



AIMÉ CÉSAIRE

**RESOLUTELY  
BLACK**

CONVERSATIONS WITH  
FRANÇOISE VERGÈS

# Resolutely Black

Conversations with Françoise Vergès

## Critical South

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Conversations with Françoise Vergès

Aimé Césaire

Translated by Matthew B. Smith

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## Note on the Translation

Translating race is no easy matter. This is because, at once a social construct and a lived reality, race is experienced differently in different contexts. To be black means something different in France, and in Francophone countries, than it does in the United States and the Anglophone world. This point – as intuitive and commonsensical as it may seem – is far too often lost in translation.

Efforts to overcome these differences linguistically risk oversimplifying the diversity of black experience. Take the English term “black” itself, for instance, which was widely used in France in the 1990s and early 2000s in place of the French term *noir*. Proponents of the English term saw in its use a sense of belonging to a larger, international black community, one that evoked the civil rights movement in the United States, which knows no

equivalent in France. But critics saw it as an unnecessary euphemism – why use an English expression when a French one already exists? – and a refusal to acknowledge race openly. *Noir* has since reemerged as the term most frequently used to speak of black experience in France.

But what does it mean to be black in France, or even in French, for that matter? France, casting itself as a color-blind society, officially rejects race as a category and even prohibits the collection of census data according to race. The lack of statistics relating to race, however, does little to hide the brute reality of racism, which proves the extent to which race is very much a category that matters in France. To be black in France, many have argued, is thus “primarily a response to and rejection of anti-black racism.”<sup>1</sup> If the English term “black” allowed the French to ignore race, *noir*, many believe, takes a step in openly acknowledging it. Still, the question of whether “black” adequately translates *noir* or *noir* adequately translates “black” remains unsettled.

In these 2004 interviews, Aimé Césaire only occasionally uses the term *noir*. His term, and one that is forever associated with his name, is *nègre* (the title of the French version of this book is “*Nègre je suis, nègre je resterai*”). Césaire wasn’t the first to reclaim this term, but he is perhaps responsible for elevating and popularizing its use at a time



when both *noir* and *homme de couleur* were both available as relative terms of distinction.<sup>2</sup> Rather than drawing on these mildly “accepted” terms, Césaire deliberately chose a more confrontational approach with the use of *nègre*, a word rejected by many at the time as offensive (the term remains pejorative today). Hence the name “Négritude,” a neologism created by Césaire, for the international movement he started with Léopold Sédar Senghor and Léon Gontran Damas, a movement whose goals were twofold: to contest racism and colonialism by cultural means; and to create a collective identity based on a set of shared cultural values and experiences. In Césaire’s hands, the term *nègre* is thus double-edged. On the one hand, the appropriation of this once pejorative term is used as a rallying cry; on the other, it is meant to serve as a stark reminder of slavery and colonialism.

In this respect, Césaire’s use of this term is not unlike his much-discussed stance on reparations, articulated here in these conversations with Françoise Vergès. Césaire feared reparations could offer France an easy way out of its dark past and troubled present. By paying its due, not only would France be free of guilt, but it would be easier for it to elude accusations of structural racism. Failing to acknowledge the weight of history, acts of racism could be falsely perceived as chance occurrences spontaneously produced by individual

actors, rather than part of a deep-rooted historical phenomenon shaping French society on a more fundamental level. Césaire believed France could still be forced to own up to its past and provide aid to countries in need without succumbing to a fantasy of reconciliation. The past, however, would remain – and should remain – irreparable.

Once synonymous with “slave,” the term *nègre* prevents one from forgetting the irreparable damage caused by slavery and colonialism. Its range of meaning – from offensive slur to a self-affirming designator – knows no exact equivalent in English. Throughout the history of its use, it aligns with a different set of English terms depending on the period in question. Brent Hayes Edwards suggests that during the interwar period, when Césaire adopted the term, though its function was similar to the “n-word” in English, it was more closely aligned with “black,” which was also a derogatory term in the 1920s, whereas “Negro,” written with a capital N in the manner of W. E. B. Du Bois, corresponded at that time more to the French term *Noir*. Of course, these are all rough and fleeting correspondences that would continue to shift over the ensuing decades. For a while, *nègre* was most frequently translated as “negro”; now it isn’t uncommon to translate it as “black”. It goes without saying that neither of these can account for the historical shifts in its meaning.

Thus, any attempt to translate Césaire's use of *nègre* in 2004 would remain approximate, if not misleading. For this reason, I have decided against seeking a single linguistic match for it. At times, I have left it untranslated when I believe it speaks for itself. At others, I offered what I felt was an appropriate translation for a given context while providing the original in square brackets. My hope is that this will allow the reader to gain a sense of the nuance and range of the term as used by Césaire while serving as a reminder of the plurality of black experience and of the history of slavery and colonialism.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that race and gender are often ignored when discussing a translator's approach. This is unfortunate. As a translator who is both white and male, I am aware that my position affords me certain privileges just as it imposes certain limitations on the strategies I can choose from. Césaire's writing has been deftly handled by a wide range of translators, many of whom are black or people of color, and their strategies are by necessity different from mine. I admire these translations and don't see my approach in opposition to theirs. Nor do I think recognizing the race and gender of a translator should be seen as an apology or justification for the linguistic or stylistic choices made. Still, I believe it is important to acknowledge limits and to see them for what

they are: an opportunity to recognize difference, to make a certain level of distance felt, rather than as an excuse to speak on the behalf of others. After all, as Césaire reminds us, the specificity of different cultures is often best seen in the gaps that hold them apart.

Matthew B. Smith