He Proclaims Uhuru
Understanding Caliban as a Speaking Subject

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Abstract: Revising William Shakespeare’s The Tempest, Aimé Césaire wrote A Tempest as a proclamation of resistance to European cultural dominance—a project to “de-mythify” Shakespeare’s canonical text. In A Tempest, Caliban attempts to authorize his own freedom by speaking it, positioning speech as a tool to empower the colonized. By placing Caliban, the speaking slave, in the pages of a new play with a specific historical trajectory, Césaire’s message of colonial empowerment forces a second critique of Shakespeare while also inhabiting a space of its own. To connect speech with power, Césaire’s text focuses on the role of dialogue within the colonial system, emphasizing its unique ability to move between the disparate subjective spaces of the colonizer and the colonized. Infusing speech theory with politics, Césaire points out the dual possibilities of negotiation between the colonizer and colonized in his play; speech functions both to disrupt and reaffirm the identities of his players in the colonial system. By presenting colonial power structures as contestable, negotiable, and provisional, A Tempest exists outside the boundaries of a simple revision, as it engages with The Tempest to reveal the potential for language to act.

Keywords: Aimé Césaire, William Shakespeare, Caliban, A Tempest, colonization, hybridity, performative utterance, interstitial, dialogic
The Martinican poet and theorist Aimé Césaire originally intended to translate William Shakespeare’s play \textit{The Tempest} from its original English into French, but in the end, his project extended far beyond a mere translation. Césaire’s revision, \textit{Une Tempête},\textsuperscript{2} diverges from Shakespeare’s original play in a number of important ways—all of which suggest his political stance against colonization in the recognition of its terrifying power to marginalize and dehumanize. By locating the action of the play specifically in a colonial context and focusing almost entirely on the master/slave relationship between Prospero and Caliban, Césaire openly identifies the colonial themes that were merely suggested in Shakespeare’s original text. An activist himself, Césaire was a main progenitor of the négritude movement, an early organized gesture of black resistance to European cultural dominance. Given the political fervor of its author, \textit{Une Tempête} has become an object of critical scrutiny by both Shakespearean and postcolonial scholars attempting to discern to what extent Césaire’s revision is a radical departure from Shakespeare’s original \textit{Tempest} and what Césaire’s work would mean on its own terms. Navigating a hybrid space between the political and performative, \textit{Une Tempête} becomes necessarily a diverse and discordant conversation between Shakespeare and Césaire: the canonical text and its postcolonial revision.

Although older criticisms of Césaire’s \textit{A Tempest} often simply compare his revision to Shakespeare’s original text in an effort to understand its value as either a commentary upon or update of it, Timothy Scheie represents a new mode of critique that resists a simple analysis of the referential relationship between Shakespeare and Césaire to understand the meaning of Césaire’s text on its own. In this way, Scheie moves beyond questioning the legitimacy of Césaire’s project, instead focusing on the ability of Césaire’s text to represent colonial systems. Scheie argues that despite Césaire’s project to critique racist colonial power structures, his


\footnote{2} Richard Miller’s 2002 translation of Césaire’s \textit{Une Tempête} into English, \textit{A Tempest}, is used throughout this article.
play appears to reinforce their hegemonic power; as he seems to reconstruct them in his text. Offering an example of the problematic depictions of race in the text, Scheie points out Césaire’s use of masks in the play to identify characters. He argues that the masks function to undermine the potential for Césaire’s play to create “real” power shifts in colonial systems.

Masks are specifically addressed in *A Tempest’s* prologue, which Scheie cites as the initial moment of Césaire’s inappropriate treatment of race throughout the play. Césaire’s original staging of the play called for an all-black cast, and in the Prologue, a Master of Ceremonies directs the actors to choose which character they will perform during the play by selecting a mask from a box at random:³

Come gentlemen, help yourselves. To each his character and to each character his mask. You, Prospero? Why not? His is an unfathomable will to power. You, Caliban? Well, well, that’s revealing. You, Ariel! I have no objections. And what about Stephano? And Trinculo? No takers? Ah, just in time! It takes all sorts to make a world.⁴

Scheie reads the arbitrary distribution of racial identities in the play as evidence of Césaire’s project to expose race as a social construct rather than as a biological absolute. However, Scheie argues that Césaire’s deconstruction goes too far. Since the play was written for an all-black cast, his updated Prospero must be played by a black actor in a white mask—a shift that Scheie argues undercuts the authenticity of “true” racial hierarchies. The play, Scheie writes, “…discredits racial categories without furnishing a visible ‘doer behind the deed’ a ‘true’ race under the mask of race, a performer whose identity is not implicated in the performance itself.”⁵ To the extent that the play becomes too decontextualized and decentered to depict racial power dynamics as they exist in the real world outside of the performance, Scheie argues that the play loses its credibility as a legitimate critique on racialized power constructions. Existing in a vacuum in which the given racial identities of the characters do not match up with the reality of the actors, Scheie emphasizes that the problem of Césaire’s play rests in the performative. If racial identities here seem to be only a performance, can they be politically urgent?

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³ Césaire includes the subtitle “Adaptation for a Black Theatre” in his original version.
Apparently not: Scheie locates the failure of the play in Césaire’s refusal to present tangible racial constructs and describes a theater experience that would even draw audiences away from a productive critique of race and power: “the spectators might wish to escape the categories of race that have caused so much strife and suffering, but they need racial identities in order to make the world intelligible.” By applying these close readings of the inauthentic nature of race in Césaire’s play to Judith Butler’s theories of identity and performance, Scheie crafts a provocative articulation of the play’s political limits, where the identities it attempts to challenge already appear arbitrary, ambiguous, and negotiable, but must still be constantly reasserted. The play is thus, “…condemned to iterate them [racial categories] into exhaustion even when their instability has been revealed and their truthful status questioned.” However, Scheie does not ask whether these performative reiterations of racial categories (constructed as they are) can make new dynamics possible.

