

The Wretched of the Earth
A Dying Colonialism
Toward the African Revolution

BLACK SKIN, WHITE MASKS

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the contrary, we are witness to the desperate efforts of a black man striving desperately to discover the meaning of black identity. White civilization and European culture have imposed an existential deviation on the black man. We shall demonstrate furthermore that what is called the black soul is a construction by white folk.

The educated black man, slave of the myth of the spontaneous and cosmic Negro, feels at some point in time that his race no longer understands him.

Or that he no longer understands his race.

He is only too pleased about this, and by developing further this difference, this incomprehension and discord, he discovers the meaning of his true humanity. Less commonly he wants to feel a part of his people. And with feverish lips and frenzied heart he plunges into the great black hole. We shall see that this wonderfully generous attitude rejects the present and future in the name of a mystical past.

As those of an Antillean, our observations and conclusions are valid only for the French Antilles—at least regarding the black man *on his home territory*. A study needs to be made to explain the differences between Antilleans and Africans. One day perhaps we shall conduct such a study. Perhaps it will no longer be necessary, in which case we can but have reason for applause.

Chapter One

THE BLACK MAN AND LANGUAGE

We attach a fundamental importance to the phenomenon of language and consequently consider the study of language essential for providing us with one element in understanding the black man's dimension of being-for-others, it being understood that to speak is to exist absolutely for the other.

The black man possesses two dimensions: one with his fellow Blacks, the other with the Whites. A black man behaves differently with a white man than he does with another black man. There is no doubt whatsoever that this fissiparousness is a direct consequence of the colonial undertaking. Nobody dreams of challenging the fact that its principal inspiration is nurtured by the core of theories which represent the black man as the missing link in the slow evolution from ape to man. These are objective facts that state reality.

But once we have taken note of the situation, once we have understood it, we consider the job done. How can we possibly not hear that voice again tumbling down the steps of History: "It's no longer a question of knowing the world, but of transforming it."

This question is terribly present in our lives.

To speak means being able to use a certain syntax and possessing the morphology of such and such a language,

but it means above all assuming a culture and bearing the weight of a civilization.

Since the situation is not one-sided, the study should reflect this. We would very much like to be given credit for certain points that, however unacceptable they may appear early on, will prove to be factually accurate.

The problem we shall tackle in this chapter is as follows: the more the black Antillean assimilates the French language, the whiter he gets—i.e., the closer he comes to becoming a true human being. We are fully aware that this is one of man's attitudes faced with Being. A man who possesses a language possesses as an indirect consequence the world expressed and implied by this language. You can see what we are driving at: there is an extraordinary power in the possession of a language. Paul Valéry knew this, and described language as "The god gone astray in the flesh."¹

In a work in progress² we propose to study this phenomenon. For the time being we would like to demonstrate why the black Antillean, whoever he is, always has to justify his stance in relation to language. Going one step farther, we shall enlarge the scope of our description to include every colonized subject.

All colonized people—in other words, people in whom an inferiority complex has taken root, whose local cultural originality has been committed to the grave—position themselves in relation to the civilizing language: i.e., the metropolitan culture. The more the colonized has assimilated the cultural values of the metropolis, the more he will have escaped the bush. The more he rejects his black-

1. *Charmes*, "La Pythie."

2. "Language and Aggressiveness."

ness and the bush, the whiter he will become. In the colonial army, and particularly in the regiments of Senegalese soldiers, the "native" officers are mainly interpreters. They serve to convey to their fellow soldiers the master's orders, and they themselves enjoy a certain status.

There is the town, there is the country. There is the capital, there are the provinces. Apparently, the problem is the same. Take an inhabitant of Lyon in Paris. He will boast of how calm his city is, how bewitchingly beautiful are the banks of the Rhône, how magnificent are the plane trees, and so many other things that people with nothing to do like to go on about. If you meet him on his return from Paris, and especially if you've never been to the capital, he'll never stop singing its praises: Paris, City of Light; the Seine; the riverside dance cafés; see Paris and die.

