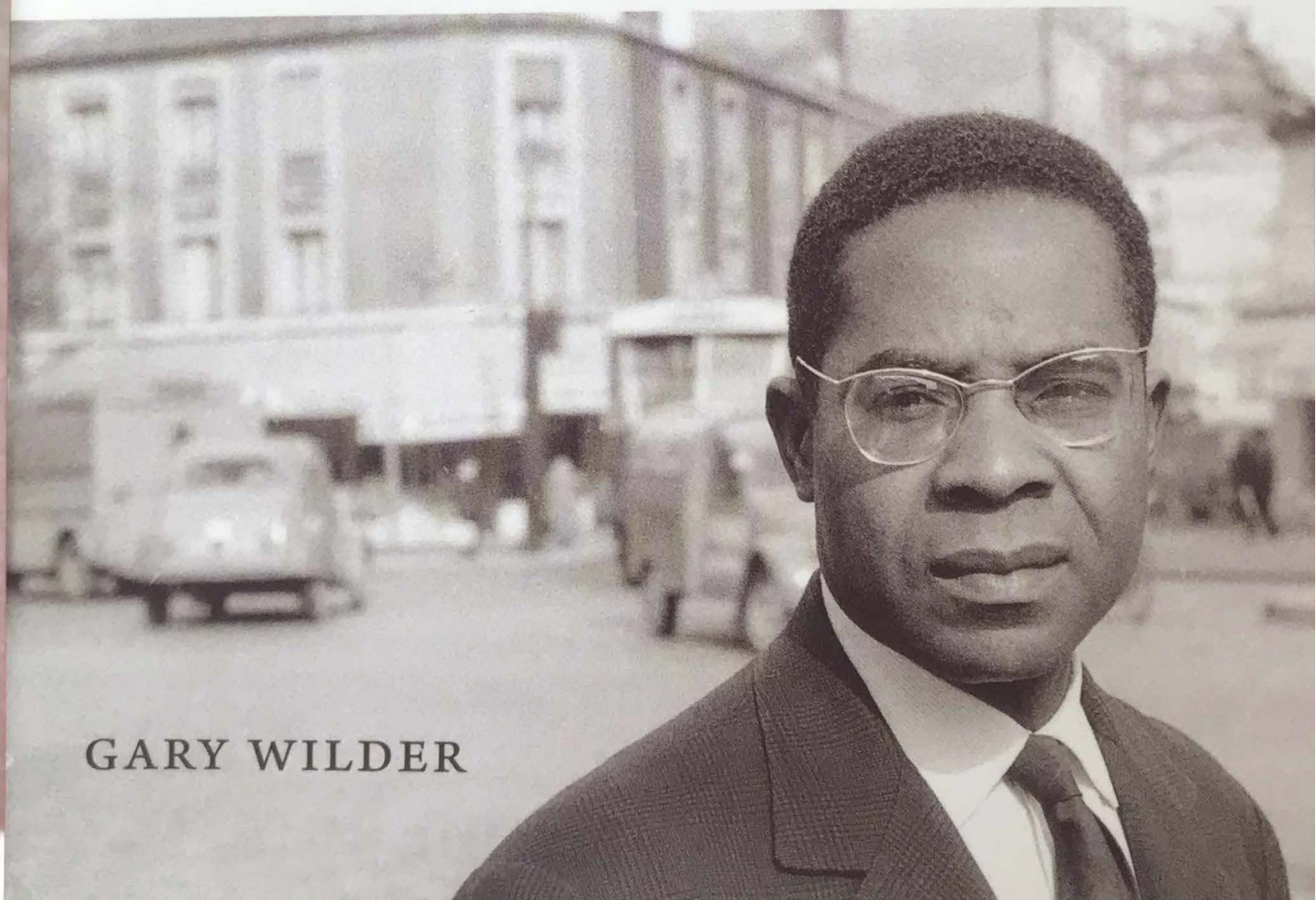




FREEDOM TIME

Negritude, Decolonization,
and the Future of the World



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Césaire further elaborated his ideas about self-determination at the First International Congress of Black Artists and Writers, held in Paris at the Sorbonne, September 19–22, 1956. Organized by the Society for African Culture, which was affiliated with the journal and publisher *Présence Africaine*,⁶ the conference drew participants from Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States.⁷ Alioune Diop, president of the society and editor of the journal, opened the conference by challenging the assumption that “culture and politics belong to two radically distinct worlds,” observing “if political authority (the state) can exercise deadly pressure on culture . . . it is then certain that it is up to culture . . . to inspire politics.”⁸ Diop argued that black writers and artists had a responsibility to realize the universal promise of modern Western culture and to universalize African cultural forms; both had been debased by imperialism.⁹ He declared “culture is a dialogue” among peoples and that “we others from the non-European world . . . have to spark . . . new values, and explore together the new universe born of the meeting of peoples.”¹⁰ He envisioned a black humanism available to all peoples seeking to overcome the alienating distinction between manual and intellectual labor through which ordinary people in modern society were separated from philosophical speculation and aesthetic production.¹¹

Césaire similarly argued that emancipation must entail a people’s freedom to fashion autonomous cultural forms and futures. Condemning colonialism for having “broken the living spirit [*élan*] of civilizations that had not yet fulfilled their promise,” he insisted that the seemingly static or backward cultures ethnologists encountered were products of the “colonial situation.”¹² This critique of colonial knowledge of culture engaged with anthropologists (including Caillois, Frobenius, Kroeber, Malinowski, Mauss, Mead, and Segalen) and social theorists (Hegel, Lenin, Marx, Nietzsche, Spengler, and Toynbee).

