up as watermarks in the very substance of the system, as the obsession behind our feelings of failure and humiliation.⁷

Césaire will no longer belong to a party that refuses to reckon with the death and destruction wrought by Stalin, for the ghosts that haunt the official history of the party will be unbearable without reconciliation with the dead. These watermarks left by the dead and dispossessed victims of Stalin's purges and famines stain the official accounts moldering in the archives. These ghosts that haunt the official Communist Party archives must be acknowledged if the French Communist Party is to retain its moral voice. "And, of course, it is not the attitude of the French Communist Party as it was defined at its Fourteenth

Congress—an attitude which seems to have been dictated above all by the pitiful concern of its leaders to save face—that will facilitate the dissipation of our malaise and bring about an end to the festering and bleeding of the wound at the core of our consciences.”⁸ Their efforts so far have been merely “mechanical” or routine, devoid of any true effort or meaning. Furthermore, the universal aims of the party disregard the particular needs of “men of color.” Instead of subordinating the interest of people to party doctrine, party doctrine must serve the needs of the people and therefore party doctrine needs to be adaptable instead of doctrinaire and “mechanical.” Furthermore, progressive political parties only exist to further the goal of freedom for oppressed peoples:

If the goal of all progressive politics is to one day restore freedom to colonized peoples, it is at least necessary that the everyday actions of progressive parties not be in contradiction with this desired end by continually destroying the very foundations, organizational as well as psychological, of this future freedom, foundations which can be reduced to a single postulate: the right to initiative.⁹

The colonial question cannot simply be reduced to another set of questions or concerns, be they economic or something else (Césaire cites the French Communist Party’s recent vote on Algeria, which granted the French government authority “to carry out its North Africa policy.”)¹⁰ On the contrary, the colonial question lies at the heart of these concerns.

His letter is a call for cultural independence that would subordinate Communist Party doctrine to the aims of various peoples in their concrete struggles for freedom. Instead of freedom, the Communist governments promise “civilization with a capital C and progress with a capital P,” a promise that presupposes a racist cultural and civilizational discourse that sees colonized peoples as the means by which white European cultures will flourish. “Stalin is indeed the very one who reintroduced the notion of ‘advanced’ and ‘backward’ peoples into socialist thinking.”¹¹ In other words, Stalin and his successors promise little more than imperialism by another name. This letter was published in the month after the First International Congress of Black Writers and Artists, another important moment for understanding Césaire’s struggle for cultural independence for Martinique and other African diasporic societies.

The First International Congress of Black Writers and Artists was held in Paris during September 19–22 of 1956. Inspired by the previous year’s Bandung Conference, the writers and artists gathered at the Sorbonne saw themselves as embodying a cultural complement to the Bandung Conference’s political concerns.¹² They considered the vexed question of cultural identity and what culture might mean given the oppressive legacies of imperialism: What is culture? Is autonomous cultural identity (or any

cultural identity whatsoever) possible under the conditions of colonial oppression? And in what way were African diasporic cultures related to Africa?

I want to briefly consider James Baldwin’s journalistic account of this meeting published in his second essay collection, *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961). Despite its flaws, Baldwin’s account of this meeting in his essay “Princes and Powers” represents an African American attempt to simultaneously provide a journalistic account of the conference (Baldwin’s report had originally been published in the literary magazine *Encounter*) and a critique of some of the key presentations, including those given by Césaire and Richard Wright. Baldwin expresses his skepticism for what he sees as Négritude’s attempt to reduce African diasporic identity to some sort of fundamental African cultural identity. He is critical of Césaire’s claim that colonial oppression denies the oppressed any sort of cultural identity of their own or that this cultural oppression alienates the oppressed from this cultural patrimony, just as he is dubious that black culture can ultimately be reduced to African culture. Although he does not use this language, Baldwin’s worry seems to be that Césaire’s reduction of African diasporic identity to an originary African identity denies these peoples of any sort of cultural agency, alienating colonized black people from their authentic African cultural patrimony. Baldwin writes that Césaire sought to show how descendants of enslaved Africans in the Americas had become alienated from their African cultural heritage while Baldwin wanted to show that these descendants of Africans in the Caribbean and the Americas had formed new hybrid cultural identities that could no longer simply be traced back to an originary African cultural matrix. As Baldwin writes, “Césaire’s speech left out of account one of the great effects of the colonial experience: its creation, precisely, of men like himself.”¹³

Baldwin’s account of the meeting is motivated, at least in part, by one of the key questions that motivates his writing more generally, namely “How should we relate to the past?” Note first that this is a normative question, one that presupposes a descriptive account of how we actually relate to our past. And, second, note that Césaire’s question of how we ought to acknowledge the dead through poetic words is a specific version of the more general question of how we ought to relate to the past. Baldwin’s concern with the normative dimension here (“How should we relate to the past?”) becomes clearer in Baldwin’s description of Richard Wright’s talk at the conference. According to Baldwin, Wright claims that he had thought that colonization had been a force for progress and improvement, one that served the worthwhile goal of helping the colonized leave their superstitious past behind. “In sum, Wright said, he felt that Europe had brought the Enlightenment to Europe and that ‘what was good for Europe was good for all mankind.’”¹⁴ On Baldwin’s account, Césaire seeks to recover an authentic

cultural past, while Wright sees the cultural past as something that ought to be overcome.