Scheie fails to acknowledge that Césaire consciously refused to operate within authentic racial categories in his play—a choice that opens up new possibilities to contest the validity of these categories even as they are performed. Scheie acknowledges that new, hybrid racial identities are being created and negotiated on Césaire’s stage but only views this as a problem. He argues that Césaire’s revision loses its poignancy because it “offers no cure” for unequal race relations in the colonial context it maps out, leaving audiences instead “stuck on categories of race” that can never be fully authenticated by the masks. Citing Butler’s Gender Trouble as a supporting text in his critique, Scheie incorporates her theory of the performative in this play of masks. Specifically, Scheie uses her discussion on the need for marginalized peoples to perform identities that provide them with more agency—agency in the sense that the repetitive performance of these identities “troubles” the existing identity categories and can create shifts in power. Using Butler’s theory, Scheie interprets the distribution of masks by the Master of Ceremonies as evidence that Césaire’s play does not achieve the same shifting effect that Butler describes because of its unreality. Instead, Scheie argues, Césaire seems to be reinscribing preconceived racialized power structures by reiterating their inappropriate inscription on subjects. As the black/white Prospero performs his borrowed identity of racial dominance, Scheie points out the problem of its theatricality. Since racial boundaries are only being challenged on the stage, the performance loses its potential to translate into the real world.

6 Scheie 215.
7 Scheie 215.
8 Scheie 216.
Although the question of performance presents a serious critique of Césaire’s potential to present a “real” racial performance, I argue that it is exactly Césaire’s reluctance to provide an answer to the question of race and power in A Tempest that allows alternatives outside of the dominant discourse to be explored on the stage. Racial identities are made even more provisional as the play forces audiences to consider racial constructions as they are actively created on stage. If we view Césaire’s play as a representation of the provisional nature of racial identities in a colonial context and as a suggestion of the inappropriate power ascribed to race, problems emerge in Scheie’s interpretation of the text, both critically and theoretically, as his scope becomes too limited to discern the importance that negotiation plays in identity formation.

Certainly Caliban and Prospero lose their genuine claim to racial identities in the play of masks as Scheie points out; however, this fact does not hinder their ambition to power in the racialized colonial system Césaire presents. Locked in conflict with each other over the course of the play, Caliban and Prospero reveal to audiences that the negotiation of identity and power must be not only performative, but dialogical. Although Scheie focuses on the problems of performed identities within the structure of a theatrical play, he ignores the potential for the play to access the association between speech and power through its necessarily dialogical format. Much of Césaire’s play takes the form of a continuing argument between Prospero and Caliban, allowing audiences to re-envision colonial power structures without an explicit connection to race, where identities and power must be solely enacted through articulation. In spite of Prospero’s assumption of “superior” power and knowledge as a colonizer/master, Caliban attempts to authorize his own freedom in A Tempest by speaking out against him, suggesting the power of speech as a tool for colonized people to challenge systems of oppression.

The connection between language and power has been made elsewhere by postcolonial critics and linguistic theorists, but Césaire’s play offers new insight into the power of performative utterances through its specific example of Caliban: a slave who speaks. In updating Shakespeare’s classic text to focus on the ambiguous relationship Caliban has to power and identity through the use of speech, Césaire’s play problematizes the boundaries between binaries such as self/other and oppressor/oppressed. By isolating Caliban’s capacity for speech as a tool for negotiating his identity, Césaire suggests the potential for resistance to oppressive power structures through dialogue. Portraying Caliban as a radical, speaking “other,” Césaire

10 See for example, Homi K. Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.
challenges colonial power structures and provides a provisional model for the marginalized to gain power by speaking.

**Shakespeare’s Speaking Slave**

Césaire’s emphasis on Caliban’s arguments with Prospero does not present a particularly radical revision, since Shakespeare’s original text already established Caliban as a speaking slave. Writing in the earliest moments of colonization, evidence abounds that Shakespeare was heavily influenced by the writings of early European explorers who kept journals and sent letters detailing their encounters with new places and peoples. Significantly, these narratives tend to place a specific importance on the ability of native peoples to speak as a marker of humanity. Steven Greenblatt’s essay *Learning to Curse* locates the paradoxical connection between humanity and language for native people. On the one hand, learning the language of the colonizer was one mode of gaining agency and a sense of humanity. On the other hand, speaking in general did not achieve the same effect: native languages unknown to colonizers relegated native people to a subhuman social status, as these utterances were viewed as illegitimate speech.\(^\text{11}\) Using Shakespeare’s terms, native languages were the “gabbling of a thing most brutish.”\(^\text{12}\)

To place the question of speech and power in a historical context, Greenblatt points to the experience of Robert Fabian of the Court of King Henry the VII, who described the ambiguous moment when a group of North American natives wearing the appropriate English clothing in court were still marked as “other” for their inability to speak the English language. He explains, “The real test of their conversion to civilization would be whether they had been able to master a language that ‘men’ could understand.”\(^\text{13}\) Shakespeare echoes this connection between the English language and humanity in his text through Caliban. Over the course of the play, audiences encounter Caliban as an English speaker; his speeches are not only intelligible, but complex. Although Prospero and Miranda berate Caliban as a “monster,” offering physical descriptions of his otherness (e.g., “mooncalf,” “freckled whelp”), audiences are urged to a more nuanced view when he delivers moving speeches, “be not afeard, the isle is full of noises...,” and articulates his hopes for a life outside the oppressive control of Prospero.\(^\text{14}\) Caliban’s poignant command of language not only gives a voice to his misery, but also encour-

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\(^{13}\) Greenblatt 18.

\(^{14}\) Shakespeare III. ii. 134.
ages audiences to grapple with this question of his humanity. Greenblatt argues that Shakespeare’s choice to make Caliban’s speech intelligible despite his apparent physical monstrosity complicates his identity, opening up the space for “a mysterious measure of resemblance” between the monster and his master Prospero.\(^\text{15}\) Shakespeare plays with the limits of human/inhuman in terms of language by framing Caliban’s discourse in English, and as Greenblatt points out, this construction has the effect of forcing the gaze of audiences into a comparison between the “monster” Caliban and his “human” counterparts—by extension, forcing the viewer to confront the shrinking space between the colonizer and the colonized.

