

Mutilating the Western Corpus:

The Postcolonial Deconstruction of Césairean Cannibalism

Césaire's Caliban is an anti-archetype. He does not function as a stand-in for any particular person, group, or concept; not for the uncivilized 'savage' so-named by Prospero, nor for any, or all, of those suffering under colonial power. Caliban is merely himself: an individual person, whose freedom has been swept away by a 'tempest' conjured up through colonial sorceries. But where Caliban is treated like an individual, the colonial enterprise is shown to be utterly singular and generic, motivated by the simple and selfish goal to define oneself through the negation of the 'other.' Césaire employs deconstructive methodology to highlight the internal inconsistencies of Prospero's colonial logic, showing that the ideology presented through him lacks any metaphysical power of its own. Rather, Prospero's status as 'master' is sustained only by the willful assent of Caliban, who must first concede his own inferiority in order for Prospero to assume the role of his superior. Thus Césaire demonstrates that, despite its claims to truth and propriety, colonial ideology is necessarily ontologically unstable. It is akin to a theatrical performance, with roles that are maintained exclusively through the united suspension of disbelief. By means of this critical reframing, Césaire shatters the illusion created by colonial discourse, invoking the metatheatrical devices utilized by Shakespeare in *The Tempest*. Césaire uses the logic and expressions of the colonial paradigm as a means of dismantling that very same paradigm, and even appropriates the designation of 'cannibal'—a term of colonial denigration—as a means of deconstructing prejudicial metaphysics.

In theatre studies, metatheatres refers to the contextualizing of on-stage action in terms of its performative medium; it involves the re-establishing of a cognitive link between the *content* of a play—the semblance of reality that is projected by the performance or by the script, and received by the faculties of the imagination—and the *fact* of its performance, which is temporally and spatially rooted in the ‘real’ world. Metatheatres involves the playwright, the actor, and the theatre-goer all looking beyond the narrative of the play and back to themselves as they exist *in relation* to the play; to themselves *as* playwright, *as* actor, and *as* theatre-goer. “By sharpening our awareness of the unlikeness of life to dramatic art,” metatheatrical elements shatter the illusion created by the play, ultimately “making us aware of life’s uncanny likeness to art or illusion” (Cornell University, ENG 327, “Metatheatres”). It involves a critical approach to a particular theatrical production; a critical approach to the nature of the interaction between audience and performance—and even a critical approach to reality itself, facilitated by a juxtaposition of the previous critical modes to the general nature of human cognition.

Maurice Blackman identifies three ‘degrees of theatrical illusion’ that are present in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*. The first degree is “a spectacle in which Prospero is one of the characters.” In other words, this first degree refers to the formal structure of the artwork itself—the play-as-play. The second degree “presents spectacles of which Prospero is both the director and one of the performers,” and refers to Prospero’s manipulation of the other characters in a manner likened to stagecraft. The third degree constitutes the *literal* play-within-a-play that occurs in *The Tempest*: “a masque performed by the gods and arranged by Prospero in honour of Miranda and Ferdinand” (303). With regard for Césaire’s adaptation, *Une Tempête*, Blackman identifies a further metatheatrical dimension: “the representational strategy of the psychodrama and the masked black actors,” which she suggests “are a constant reminder to the spectator of the theatrical illusion created in *Une Tempête*, presented as the performance of a performance” (303).

Both of these playwrights' approaches utilize the expressions and tools of their encapsulating medium in order to challenge its preconceptions and overarching structure. Césaire, in particular, appropriates Shakespeare's metatheatrical devices for postcolonial ends, subjecting the critical western eye to its own signature brand of scrutiny. In a literal metatheatrical sense, this can be seen at the opening of the play—where “the Master of Ceremonies” assigns the various roles to the cast of actors. As Blackman points out, this is a “fourth dimension” of metatheatrical deployment, and as such, it serves to ‘objectivize’ Shakespeare himself in much the same way that Shakespeare objectivized—that is, rendered as an object of study—the institution and conventions of the theatre. But for Césaire, the scope of this ‘fourth remove’ is not limited to Shakespeare-the-man, but extends to cover all of Western logic, which was practiced *by* Shakespeare. This involves the appropriation of Western logic, metaphysics, conventions, and linguistic expressions—but more than their mere appropriation, Césaire also realizes the complete implications of these things, showing how they are fundamentally incoherent. Thus, Césaire adapts for his own use the language of colonialism, wielding it as a weapon against its own racist rhetoric.