The same process repeats itself in the case of the Martinican. First, there is his island: Basse Pointe, Marigot, Gros Morne, in opposition to the imposing city of Fort-de-France. Then—and this is the essential point—there is what lies beyond his island. The black man who has been to the *métropole* is a demigod. On this subject I shall indicate a fact that must have struck my fellow islanders. After a fairly long stay in the *métropole*, many Antilleans return home to be deified. The native islander who has never left his hole, the country bumpkin, adopts a most eloquent form of ambivalence toward them. The black man who has lived in France for a certain time returns home radically transformed. Genetically speaking, his phenotype undergoes an absolute, definitive mutation.³ Even before he

3. By this we mean that the black man who returns home gives the impression of having completed a cycle, of having added something that was missing. He returns home literally full of himself.

leaves one senses from his almost aerial way of walking that new forces have been set in motion. When he meets a friend or colleague, gone is the expansive bear hug; instead our "future" candidate bows discreetly. The usually raucous voice gives way to a hushed murmur. For he knows that over there in France he will be stuck with a stereotype in Le Havre or Marseille: "I'm fwom Matinique; this is my vewy furst visit to Fwance"; he knows that what the poets call "divine cooing" (meaning Creole) is but a term midway between Creole and French. In the French Antilles the bourgeoisie does not use Creole, except when speaking to servants. At school the young Martinican is taught to treat the dialect with contempt. Avoid Creolisms. Some families forbid speaking Creole at home, and mothers call their children little ragamuffins for using it.

My mother wanted a memorandum son
If you don't learn your history lesson
You'll not go to Sunday mass
In your Sunday best
This child will be the shame of us
This child will be our God damn it
Shut up I told you you have to speak French
The French from France
The Frenchman's French
French French.⁴

Yes I must watch my diction because that's how they'll judge me. He can't even speak French properly, they'll say with the utmost contempt.

Among a group of young Antilleans, he who can express himself, who masters the language, is the one to look out for: be wary of him; he's almost white. In France they say

4. Léon-G. Damas, "Hoquet," *Pigments*.

"to speak like a book." In Martinique they say "to speak like a white man."

The black man entering France reacts against the myth of the Martinican who swallows his r's. He'll go to work on it and enter into open conflict with it. He will make every effort not only to roll his r's, but also to make them stand out. On the lookout for the slightest reaction of others, listening to himself speak and not trusting his own tongue, an unfortunately lazy organ, he will lock himself in his room and read for hours—desperately working on his *diction*.

Recently, a friend told us this story. On arrival in Le Havre a Martinican goes into a café and calls out with great assurance: "Waiterrrr? Bwing me a dwink of beerrrr!" This is a case of genuine intoxication. Anxious not to correspond to the black man who swallows his r's, he makes use of a great many of them but doesn't know how to divide them out.

There is a psychological phenomenon that consists in believing the world will open up as borders are broken down. The black Antillean, prisoner on his island, lost in an atmosphere without the slightest prospect, feels the call of Europe like a breath of fresh air. For we must admit that Césaire was overly generous in his *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land*. The city of Fort-de-France is truly lackluster and shipwrecked. Over there on the slopes of the sun is "the city—flat, sprawled, tripped up by its common sense, inert, winded under the geometric weight of its eternally renewed cross, at odds with its fate, mute, baffled, unable to circulate the pith of this ground, embarrassed, lopped, reduced, cut off from fauna and flora."⁵

Césaire's description has nothing poetical about it. It is easy to understand therefore why the black man, on the

5. *Return to My Native Land*, translated by Émile Snyder, Présence Africaine, 1968, p. 13.

announcement of his entry into France (as is said of someone entering "high society"), is overjoyed and decides to change. Moreover, there is nothing thematic about this change that is structural and independent of any introspection. In the United States, Pearce and Williamson have conducted an experiment called the Peckham experiment. The authors have proved that there is a biochemical modification in a married couple, and apparently they have detected in the husband certain hormones of his pregnant wife. It would be interesting (and there will always be somebody willing) to make a study of the black man's humoral mutation on entering France. Or simply study his psyche before he leaves and then one month after settling in France.