The “mysterious resemblance” between Caliban and Prospero that Greenblatt suggests parallels Homi K. Bhabha’s work on the disruptive role of mimicry in colonial systems. Just as Shakespeare navigates the collapsing space between colonizer and colonized through language when Caliban speaks Prospero’s English, Bhabha provides a theoretical lens to view the identity shift that occurs during this event. He points out that the colonial ambition to initiate the colonized into the language of the colonizer becomes “inappropriate” in the sense that it creates colonial subjects who are “almost the same, but not quite” the colonizer. Thus, the two identities begin to exist in tandem with one another, in a constant state of negotiation, where differences between the colonizer and colonized must continue to be reasserted, even as they are simultaneously broken down.\(^\text{16}\)

...the excess or slippage produced by the ambivalence of mimicry (almost the same, but not quite) does not merely “rupture” the discourse, but becomes transformed into an uncertainty which fixes the colonial subject as a “partial” presence. By “partial” I mean both “incomplete” and “virtual.” It is as if the very emergence of the “colonial” is dependent for its representation upon some strategic limitation or prohibition within the authoritative discourse itself. The success of colonial appropriation depends on a proliferation of inappropriate objects that ensure its strategic failure, so that mimicry is at once resemblance and menace.\(^\text{17}\)

Shakespeare illustrates Bhabha’s theory of mimicry by allowing Caliban the slave to speak English. Forcing audiences to determine for themselves whether Caliban is a “monster” or not, Shakespeare positions Caliban always in comparison to Prospero—creating a similar

\(^{15}\) Greenblatt 31.


\(^{17}\) Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man,” 127.
binary to the one that Bhabha maps out between the colonizer and the colonized. Just as the division between the colonizer and colonized blurs in Bhabha’s system, wherein the colonial subject becomes a “partial” colonizer through mimicry, audiences are faced with a similar construction in scenes where Caliban speaks as clearly and eloquently in English as Prospero. Language is the mode of Caliban’s “transformation” into a “partial” subject through mimicry, a subject that is both “resemblance and menace.” As a lens for understanding Shakespeare’s suggestion of identity politics in *The Tempest*, Bhabha’s assertion of the disruptive, “menacing,” and “inappropriate” nature of mimicry postulates that unstable power dynamics in colonial systems are symptomatic. When linguistic colonialism, or really colonialism in general, blurs the boundaries between Prospero and Caliban (the colonizer and the colonized) by creating colonial “mimic men,” the potential emerges, as Bhabha articulates, for these “mimic men” to disrupt/transform the colonial system, gaining agency for themselves in their proximity to the colonizer. “The menace of mimicry,” Bhabha writes, “is its double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority. And it is a double-vision that is a result of what I’ve described as the partial representation/recognition of the colonial object.”

In this way, the object of mimicry, the colonial object, despite its authority as such, goes under a disruptive transformation once the colonial subject begins to approximate it. I will return to the concept of the disruptive transformation of mimicry later on; however, at this point it becomes possible to visualize Caliban’s potential for power when Bhabha’s theory is applied to the text. As Caliban comes closer to a perfect mimicry of his master Prospero, he begins to undermine his authority.

Using the example of language, we can begin to understand Caliban’s mimicry of Prospero’s English as a gesture to remove the differences that separate them. Bhabha places this possibility at the crux of the power in mimicry: it “…articulates those disturbances of cultural, racial, and historical difference that menace the narcissistic demand of colonial authority.” Returning to the Shakespearean connection between language and humanity, mimicry becomes the mode through which Caliban can access humanity. As the differences between Caliban and Prospero collapse and Caliban gains a closer proximity (although always not quite) to humanity, it becomes possible to imagine this as a site of the attack on colonial authority Bhabha suggests.

If language humanizes Caliban to audiences in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*—or at least reveals his proximity to humanity through linguistic mimicry—it is paradoxically language that

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simultaneously works to enslave him within the colonial system of the play. It is important to remember that Bhabha’s account of the potential for mimicry to disrupt colonial systems is not a mode of complete resistance since it is predicated on the need for the colonizer’s authority/identity to mimic. The colonized exists in proximity to the colonizer. In this sense, Caliban must necessarily navigate the space between his prior identity and the identity of the colonizers he mimics—a problem that renders him unable to fully claim either the “colonizer” or “colonized” as his identity. Bhabha’s interpretation of colonization outlines how Caliban becomes “not quite” the colonizer, existing as an ambiguous “other” to the colonizer. So what then is he? The process of colonization has not only placed him in a proximal relationship to the colonizer, but also to his own pre-colonial identity. As Caliban shows, the process of colonization itself complicates the colonized person’s connection to his/her prior cultural identification.

When Prospero and Miranda taught Caliban how to speak their language, they allowed him to approximate them as a “mimic man.” However, Shakespeare suggests that this gesture functioned mostly to inscribe him as a subject into their community and culture. Linguistically incorporated into a new community with his colonizers, Caliban faces the much theorized problem of colonial alienation, forcing him to simultaneously exist within two cultures. Albert Memmi’s work in *The Colonizer and Colonized* explains the doubling that occurs when the colonized person learns the language of the colonizer, suggesting the physical and psychological trauma of negotiating between two worlds at once.

The difference between native language and cultural language is not peculiar to the colonized but colonial bilingualism cannot be compared to just any linguistic dualism. Possession of two languages is not merely a matter of having two tools, but actually means participation in two psychical and cultural realms.²⁰

Caliban’s education in English literally places him in two worlds,²¹ a position that necessarily complicates his prior identity and places him within the mimetic proximal relationship to the colonizer that Bhabha theorizes. As Caliban is taught not to “gabble like a thing most brutish,”²² he is also interpellated into a community with Prospero and Miranda, albeit a community built upon control and dominance. Instead of engaging in a discourse with Caliban as equals, Miranda and Prospero exploit Caliban’s capacity for the English language to

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²¹ Keep in mind that Césaire’s original text was written in French.

²² Shakespeare I. ii. 356-7.
further enslave him, using it to give orders, criticize, and threaten. However, despite this community of control, Caliban’s ability to speak English opens up new possibilities for communication between master and slave, and consequently forms the proximity to power that Césaire updates in his revision. Recognizing that learning English has relegated him to slavery, Caliban defiantly responds to Prospero and Miranda, “You taught me language and my profit on’t is I know how to curse.”