It is true that Césaire understands colonization as a form of alienation that affects both colonizer and colonized. Hence, the task of decolonization must also be understood as a task of dis-alienation. In other words, dis-alienation is a necessary but insufficient condition for decolonization. Indeed, this is one of the key claims advanced in *Discourse on Colonialism*. Baldwin would likely agree, though he would put this somewhat differently, understanding whiteness as constituted through a willful ignorance of the past. But what precisely are colonized peoples alienated from? It is in their different responses to this question that we can begin to understand the differences between the approaches of Baldwin and Césaire. Baldwin presents us with a stark choice concerning how to relate to history, for how to own it and make it one's own (assuming these things are possible). On the one hand, Césaire claims that dis-alienation can only come about through a recovery of the authentic past of one's cultural identity, and for African diasporic peoples, this authentic cultural past has its roots in Africa. By contrast, Baldwin's Wright claims that the past is something that must be overcome in the name of progress.¹⁵

In his programmatic essay "Poetry and Knowledge" (1945), Césaire presents a poetics tinged with nostalgia: the poet's task is to recover a visionary moment before the human world was old. This would have been a moment before the decadence brought about by scientific knowledge. After all, scientific knowledge comes at a steep price: in exchange for scientific knowledge, "man has *depersonalized* and *deindividualized* himself."¹⁶ Beneath this impoverished knowledge lies "a satisfying knowledge" that originates "in man's earliest times."¹⁷ Scientific knowledge alienates humans from "the first days of the species" when the world was new, but poetic knowledge may be able to dis-alienate them from the world of science. He appeals to the nineteenth-century visionary poets Baudelaire and Rimbaud as the guides to this nocturnal world of poetic knowledge. Césaire's account culminates in Breton's surrealism and with it the possibility of overcoming the chasm between self and world. Breton promises to dis-alienate the self from nature by plumbing the depths of the unconscious. This poetic work takes us back to the beginnings of human history which are also the beginnings of natural history, in other words a time before humans became alienated from themselves and the world. The poet's living word is the only antidote to the dead world of scientific knowledge. The poet must salvage the human past if we are to avoid alienation through scientific knowledge.

But things are not nearly so simple, and this yearning for a return to a primeval past freed of the taint of scientific knowledge is not the end of the story. While we can certainly find moments in Césaire's work that express this essentialist position, authors such as Michael Rothberg and Gary Wilder have shown that there is more to Césaire's appeals to history than mere nostalgia,

even though at times Négritude authors in the 1930s did begin by essentializing the African cultural past, and this temptation remains present in Césaire's early writing.

Gary Wilder expertly reveals the intellectual, political, and cultural matrix of Négritude in the 1930s in his first book, *The French Imperial Nation-State: Négritude and Colonial Humanism between the Two World Wars* and then continues this story during the postwar period with an acute historical and critical analysis of Aimé Césaire and Leopold Senghor in *Freedom Time*, which focuses on the postwar context. Wilder argues that Césaire complements this nostalgic mood that pervades texts such as "Poetry and Knowledge" with an orientation to the future, and this saves it from lapsing into mere nostalgia. His appeals to the past function as rehearsals for thinking through what might be. These rehearsals in the subjunctive mood of what-might-have-been orient us, his readers who are feeling and thinking with him, to a consideration of what might be. These rehearsals of the past in order to consider the future are necessary if we are going to free ourselves from this imperial present. These are the dimensions of what Wilder calls, following Césaire, "freedom time," and the work of freedom time has both its political and artistic dimensions:

He [Césaire] defined colonies as "dominated" and "alienated" countries whose very existence is a "someplace else," an "over there," or an "outside." Assimilation was never fully applied to Antillean social and economic domains, and departmentalization was "an obstacle . . . to economic progress," a "mystification" and "form of domination" that kept these countries dependent upon metropolitan France and preempted independence movements [. . .] Here was a dialectic of the possible and impossible, the timely and the untimely, wherein each disclosed, inhered within, and helped to realize the other. By pursuing an impossible vision systematically, he revealed what might have been possible in the present; by seizing the present possible, he glimpsed what seemed to be an impossible future.¹⁸

Furthermore, the drama of politics and the drama of history were linked in Césaire through historical figures such as Toussaint Louverture and Victor Schoelcher. "He regarded Caribbean history as an arena of epochal 'unknotting' without dramatic resolution, historical *dénouage* without *dénouement*. The story of exile, enslavement, emancipation, and self-management among New World blacks was ideal material for tragic drama and theater an ideal medium through which Césaire could attempt to work through their tragic predicament. In a 1967 interview with Nicole Zand in *Le Monde*, Césaire explained, 'My theater is the drama of blacks [Nègres] in the modern world.'"¹⁹

This drama could not be understood without also understanding the intricate workings of imperialism, how it works systematically to transform societies as well as how it works to transform individuals. In 1955, Césaire published the revised version of *Discourse on Colonialism*, a text Robin D. G. Kelley has called his “Third World Manifesto.”²⁰ In this brief incendiary text, Césaire motivates people to finally see the horrors that colonialism has inflicted upon the colonized, and how this economic and political system of imperialism has, at the same time as it called forth these horrors, whitewashed them from history by invoking a series of hypocrisies such as “civilization” and “progress” that serve to mask their full extent. In the course of revealing these hypocrisies and thereby making people aware of these horrors he offers a disarmingly simple definition of colonization which states baldly that colonization equals thingification:

Between colonizer and colonized there is room only for forced labor, intimidation, pressure, the police, taxation, theft, rape, compulsory crops, contempt, mistrust, arrogance, self-complacency, swinishness, brainless elites, degraded masses.