Césaire challenged the imperial “illusion” that the colonizer could substitute his own civilization for the destroyed indigenous one.¹³ Because European powers never made all their own cultural resources available to colonized people, genuine assimilation was impossible and a true “transfer of civilization” would never occur.¹⁴ And because colonialism was not a form of “civilizational contact like others,” it could not lead to “a new [hybrid] civilization.”¹⁵ Citing Malinowski, he reasoned that successful cultural borrowing cannot be imposed; it must be an organic process of active appropriation. In a “living civilization,” he explained, “this heterogeneity is lived internally as a homogeneity . . . the elements . . . are experienced by the consciousness of the community as their own, no different from the most typically autochthonous elements.”¹⁶ Césaire characterized this as a “dialectic of having” whereby “foreign elements become

mine, have passed into my being . . . because I can organize them in my universe, because I can bend them to my needs. Because they are at my disposition and not me at theirs. It is precisely this dialectic which is refused to colonized people."¹⁷ Césaire concluded that "the cultural situation in colonial countries is tragic"; subject peoples cannot take "historical initiative" and are deprived of "the concepts from which [they] could build or rebuild the world."¹⁸ What could now be done?

Rejecting the false alternative between "autochthonous tradition and European civilization," Césaire called on "black men of culture" to create a "para-African culture yet to be born" that would be rooted in but surpass inherited civilizations.¹⁹ The resulting renaissance would provide new solutions to a range of modern political, social, and economic problems. The challenge was to anticipate without predefining this configuration: "our role is [not] to construct a priori a plan for the future black culture. . . . Our role, infinitely more humble, is to announce . . . and to prepare the arrival of the one who possesses the response . . . our peoples and their creative genius, finally rid of that which fetters or sterilizes it."²⁰ The task of cultural creators, he announced, is to "liberate the demiurge that alone can organize this chaos into a new synthesis . . . a reconciliation and transcendence [*dépassement*] of the old and the new . . . [to] give voice to the peoples [and] let black people enter the great stage of history."²¹

Césaire believed that abolishing colonialism would restore this "dialectic of having." Africans and Antilleans could then develop the most singular *and* most universal dimensions of their civilizations. This dynamic process whereby the apparently foreign is lived as one's proper inheritance signals precisely the political relationship to modern France Césaire desired for Antilleans.²²