Although learning English certainly disempowers Caliban in this colonial microcosm, his ability to use English to curse his colonizers locates his proximity to power in mimicry, at least allowing Caliban the agency to subvert the dominance of Prospero and Miranda through speech. In this moment of resistance, Caliban undermines his education by using the language he learned against his teachers. In this way, he reaffirms his own position as an individual by critiquing those who oppress him, thus problematizing his inscription as “slave” through his exhibition of agency (limited though it is). Shakespeare’s play locates Caliban’s humanity and power at the point that he speaks perfect English, raising questions about the creation of colonial power dynamics and revealing the ambiguous access to power held by the speaking “other.”

Caliban Re-emerges

Recognizing the political implications of *The Tempest* as an allegory for colonialism, Aimé Césaire wrote *A Tempest* as a specific part of his project to empower colonized peoples. In a 1972 interview, Césaire explains the goal of his text:

> I was trying to “de-mythify” the tale. To me Prospero is the complete totalitarian. I am always surprised when others consider him the wise man who “forgives.” What is most obvious, even in Shakespeare’s version, is the man’s absolute will to power. Prospero is the man of cold reason, the man of methodical conquest … Caliban is the man who is still close to his beginnings, whose link with the natural world has not yet been broken.\(^{24}\)

Césaire’s vision of Caliban’s proximity to the “natural world,” when contrasted with Prospero’s detached “cold reason” and “methodical conquest,” clearly reflects his outlook on the colonial system and forms a consistent link with his larger anticolonial political views. *A Tempest* was written in 1969, relatively late in Césaire’s long political/academic career. As a student in a French university, Césaire found a cohort of likeminded intellectuals from the

\(^{23}\) Shakespeare I. ii. 363-4.

French colonies who were also interested in issues of race and culture. By 1935, this small group had produced a journal, L’Étudiant noir, which included writings that offered a counterpoint to the dominant university discourse and was produced entirely by black students. The growing black student movement sparked by this journal and others in the French universities was first articulated by Césaire in 1935 as négritude, which he defined as a collective “resistance to assimilation” in which black cultural practices could be re-asserted to combat European cultural dominance. Although scholars today point out that négritude’s basic assumption of a unified black culture may be too essentialist, the movement retains its cultural and historical importance as a reclamation of blackness as an identity for black academic elites, as well as an early attempt to initiate new possibilities for agency within the rapidly shifting power dynamics of decolonizing countries during the movement’s historical moment.

To represent and assert a new black culture/consciousness, négritude promoted the creation of black literature. In addition to writing A Tempest and other plays, Césaire embodied his own vision of a black cultural voice through his poetry, memoirs, and theoretical texts, which all focus closely upon the lived experience of blackness. However, this movement was not simply a suggestion of, but rather was an aggressive assertion of, black cultural presence. For Césaire, négritude was always a deeply political movement, born from a “place of struggle,” where the re-appropriation of the word nègre as a name for the movement was in itself a resistant act:

That’s when we adopted the word nègre, as a term of defiance. It was a defiant name. To some extent it was a reaction of enraged youth. Since there was some shame about the word nègre, we chose the word nègre.

Significantly, the site of resistance in négritude on its most basic level was located within language—in the quotation above, Césaire explains the explicit act of reclaiming “nègre” for political purposes. The négritude movement thus exists in the interplay of language and politics, and Césaire theorizes his movement entirely in terms of its imperative to assert a new literature—one that could produce work that would prove that “…Africa was not some sort of blank page in the history of humanity.” On the surface, Césaire’s A Tempest approaches his goal to create a black literary canon and directly assert the presence of black lit-

27 Césaire, Discourse on Colonialism, 89.
28 Césaire, Discourse on Colonialism, 92.
erary culture by simply writing a play as a black man. However, Césaire’s play moves beyond even these surface possibilities, since its themes also further the political goals of the négritude movement. This play, as with all his works, seeks to expose the violence of colonial systems and how the tortures of colonization are enacted on black bodies and identities as well as on white ones.

Perhaps Césaire’s most important contribution was to make explicit the horrific effects of colonialism on both the physical body and metaphysical self of all participants in the colonial system. Césaire wrote extensively on the dehumanizing aspects of colonization in *Discourse on Colonialism*, in which he famously encapsulated the experience of colonization into the equation: “colonization= thingification.” Césaire’s approach to explaining the plight of people living within the colonial system through the pragmatic format of an equation performs the rhetorical effect of expressing a profound sense of dehumanization both in its linguistic construction and in its meaning. Albert Memmi, agreed that the colonized person “tends rapidly toward becoming an object,” explaining that the combination of physical and psychological disempowerment in colonial systems has the effect of rendering people suddenly strange and inhuman. In this system, Césaire also points out the dual function of colonization to dehumanize the colonizer as well as the colonized: “…the colonizer, who in order to ease his conscience gets into the habit of seeing the other man as an animal, accustoms himself to treating him like an animal, and tends objectively to transform himself into an animal.” Thus, colonialism performs a double violence paradoxically on the colonizer as well as on the colonized, as Césaire offers that all power in colonial systems is corruptive.

This theoretical trajectory offers a key insight into Césaire’s project to reposition *The Tempest* in a colonial context. In one interview, he discussed the political project of his play, offering it as emblematic of the experience of colonized people around the world:

Demystified, the play [is] essentially about the master-slave relation, a relation that is still alive and which, in my opinion, explains a good deal of contemporary history: in particular, colonial history, the history of the United States.

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29 Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, 42-3.

30 Even semantically, the use of the equation format necessarily limits the possibility for multiple interpretations of this statement. In other words, the equation also “thingifies” or flattens the complexities of the language Césaire uses to construct “colonization.”

31 Memmi 210.

32 Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, 41.
Wherever there are multiracial societies, the same drama can be found, I think.33

As a revision, Césaire’s text mostly infuses a new sense of urgency to Caliban’s position as a slave by explicitly evoking colonization, and most importantly, adding many more dialogical interactions between the master and slave. Taking up Shakespeare’s suggestion that speech is the site of Caliban’s potential power, Aimé Césaire’s A Tempest presents a Caliban who attempts to tear down Prospero’s dominance by speaking. Although the speech/agency connection was initiated in Shakespeare’s original text, Césaire’s own political moment and affiliations offer new insight into Caliban speaking, as the author himself believed in the power of speech and literary projects to enact political change.