No human contact, but relations of domination and submission which turn the colonizing man into a classroom monitor, an army sergeant, a prison guard, a slave driver, and the indigenous man into an instrument of production.

My turn to state an equation: colonization=thingification.²¹

Imperialism works through alienation, a process that Césaire terms “thingification.” In other words, colonization is a process that seeks the ultimate dehumanization of the colonized, but not them alone. Césaire lets these thingifying workers describe their work in their own terms throughout his *Discourse* before rendering his judgment based upon what they have done:

For my part, if I have recalled a few details of these hideous butcheries, it is by no means because I take morbid delight in them, but because I think these heads of men, these collections of ears, these burned houses, these Gothic invasions, this steaming blood, these cities that evaporate at the edge of the sword, are not to be so easily disposed of. They prove that colonization, I repeat, dehumanizes even the most civilized man; that colonial activity, colonial enterprise, colonial conquest, which is based upon contempt for the native and justified by that contempt, inevitably tends to change him who undertakes it; that the colonizer, who in order to ease his conscience gets into the habit of seeing the other man as *an animal*, accustoms himself to treating him like an animal, and tends objectively to transform *himself* into an animal.²²

In this passage, Césaire famously refers to a “*choc en retour*,” the shocking backlash translated here as a “boomerang effect” that affects the imperialist perpetrator in unpredictable ways.²³ This *choc en retour* occurs because the technologies of imperialism pioneered in the colonies inevitably rebound upon the imperialist at home. The colonizer’s effort to dehumanize another renders her dehumanized. Just as we try desperately to avoid seeing and contemplating the dead, those implicated in the imperialist project attempt to avoid acknowledging what they have done. Through his words, Césaire tries to make us see the complex machinery of imperialism through which the colonizer is left implicated and the colonized alienated or dead—in other words, thingified.

Poetic Acknowledgment: Césaire, Emmett Till, and American Indifference

Négritude was a movement born from a variety of sources. One of the most important influences was the literary and artistic movement that came to be known as the Harlem Renaissance. Césaire had long been fascinated with the writers and artists associated with this movement and African American literature more generally. Furthermore, he wrote his *Diplôme d’Etudes Supérieures* on writers in the American South, so this American cultural and political matrix clearly exerted a pull on Césaire just as it did on a number of Caribbean writers and artists.²⁴ So it is not all that surprising that references to the United States can be found throughout Césaire’s poetry. Jamaican-born Harlem Renaissance writer Claude McKay is particularly significant in this context, and his novel *Banjo* (1929) was of particular importance to the intellectuals who were beginning to articulate the meaning of Négritude. Gary Wilder writes that “*Banjo*, based on McKay’s own experience in imperial France, presents a critique of modernity from the standpoint of racial difference by establishing a series of irreconcilable dichotomies between intellect and intuition, civilization and primitivism, capitalism and blackness. McKay’s representation of a lumpen community of black migrants in Marseille is written on the border of ethnic fiction and urban ethnography.”²⁵ Césaire elaborates on the influence of the poetry of Langston Hughes and Claude McKay in his 1967 interview with René Depestre. In response to a question about his early literary influences, Césaire responds:

I remember very well that around that time we read the poems of Langston Hughes and Claude McKay. I knew very well who McKay was because in 1929 or 1930 an anthology of American Negro poetry appeared in Paris. And McKay’s novel, *Banjo*—describing the life of dock workers in Marseille—was published in 1930. This was really one of the first works in which an author spoke of the Negro and gave him a certain literary dignity.²⁶

Here Césaire acknowledges the importance of two poets for the development of his own poetic voice in the 1930s. As we shall see in the conclusion, this is important, for I want to show that McKay's 1921 poem "America" is an important precursor to Césaire's elegy for Emmett Till, ". . . On the State of the Union," published in his 1960 collection *Ferraments*.

The details of Emmett Till's brutal murder in August of 1955 are well known, so there is little need to rehearse the details here. Emmett Till was visiting relatives in Mississippi and allegedly flirted with a white woman, Carolyn Bryant. As was so often the case in the American South, this allegation proved to be a death sentence imposed by vigilantes.²⁷ These sorts of brutal lynchings had become a common form of terror in the American South in the years following the Civil War. What was different about Emmett Till's murder was his mother Mamie Till-Bradley's insistence on an open-casket funeral so that the world could witness the lynching perpetrated upon her son at the hands of two white men who were eventually acquitted of the brutal crime.

