

The Négritude movement.

The Négritude movement was a literary and cultural movement by black intellectuals in France that sought to reestablish black identity and pride and to reaffirm Africa's image, after a long history of colonial interference, as the home of a great civilization. Although the movement is dated from the publication of *L'étudiant noir* (*The Black Student*) in 1934, the ideas that gave rise to it had already begun circulating among black intellectuals and artists in the United States, as well as in France since the early 1920s. The Negritude movement and its ideals cannot be understood without acknowledging the group of black writers and artists in New York who became the main proponents of what was called at the time the *New Negro movement*. Later known as the *Harlem Renaissance*, this movement promoted the advancement of black writers and artists as well as a renewal of racial pride.

Harlem Renaissance and the Negritude movement.

The notion of a renewed cultural and social identity for all black people emerged during the period of the Harlem Renaissance and was disseminated in the pages of a few black-owned journals and newspapers were published in the United States, such as *Opportunity* and *The Crisis*. The pioneers of the Harlem Renaissance were the writers W.E.B. Dubois, Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Zora Neale Hurston and Claude Mckay. The initial link between the Harlem Renaissance and the Negritude movement was the translation into French by Paulette and Jeanne Nardal of *The New Negro*, a 1925 anthology of black writers edited by Howard University philosophy professor Alain Locke (1886 – 1954), regarded as the father of the Harlem Renaissance. Paulette (1896-1985), Jeanne, and Andrée Nardal were young blacks from Martinique (French West Indies), studying in Paris during the late 1920s. Every Sunday, along with a third sister, Andrée, they hosted black students, artists, writers, and politicians, at their

apartment in Clamart, a Paris suburb, where they discussed subjects relevant to the black race and Africa. Among the regular guests at the Clamart Salon were, Jean Price Mars (1876-1969), a Haitian ethnologist, physician and thinker who started the *Indigéniste* movement in Haiti around 1919, the American writers Langston Hughes (1902-1967) and Claude McKay (1890-1948); and other African, Antillean and North American black writers. The Nardal sisters also founded a magazine, *La Revue du Monde Noir (The Review of the Black World)*, in collaboration with Léo Sajous, a Haitian dentist. One of the main review's main goal was to revalorize African culture and heritage through the publication of creative and theoretical works by black authors and artists, thus restoring the image of the African continent and its peoples.

Founders of the Négritude movement.

In the early 1930s three young black men, Aimé Césaire (1913-2008) from Martinique, Léon Gontran Damas (1912-1978) from the French Guyana, and Léopold Sédar Senghor (1906-2001) from Sénégal, were studying in Paris. Césaire made the writings of African American authors the subject of his 1937 doctoral dissertation, "Le thème du sud dans la poésie negro-américaine des États-Unis." ("The South in United States Black-American Poetry."). In 1934 Césaire, Damas and Senghor founded the *Revue de l'étudiant Martiniquais (The Martinican Student Review)* which was shortly after renamed la *L'étudiant noir*. The term Négritude was coined by Césaire, recovering the word nègre, until then used pejoratively when making reference to a black person. Césaire, Senghor and Damas spoke of their black identity and the ensemble of their cultural values as their main source of pride. They promoted the importance of a black identity for all black people and the restoration of the image of Africa, which, in Négritude literature, became the matrix of all black cultural heritages, and a mythical persona: Africa as the mother, and motherland of all black people.

In 1939, World War II was beginning, Césaire returned to Martinique. That year an early version of his, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (Notebook of a return to my native land), appeared in a French journal. (It was published in Spanish in 1942, in French in 1947, and in a final version in 1956.) In 1941 he co-founded, with his then-wife Suzanne Césaire and Martinican writer René Ménénil, the cultural and literary review *Tropiques*. In an earlier poem, “Corps perdu”(Lost body), Césaire proclaims, “Nègre, nègre, depuis le fond / du ciel immemorial.” / (“Nigger, nigger, from the deepest end of the immemorial sky”). Césaire always insisted on his conception of Négritude not as biological but rather as cultural and historical. Négritude deepened the awareness of belonging to the black race.

The impact of Negritude.

Subsequent generations of authors and artists, in recognition of Césaire’s contributions to the Négritude Movement as a means to advance black literature and culture throughout France, the Caribbean and the United States regard him as the *nègre fondamental* (the *fundamental negro*). As Raphael Confiant once stated in *L’Éloge de la Créolité*: « Nous sommes à jamais fils d’Aimé Césaire. » (“We are forever the sons of Aimé Césaire.”). (*L’Éloge*, 18).

Césaire and Senghor whose lives were not only devoted to literature but to politics in their home countries, exemplified the values of the Négritude movement restoring black identity and asserting the leadership capabilities of blacks. In 1945 Césaire was elected mayor of Fort-de-France and deputy for Martinique in the French National Assembly. He was reelected mayor consecutively until 2001, when he retired. Césaire will also defend the departmentalization process for Guadeloupe and Martinique in 1946, believing that this change in status would bring development and progress to the islands. Known as the poet president,

Senghor became the president of Sénégal in 1960 and served as leader of the country until retiring in 1980.

Although the Négritude movement was later criticized as essentialist and reverse racism, its importance and impact lie in its transformational effect: the movement was an undeniably necessary step towards black self-awareness and for the world's awareness of blacks. In the Francophone world, Négritude became synonymous of black pride and honor, and with intellectuals, writers, artists, and politicians who took part in it. Négritude continues to influence the way black authors and artists, and blacks in general, are understood.

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Relevant internet sites:

<http://www.lehman.cuny.edu/ile.en.ile>

<http://www.unc.edu/depts/europe/francophone/negritude/eng/index.htm>

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