There is a dramatic conflict in what is commonly called the human sciences. Should we postulate a typical human reality and describe its psychic modalities, taking into account only the imperfections, or should we not rather make a constant, solid endeavor to understand man in an ever-changing light?

When we read that a man loses his affective faculties starting at the age of twenty-nine and he has to wait until he is forty-nine to regain them, we feel the ground give way beneath our feet. Our only hope of getting out of the situation is to pose the problem correctly, for all these findings and all this research have a single aim: to get man to admit he is nothing, absolutely nothing—and get him to eradicate this narcissism whereby he thinks he is different from the other "animals."

This is nothing more nor less than the *capitulation of man*.

All in all, I grasp my narcissism with both hands and I reject the vileness of those who want to turn man into a machine. If the debate cannot be opened up on a philosophical level—i.e., the fundamental demands of human reality—I agree to place it on a psychoanalytical level: in

other words, the "misfires," just as we talk about an engine misfiring.

The black man entering France changes because for him the *métropole* is the holy of holies; he changes not only because that's where his knowledge of Montesquieu, Rousseau, and Voltaire comes from, but also because that's where his doctors, his departmental superiors, and innumerable little potentates come from—from the staff sergeant "fifteen years on the job" to the gendarme from Panissières. There is a kind of spell cast from afar, and the black man who leaves in one week for the *métropole* creates an aura of magic around him where the words Paris, Marseille, the Sorbonne, and Pigalle represent the high points. On departure, the amputation of his being vanishes as the ocean liner comes into view. He can read the authority and mutation he has acquired in the eyes of those accompanying him to the ship: "*Adieu madras, adieu foulard.*"

Now that we have accompanied him to the port, let him sail away, and we'll come back to him later on. Let us now go and meet one of those who have returned home. The new returnee, as soon as he sets foot on the island, asserts himself; he answers only in French and often no longer understands Creole. A folktale provides us with an illustration of this. After having spent several months in France a young farmer returns home. On seeing a plow, he asks his father, an old don't-pull-that-kind-of-thing-on-me peasant: "What's that thing called?" By way of an answer his father drops the plow on his foot, and his amnesia vanishes. Awesome therapy.

So here is our new returnee. He can no longer understand Creole; he talks of the Opera House, which he has probably seen only from a distance; but most of all he assumes a critical attitude toward his fellow islanders. He reacts differently at the slightest pretext. He knows

everything. He proves himself through his language. On the Savanna in Fort-de-France, a meeting place for young people, the new returnee is given the floor for a purpose.

As soon as school's out, they all gather on the Savanna. Imagine a square 600 feet long and 120 feet wide, lined by worm-eaten tamarind trees down each side; at the top the huge war memorial, acknowledging the mother country's gratitude to her children; and at the bottom the Central Hotel—a square twisted with uneven paving stones and gravel that crunches underfoot, and walking up and down in it 300 or 400 young people, greeting one another, making contact, no, never making contact, then walking on.

"Hi, how's it going?"

"Hi, how's it going?"

"Hi, how's it going?"

And that's been going on for fifty years. Yes, this town is a lamentable shipwreck. This life too.

They meet and talk. And the new returnee is quickly given the floor because they *are waiting for him*. First of all regarding form: the slightest mistake is seized upon, scrutinized, and in less than forty-eight hours it will be all over Fort-de-France. There is no forgiving the Martinican flaunting his superiority for failing his duty. Let him say, for instance: "I did not have the good fortune, when in France, of seeing gendarmes on horses' backs," and he is lost. His only choice is either to get rid of his Parisian affectation or to die of ridicule. For people will never forget; once married, his wife will realize she has married a joke, and his children will have to deal with and live down the tale.