**Powerful Utterances**

If Césaire’s project as a whole is to assert language as an avenue toward liberation for the colonized, A Tempest places his ideas within the specific context of a master and a slave: Prospero and Caliban. Césaire identifies one potential for power in raising the question of native languages. Caliban’s first utterance in A Tempest to Prospero is “uhuru,” a Kiswahili word roughly translatable to “freedom.” The word was used prominently in the nativist Kenyan Mau Mau revolution of 1961. Not only does “uhuru” draw a connection to radical political movements in Africa, linking Caliban to the decolonization struggle in a specific sense, but the utterance also suggests that Caliban possesses knowledge beyond Prospero’s. This has the function of subverting Prospero’s claim to a master’s absolute knowledge and presents a challenge to his control. In the text, “uhuru” disorients Prospero, and he complains, “mumbling in your own native language again, I don’t like it,” a thinly veiled attempt to reassert himself as master.34 Steve Almquist argues that uhuru in the text is evidence of Caliban’s “… ability to conceptualize a world foreign to Prospero, a world not defined through Prospero’s authoritative lexicon….”35 In this way, Caliban’s use of uhuru adheres to many of the theoretical concepts Césaire and his contemporaries identify for subverting colonial power dynamics through speech.

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34 Césaire, A Tempest, 17.

This moment illustrates the kind of cultural resistance through the use of native language that Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o also advocates. In *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, Ngũgĩ points out the paradox that most literature produced in Africa by Africans is written in European languages. Troubled by what seems an affront on authentic African cultural forms, he questions to what extent the “fatalistic logic” of using English affords more agency to Africans:

> The fact is that all of us who opted for European languages...accepted that fatalistic logic to a greater or lesser degree. We were guided by it and the only question which preoccupied us was how best to make the borrowed tongues carry the weight of our African experience....

Despite the rich diversity of languages in Africa, African writers opt to use the language of the colonizer, a choice that Ngũgĩ finds deeply problematic: African writers are in a constant state of translation and must always try to adapt their “African experience” into fundamentally inappropriate languages. He argues that the resulting hybrid literatures Africans produce in foreign languages must be specifically termed “Afro-European” literature, because they cannot possibly be considered “African” literature due to their implicit participation in the imperial system by way of language. Ngũgĩ’s calls for African writers to embrace their native languages to “communicate the message of revolutionary unity and hope.”

Linking literature with power, writing becomes an overtly political demonstration for Ngũgĩ: He explains that “writing in African languages becomes a subversive or treasonable offence,” given the pervasiveness of the colonial project to silence native languages. In view of Ngũgĩ’s edict, Césaire’s play appears revolutionary for its inclusion of a Kiswahili word specifically as a tool to resist the colonizer, especially a word that means “freedom.” Although Césaire wrote his play in a much earlier historical moment than Ngũgĩ wrote his call for the production of African language literature, clearly the two men placed a deep significance on the power of native language not only as a symbol of cultural ownership but also as an act of resistance to colonial dominance.

Caliban’s potential for liberation by speaking his native language is limited given that he still uses English as his primary language in Césaire’s text. Although Caliban acknowledges a prior language/culture by shouting “uhuru,” his total liberation is compromised as he per-

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37 Ngũgĩ 27.
38 Ngũgĩ 27.
39 Ngũgĩ 30.
petuates his ties to the English language and his colonizing teachers. If Caliban only spoke his native language in the text, he would be symbolically distinct from the culture of his colonizers, and thus, liberated in the sense that colonization failed to permeate his language. However, this idyllic vision of the power of native languages is interrupted by Césaire, who acknowledges that Caliban must successfully communicate with Prospero or risk being ignored entirely.

Shakespeare directly addresses the problem of native language in his text, presenting it not only as a marker of cultural inferiority, but also as an obstacle to communication. Miranda dismisses Caliban’s native language as unintelligible “gabbling,” revealing her assumption that English is the only language. 40 Facing a reality of impetuous colonizers, marginalized people (Césaire included) have adopted European languages—whether voluntarily or not—as a means to open new channels of communication. Although the use of European languages places the viability of native cultures at stake, 41 Césaire points out the paradox that Caliban must speak Prospero’s language in order to more completely destabilize his power. While Caliban’s use of Kiswahili jars Prospero, his immediate reaction is to dismiss it. Caliban needs to be able to resist Prospero in English. At the crux of Césaire’s play, the impossible question emerges: How can Caliban organize to overthrow the dominance of Prospero when he must do it in English, a gesture that removes his original cultural identity in the oppressive system of colonization?

In this complex environment of language and power, I find that the connection between speech and power has not always been articulated in a colonial or even explicitly political context. Retreating for a moment from the discussion of language and power in Césaire’s work and its implicit identity politics, the interstices of language and power can also be discussed in terms of semantics. J. L. Austin’s work on performative utterances shows that performative speech, or spoken words, can act—given that these utterances adhere to a specific set of social conventions. 42 Although not explicitly political, Austin’s work merits some consideration in the context of Césaire’s attempt to liberate Caliban through speech.

Austin defines a performative utterance as a speech act, where “the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action—it is not normally thought of as just saying something.” 43 To illustrate the performative utterance more completely, Austin uses the example of wedding vows—saying the words “I do” brings a new state of affairs into existence, in

40 Shakespeare I. ii. 356.
41 See Frantz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks (New York: Grove, 1994).
43 Austin 6.
this case, a marriage. However, Austin complicates the issue by acknowledging that specific conditions must be met for these performative utterances to achieve their intended action. For words to be active, they must operate within the correct context. In the marriage example, if the circumstances are inappropriate, a person saying “I do” cannot actually perform a marriage; the person would simply be saying, “I do.” The idea that performative utterances depend upon social convention forms the crux of the political implications of Austin’s work. He points out that it is “necessary that the circumstances in which the words are uttered should be in some way, or ways, appropriate,” and goes on to argue that appropriateness is mostly based on social convention.\(^4\) Weddings require legitimization to be recognized by the state, to say nothing of the additional requirements of adhering to religious/cultural traditions. The necessity for performative utterances to operate within social “conventions” reveals their complicity with dominant power structures.