The response from the African American community was both swift and decisive. The NAACP condemned Till's murder on the day after his body was recovered from the Tallahatchie River. Paul Robeson sent a telegram to A. Philip Randolph condemning Till's lynching, writing that "our people must unite as never before in militant resistance to terror and oppression. In this hour of crisis I stand as always with my people and offer all that I have my heart my strength my devotion to our common cause." Robeson's outrage was representative of the outrage that galvanized a generation of artists and writers and turned ordinary people into civil rights activists. The "Emmett Till Generation" had been born.²⁸

Till's murder also prompted a global response of outrage that was keenly felt in France. However, one exception to this general outrage at the killing was in *Présence Africaine*. Sylvie Kandé argues that Césaire's poem was the only reference to Till's lynching that appeared in the journal founded by Césaire and Senghor in 1947. "Acting as a Pan-African magnet, *Présence Africaine* seems to have been the privileged site where breaking news, such as the lynching of an African American teenager, was formally and informally addressed. Yet, from September 1955 to January 1957, no essay on the subject appeared in the journal."²⁹ Kandé examines Césaire's probable sources for his poem ". . . On the State of the Union." *Le Monde* and *L'Humanité* (the French Communist Party newspapers) both reported the case extensively and there was hope that the publicity would change the likely outcome of the case against the two men charged with Till's murder. These hopes were dashed by their November acquittal, prompting *Le Monde's* correspondent Henri Pierre to cite "the passivity of the American public opinion toward an event that elsewhere generates so much emotion and disgust" (November 11, 1955).³⁰ Presumably Pierre's ire was directed at the mainstream (white) media in the

United States, since the African American media had contributed to the African American public’s justified outrage.

Kandé points out that French journalists and writers were quick to see the parallels between Till’s lynching and Algeria’s war for liberation:

A September 20 article relates the history and circumstances of the murder, and the quick degradation of the initial consensus on the tragedy across racial lines. The intervention of the NAACP had reminded Mississippi white supremacists to urgently and locally fight against the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision that was leading to national school desegregation. *Le Monde’s* anonymous correspondent, possibly Henri Pierre, closes the article with advice to American critics of European colonialism, most notably French colonialism in Algeria, whose foundations had begun to shake under the first onslaught of an upcoming eight-year liberation war (1954–1962). “In any case, the situation of Black people [in America] should call for more reserve and modesty from those who denounce the ‘colonialism’ of others. America, too, has her *medinas* [segregated native quarters in North Africa] and her ghettos.”³¹

Perhaps predictably, mainstream French media seized on Emmett Till’s lynching in an attempt to show that the United States had its own share of racial problems. However, this parallel cuts both ways: in addition to blunting criticism of the French war in Algeria (or at least spreading the blame), Kandé points out that *Le Monde* also published an article that identifies J. W. Milam, one of Till’s murderers, with “the ‘gendarme auxiliaire of Ain-Abid,’ a French policeman who, paid by a photojournalist eager to document French repression, cold-bloodedly killed one of his Algerian prisoners for a sensational photo (11 January 1956, 30 December 1955).”³² Generally, the Communist journal *L’Humanite* was quicker to condemn Till’s murder as part of a “latent civil war” and identify his killers with French forces in Algeria rather than use Till’s murder as a means to justify French imperialism.³³

According to Kandé, it is likely that Césaire used these various media reports as inspiration for his elegy to Emmett Till.³⁴ Césaire’s poem “Message sur l’Etat de l’Union” was first published in the February/March 1956 issue of *Présence Africaine* before appearing in his 1960 collection *Ferraments*. *Ferraments* is an archaic word in both French and English that refers to an iron implement, either a tool or shackles. According to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, “ferremant” referred to “an article made of iron, such as an iron instrument or tool, an iron shackle or fetter, an iron fitting for a window, etc.; a piece of ironwork” and it was usually used in the plural.³⁵ A. James Arnold identifies three voices at work in this collection: the first “is inspired by

various phases of the fight for black independence, whether in Africa, the Caribbean, or the United States." A second voice "consists of a fantastic evocation of black bondage throughout history." A final poetic voice weaves itself throughout these poems, that of the elegiac voice.³⁶

Césaire's elegy for Emmett Till begins with a condemnation of America by referencing various resources, including iron. He begins "... On the State of the Union" by imagining a president's State of the Union Address to Congress about a "situation tragic/left underground only 75 years of iron/50 years of cobalt/but 55 years worth of sulfur and 20 of bauxite." This imagined litany of resource projections that comprises the poem's first stanza concludes ruefully by noting that the nation lacks any resources "in the heart": "in the heart what?"

Nothing, zero,
 Mine without ore,
 cavern in which nothing prowls
 of blood not a drop left.³⁷

This imagined address indicates that the United States has an abundance of various raw materials but it is otherwise bloodless and heartless. Césaire juxtaposes various inanimate resources that provide the basis for industrial output with a heartlessness and bloodlessness of America. On this official account, America just is this list of resources, wholly without heart and dispassionate to the core. Recalling the language of "Poetry and Knowledge," we can say that United States' drive for scientific and industrial dominance has led to the sacrifice of its poetic heart. The opening stanza recalls the same sort of depersonalized and deindividualized language that Césaire had critiqued in this essay.

At bottom these are all problems of value, and we can evaluate things in various ways. For example, we commonly estimate value using an economic, moral, aesthetic, or a religious calculus. The speech referenced in the first stanza provides an economic calculus that quantifies value solely in monetary terms. Hence, we can read this first stanza in terms of the alienation and reification ("thingification") that Césaire had diagnosed in *Discourse on Colonialism* and elsewhere. Césaire's equation of colonization with reification revises the evaluative claim made a century earlier by Marx and Engels when they claim that the modern bourgeois revolution was, among other things, essentially a revolution in value. According to the bourgeois evaluative calculus, all judgments of value could be reduced to economic judgments. Everything has its price.