Where does this change of personality come from? What can this new way of being be ascribed to? Any idiom is a

way of thinking, Damourette and Pichon said. And the fact that the newly returned Martinican adopts a language different from that of the community in which he was born is evidence of a shift and a split. Professor Westermann writes in *The African Today* that the feeling of inferiority by Blacks is especially evident in the educated black man who is constantly trying to overcome it. The method used, Westermann adds, is often naive: "The wearing of European clothes, whether rags or the most up-to-date style; using European furniture and European forms of social intercourse; adorning the native language with European expressions; using bombastic phrases in speaking or writing a European language; all these contribute to a feeling of equality with the European and his achievements."

By referring to other research and our personal observations, we would like to try to show why the black man posits himself in such a characteristic way with regard to European languages. We recall once again that our findings are valid for the French Antilles; we are well aware, however, that this same behavior can be found in any race subjected to colonization.

We have known, and unfortunately still know, comrades from Dahomey or the Congo who say they are Antillean; we have known, and still know, Antilleans who get annoyed at being taken for Senegalese. It's because the Antillean is more "*évolué*" than the African—meaning he is closer to the white man—and this difference exists not only on the street or along the boulevard, but also in the administration and the army. Any Antillean who has done military service in a colonial regiment of infantry is familiar with this distressing situation: on one side, the Europeans and the French Antilleans; and on the other, the Africans. I can remember once when in the heat of action a nest of enemy machine guns had to be wiped out. Three times the

Senegalese were ordered out and three times they were forced back. Then one of the Senegalese asked why the *toubabs* didn't go. In such moments we no longer knew whether we were *toubabs* or "natives." For many Antilleans, however, the situation was by no mean distressing, but on the contrary quite normal. That would be the last straw, to put us with the niggers! The European despises the African, and the Antillean lords it as uncontested master over this black rabble. An extreme example, but nevertheless amusing, is the following: I was recently talking with a Martinican who was incensed that certain Guadeloupeans were passing for Martinican. But, he added, the mistake was rapidly detected; they are more savage than we are—meaning once again that they are farther removed from the white man. It is said that the black man likes to palaver, and whenever I pronounce the word "palaver" I see a group of boisterous children raucously and blandly calling out to the world: children at play insofar as playing can be seen as an initiation to life. The black man likes to palaver, and it is only a short step to a new theory that the black man is just a child. Psychoanalysts have a field day, and the word "orality" is soon pronounced.

But we have to look further. We cannot hope to cover the fundamental question of language here in its entirety. The remarkable research by Piaget has taught us to distinguish stages in its emergence, and the studies by Gelb and Goldstein have demonstrated that the function of language operates by steps and degrees. Here we are interested in the black man confronted by the French language. We would like to understand why the Antillean is so fond of speaking good French.

In his introduction to the *Anthologie de la poésie nègre et malgache* Jean-Paul Sartre tells us that the black poet will turn against the French language, but this will not be

the case for the Antilleans. In this respect I agree, moreover, with Michel Leiris, who recently wrote on the subject of Creole: "Still very much a popular language which everyone can speak more or less, except for the illiterate who speak it exclusively, Creole seems destined sooner or later to become a relic of the past, once education (however slow its progress, delayed by the too few schools, the shortage of public libraries, and the very low standard of living) is widely accessible to the underprivileged sectors of the population." And, adds the author: "For the poets I'm talking about here it's not a question of their turning themselves into 'Antilleans'—along the lines of the picturesque Provençal model—by borrowing a language that, moreover, is devoid of any external influence, whatever might be its intrinsic qualities, but a question of asserting their personal integrity faced with Whites who are steeped in the worst racial prejudice and whose arrogance clearly proves to be unfounded."⁶

There may be one Gilbert Gratiant writing in Creole, but admittedly he is a rare case. Besides, the poetic worth of such writing leaves much to be desired. On the other hand, great works have been translated from the Wolof and Fulani, and we have been reading Cheikh Anta Diop's linguistic research with great interest.

There is nothing comparable in the French Antilles. The official language is French; elementary-school teachers keep a close eye on their pupils to make sure they are not speaking Creole. We will not go into the reasons why. The problem perhaps lies in the fact that in the Antilles, as in Brittany, there is a dialect and there is the French language. But that

6. Michel Leiris, "Martinique-Guadeloupe-Haïti," *Temps Modernes*, February 1950, p. 1347.

can't be right, because the Bretons do not consider themselves inferior to the French. The Bretons were never civilized by the Whites.