Although Austin’s performative utterances create new possibilities for Césaire’s text to “do something” to correct oppressive colonial power structures, the problem of legitimacy presents an unavoidable obstacle. For example, we can identify Caliban’s proclamation of “uhuru” as a performative utterance using Austin’s criteria. As audiences are presented with Caliban’s clear announcement of “freedom,” an utterance that has the potential to activate what it announces under the right circumstances, Caliban’s action is disrupted when Prospero cannot understand the word. Since the power dynamic on the island mirrors colonial situations, Prospero’s role as colonizer grants him the authority to determine which of Caliban’s utterances are fulfilled and which are not. In this instance, Caliban’s claim cannot achieve its action because it goes against colonial convention for a slave to free himself by speaking. While Caliban can “speak,” his social status as a slave removes the potential for his words of resistance to expressly perform their intended action, suggesting the close relationship between speech and power and politicizing the action of Caliban’s speech within a colonial system. As Austin argues, performative utterances outside of convention are doomed to failure. However, Césaire’s suggestion of Prospero’s discomfort with the word “uhuru” does point to one remaining possibility for Caliban’s power through speech. Although Caliban’s performative utterances are not fully realized, perhaps even their iteration is enough to destabilize the colonial construct.

In this void between the utterance and its intended action, Judith Butler updates Austin to suggest how even inappropriate utterances can become active. Identifying the inherent politics of the performative utterance, Butler emphasizes their ability to work within social conventions to produce subjects for control. In *Excitable Speech*, Butler places Austin’s ideas in

\(^4\) Austin 8.
a more political context, arguing that the performance of “injurious speech acts” causes a loss of context that disorients the receiver, allowing a temporary loss of control that places him/her into a new social order.45 By synthesizing Austin’s productive performative utterance with Althusser’s theories of ideological interpellation, Butler points out that some speech acts move beyond action in the restricted definition that Austin articulates. Instead, these words are active in the sense that they function to call a new subject into being. Specifically citing the phenomena of naming, she argues that as people are named, even incorrectly, they are initiated into a particular social system. Naming implies a sense of identity, and although the new identity could function to place the named in an inferior social position, there is still the suggestion of agency where at least the named is assured of his/her social position. This fact allows Butler to present a new possibility for agency:

The terms by which we are hailed are rarely the ones we choose…but these terms we never really chose are the occasion for something we might still call agency, the repetition of an originary subordination for another purpose, one whose future is still partially open.46

When applied to Césaire’s text, Butler’s theories open the space for Caliban’s agency through speech as his “future is still partially open.” Readers must acknowledge that the moment in which Prospero first names Caliban his slave is an inappropriate gesture: both texts explain that Caliban had a legitimate claim to the island before Prospero arrived. By specifically christening Caliban as a “slave,” Césaire’s text illustrates Butler’s idea that naming works as a performative utterance to “introduce a new reality rather than report on an existing one.”47 Butler’s theory also traces Caliban’s shifting role after that initial moment of vulnerability. Referring to Althusser, she notes the power of language to interpolate the body into a new social existence.48 Applying Butler’s theory to Césaire’s text, once the title “slave” is given to Caliban, he has also been given the identity of “slave,” along with all of its social connotations on the island. Butler suggests that “slave” is not just a temporary condition. Caliban will never be able to “unsay” the name he has been given by Prospero – thus permanently cementing his position as a “slave,” both socially and psychologically. However, Butler’s discussion of the new sort of agency naming initiates makes it possible for Caliban to modify this given

46 Butler, Excitable Speech, 38.
47 Butler, Excitable Speech, 33.
48 Butler, Excitable Speech, 26.
identity within existing social constructs by negating it. We can imagine that Caliban’s role as “slave,” although not a name he chose for himself, gives him a contestable identity. Caliban exemplifies the hidden potential of naming; not only does it support the existing dominant power structure by interpolating Caliban as a slave, but it simultaneously initiates a new power dynamic as Caliban finds the agency to deny his new inappropriate name/identity.

Césaire explores the possibility for naming to empower in his text most specifically in the scene in which Caliban directly challenges his name given by Prospero.

Caliban: It’s this: I’ve decided I don’t want to be called Caliban any longer.

....

Caliban: It’s the name given me by your hatred, and every time it’s spoken it’s an insult.

Prospero: My aren’t we getting sensitive! All right, suggest something else... I’ve got to call you something. What will it be? Cannibal would suit you, but I’m sure you wouldn’t like that, would you? Let’s see... what about Hannibal? That fits. And why not... they all seem like historical names.

Caliban: Call me X. That would be best. Like a man without a name. Or, to be more precise, a man whose name has been stolen. You talk about history... well, that’s history, and everyone knows it! Every time you summon me it reminds me of a basic fact, the fact that you’ve stolen everything from me, even my identity! Uhuru! (He exits.)

Prospero: (to Ariel) My dear Ariel, did you see how he looked at me, that glint in his eye? That’s something new. Well, let me tell you, Caliban is the enemy.49

In an attempt to reassert agency over his own identity, Caliban asks Prospero to call him “X” as a placeholder for “a man whose name has been stolen.” Prospero’s insidious assertion of power in pretending to reassign Caliban an equally offensive new name, as well as his aside that Caliban needs a name, functions to establish his sense of ownership over Caliban’s identity along the lines of colonial structures. Although the dialogue ultimately ends without a clear resolution, the exchange still exemplifies Butler’s theory as Caliban reclaims agency over his own identity by contesting it. Caliban’s latent power is palpable. Most important in this scene, however, is the effect of Caliban’s words on Prospero. Césaire suggests that Prospero was unsettled by the exchange after Caliban leaves, a reaction that opens up the space for

49 Césaire, A Tempest, 20.
Caliban’s resistance to colonization through dialogue. Paradoxically empowered by his inscription into the colonial system through language, Caliban in turn uses language to attempt to reclaim his lost identity and challenge his oppressor. As Caliban realizes his potential power through speech, the question emerges: what is at stake in marginalized peoples using speech against their masters?

