



November 2023

## Lecture 05

# Negritude

## I. What Does Negritude Mean?

Negritude is a political and artistic movement that was launched by African and Caribbean intellectuals in Paris, France during the 1930s. Negritude, as a term, was inspired by figures from the Harlem Renaissance and their going back to African cultures and traditions. Moreover, the movement came as a reaction to the calls of French colonialism to assimilate the colonies in their French culture and civilisation—which they believed to be superior to African and Caribbean cultures. Due to this, Negritude writers used their works to celebrate all that was considered negative and inferior by the coloniser such as Blackness, pre-colonial scenes, African mythologies, and so on.

## II. Negritude Founders and Their Views

The movement was founded by three main intellectuals: Leopold Sédar Senghor (Senegal), Aimé Césaire (Martinique), and Léon-Gontran Damas (French Guiana).

### 1. Léopold Sédar Senghor

According to Senghor, the importance of Negritude as a movement is in its philosophical side, that is its role as a cultural movement. In his poetry, the Senegalese writer reflects a return to African traditions through celebrating what French colonialism assumed to be negative. Concepts like darkness, femininity, and traditions and sensuous topics form the basis of Senghor's texts as the example below shows.

*\*To the Negro-American soldiers by Senghor*

I did not recognize the whining sound of your iron horses, who drink but do not eat.

And it is no longer the nobility of elephants,

it is the barbaric weight of the prehistoric monsters of the world.  
Under your closed face, I did not recognize you.  
I only touched the warmth of your brown hand, I called myself “Afrika! ”  
And I found once again the lost laughter, I hailed the ancient voices  
and the roar of Congo waterfalls.

## 2. Aimé Césaire

Out of the three co-founders, Césaire was the first to use the term Negritude in his collection of poems *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (1939; translated as *Return to My Native Land* in 1969). Negritude literature or any form of writing by Black intellectuals, according to Césaire, is an act of resistance, self-determination, and a refusal of assimilation in French culture. Unlike Senghor who focused on the cultural aspect of the movement, Césaire used his writings to address the social and political impacts of colonialism and imperialism and their dehumanisation and subjugation of Black people.

## III. Criticism

### 1. Wole Soyinka

The Nigerian poet and playwright, Soyinka, is one of the most critical intellectuals of the Negritude movement. In the Kampala conference in 1962, Soyinka comments on the movement's continuous calls to celebrate African cultures stating: “I don’t think a tiger has to go around proclaiming his tigritude” (quoted in Eze, 2010, p. 128). Soyinka’s criticism of the movement is shared by other Anglophone writers and intellectuals. According to these critics, the movement is based on abstract, romantic, and subjective ideas that maintains the Self-Other relationship between the coloniser and colonised. In other words, Soyinka criticises how the movement positions the African subject in defence as they need to continuously announce their humanity and history in order to be accepted by the colonizer as an equal.

### 2. Frantz Fanon

Even though Fanon was inspired by Césaire’s interpretation of Negritude on how colonialism dehumanises the colonised, he criticised the limitations of the movement to the realms of literature and culture. In Fanon’s view (1967/1964), arguing about African music, myths, and folktales does not lead the colonies to achieve their liberation and freedom. Instead, he calls for an anti-colonial (violent) revolution that removes the coloniser from his military and political position of power. Only by so doing,

as Fanon argues, the colonised African and oppressed Black subject can regain their humanity, dignity, and freedom.

✎ **Négritude and Literature:** Despite the criticism, however, the movement has influenced the writings of various Francophone writers and their works such as Ferdinand Oyono's (Cameroon) anti-colonial novels like *The Old Man and The Medal* (1956), Birago Diop's (Senegal) use of folktales in his works as in *Mother Crocodile* (1961), and Jacques Rabemananjara from Madagascar who used local culture and mythology in his plays and poetry to proclaim the African identity.

#### IV. Négritude Today!

As a movement, Négritude does not have an end date as critics argue that it still forms the basis of postcolonial literature to this day. However, taking into consideration the current political and economic problems affecting the Black world (African, Caribbean, and African-American communities), the interest in Africa and its cultures and traditions is no longer a uniting characteristic between these communities.

Maryse Conde, a French writer from Guadeloupe, comments on Négritude as a movement and the current struggles of Black people around the world. In an interview with Radio France International (RFI), Conde states that Négritude as a movement is no longer "relevant." Although Conde's early novels support the unity between Africa and the Diaspora, her recent works, like *Les Fabuleux et triste destin d'Ivan et Ivana* (2017; translated as *The Wondrous and Tragic Life of Ivan and Ivana*, 2020) reflects the misunderstanding between members of the Black world. Her new novel comes as a reaction to the tragic attack that took place in Paris in January 2015, where a Malian "jihadist" shot and killed a policewoman who is originally from Martinique. This event, according to Conde, "put[s] an end to the myth of blackness based on intra-racial solidarity. Négritude died in Montrouge that day because it was revealed for what it has always been: a myth" (Chanda 2017).

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#### References

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