By refusing to multiply elements we run the risk of not staying in focus. It is important, however, to tell the black man that an attitude of open rupture has never saved anybody; and although it is true that I must free myself from my strangler because I cannot breathe, nevertheless it is unhealthy to graft a psychological element (the impossibility of expanding) onto a physiological base (the physical difficulty of breathing).

What does this mean? Quite simply this: when an Antillean with a degree in philosophy says he is not sitting for the *agrégation* because of his color, my response is that philosophy never saved anybody. When another desperately tries to prove to me that the black man is as intelligent as any white man, my response is that neither did intelligence save anybody, for if equality among men is proclaimed in the name of intelligence and philosophy, it is also true that these concepts have been used to justify the extermination of man.

Before continuing I believe it necessary to say one or two things. I am speaking here on the one hand of alienated (mystified) Blacks, and on the other of no less alienated (mystifying and mystified) Whites. Although only Sartre and Cardinal Verdier have said that the scandal of the black question has gone on far too long, we must conclude that their attitude is right. We too could give multiple references and quotations showing that "color prejudice" is indeed an idiocy and an iniquity that must be eradicated.

Sartre begins his *Black Orpheus* thus: "What would you expect to find when the muzzle that has silenced the voices of black men is removed? That they would thunder your praise? When these heads that our fathers have forced to

the very ground are risen, do you expect to read adoration in their eyes?"⁷ All I know is that anyone who tries to read in my eyes anything but a perpetual questioning won't see a thing—neither gratitude nor hatred. And if I utter a great shout, it won't be black. No, from the point of view adopted here, there is no black problem. Or at least if there is one, the Whites are only accidentally interested. Our history takes place in obscurity and the sun I carry with me must lighten every corner.

Dr. H. L. Gordon, physician at the Mathari psychiatric hospital in Nairobi, writes in an article in the *East African Medical Journal*: "A highly technical skilled examination of a series of 100 brains of normal natives has found naked eye and microscopic facts indicative of inherent new brain inferiority." "Quantitatively," he adds, "the inferiority amounts to 14.8 percent."⁸

We have said that the black man was the missing link between the ape and man—the white man, of course—and only on page 108 of his book does Sir Alan Burns come to the conclusion, "We are unable to accept as scientifically proven the theory that the black man is inherently inferior to the white, or that he comes from a different stock." Let us add it would be easy to prove the absurdity of such statements as: "The Bible says that the black and white races shall be separated in Heaven as they are on earth, and the natives admitted to the Kingdom of Heaven will find themselves separated to certain of our Father's

7. Jean-Paul Sartre, Preface to *Anthologie de la poésie nègre et malgache: Black Orpheus*, translated by S. W. Allen, Présence Africaine, 1976.

8. Quoted by Sir Alan Burns in *Colour Prejudice*, Allen and Unwin, London, 1948, p. 101.

mansions mentioned in the New Testament." Or else: "We are the chosen people; look at the color of our skin; others are black or yellow because of their sins."

By appealing, therefore, to our humanity—to our feelings of dignity, love, and charity—it would be easy to prove and have acknowledged that the black man is equal to the white man. But that is not our purpose. What we are striving for is to liberate the black man from the arsenal of complexes that germinated in a colonial situation. Monsieur Achille, a teacher at the Lycée du Parc in Lyon, cited a personal experience during his lecture. It is a universally familiar experience. Few black people living in France have not experienced it. As a Roman Catholic, he took part in a pilgrimage. Seeing a black face among his flock, the priest asked him: "Why you left big savanna and why you come with us?" Achille answered most politely, and in this story it wasn't the young deserter of the savanna who was the most embarrassed. Everyone laughed at the exchange and the pilgrimage continued. But if we stop to reflect, we realize that the priest's usage of pidgin calls for several remarks.

