

Négritude

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Négritude is a cultural movement launched in 1930s Paris by French-speaking black graduate students from France's colonies in Africa and the Caribbean territories. These black intellectuals converged around issues of race identity and black internationalist initiatives to combat French imperialism. They found solidarity in their common ideal of affirming pride in their shared black identity and African heritage, and reclaiming African self-determination, self-reliance, and self-respect. The Négritude movement signaled an awakening of race consciousness for blacks in Africa and the African Diaspora. This new race consciousness, rooted in a (re)discovery of the authentic self, sparked a collective condemnation of Western domination, anti-black racism, enslavement, and colonization of black people. It sought to dispel denigrating myths and stereotypes linked to black people, by acknowledging their culture, history, and achievements, as well as reclaiming their contributions to the world and restoring their rightful place within the global community.

The Roots of Négritude

The movement is deeply rooted in Pan-African congresses, exhibitions, organizations, and publications produced to challenge the theory of race hierarchy and black inferiority developed by philosophers such as Friedrich Hegel and Joseph de Gobineau. Diverse thinkers influenced this rehabilitation process, including anthropologists Leo Frobenius and Maurice Delafosse, who wrote on Africa; colonial administrator René Maran, who penned the seminal ethnographic novel *Batouala: Véritable roman négre*, an eyewitness account of abuses and injustices within the French colonial system; André Breton, the father of Surrealism; French romantics Arthur Rimbaud and Charles Baudelaire; Haitian Jean-Price Mars, who developed the concept of Indigenism; Haitian anthropologist Anténor Firmin and Cuban Nicolás Guillén, who promoted Negrismo.

Of major significance are the Harlem Renaissance intellectuals who fled to France to escape racism and segregation in the United States. Prominent among them were Langston Hughes, James Weldon Johnson, Richard Wright, and Claude McKay. McKay, who bemoaned divisions of blacks, was acclaimed by Senegalese poet and politician Léopold Sédar Senghor as the spiritual founder of Négritude values. Senghor argued that "far from seeing in one's blackness inferiority, one accepts it; one lays claim to it with pride; one cultivates it lovingly." Pan-Africanist leader Marcus Garvey similarly implored his peers: "Negroes, teach your children that they are direct descendants of the greatest and proudest race who ever peopled the earth."

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Négritude's Women

The mobilization of young black women students in Paris signaled the beginning of an international solidarity network among Africans and people of African descent. Martinican students Jane and Paulette Nardal played a primary role in the creation and evolution of Négritude. Proficient in English, Paulette became a primary cultural intermediary between the Anglophone Harlem Renaissance writers and the Francophone students from Africa and the Caribbean, three of whom would later become the founders of the Négritude movement: Aimé Césaire from Martinique, Léopold Sédar Senghor from Senegal, and Léon-Gontran Damas from French Guiana. Poets and writers, they put their artistry at the service of Négritude, which soon became a literary movement with ideological, philosophical, and political ramifications.

Jane Nardal was credited by her sister as the first "promoter of this movement of ideas so broadly exploited later" by the so-called *Trois Pères* (Three Fathers), the movement leaders who "took up the ideas tossed out by us and expressed them with more flash and brio... Let's say that we blazed the trail for them." Senghor acknowledged as much in 1960, when he wrote: "We were in contact with these black Americans during the years 1929–34, through Mademoiselle Paulette Nardal who, with Dr. Sajous, a Haitian, had founded *La Revue du monde noir*. Mademoiselle Nardal kept a literary salon, where African Negroes, West Indians and American Negroes used to get together." After her death in 1985, Césaire paid tribute to Paulette Nardal as an *initiatrice* (initiator) of the Négritude movement and named in her honor a square in Fort-de-France, the capital of Martinique.

The theoretical and literary body of ideas by Paulette Nardal, Jane Nardal, and another Martinican student, Suzanne Roussi Césaire, usefully outlines Négritude cultural politics: Jane Nardal's "Internationalisme noir" (Black Internationalism) and "Pantins exotiques" (Exotic Puppets, 1928); Paulette Nardal's "En exil" (In Exile, 1929) and "L'Éveil de la conscience de race chez les étudiants noirs" (The Awakening of Race Consciousness Among Black Students, 1932); Suzanne Roussi Césaire: "Malaise d'une civilisation" (The Malaise of a Civilization, 1942), "Le Grand camouflage" (The Great Camouflage, 1945). The women's writings appeared in periodicals such as the bilingual *Revue du monde noir* (1931), the radical *Légitime défense* (1932), *L'Étudiant noir* (1934), and later on, the seminal literary review *Tropiques* (1942), edited by Aimé and Suzanne Césaire. Previous publications launched to promote race consciousness and to study black identity included *La Voix des négres*, *Les Continents* (1924), *La Race négre* (1927), *L'Ouvrier négre*, *Ainsi parla l'oncle*, *La Dépêche africaine* (1928), *Le Cri des négres*, *Revue indigène* (1931). These publications influenced discussions on race and identity among black Francophone intellectuals and culminated in the founding of Négritude.