Of particular interest is Césaire's appropriation of the term, ‘cannibal.’ On the surface, ‘cannibal’ refers to one who eats the flesh of his own kind; an act that is rightfully condemned as inhuman, or in other words, an act that is unfitting for human behavior. It is an act that may be perpetrated by humans, but through its perpetration, *it degrades the human identity*, “eradicat[ing] the distinction between I and the Other, between human and non-human, between what is (anthropologically) edible and what is not” (Eshleman and Smith, 13).

Yet Césaire writes, in his *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, that “because we hate you and your reason, we claim kinship with dementia praecox with the flaming madness of persistent cannibalism” (Césaire, 22). Césaire embraces the scornful moniker, symbolically becoming the ‘cannibal’ that the West has accused him of being. But the Césairean cannibal is not an eater of human flesh, but an eater of *language*. Subsumed by a colonial paradigm that

has degraded and subdued him, the Césairean cannibal ravages the paradigm from within, using its own internal logic to mutilate and defile its most sacred precepts. As Eshleman and Smith point out: “Ultimately, in a political frame of reference, cannibalism may summarize the devouring of the colonized country by the colonizing power—or, vice-versa, the latent desire of the oppressed to do away with the oppressor, the wishful dreaming of the weak projecting themselves as warriors and predators” (13).

When incorporated peoples rebel against the system that has subsumed them, the system is shown to be lacking. The advocates of this system can no longer dismiss its enemies as ‘uneducated’ or ‘savage,’ for their mastery of its language and expressions is proof of their co-membership. Thus the very existence of an informed critic undermines any basis for universality; it makes the so-called ‘self-evident’ uncertain, and the unquestionable is made a subject for debate. This subversive power is not primarily derived from the actual content of a given postcolonial critique. Much like how metatheatrical staging “sharp[ens] our awareness of the unlikeness of life to dramatic art,” Césairean cannibalism generates a paradigm-shattering dissonance between the medium of its expression and the medium’s dominant discourse.

This function of Césairean cannibalism is aligned with a feature of postcolonial discourse identified by Helen Tiffin, which she refers to as “counter-discursive” (Tiffin, 96). Tiffin writes; “Decolonisation is process, not arrival; it invokes an ongoing dialectic between hegemonic centrist systems and peripheral subversion of them; between European or British discourses and their post-colonial dis/mantling” (95). Hence why Césaire embraces ‘cannibalism’ in the context of postcolonial dialogue: “Cannibalism carries to its fullest degree the idea of participation” (Eshleman and Smith, 13), while at the same time unsettling and undermining those very systems which it participates in. It does not seek to ‘build’ but to ‘destroy,’ anticipating the emergence of new and unimagined realities—horizons that are inaccessible to those who would preach a determinate, absolute, and self-interested metaphysics.

This definition of postcolonial discourse recalls the deconstructionism of Jacques Derrida—a school of criticism that challenges the West’s “assumptions about principles of reality that are supposedly prior to the physical world” (Harris, 42). As Harris explains, Derrida’s approach to deconstruction seeks to expose “a covert linguistic operation that posits a domain of meaning prior to language and, in turn, prioritizes thought over utterance, speech over writing, and origin over copy.” It goes about this by attempting to show the paradoxical—yet thoroughly necessary—multiplicity of significations that coexist within every linguistic expression. For instance, “for black to signify, it presumes white. It does not just refer to blackness, then, but also contains the trace of something else that it is not” (43). In other words, the assertion of one reality necessarily asserts at least the ontological *possibility* of its negation; otherwise, it would be entirely meaningless to make the original assertion. As a result, “pure, self-identical *logos* is thus perpetually deferred by language’s potentially endless slippages of signification.”