1. "I know black people; you have to talk to them kindly, talk to them about their country; knowing how to talk to them, that's the key. Now here's what you have to do . . ." This is no exaggeration. A white man talking to a person of color behaves exactly like a grown-up with a kid, simpering, murmuring, fussing, and coddling. It's not just one white person we have observed, but hundreds; and our observations were not limited to one category; insisting on a fundamentally objective attitude, we studied such behavior in physicians, police officers, and foremen on work sites. People will tell us, forgetting our aim, that we could have focused our attention elsewhere, and that there are Whites who do not fit our description.

Our answer to these objections is that here we are picking holes with the mystified, the mystifiers, or the alienated, and that if there are Whites who interact sanely with Blacks, those are precisely the cases that will not be taken into account. It's not because my patient's liver is functioning normally that his kidneys are healthy. Since his liver is found to be working normally, it's only normal for me to leave it at that and turn my attention to the kidneys. In other words, alongside normal people behaving rationally according to human psychology, there are those who behave pathologically according to an inhuman psychology. And it so happens that the existence of such a type of person has determined a number of realities that we would like to help eliminate in this study.

Speaking to black people in this way is an attempt to reach down to them, to make them feel at ease, to make oneself understood and reassure them.

Consulting physicians know this. Twenty European patients come and go: "Please have a seat. Now what's the trouble? What can I do for you today?"

In comes a black man or an Arab: "Sit down, old fellow. Not feeling well? Where's it hurting?" When it's not: "You not good?"

2. To speak gobbledygook to a black man is insulting, for it means he is the gook. Yet, we'll be told, there is no intention to willfully give offense. OK, but it is precisely this absence of will—this offhand manner; this casualness; and the ease with which they classify him, imprison him at an uncivilized and primitive level—that is insulting.

If the person who speaks to a man of color or an Arab in pidgin does not see that there is a flaw or a defect in his behavior, then he has never paused to reflect. At a personal level, during certain consultations, I have felt myself lapsing.

In the company of this seventy-three-year-old peasant afflicted with senile dementia I suddenly feel I am losing my touch. The very fact of adopting a language suitable for dementia and the mentally retarded, the fact of "leaning over" to address this poor seventy-three-year-old woman, the fact of my reaching down to her for a diagnosis are the signs of a weakening in my relations with other people.

He's an idealist, they'll say. Not at all; it's the others who are the scumbags. I always make a point of speaking to the "towelheads" in correct French and I have always been understood. They answer as best they can, but I refuse to indulge in any form of paternalism.

"Hey, no feel good? Show me! Belly pain? Heart hurting?" Said in that accent that the hospital interns know all too well.

They have a clear conscience when the answer comes back along the same lines. "You see, I told you so. That's how they are."

In the opposite case, you need to retract your pseudopodia and behave like a man. The entire foundation collapses. A black man who says: "I object, sir, to you calling me 'my old fellow.'" Now there's something new.

But we can go even lower. You're sitting in a café in Rouen or Strasbourg and you have the misfortune to be spotted by an old drunk. He makes a beeline for your table: "You African? Dakar, Rufisque, whorehouse, women, coffee, mangoes, bananas . . ." You get up and leave; you are greeted with a hail of insults: "You didn't play big shot like that in your jungle, filthy nigger!"

Mr. Mannoni has described what he calls the Prospero complex. We shall return later to these findings that will allow us to understand the psychology of colonialism. But

it is already safe to say that to speak pidgin means: "You, stay where you are."

When I meet a German or a Russian speaking bad French I try to indicate through gestures the information he is asking for, but in doing so I am careful not to forget that he has a language of his own, a country, and that perhaps he is a lawyer or an engineer back home. Whatever the case, he is a foreigner with different standards.

There is nothing comparable when it comes to the black man. He has no culture, no civilization, and no "long historical past."

Perhaps that is why today's Blacks want desperately to prove to the white world the existence of a black civilization.