We can contrast the bloodlessness evoked in this first stanza with Césaire's earlier diagnosis of the ills afflicting bourgeois European

civilization. There, the diagnosis was that European civilization was too bloodthirsty, and this bloodthirstiness was the cause of the *choc en retour*:

And then one fine day the bourgeoisie is awakened by a terrific boomerang effect: the gestapos are busy, the prisons fill up, the torturers standing around the racks invent, refine, discuss.

People are surprised, they become indignant. They say: “How strange! But nevermind—it’s Nazism, it will pass!” And they wait, and they hope; and they hide the truth from themselves, that it is barbarism, the supreme barbarism, the crowning barbarism that sums up all the daily barbarisms; that it is Nazism, yes, but that before they were its victims they were its accomplices; that they tolerated that Nazism before it was inflicted on them, that they absolved it, shut their eyes to it, legitimized it, because, until then, it had only been applied to non-European peoples; that they have cultivated that Nazism, that they are responsible for it, and that before engulfing the whole edifice of Western, Christian civilization in its reddened waters, it oozes, seeps, and trickles from every crack.³⁸

In this passage, Césaire evokes the bloodstained waters filled found throughout the imperial world. The United States, certainly just as bloodthirsty and bloodstained as imperial Europe, is nevertheless bloodless. Note too that in this extended passage Césaire asserts that the bourgeoisie “is awakened” to the *choc en retour*, belatedly forced to acknowledge what their governments have done in their name and how they are themselves hopelessly implicated in the imperial machinery.

We can resolve the apparent contradiction between the American bloodlessness referred to in Césaire’s poem and imperial European bloodiness in his *Discourse on Colonialism* once we realize how Césaire juxtaposes the apparently dispassionate state of America’s official face found in various facts and statistics that government officials report to one another (for that is what a State of the Union Address does) with the evocation of Emmett Till’s youthful disfigured corpse presented in the remainder of the poem. The “situation tragic” is not what is in the ground; it is how people will be exploited and lives ruined to get these resources out of the ground. In other words, the cold bloodlessness referred to in the official remarks of the poem’s first stanza stands as one of the reasons for Till’s murder, for we must remember that this cold official language is itself a form of forgetting. The United States has a long history of conceiving of bodies, and in particular black bodies, as a resource to be exploited, forgetting the single beating heart that hides behind official statistics. Césaire wants us to remember Emmett Till, but in order to do that we need to first recall that statistics and archives are

ways of disregarding the singularities of life and existence by aggregating them into data or official narratives. In other words, the official account of the “State of the Union” presented in the first stanza can only conceive of tragedy in terms of a depletion of resources, but this is precisely to miss the tragic dimension of Till’s murder.³⁹

The first lines of the second stanza refer to Emmett Till’s vitality in terms of eyes that are both ever-present and revelatory of the past:

EMMETT TILL

Your eyes were a sea conch in which the heady battle
of your fifteen-year-old blood sparkled.

Even young they never had any age,
or rather more than all the skyscrapers

five centuries of torturers

of witch burners weighed upon them

five centuries of cheap gin of big cigars

of fat bellies filled with slices of rancid bibles

a five century mouth bitter with dowager sins,

they were five centuries old EMMETT TILL,

five centuries is the ageless age of Cain’s stake.⁴⁰

This second stanza is rich with poetic allusion evoking, among other things, religious and economic histories. In Till’s eyes, which are likened to conch shells, one can detect the spirals of history—Till’s once-living eyes reveal the traces of those histories that are not ever really past, those histories that remain present despite our disavowals. Till’s conch-shell eyes simultaneously reveal the present (“they never really age”) and the past (“or rather more than all the skyscrapers/five centuries of torturers”). If we take the time to look and acknowledge them, these young eyes reveal the histories we would rather not see: five centuries of death and destruction in the form of race-based chattel slavery, five centuries of imperial oppression and dispossession.

These histories stake a claim upon us that demand acknowledgement and reparation (“Cain’s stake”), and this stake therefore demands a response from us. Till’s eyes reveal a history of violence extending all the way back to the first murder, Cain’s murder of Abel because he thought God favored his brother’s sacrifice more than his. Perhaps it is even murder that makes us human. At the very least, it is central to human history. Gil Anidjar meditates on the centrality of murder in human history in his account of how blood

figures in Christianity and religion more generally and how the rich semantic field of blood in religion spills over into other domains. As Gil Anidjar notes:

The Bible clearly "knows" blood and suffuses it with multifarious meanings, and though many of these meanings invest blood with a powerful charge (ritual, symbolic, and other), no one suggests that blood could ever be what the community is made of, a measure of difference or distinction, let alone running pure in anyone's veins.⁴¹

Nevertheless, Anidjar claims that the Old Testament marks community through the phrase "flesh and bone" rather than the typically modern phrase "flesh and blood." The former signifies a relationship in the present rather than a relationship that persists through time. "For the biblical text does make a link, if a negative one, between flesh and blood. [. . .] It is a negative link because the Bible establishes in fact a crucial, normative distinction between flesh and blood whereby the latter is the interruption or disruption of the former. Not only is blood not a figure of continuity [. . .], blood rather figures as a site of interruption, invoking mainly images of violence, death, and contamination."⁴² This is how the reference to "Cain's stake" functions in the poem: to mark the difference between Emmett Till and his murderers, who may not be guilty in the eyes of the state, but who are guilty nevertheless. The economic and industrial history of commerce and skyscrapers also reveals a religious history, but these histories are all histories of violence and histories of blood. In the Bible, Cain and Abel were born of Adam and Eve, the first human children born with the potential for sin. Economic and religious histories are linked through the history of violence, and they cannot be understood independently of one another. Economies of blood, sacrifice, murder, and violence all swirl and congeal in the poem's evocation of these conch-eyes.