Deconstruction is an antidote for the stagnation of metaphysics, and has often been applied by deconstructionists to Western—and especially to so-called ‘Platonic’—philosophies. By blurring the supposed ontological distinctions between one object and another, deconstruction shows that the metaphysician has a far more tenuous grasp of ultimate reality than he would otherwise like to believe. This could be described as semantic ‘cannibalism,’ for it entails the appropriation of Western logic, applying it towards the end of its own subsumption.

In fact, deconstructive criticism involves not merely the ‘negation’ of Western logic, but its full realization—for it actualizes, that is, it brings into the spotlight of public dialogue, the hidden implications of its own logic. The term ‘deconstruction’ is thus somewhat of a misnomer, much like the Césairean notion of the ‘cannibal.’ What is meant by ‘deconstruction’ is not sabotage or senseless brutality, but *completion*. Deconstruction does not suppose to promote ignorance, but to demonstrate the flaws and inconsistencies *which we are already ignorant of*. But for those who defend these systems, deconstructionism may appear as though it were only

tearing things down. Likewise, the Césairean cannibal is not, in actual fact, an eater of human flesh; nor is he an anarchist, though he may certainly appear as one to those who are unwilling to receive his criticisms. Rather, the Césairean cannibal embraces the degrading moniker given to him by the colonial powers, knowing fully that the moniker fails to adequately describe him, and that the biases against him cannot endure the dissonance of his real nature in juxtaposition with the political and social identities bestowed upon him. The Césairean cannibal annihilates the supposed distinction between ‘civil’ and ‘savage,’ by proving himself to be civil at the same time as he claims the title of a ‘savage.’ In this, he proves that the colonial designation, built upon Western metaphysics, is not in fact a disinterested reflection of reality, but is rather a reflection of *self-identity*. The Césairean cannibal shows that the labelling of non-whites as ‘savage’ and inferior is solely a means of establishing and defending a supposedly ‘civilized’ white identity.

Caliban is an open practitioner of this sort of linguistic cannibalism, in both Césaire’s version of the play, and in Shakespeare’s. In *The Tempest*, Caliban declares the following to Prospero: “You taught me language, and my profit on ’t / Is I know how to curse. The red plague rid you / For learning me your language!” (I.ii.) This is a very direct example of Césairean cannibalism—of the colonized person, Caliban, cursing (in English) the man who taught him to speak (the English) language. But the ‘curses’ employed by *Césaire’s* Caliban have far less to do with actual sorcery. In fact, Césaire’s Caliban does not merely express, or translate, his curses into Prospero’s language, but actually uses Prospero’s *rhetorical method*—the logic that informs, and is represented by, his language—as a means of attack. “You didn’t teach me a thing! Except to jabber in your own language so that I could understand your orders: chop the wood, wash the dishes, fish for food, plant vegetables, all because you’re too lazy to do it yourself” (*Une Tempête*, 17). Caliban appropriates the pragmatism inherent in Prospero’s metaphysics, using it to unveil the internal inconsistency of his ‘master’s’ philosophy. This inconsistency comes from Prospero’s rejection of the value of ‘unrefined’ nature—of the value of

things as-they-are. He instead sees objects, and even people, as vessels upon which to impose his own supposed value. Thus, Prospero decides at the conclusion of the play to remain with Caliban on the island; a supposedly “desert island,” mind you, which he had earlier called a “disgusting place” (15).

Prospero does not relish the island itself, nor the company of “savage” Caliban. Rather, he frames this decision as though it were made for a future benefit. Both Caliban and the island, supposes Prospero, are raw, and thus in need of correction and guidance. “Summoning voices, I alone, and mingling them at my pleasure, arranging out of confusion one intelligible line... Without me, who would be able to draw music from all that? ... This isle is mute without me. My duty, thus, is here, and here I shall stay” (64). This is a thoroughly pragmatic decision, made in the interest of a ‘higher good,’ and coming at the expense of temporary displeasure.