Whether he likes it or not, the black man has to wear the livery the white man has fabricated for him. Look at children's comic books: all the Blacks are mouthing the ritual "Yes, boss." In films the situation is even more acute. Most of the American films dubbed in French reproduce the grinning stereotype *Y a bon Banania*. In one of these recent films, *Steel Sharks*, there is a black guy on a submarine speaking the most downright classic dialect imaginable. Furthermore, he is a true nigger, walking behind the quartermaster, trembling at the latter's slightest fit of anger, and is killed in the end. I am convinced, however, that in the original version he did not have this way of expressing himself. And even if he did I can't see why in a democratic France, where 60 million citizens are colored, anyone would dub the same idiocies from America. The reason is that the black man has to be portrayed in a certain way, and the same stereotype can be found from the black man in *Sans pitié*—"Me work hard, me never lie, me never steal"—to the servant in *Duel in the Sun*.

All they ask of the black man is to be a good nigger; the rest will follow on its own. Making him speak pidgin is tying him to an image, snaring him, imprisoning him as the eternal victim of his own essence, of a *visible appearance* for which he is not responsible. And of course, just as the Jew who is lavish with his money is suspect, so the black man who quotes Montesquieu must be watched. Let me make myself clear: "watched" insofar as he might start something. I do not contend that the black student is suspect to his peers or his professors. But outside university circles there is an army of fools. It is a question not of educating them but of teaching the black man not to be a slave of their archetypes.

Granted, these fools are the product of a psychological-economic structure. But that does not get us anywhere.

When a black man speaks of Marx, the first reaction is the following: "We educated you and now you are turning against your benefactors. Ungrateful wretches! You'll always be a disappointment." And then there's that sledgehammer argument from the plantation owners in Africa: our enemy is the elementary-school teacher.

The fact is that the European has a set idea of the black man, and there is nothing more exasperating than to hear: "How long have you lived in France? You speak such good French."

It could be argued that this is due to the fact that a lot of black people speak pidgin. But that would be too easy. You're traveling by train and ask:

"Excuse me, could you please tell me where the restaurant car is?"

"Yes, sonny boy, you go corridor, you go straight, go one car, go two car, go three car, you there."

Let's be serious. Speaking pidgin means imprisoning the black man and perpetuating a conflictual situation where

the white man infects the black man with extremely toxic foreign bodies. There is nothing more sensational than a black man speaking correctly, for he is appropriating the white world. I often have conversations with foreign students. They speak French badly. Little Robinson Crusoe, alias Prospero, is in his element. He explains, informs, comments, and helps them with their studies. But with the black man, he is utterly stupefied; the black man has put himself on an equal footing; the game is no longer possible; he's a pure replica of the white man, who has to surrender to the facts.⁹

After everything that has just been said, it is easy to understand why the first reaction of the black man is to say *no* to those who endeavor to define him. It is understandable that the black man's first action is a *reaction*, and since he is assessed with regard to his degree of assimilation, it is understandable too why the returning Antillean speaks only French: because he is striving to underscore the rift that has occurred. He embodies a new type of man whom he imposes on his colleagues and family. His old mother no longer understands when he speaks of her pj's, her ramshackle dump, and her lousy joint. All that embellished with the appropriate accent.

9. "I knew some Negroes at the School of Medicine. . . . In short, they were a disappointment. The color of their skin should have given us the opportunity of being charitable, generous, and scientifically friendly. They failed in their duty and to satisfy our goodwill. All our tearful tenderness, all our artful concern, was to no avail. We had no Negroes to cajole, we had nothing to hate them for either; on the scales involving small jobs and meager daily deceits, they weighed virtually as much as we did." Michel Salomon, "D'un juif à des nègres," *Présence Africaine*, no. 5, p. 776.

In every country in the world there are social climbers, those who think they've arrived. And opposite them there are those who keep the notion of their origins. The Antillean returning from the *métropole* speaks in Creole if he wants to signify that nothing has changed. It can be sensed on the docks where friends and relatives are waiting for him—waiting for him not only in the literal sense, but in the sense of waiting to catch him out. They need only one minute to make their diagnosis. If he says: "I am so happy to be back among you. Good Lord, it's so hot in this place; I'm not sure I can put up with it for long," they have been forewarned—it's a European who's come back.