Stakes are used to divide and claim: they mark a territory and thereby erect a division or border between one plot of land and another. They transform land into territory and therefore they signify sovereign control.⁴³ Sovereign control legitimates and sanctions imperial violence. Thus "Cain's stake" signifies the sovereign government that simultaneously turns a blind eye to these lynchings and permits them to occur. Behind these singular murders lie the accumulated weight of history as a history of unending violence, but a history whose weight can be felt through the poetic word. The poem calls our attention to this murder and what it signifies now ("they never had any age") and how these ageless eyes can reveal the sordid histories of violence beneath the bloodless statistics cited in the poem's opening stanza.

Questions of valuation are posed again in the third stanza, where the perspective changes to that of Till's white persecutors who again pose the question of value in the same economic terms of the first stanza:

EMMETT TILL I say:

in the heart zero
of blood not a drop.⁴⁴

Using quotations from news sources, Césaire next cites the evaluative question at the heart of anti-black racism and white supremacy: “—‘Hey Chicago Boy / is it still true that you’re worth / as much as a white man?’” This is some version of the mocking question Till’s murderers likely posed to him as they were brutalizing him. This evaluative question is at the heart of white supremacy because in the estimation of his killers, Till had made the fatal mistake of assuming that his life had as much value as a white man’s and that he could conduct himself in the same way that a white man would by allegedly flirting with a white woman.

The poem concludes by evoking the landscape in Till’s final moments before returning to the litany of resources (“20 years of zinc / 15 years of copper / 15 years of oil”) from the opening stanza and concluding with these words:

and the 180th year of these states
but in the heart unfeeling clockwork
what, nothing, zero,
of blood not a drop
in the white heart’s tough antiseptic meat?

Césaire concludes this poem by reiterating his variation on the Marxist claim that bourgeois value judgments can only be framed in economic terms found at the beginning of the poem. Césaire’s variation is to construe this judgment in terms of white supremacy rather than simply in Marx’s terms of economic class. The 180th year after 1776 would be 1956. The State of the Union in the year after Till’s murder and in the year his murderers were acquitted is dire: “the white heart’s tough antiseptic meat” is both clean and efficient at enforcing its violent racist regime. The poem presents this smooth, cold brutality as the heartless heart of this nation. In murdering young Emmett Till and stopping his heart, his murderers underscore the heartlessness of this nation. Any hope of changing this must begin with an acknowledgment that the heartlessness of white supremacy was present in this nation before its formal beginnings, in the five hundred years of brutal slavery and exploitation conditions life in the United States, hidden in plain sight.

For the Future: The American Revisions of Claude McKay and Aimé Césaire

“. . . On the State of the Union” leaves the reader trapped in a land of disavowed racism seemingly without reprieve, but the pessimistic vision

expressed in this poem is not the only perspective present in *Ferraments*. One also finds poems of that foretell a future freed from this past ("The Time of Freedom") and poems that return to the possibilities that were unrealized in the past, those might-have-beens that could help shape a future freed from the shackles of this racist colonial present.⁴⁵

Claude McKay also wrote about the bitter taste of American life, particularly in his 1921 poem "America," originally published in *The Liberator*:

Although she feeds me bread of bitterness,
 And sinks into my throat her tiger's tooth,
 Stealing my breath of life, I will confess
 I love this cultured hell that tests my youth.
 Her vigor flows like tides into my blood,
 Giving me strength erect against her hate.
 Her bigness sweeps my being like a flood.
 Yet, as a rebel fronts a king in state,
 I stand within her walls with not a shred
 Of terror, malice, not a word of jeer.
 Darkly I gaze into the days ahead,
 And see her might and granite wonders there,
 Beneath the touch of Time's unerring hand,
 Like priceless treasures sinking in the sand.⁴⁶

McKay's American meditation evinces ambivalence. We find expressed here both a feeling of bitterness and the strength and resilience born of this bitterness. We find resentment and awe at America's "bigness." Additionally, the nation's might proves illusory, no match for "Time's unerring hand." McKay's is a poem about the weight of history, though its optimism derives from the fact that no matter how mighty and wicked the state, it is no match for the march of time. This is similar to the optimism we find in Césaire, optimism that anticipates the end of imperialism and its long shadows in the prospect of a new beginning.

¹Perhaps various efforts to politicize the pandemic are efforts to render invisible the death and suffering COVID-19 has caused, just as the claim that “All Lives Matter” is an attempt to render the specifics of Black suffering invisible. Although “modernity” is a notoriously ambiguous term, one of its key features is that during modernity, killing becomes more efficient at the same time as we develop more ingenious ways to disavow this fact. Sigmund Freud began to explore these mechanisms of avoidance and disavowal (*Verleugnung*) in his later work. See, in particular, his essay “The Loss of Reality in Neurosis and Psychosis” (1924). The literature after Freud on this individual and cultural avoidance of death is vast. See, in particular, Phillipe Ariès, *Western Attitudes Toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present*, trans. Patricia Ranum (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975). Philosophically, Martin Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, trans. John McQuarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962) provides an important phenomenological account of death that will later be appropriated and challenged by later thinkers in this tradition; as well as Walter Benjamin’s “The Storyteller,” *Selected Writings*, vol. 3, 1935-1938, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Edmund Jephcott et al. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 143-166.