But Prospero’s pragmatic logic does not apply to his education of Caliban. He supposes that Caliban should be grateful for receiving the ‘gift’ of this language—as though Prospero’s tongue holds value, in-and-of itself. He castigates Caliban for cursing him, proposing that, “since you’re so fond of invective, you could at least thank me for having taught you to speak at all. You, a savage ... a dumb animal, a beast I educated, trained, dragged up from the bestiality that still clings to you” (17). This represents a sudden turn in Prospero’s logic away from pragmatism, and ultimately gives rise to the question—what use would Caliban have for Prospero’s language? And what end does educating Caliban serve? As Caliban points out, the only ‘end’ to this education was developing Caliban’s potential as a servant (“You didn’t teach me a thing! Except to jabber in your own language so that I could understand your orders,” 17). Prospero thus demands gratitude from Caliban for equipping him to address a problem that was first created *by Prospero’s demand for service*. Caliban proves the singular motivation of Prospero by reminding him of what was left *untaught*: “And as for your learning, did you ever impart any of that to me? No, you took care not to. All your science you keep for yourself alone, shut up in those big books” (17).

Prospero does not represent his motives honestly, instead attempting to subsume Caliban's personal and cultural identity through lies and manipulation. And here lies the great vulnerability of Prospero's politics: that he not only deceives *others* to attain his own ends, but also *himself*. Indeed, Prospero stands condemned by even his own standards. Decrying the injustice of his exile, he proclaims that "they bribed my people, they stole my charts and documents and, to get rid of me, they denounced me to the Inquisition as a magician and sorcerer" (13).

First, this is a fairly clear reference to the sort of manipulative methods utilized by colonial powers in order to justify the subjugation of native peoples. For instance, the wide use of the term 'cannibal' to describe non-Europeans—and in fact, even the terms 'witch' and 'witchcraft' and 'black magic' etc., for a more literal parallel—mirrors the accusations of "heretical perversion" (14) lobbied against Prospero. His moral outrage in response to this treatment thus demonstrates the radical hypocrisy required in order to sustain his condemnation of Caliban and his mother.

Secondly, the accusations against Prospero are, in fact, accurate. He *is* a sorcerer, or at least a practitioner of "prophetic sciences" (15)—a term that invokes the ancient (and, in the Christian religion, *forbidden*) practice of augury. Prospero even complains at the lack of a trial afforded him: "And yet, the trial they said they were going to hold never took place," adding that: "Such creatures of darkness are too much afraid of the light" (14). It is of course clear that Prospero's exile was motivated by political gain, and thus he is correct in identifying the cause as being "the intrigues of my ambitious younger brother" (13). Even though sorcery was against church regulations, there is also a tradition of good alchemists, or 'white magicians,' in European culture. Perhaps Césaire's audience might have been able to sympathize with Prospero's plight, if only his motivations were anything other than supremely selfish, and his methods anything less than supremely manipulative. But as it stands, Prospero is ultimately less morally defensible than Caliban, who has been accused of attempted rape.

Both Prospero and Caliban are, presumably, guilty of the charges lobbied against them. Caliban does not deny Prospero's allegation, and Prospero wields openly—and in the company of other Christian Europeans—his sorcerous arts. However, Caliban claims to have no interest in Miranda, even suggesting that his actions were a byproduct of Prospero's own influence: "Rape! Rape! Listen, you old goat, you're the one that put those dirty thoughts in my head" (19). Caliban does not at all deny the depravity of the actions that are attributed to him. He recognizes that rape is an ugly crime, unbecoming of human behaviour. But he also points out that he would have had no desire for such things, if it was not for Prospero's influence. In this, Césaire, through Caliban, invokes the symbolic implications of the word 'rape.' According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the archaic definition of rape is "the act of taking something by force; esp. the seizure of property by violent means; robbery, plundering" (oed, "rape," n.3). This definition is the very taxonomy of colonial ambitions, and aptly describes the sort of behaviour being practiced by Prospero with regards to Caliban and the island. Thus, Caliban accuses Prospero of having led him by example, and ultimately of being complicit in his own guilt.

