

Freedom Time: Negritude, Decolonization, and the Future of the World. Gary Wilder. Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2015. ISBN: 9780822358503

*Freedom Time* explores the lives of Aimé Césaire from Martinique and Leopold Sedar Senghor who were intellectuals, philosophers and politicians in their respective countries. The main gist of the book is to demonstrate how Césaire and Senghor imagined an alternative type of decolonization, a decolonization process in which former French colonies would come together in a federation with France. Césaire and Senghor argued that this form of decolonization would allow former colonies to be in a mutually beneficial relationship with their former colonizer, France. Aimé Césaire was a poet, author and politician who went on to be elected Mayor of Fort de France and deputy in the French Assembly for Martinique. Leopold Senghor was also a poet and politician and Senegalese first president from 1960-1980.

Chapters one to three are introductory and they tease out the manner in which the process of decolonization was perceived differently by Césaire and Senghor. The chapters also introduce the main characters, Césaire and Senghor and how their ideas of decolonization (pages 3, 10, 133), departmentalization (20-21) and negritude (10-13) were reflected in their writings and poems. From chapter four to six, Wilder discusses France's position as an imperial power and how it was forced to depend on external help mainly the USA for its activities. The author also interrogates the prospect of departmentalization through the eyes of Aimé Césaire and how Leopold Senghor envisioned a "French union that would extend emancipatory aspects of the legacy of the French Revolution while transcending their unitary aspects through a federal system that ended colonialism, extended citizenship, and granted autonomy" (141). From chapter seven to nine, Wilder demonstrates how Martinique came to withdraw its initial support for departmentalization and how

Senghor managed to make a transition from his philosophical tone to become a political pragmatist.

The main arguments in Gary Wilder's book revolve around the idea that at the time of decolonization, not everyone in French territories was of the opinion that the new countries should detach themselves from the former colonial masters. Senghor, according to Wilder, was actually a nationalist in his own right in that he challenged "false assimilation" and argued for "association" founded on political equality and cultural diversity. Wilder also argued that Senghor and Césaire should not be viewed as anti-nationalist but as visionaries who imagined an alternative form of decolonization a process he calls *self-determination without state sovereignty* (1-5). Put differently, Wilder argues that Senghor and Césaire were individuals who refused to reduce decolonization to independence derived from their convictions about the difference between formal liberation and substantive freedom (5). They did not see the possibility of real freedom that did not include a mutually beneficial relationship between former colonizers and their colonies.

One of the major strengths of the book is that unlike most literature and commentary on Senghor and Césaire which casts them as anti-national or opposed to notions of self-determination, the author projects them in a new light. He argues that both Leopold Senghor and Aimé Césaire fully understood the historical background in which Africa and Europe had a donkey-rider relationship, which partly explains why neither wanted political emancipation which would leave them dependent on the metropole or approach it with a begging basket a day after independence (137). To his credit, Wilder seems to have taken a very different approach to the processes and debates around decolonization. In contexts such as Zimbabwe, decolonization was articulated in terms of a united nationalist movement focused on overthrowing the colonial administration while those proposing alternative means were

branded as anti-nationalist and lackeys of the colonizers. This is a very important intervention in that it proposes an alternate narrative of individuals who envisioned other forms of decolonization. Regardless of the fact that Senghor was in support of departmentalization, he was nonetheless a very strong critique of the colonial system and imperialism which they argued was based on the belief of African inferiority.

Another key point that the book makes is a critique of the decolonization process by contrasting it to what could have been. In an interview, Wilder noted that, “Césaire and Senghor thus believed that imperialism had created a perversely cosmopolitan situation to which European national-states and monoculturalists would now have to accommodate themselves, by becoming something else entirely.” I found this to be very striking in that both Césaire and Senghor did not only dream of an alternative decolonization process for Martinique and Senegal, but suggested that decolonization was supposed to transform the structure of relations between former colonies and colonizers the world over.

Although I fully appreciate the merits of Wilder’s argument, I am very reluctant to agree with his notion of Césaire and Senghor not being anti-nationalist. The author seems to romanticize Senghor and Césaire to the point of not analyzing them within the context they were making their Utopian proposals. At a time when most of Africa was clamoring for decolonization, it is barely surprising that Senghor and Césaire were perceived as traitors or anti-nationalist considering how they wanted to perpetuate ties to colonial masters, the same colonial powers who had pillaged and plundered. Notwithstanding that history should be a dialogue between past and present, it is equally imperative to attempt an analysis of events within the context (*Zeitgeist*) that they happened. I do feel that commenting from a distance, the author romanticized with Césaire and Senghor, the result of which is an analysis of past events based on “present” biases.

In summation, Wilder's book makes a very interesting read by exploring the manner in which decolonization was conceptualized by Césaire and Senghor. The book makes a significant contribution to the field of history by interrogating what could have been, arguing that Freedom did not mean the same thing for everyone under French colonial rule. While the popular sentiment in French colonies was Freedom that would separate former colonies and their former colonial masters, Césaire and Senghor argued that the only way former colonies would go through a successful process of decolonization was by entering into a federation with the former colonizers where they would be in a mutually beneficial relationship. This is a good book which I would recommend to anyone studying French colonial history in Africa.

Abraham Seda is a Ph.D. student in the History Department at the University of Minnesota.