² Susan Sontag argues this in one of her last published books, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2004).

³ Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (London: Verso, 2019). Azoulay develops this conception of the archive in her third chapter “Archives: The Commons, Not the Past,” which comprises a critique of the imperial institution of the archive and an alternative vision for an archive that would be based upon common experiences rather than the official accounts typically provided in archival histories.

⁴ James Martel examines the political significance of corpses in his recent book *Unburied Bodies* (Amherst, MA: Amherst College Press, 2018). Drawing on a wide variety of historical and contemporary examples, Martel explores various ways that corpses can challenge state authority. Certainly this is an important dimension of the significance of Emmett Till’s body, as we shall see.

⁵ Robin D. G. Kelley, “A Poetics of Anticolonialism,” in Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000 [1955]), 13.

⁶ Aimé Césaire, “Letter to Maurice Thorez,” *Social Text*, 103: 2 (Summer 2010), 145.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Césaire, “Letter to Maurice Thorez,” 149. John E. Drabinski points out the importance role that the trope of beginnings plays in Césaire’s *Cahier D’un Retour au Pays Natal*; the emphasis on the right to initiative can be seen as the political counterpart to this poetic meditation on origins. }

¹⁰ Césaire, “Letter to Maurice Thorez,” 147.

¹¹ Césaire, “Letter to Maurice Thorez,” 149.

¹² For an account of the gathering that focuses on James Baldwin’s account of it, see Christopher Winks, “Into the Heart of the Wilderness: Understanding James Baldwin’s Quarrel with Négritude,” *African American Review* 46: 4 (2013), 605-614.

¹³ James Baldwin, “Princes and Powers,” in *Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Library of America, 1998), 158.

¹⁴ Baldwin, “Princes and Powers,” 164.

¹⁵ I say “Baldwin’s Wright” here to signal the fact that Baldwin’s interpretation of Wright’s work is fraught, and that there is certainly more to Wright’s work than Baldwin sees. Similarly, Baldwin’s Césaire is more complex than the snapshot Baldwin provides in “Princes and Powers.” I try to fill in some of the gaps in the remainder of this section.

¹⁶ Aime Césaire, “Poetry and Knowledge,” *Refusal of the Shadow*, 134.

¹⁷ Césaire, “Poetry and Knowledge,” 135.

¹⁸ Gary Wilder, *Freedom Time: Négritude, Decolonization, and the Future of the World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 198.

¹⁹ Ibid., 200.

²⁰ Robin D. G. Kelley, “Introduction,” *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review Press, 200), 8.

²¹ Ibid., 42.

²² Ibid., 41.

²³ Michael Rothberg points out that the usual translation of *une choc en retour* as “boomerang effect” misses the dimension of shock present in the original French, and he links this shock to Benjamin’s use of the term in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History”: “The *choc en retour* (*einen Chock* in German; *shock* in English) is the force that the ‘arrest’ of thought produces [. . .] This shock is critical to materialist methodology, according to Benjamin, because it allows the critic to grasp time as dense with overlapping possibilities and dangers—an understanding of the present as, in the vocabulary developed here, the site of multidirectional memory.” See *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 80.

²⁴ Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith, “Introduction,” Aimé Césaire, *The Collected Poetry*, trans. Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 3. Gary Wilder fleshes out the lines of influence between Césaire and African American writers in *The French Imperial Nation-State: Négritude and Colonial Humanism between the Two World Wars* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), esp. chapter 6. Wilder notes that Alain Locke and Claude McKay were key influences on the Négritude movement: Locke provides a modern account of black identity as agency as both “national and transnational” while McKay sees black identity as an “antimodern” protest against modernity: “Whereas Locke linked New Negro race pride to black participation in urban, political, and aesthetic modernity, Claude McKay presented an antimodern vision of racial reclamation. If Locke’s black intellectuals sought both to reject assimilation and to claim membership in the nation, McKay’s characters were unable and unwilling to find a place for themselves in nations that insisted on their racial inferiority,” 176.

²⁵ Gary Wilder, *The French Imperial Nation-State*, 176.

²⁶ “Interview with René Depestre,” in *Discourse on Colonialism*, 87.

²⁷ The Library of Congress Civil Rights History Project provides a good overview of the Emmett Till murder and its aftermath: <https://www.loc.gov/collections/civil-rights-history-project/articles-and-essays/murder-of-emmett-till/>. Accessed September 10, 2020. Again, I am struck by the parallels with contemporary events: Some journalists are expressing outrage and confusion at the fact that armed vigilantes are roaming the streets allegedly to protect property from protestors outraged at the murders of African Americans such as George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, but this dynamic of vigilante “justice” being sanctioned by police authorities has a long history that extends back in the United States at least to slavery and the extra-judicial terrorism and murder that reinforced the social and political order in the Jim Crow South.