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The Three "Fathers"

The 1931 encounter between Césaire, Senghor, and Damas marks the beginning of a collective exploration of their complex cultural identities as black, African, Antillean, and French. In 1934 they launched the pioneering journal *L'Étudiant noir* (The Black Student), which aimed to break nationalistic barriers among black students in France. Crystallizing diverse expressions of Négritude by these so-called fathers, *L'Étudiant noir* was its most important political and cultural periodical. While the three leaders agreed on Négritude's Pan-Africanist engagement to affirm blacks' "being-in-the-world" through literary and artistic expression, they differed in their styles and designs.

The term *Négritude* (blackness) was coined by Césaire from the pejorative French word *nègre*. Césaire boldly and proudly incorporated this derogatory term into the name of an ideological movement, and used it for the first time during the writing of his seminal poetic work *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (Notebook of a Return to the Native Land, 1939). In the author's own words, Négritude is "the simple recognition of the fact that one is black, the acceptance of this fact and of our destiny as blacks, of our history and culture." The concept of Négritude thus provided a unifying, fighting, and liberating instrument for the black Francophone students in search of their identity. It was an expression of a new humanism that positioned black people within a global community of equals.

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Aimé Césaire

For Césaire's (1913–2008), the original concept of Négritude is rooted in the specificity and unity of black people as historically derived from the Transatlantic Slave Trade and their plight in New World plantation systems. In his own words, "Négritude [is] not a cephalic index, or plasma, or soma, but measured by the compass of suffering." The movement was born of a shared experience of discrimination, oppression, and subordination to be suppressed through concerted efforts of racial affirmation.

Césaire's response to the centuries-old alienation of blacks is a call to reject assimilation and reclaim their own racial heritage and qualities. He experiences his négritude as a fact, a revolt, and the acceptance of responsibility for the destiny of his race. He advocates the emergence of "cultural workers" who will reveal black specificity to the world by articulating their experiences, their fortunes and misfortunes. This consciousness of blacks' "being-in-the-world" will write them back into history and validate their achievements. It will restore the lost humanity, dignity, integrity, and subjectivity of black identity, necessary to confront colonialism, racism, and Western imperialism. He rejects assimilation and articulates the concept in his *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*:

My Négritude is not a stone, its deafness hurled against the clamor of the day
my Négritude is not a leukoma of dead liquid over the earth's dead eye
my Négritude is neither tower nor cathedral
it takes root in the red flesh of the soil
it takes root in the ardent flesh of the sky
it breaks through opaque prostration with its upright patience.

In other words, black personality is not the lifeless object society has reduced it to; instead, it is a vibrant creative force that confronts racism, colonialism, and other forms of domination. Some of Césaire's numerous works are *Les Armes miraculeuses, Et Les Chiens se taisaient* (1946), *Soleil cou-coupé* (1948), *Corps perdu* (1950), *Discours sur le colonialisme* (1955), *Lettre à Maurice Thorez* (1956), *La Tragédie du roi Christophe* (1963), *Une Saison au Congo* (1966), *Une Tempête* (1968), *Moi, laminaire* (1982).

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Léon-Gontran Damas

Damas (1912–1978) was the first of the *Trois Pères* to publish his own book of poems, *Pigments* (1937), which underscores the need to cure the ills of Western society and is sometimes referred to as the "manifesto of the movement." Its style and overtones passionately condemn racial division, slavery, and colonialist assimilation. For Damas, Négritude is a categorical rejection of an assimilation that negated black spontaneity as well as a defense for his condition as black and Guyanese. Becoming French requires loss, repression, and rejection of self as well as adoption of a civilization that robs indigenous cultures, values, and beliefs, as articulated in his poem "Limbé" in which the poet laments his losses:

Give me back my black dolls
so that I may play with them
the naïve games of my instinct
in the darkness of its laws
once I have recovered
my courage

and my audacity
and become myself once more

Damas's poetry is influenced by elements of African oral traditions and Caribbean calypso, rhythms and tunes of African-American blues and jazz, Harlem Renaissance poetry, as well as French Surrealist ideas. Damas's subsequent works are *Retour de Guyane* (1938), *Poèmes nègres sur des airs africains* (1948), *Graffiti* (1952), *Black-Label* (1956), *Névralgies* (1965), and *Veillées noires* (1943).

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Léopold Sédar Senghor

Like Césaire and Damas, Senghor (1906–2001) promotes a quest for the authentic self, knowledge of self, and a rediscovery of African beliefs, values, institutions, and civilizations. Unlike his two peers, who strongly oppose assimilation, Senghor advocates assimilation that allows association, "a cultural métissage" of blackness and whiteness. He posits notions of a distinct Negro soul, intuition, irrationalism, and crossbreeding to rehabilitate Africa and establish his theory of black humanism. He envisions Western reason and Negro soul as instruments of research to create "une Civilisation de l'Universel, une Civilisation de l'Unité par symbiose" (a Civilization of the Universal, a Civilization of Unity by Symbiosis).