In a different respect, when a group of Antillean students meet in Paris they have two options:

Either support the white world—i.e., the real world—and with the help of French be able to address certain issues and aim at a certain degree of universalism in their conclusions.

Or reject Europe, "Yo,"¹⁰ and come together thanks to Creole by settling comfortably in what we'll call the Martinican *Umwelt*. By this we mean—and this goes especially for our Antillean brothers—that when one of our comrades in Paris or another university town attempts to address a problem in all seriousness he is accused of putting on airs, and the best way of disarming him is to brandish the Antilles and shift into Creole. This is one of the reasons why so many friendships fall through after a few months of life in Europe.

Since our argument is the disalienation of Blacks, we would like them to realize that every time there is a break-

10. A generic term for *other people*, especially Europeans.

down in understanding among themselves faced with the white world, there is a lack of judgment.

A Senegalese who learns Creole to pass for an Antillean is a case of alienation.

The Antilleans who make a mockery out of him are lacking in judgment.

As we have seen, we are not mistaken in thinking that a study of the Antillean's language can reveal several characteristics of his world. As we said at the beginning, there are mutual supports between language and the community.

To speak a language is to appropriate its world and culture. The Antillean who wants to be white will succeed, since he will have adopted the cultural tool of language. I can remember just over a year ago in Lyon, following a lecture where I had drawn a parallel between black and European poetry, a French comrade telling me enthusiastically: "Basically, you're a white man." The fact I had studied such an interesting question in the white man's language gave me my credentials.

It should be understood that historically the black man wants to speak French, since it is the key to open doors which only fifty years ago still remained closed to him. The Antillean who falls within our description goes out of his way to seek the subtleties and rarities of the language—a way of proving to himself that he is culturally adequate.¹¹

11. See, for example, the almost unbelievable number of anecdotes stemming from the parliamentary elections of any number of candidates. That rag of a paper by the name of *Le Canard Déchaîné* has constantly buried M. B. with damning Creolisms. This is in fact the sledgehammer used in the French Antilles: *Can't speak French properly*.

It has been said that the Antillean orator has a power of expression which leaves the Europeans gasping. In 1945, during an electoral campaign, Aimé Césaire, who was running for parliament, was speaking at a boys' school in Fort-de-France in front of a packed auditorium. In the middle of his talk a woman fainted. The next day a colleague describing the event commented: "His French was so dynamite the woman fell to the floor and started ketching malkadi."¹² The power of language.

A few other facts deserve closer attention—for instance, M. Charles-André Julien introducing Aimé Césaire as a "black poet with a university *agrégation*" or else quite simply the expression "a great black poet."

These ready-made phrases that seem to be commonsense—after all Aimé Césaire is black and a poet—contain a hidden nuance, a persisting crux. I know nothing about Jean Paulhan except that he writes interesting books. I have no idea how old Roger Caillois is; the only evidence I have of him is when his presence streaks across the sky from time to time. And let no one accuse me of affective anaphylaxis. What I mean to say is that there is no reason why Monsieur Breton should say of Césaire: "Here is a black man who handles the French language unlike any white man today."¹³

And even if Monsieur Breton were telling the truth, I don't see where the paradox lies; I don't see why there should be any emphasis, because after all Aimé Césaire is Martinican with a university *agrégation*.

12. Fell into convulsions.

13. Introduction to *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (Notebook of a Return to My Native Land).

Let us return to Michel Leiris:

If in the Antillean writer there is a desire to break with the literary forms associated with official education, such a desire, striving toward a freer future, would not assume the appearance of folklore. Seeking above all in literature to formulate a message that is their very own and, in the case of some of them at least, to be the spokesmen of a real race with unrecognized potential, they scorn the artifice which for them, whose intellectual education has been almost exclusively French, would represent recourse to a language they could only use as a second language they have learned.¹⁴

But, Blacks will retort, we should be honored that a white man such as Breton writes such things about us.

Let us move on. . . .

14. Michel Leiris, op. cit.