²⁸ Links to the NAACP condemnation and Paul Robeson’s telegram as well as brief discussion of the “Emmett Till Generation” can be found at the Library of Congress’s website referenced in the previous footnote.

²⁹ Sylvie Kandé, “Nicolás Guillén and Aimé Césaire on Till’s Lynching,” in *Emmett Till in Literary Memory and Imagination*, ed. Harriett Pollack and Christopher Metress (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008), 146.

³⁰ Cited by Kandé, “Nicolás Guillén and Aimé Césaire on Till’s Lynching,” 147.

³¹ Kandé, “Nicolás Guillén and Aimé Césaire on Till’s Lynching,” 147.

³² Kandé, “Nicolás Guillén and Aimé Césaire on Till’s Lynching,” 1148.

³³ Kandé, “Nicolás Guillén and Aimé Césaire on Till’s Lynching,” 1148-149.

³⁴ Kandé writes, “As a Francophone leftist intellectual, Césaire also likely turned to *Le Monde*, a top-quality newspaper with moderately leftist views, and *L’Humanité*, the organ of the Communist party, for the information he gathered prior to writing this poem, in addition to probable discussions in the *Présence Africaine* circles. Both newspapers covered the event approximately from September 1, 1955 (one day after Emmett Till’s mutilated and decomposed body was pulled from Mississippi’s Tallahatchie River) to January 21, 1956,” one week after the official publication by W. B. Huie of “The Shocking Story of the Approved Killing in Mississippi” in *Look* magazine. “Nicolás Guillen and Aimé Césaire on Till’s Lynching,” *Emmett Till in Literary Memory and Imagination*, op. cit., 146-147.

³⁵ *The Oxford English Dictionary*, “ferrament” <https://www-oed-com.ezproxy.elmira.edu/view/Entry/69416?redirectedFrom=ferrament#eid>.

Accessed September 10, 2020.

³⁶ Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith, “Introduction,” in Aimé Césaire, *The Collected Poetry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 23.

³⁷ Aimé Césaire, *The Collected Poetry*, op. cit., 343.

³⁸ Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, 36.

³⁹ While I cannot say precisely what Césaire has in mind here, there are various European thinkers who have critiqued the effort to reduce singularities to a particular examples of a more general type or category that comes to be known as instrumental reason. The influence of Nietzsche on Césaire has been well documented, but we can also see echoes of Adorno’s critique of forms of discursive knowledge that render the singular into exemplary particulars. See, e.g., Friedrich Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense” in *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, ed. Raymond Guess and Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 139-153; and Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007). One could also draw parallels between Césaire’s report and Heidegger’s conception of technology as an arrangement of beings as *Bestand* (i.e., resources or standing-reserve). See Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology, in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, ed. and trans. William Lovitt (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1977). Bernard E. Harcourt provides a good overview of Nietzsche’s influence on Césaire in his 2016 blog post, “Aimé Césaire: Poetic Knowledge, Vitality, Négritude, and Revolution,” <http://blogs.law.columbia.edu/nietzsche1313/aime-Césaire-poetic-knowledge-vitality-négritude-and-revolution/>. Accessed September 11, 2020. Finally, Gary Wilder discusses “Poetry and Knowledge” in terms of the critique of instrumental reason in *Freedom Time*: “This is a vitalist vision of recovery, reconciliation, and

salvation through poetry. But if Césaire evoked this primordial unity to reject modern forms of instrumental rationality, this was not a romantic rejection of modernity. Rather, ‘poetic knowledge’ represented a modern modality of knowing through which modern antinomies are not denied but transcended: ‘There we see resolved—and by the poetic state—two of the most anguishing antinomies that exist: the antinomy of one and the other, the antinomy of Self and World.’ He thus identified nineteenth-century modernism as a revolutionary ‘leap into the poetic void’ through which figures like Baudelaire, Apollinaire, Breton, Lautréamont, and Freud recovered the ancient insights of Lucretius [. . .] and Seneca.” *Freedom Time*, op. cit., 30-31.

⁴⁰ Aimé Césaire, *The Collected Poetry*, op. cit., 343.

⁴¹ Gil Anidjar, *Blood: A Critique of Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 49.

⁴² Anidjar, *Blood: A Critique of Christianity*, 47.

⁴³ Wendy Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* (New York: Zone Books, 2011). Brown wants to show how walls and other territorial markers both demarcate a sovereign claim and signify, in this globalized world of waning nation-state power, the weakness of late modern state sovereignty. Following Carl Schmitt, Brown wants to show how political sovereignty is modelled upon divine sovereignty, which also demonstrates the overlap between these various histories and their conspiracies of violence. “If political sovereignty is structured theologically as the supreme and unaccountable political power and draws on God for legitimacy, and if its theological dimensions enable the conceit of the autonomy and sovereignty of the political vis-à-vis the economic, what happens as nation-state sovereignty wanes?” (62).

⁴⁴ Aimé Césaire, “. . .On the State of the Union,” *Collected Poems*, op. cit., 343.

⁴⁵ This is one of the key themes of Gary Wilder’s *Freedom Time*, and it is also the basis for John Drabinski’s distinction between the prophetic and apocalyptic word in his reading of “Cahier d’Un Retour au Pays Natal.”

⁴⁶ Claude McKay, “America,” *The Poetry Foundation*.
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44691/america-56d223e1ac025>.

Accessed September 13, 2020.