Through this exchange, Césaire builds upon, while also criticizing, the original scene as written by Shakespeare. Shakespeare's Caliban responds to Prospero's accusation in exactly the opposite manner of Césaire's Caliban: "O ho, O ho! Would 't had been done! / Thou didst prevent me. I had peopled else / This isle with Calibans" (1.ii.419-421). Caliban is not primarily motivated by sexual desire, but by a vision for the island that is shaped after his own image—inhabited and dominated by his descendants. Shakespeare expresses the very heart of colonialism through Caliban, in plain imitation of Prospero's ambition.

Césaire shows Prospero's complaints to be radically hypocritical and lacking in self-awareness: that ultimately, the things that Prospero finds most ugly about Caliban are the most ugly parts of *himself*, which he has artificially projected onto Caliban. Consider that, soon after claiming credit for the successful 'education' of Caliban, Césaire's Prospero declares to him that "beating is the only language you really understand" (19). This is another invocation of a scene

from *The Tempest*, which Césaire translates from Shakespeare's idiolect to his own: "Shrugg'st thou, malice? / If thou neglect'st or dost unwillingly / What I command, I'll rack thee with old cramps, / Fill all thy bones with aches, make thee roar / That beasts shall tremble at thy din" (I.ii.443-446). Although Shakespeare's Prospero threatens Caliban with magical curses instead of physical beatings, the intention remains the same across the two interpretations.

However, Caliban's response to Prospero's threats differ in important ways. Césaire's Caliban yields service to Prospero, but also asserts his freedom by declaring that "this is the last time" (19). Additionally, he demands that Prospero cease referring to him by the name of 'Caliban,' which is "the name given me by your hatred, and every time it's spoken it's an insult" (20). This is a Caliban who has become aware of his own situation, and of the situation of his supposed 'master.' He knows what Césaire himself knows, that "between colonization and civilization there is an infinite distance; that out of all the colonial expeditions that have been undertaken... there could not come a single human value" (Césaire, 34). He knows that Prospero is self-deceived and self-interested; that he, and all other such "temporary 'masters' are lying," and "therefore that [these] masters are weak" (32). Césaire's depiction of Caliban is a petition against the image of weakness that is presented by Shakespeare—a Caliban who feebly retreats from Prospero's threats, conceding the primacy of Western arts over his own native gods and traditions: "No, pray thee. / I must obey. His art is of such power / It would control my dam's god, Setebos, / And make a vassal of him" (I.ii.447-450).

Postcolonial deconstruction in *Une Tempête* begins as early as its title, which is explicit and particular, and thus antithetical to the universality implied by the title of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Césaire's version of the play explores only *one* tempest, acknowledging that there are others; on the other hand, the inclusion of "*The*" in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* signifies supposed universality, absoluteness, and ultimacy. As Sarnecki observes, "Césaire's title privileges process over product; it suggests that the storms (a common occurrence on the island, not the result of a delusional magician's ravings) are not an end in themselves. Rather,

they are part of an ongoing process that brings about change in the form of destruction and renewal” (Sarnecki, 283). The deconstructive mode applied by Césaire targets the ‘absolute’ implications of Western philosophy, and treats them with such ruthless disdain and thorough critique, that the process may be likened to *mutilation*—dismemberment, brutality, dishonour, and profanity. Robin D. G. Kelley writes: “Césaire argues that colonialism works to ‘decivilize’ the colonizer: torture, violence, race hatred and immorality constitute a dead weight on the so-called civilized, pulling the master class deeper and deeper into the abyss of barbarism. The instruments of colonial power rely on barbaric, brutal violence and intimidation, and the end result is the degradation of Europe itself” (xi). Through his brutalization of Western logic, Césaire is much like his depiction of Caliban—a person who, having been subsumed by a system and degraded within it, realizes that his supposed ‘ugliness’ is entirely conditional on the colonial paradigm, which has *made* others ugly, savage and evil in order that its benefactors may be beautiful, civilized and righteous. If the West perceives a cannibal in Césaire, then it is a cannibal of their own creation—made, even, after their own image.

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