Colonial Applications

Caliban’s ability to speak allows his close proximity to power despite his status as a slave. To further investigate the connection between speech and power in Césaire’s *A Tempest*, I reconsider the play’s explicit colonial context and how the play mirrors and diverges from real colonial situations. Gayatri Spivak anticipates Caliban’s ambiguous relationship with speech by acknowledging the long historical relationship between marginalization and silence in colonial systems. Spivak points out that speaking is always an assertion of political power by identifying how the subaltern, or marginalized person, is cowed into silence by the oppressive discursive hierarchies of native elites and colonizers. The subaltern are rendered silent when more powerful voices presume to speak for them. Spivak identifies the utter powerlessness of the subaltern who cannot speak for and of themselves: “for the [gender unspecified] ‘true’ subaltern group, whose identity is its difference, there is no unrepresentable subaltern subject that can know and speak itself…” Spivak points out that one of the greatest violences enacted upon the subaltern, who are locked in a constant reality of misrepresentation and silence by the colonial system, is their inability to represent themselves through speech.

Thus far, I have argued that speech is the primary source of Caliban’s limited agency in both Césaire and Shakespeare’s texts. In this way, Caliban presents himself not as the fully marginalized silent subaltern that Spivak discusses, but rather as a hybrid version of her subaltern: a slave who speaks despite his status. Initiated by Shakespeare and then fully explored in Césaire’s revision, Caliban gains a sense of empowerment in his ability to speak out against Prospero to articulate his own identity and represent himself. However, this empowerment must always be limited by his position as a slave, rendering his ability to shift the power dynamic of colonization by speaking an ambiguous possibility. In a significant affirmation of Spivak’s subaltern silence theory, both plays end with no resolution to the problem of Caliban’s slavery. At the end of both plays, Caliban’s freedom remains unresolved. Despite his discursive


51 Spivak 285.
attempts to gain freedom (mostly by arguing with Prospero), audiences are only left with suggestions for his future; however, these can also be analyzed through the theoretical apparatuses of speech and subjectivity. Since Caliban may not be able to achieve total freedom, can his speech acts achieve something else?

Endings/Beginnings

Caliban’s position in-between freedom and slavery surfaces most clearly in the ambiguous ending of each play. Not fully gained but not impossible, both Shakespeare and Césaire leave the question of Caliban’s freedom unanswered. In Shakespeare’s original *Tempest*, Caliban is not even present on stage at the end of the play. He has been unceremoniously ordered to clean Prospero’s house with fellow conspirators Trinculo and Stephano. By carrying out his final orders from Prospero without voicing a single complaint, Caliban eliminates the possibility for his complete liberation. Indeed, Caliban’s last words to the audience are an acknowledgement of his failure to enact his own freedom: “What a thrice-double ass/Was I to take this drunkard for a God/And worship this dull fool.” Once he leaves the stage, audiences can only imagine Caliban’s future. Whatever bleak reality Caliban’s absence and silence may signify in Shakespeare’s play, it must also be noted that he is evoked in Prospero’s tragic musings during the epilogue. Admittedly, Caliban is not specifically mentioned in Prospero’s final lines, but in his essay “Intertextuality in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* and Césaire’s *Une Tempête*,” William Redmond points out the possibility that Caliban’s presence is implied in Prospero’s last speech. Prospero, alone on stage, speaks out to the audience, asking them to pardon his “crimes” and allow him to leave the island and return to Italy with the others. Alone on stage, Prospero makes his final address to the audience:

> And my ending is despair/Unless I be relieved by prayer./Which pierces so that it assaults/ Mercy itself and frees all faults./ As you from crimes would pardoned be,/ Let your indulgence set me free.

Redmond notes the specificity of the language in this section. Prospero’s discussion of “crimes” and desire to be “free” again suggest his participation in an oppressive colonial system, even implying some acknowledgement and guilt for the injustices he has committed.

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32 Shakespeare V.i. 296-298.
34 Shakespeare, Epilogue, lines 15-20.
against Caliban. In this way, Prospero’s speech functions to deconstruct his role as a colonizer psychologically, prompting a new consideration of the effects of Caliban’s speech acts.\textsuperscript{55} Returning to the earlier discussion of Discourse on Colonialism, Césaire reveals not only how colonial systems dehumanize the colonized, but also how they “decivilize the colonizer,” operating to “awaken buried instincts” and promote a calloused acceptance of violence.\textsuperscript{56} If read in a specifically colonial context, Shakespeare’s inclusion of Prospero’s remorseful speech at the end of his play can be interpreted as an apologetic testimonial of the kind of dehumanization that can occur to people in power in colonial systems. Although Shakespeare resists a specific discussion of Caliban’s freedom at the end of the text, he opens up the potential for a shift in the colonial power dynamic of the island in Prospero’s expression of remorse about his role as the colonizer, thus weakening his absolute control over the island and creating a space for Caliban to emerge from marginality. Although in Shakespeare’s epilogue Caliban does not speak, Prospero’s apologetic speech relocates his previously unchallengeable dominance in this colonial system elsewhere: perhaps in closer proximity to Caliban.

Césaire expresses a similar possibility for a new colonial power dynamic in his revision, amplifying Prospero’s evocation of an absent Caliban to identify their alignment with theoretical constructions of the hybridity in colonial relationships. At the end of the fifth act, rather than returning to Italy (as is implied in Shakespeare’s play), Prospero decides to remain on the island with Caliban. In a complete break from Shakespeare, Césaire adds a new final scene in which Prospero violently confronts Caliban for undermining his power: “Well I hate you as well! For it is you who have made me doubt myself for the first time.”\textsuperscript{57} After an undisclosed amount of time passes, the curtain rises again and Prospero reappears on the stage, significantly alone, and shouts: “Well, Caliban old fellow, it’s just us two now, here on this island… only you and me. You-me…me-you!”\textsuperscript{58} However, he receives no response from Caliban, who remains offstage. Only Caliban’s disembodied voice can be heard in the distance shouting “Freedom Hi-Day!” over the sound of ocean waves crashing to the shore, as prescribed in the original stage directions.\textsuperscript{59} Césaire’s ending amplifies the shifting power dynamics: Césaire’s reconstruction of Prospero’s final speech is not a plea but rather is a recognition of the dissolution of the boundary between his own identity and Caliban’s. This shift prompts a multitude

\textsuperscript{55} Redmond 179.

\textsuperscript{56} Césaire, Discourse on Colonialism, 36.

\textsuperscript{57} Césaire, A Tempest, 63.

\textsuperscript{58} Césaire, A Tempest, 65.