For Senghor, the dual black and white cultural background gives insights that neither can give separately, and African input can help solve some problems that have challenged Westerners. He points to a new race consciousness that lays the foundation for challenging enslavement and colonization of blacks, as well as establishing a "*rendez du donner et recevoir*" (give-and-take).

To the charge that Négritude is racist, Senghor responds with his definition, "Négritude... is neither racialism nor self-negation. Yet it is not just affirmation; it is rooting oneself in oneself, and self-confirmation: confirmation of one's being. It is nothing more or less than what some English-speaking Africans have called the African personality." Négritude must take its place in contemporary humanism in order to enable black Africa to make its contribution to the "Civilization of the Universal," which is so necessary in our divided but interdependent world.

Senghor's poems such as "Joal," which captures cultural memories of his childhood and ancestral lands, are interspersed with anti-colonialist rage. Others make an appeal for reconciliation and God's forgiveness for France's dehumanization of blacks through enslavement and colonization. Senghor's influence and example were very important in encouraging African intellectuals to devote themselves to literature, poetry, and the arts.

Some major works by Senghor are *Chants d'ombre* (1945), *Hosties noires*, *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache* (1948), *Liberté I: Négritude et humanisme*

(1964), *Liberté II: Nation et voies africaines du socialisme* (1971), *Liberté III: Négritude et civilisation de l'universel* (1977), *Ce que je crois* (1988).

In 1947, a fellow Senegalese, Alioune Diop, founded the seminal literary magazine, *Présence Africaine*, to disseminate ideas of Négritude and to promote other black writers. The review --and later the publishing house--earned the support of progressive French intellectuals such as Pablo Picasso, André Breton, Albert Camus, and Jean-Paul Sartre. It helped to position black writers in mainstream French literary circles.

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Négritude Sympathizers and Critics

In a preface to Senghor's *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache*, titled "Orphée noir" French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre appears as both critic and sympathizer. He calls Négritude an "anti-racist racism" but also introduces it into mainstream French literature and validates it as a philosophy of existence. Another critic of the concept was René Ménénil, a Marxist philosopher and co-founder of Martinican cultural review *Tropiques*, with Aimé and Suzanne Césaire. He considered Négritude a form of black exoticism and self-consciousness sustaining French imperialism. Guadeloupean scholar Maryse Condé has credited Négritude with the birth of French Caribbean literature, but she has also critiqued its fetishization of blackness and black identity politics, as well as black Antilleans' idea of a return to Africa.

Senghor's existentialist definition of Négritude was challenged by African philosophers and scholars such as Marcien Towa (*Essai sur la problématique philosophique dans l'Afrique actuelle, 1971*), Stanislas Adotevi (*Négritude et négrologues, 1972*), and Paulin Hountondji (*Sur la philosophie africaine, 1977*.) A revolutionary theoretician, psychiatrist, and former student of Césaire's, Frantz Fanon dismissed the concept of Négritude as too simplistic and claimed in his 1952 book *Peau noire, masques blancs* that the notion of the "black soul was but a white artifact." A major critic of the movement was Nigerian writer Wole Soyinka, who viewed Négritude as reinforcing colonial ideology, a stance that automatically placed black intellectuals on the defensive. For him, "The tiger does not proclaim its tigerness, it jumps on its prey."

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Négritude and Beyond

Numerous Francophone African writers contributed to Négritude literature as they produced works focused on the plight of their people—among them Mongo Beti, David Diop, Birago Diop, Cheikh Hamidou Kane, Paul N'Goma, Sembène Ousmane, and Guy Tirolien. The 1970s signaled a shift in style, with works by writers such as Ahmadou Kourouma, of Côte d'Ivoire, who introduced his native Malinke linguistic features into French. Younger generations of writers are creating a new type of language that draws the reader into African daily life. Cases in point are Congolese Daniel Biyaoula's *Alley Without Exit*, Mauritian Carl de Souza's *The House Walking Towards the Ocean*, or Cameroonian Calixte Beyala's *The Lost Honors*. Their literature claims creative uses and adaptations of the French language to African realities.

In the French Antilles, the concept of Négritude has been expanded into Antillanité by writer Édouard Glissant (*Caribbean Discourse 1981*). He promotes an opening of black experience to a global culture toward a liberating end. A new generation of Caribbean writers, including Patrick Chamoiseau, Raphaël Confiant, and Jean Bernabé, reclaim Créolité—the plural genealogy and multiple identity of Antillean culture, with its African, Amerindian, Chinese, Indian, and French ethnic components (*Éloge de la Créolité (In Praise of Creoleness; Traversée Paradoxe du Siècle)*). The proponents of the Créolité movement aim to portray Caribbean identity and reality by creating a new adapted language within the Creole oral aesthetics and tradition, without violating the rules of correct French rhetoric.

The concept of Négritude is a defining milestone in the rehabilitation of Africa and African diasporic identity and dignity. It is a driving inspiration behind the current flowering of literature by black Francophone writers. Alongside other Pan-African movements such as the Harlem Renaissance, Garveyism, and Negrismo, Négritude has contributed to writing Africa and its achievements back into history, as well as fostering solidarity among Africans and people of African descent.

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