\textsuperscript{59} Césaire, A Tempest, 66.
of connections to contemporary theories of the slippages created in colonial systems between subjects, further deconstructing the power dynamics between colonizer and colonized.

This evidence of Prospero and Caliban’s relationship in flux at the conclusion aligns Césaire’s play with Homi K. Bhabha’s suggestion of the dialogical and indeterminate nature of colonial power constructs. Bhabha explains that in a colonial binary, both the colonizer and colonized depend upon one another in order to establish their identities as separate. Bhabha also introduces the “third space,” the complex and various interactions passing between the colonizer and the colonized as they negotiate these differences. As a specific moment in which this “third space” is activated, Bhabha notes the power of “interstitial moments” to reveal points of contact between binaries, specifically, the seemingly disparate roles of the colonizer and the colonized. Bhabha elaborates that the distinction between the colonizer and colonized is entirely a product of negotiation:

… “difference” is not so much a reflection of pre-given ethnic or cultural traits set in the tablets of a “fixed” tradition as it is a complex ongoing negotiation—a negotiation against authorities, amongst minorities: the “right” to signify concerns.

As an aged Prospero takes the stage, the moment when he begins to conflate his own identity with Caliban’s can be interpreted as interstitial. In this moment, Prospero acknowledges the intimacy of his connection with Caliban (albeit from a position of difference): he depends upon Caliban’s presence and “difference” to locate his power as colonizer. When Caliban is absent, Prospero expresses his insecurity about being left alone on the island. He begins to confuse his identity with Caliban’s—thus illustrating the codependence that Bhabha positions as the foundation of colonial relationships. By revealing Prospero’s need to negotiate his power in relation to Caliban, Césaire initiates the possibility of investigating the power dynamic between Prospero and Caliban on a new plane where Caliban’s oppression is not an absolute reality, but one that is constructed through the articulation and negotiation of differences that separate him from Prospero. Because the colonial system depends upon negotiation to survive, the presence of Caliban’s speech in both texts gains critical importance. Caliban’s

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60 Almquist also makes the connection between Prospero’s speech and Bhabha’s idea of the dissolution of boundaries between Prospero and Caliban; however, his discussion is limited to identifying evidence of Caliban’s mimicry of Prospero.

61 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).


63 Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 270.
ability to speak ensures that the foundations upon which the colonial relationships are built can be challenged and renegotiated.

Explicitly connecting the negotiation of colonial identities with speech, Bhabha points out that the conversation is necessarily about the “right to signify concerns.”64 Bhabha’s idea maps out how subjects formulate their identities through negotiation with “others.” Applied to Césaire’s text, Bhabha’s work presents a new interpretation of Caliban’s speech acts as a means for him to redefine the power binary between himself and Prospero. In the actual text, many of Caliban’s utterances on stage are dialogical, positioning him in an unending negotiation of his status in comparison with Prospero’s. By focusing on the conflict-ridden dialogical negotiations between Prospero and Caliban, Césaire reveals the dual nature through which language acts simultaneously to enforce and to equalize oppressive power structures in which the powerful speak to defend their status even as the marginalized rise to challenge them.

Contested Dialogues

Shakespeare gave Caliban the unique position of a “speaking” slave, affording him the tantalizing possibility of subverting his master Prospero’s power; however, it was not until Césaire’s revision that the potential for speech could be fully explored in an explicitly colonial context. The focus on speech and dialogue in Césaire’s A Tempest identifies the author’s theoretical perspective that speech is essential to the project of colonial empowerment, where speech enables colonial subjects to assert their own identities as well as negotiate their position in relation to colonial power dynamics. By emphasizing Caliban’s speech in the original Shakespeare, we can see that Césaire’s revision deserves critical attention for its exposure of the power in Caliban’s speech acts: a concrete example of how speech can open up new possibilities of agency for marginalized peoples despite its many limitations and nuances.

The use of dialogue in Césaire’s text reveals that colonial power structures are in constant negotiation through performance and shows that the structures produced are always necessarily provisional. I find that the ambiguous endings in both plays imply the potential for a shift in Prospero’s power as Caliban speaks; however, the placement of these concepts within a dialogical framework removes the possibility for finalized structures. Power shifts in conversation. Prospero and Caliban’s arguments work to reveal the fluid creation and contestation of power and identity in Césaire’s colonial scenario.

The depiction of these structures being actively built up on stage requires audiences to formulate their own interpretations of what is gained or lost. In this way, the two plays raise

64 Bhabha, The Location of Culture, 270.
more questions about the political possibilities for dialogue than they answer. Though theories of the intersection of language and power suggest how dialogue can be useful to achieve “freedom” or “agency,” what remains unsaid and unsayable is our definition of “freedom” in the context of the play, what “freedom” would look like for Caliban, as well as the more direct question of whether or not Caliban ever gains “freedom” by speaking.

In the extensive scholarship comparing Césaire’s revision to Shakespeare’s original, recent critics have suggested that Césaire’s text itself could be interpreted as a dialogue with Shakespeare’s original in the sense that it engages with the canonical western text to reveal the inconsistencies within the colonial power structures it represents. Jose O’Shea and Pier Frassinelli emphasize the need to compare *A Tempest* with *The Tempest* rather than treating it as an independent play. They argue that these comparisons reveal *A Tempest*’s reflexive power to problematize and identify key aspects of colonial power in the original text. In this way, the two plays themselves become a dialogue across social and temporal boundaries to address essential questions of power, difference, and most importantly, the role of speech.

By updating Shakespeare’s original text to give a new voice to Caliban, Aimé Césaire expresses a new political trajectory with *A Tempest*. In Césaire’s revision, Shakespeare’s suggestion of the connection between speech and power is contested, reproduced, and transformed through the reinscription of Caliban as a radical speaking slave—ultimately producing a text that positions speech as a tool to empower marginal peoples. By constructing a new Caliban who challenges his position through speech, Césaire reveals the instability at the center of colonial power structures in his text: entities that must be constantly renegotiated and rearticulated in terms of difference. Thematic concerns aside, however, the text achieves a similarly disruptive effect even in its creation. Important not only for instigating an attack on the colonial system through Caliban’s speech, *A Tempest* becomes a disruptive speech act itself, as Césaire infuses his own voice into Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* to open a new space for black voices to challenge oppressive colonial scripts.

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References


