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Négritude

We have used Surrealism like Surrealism has used the nègre.

(Damas, quoted in Racine 1983 : 202)

A poetic, literary, political movement, Négritude remains one of the most emblematic discourses of African and Black Atlantic, anti-colonial, cultural politics. Although formulated in the specific context of late French colonialism and its assimilationist politics, its singular aesthetics and the depth of critiques travelled far beyond Francophone countries. Born out of the intellectual revolt of three friends – the Guyanese Léon-Gontran Damas, the Senegalese Léopold Sédar Senghor, and the Martinican Aimé Césaire – the concept of Négritude emerged in the inter-war period from their search for a poetics able to capture their specific experience as colonised black subjects. 'Négritude' comes from 'nègre', a derogatory term historically used to designate African slaves, generalised to black African people in the 19th century. By the beginning of the 20th century, it was used both as a racial term and as a slur, situated in US English of the 1920s somewhere between 'nigger' and 'black' (Edwards 2003: 34–35). Damas, Senghor and Césaire were not the first to subvert and appropriate 'nègre', a distinction claimed by anti-racist activists such as Lamine Senghor and Tiemoko Garan Kouyaté from the 1920s onwards (Edwards 2003; Miller 1998). Against the racial hierarchy prevailing in the French Empire, which distinguished Antillean 'évolués' (evolved), civilised mixed-race people and backward 'nègres', the latter came to be a symbol of the struggle and solidarity against colonial oppression. Négritude thinkers grounded their literary movement in this founding gesture, turning the vocable into an existential condition, an aesthetic style, and a pan-African form of identity. From an array of creative and political practices of the Paris-

based black diaspora, 'négritude' only emerged as a self-conscious movement after the Second World War II, and continued to be reconfigured in light of the evolution of Third-World nationalisms, decolonisation, and the advent of post-colonial states. Thus, the challenge is to understand it in the complexity of its historical transformations as Négritude progressively incoporated new dimensions: from a literary movement emerging in student politics, through reformism, it was retrospectively reconfigured as a a precursor of radical anti-colonialism and Third-Worldism. In addition, some of its central theoretical concepts (race, culture, civilisation, racism) underwent dramatic changes in the same period.

Colonial elites

[…]

Bleached

My hatred grows on the fringe
Of their wickedness
On the fringe
Of gun blows
On the fringe
Of wave blows
Of slave merchants
Of the foul freight of their cruel trade

Bleached

My hatred grows on the fringe

Of culture

On the fringe

Of theories

On the fringe of the chatters

That were deemed fit to be stuffed into me from the crib

While everything in me only aspires to be nègre

Like my Africa that they plundered

(Damas 1972: 60)

Césaire and Senghor met in the lycée Louis-le-Grand, where they had both come to attend preparatory classes for the entrance at the Ecole Normale Supérieure, one of the most prestigious higher-education institutions in France. While the aim of colonial schools was to form native élites, intermediary between French administrative functions and local populations, the French meritocratic system also helped a few native students to partake in the entry competition for some of the most prestigious schools of the capital with bursaries. In command of flawless French language, these deserving students were held up as examples of 'assimilated' subjects, but these living exemplars of an impossible 'success' only revealed the contradictory nature of the French assimilation politics. As Damas would summarise: 'he who will be assimilated expects from assimilation the equal treatment that the metropole will never grant him, and on the other hand, they will ask him to pay a price that the other cannot pay: they both agree to try to whiten the nègre, but that cannot happen' (Wilder, 2005: 223).

Senghor, born into a rich Serer family of the small town of Joal, had received his secondary education at a missionary boarding school, and after attending lycée in Dakar he obtained half

a scholarship to study Letters in Paris (Vaillant 1990). Aimé Césaire, coming from a modest family in Basse-Pointe, Martinique, had moved to Fort-de-France at the age of 11 to study at the lycée Victor Schoelscher, where he met Léon-Gontran Damas. The latter, originally from French Guyana, had moved to France in 1928, and to Paris in 1930 where he had encountered Senghor through an acquaintance (Racine 1983: 27). Senghor, who immediately befriended Césaire, was the first African person Césaire had ever known. Together with Damas, they read the same books, shared poetry, and discussed Africa, the Antilleans and the US. All three had experienced forms of racism; they were concerned with defining who they were vis-à-vis French culture, and revolted against the exclusionary character of French society and its paternalistic discourse. Their 'lived experience' as black, as Fanon would later theorise in *Black Skin White Masks*, and their ungraspable feeling of uprooting, called for words they had to invent. With their modest bursaries, Césaire and Senghor were living in extremely poor conditions, often on the verge of depression. But Damas, unlike them, had no scholarship at all. He was studying Law, Languages and Ethnology, at the same time as working in various small jobs at Les Halles, Paris's main wholesale market, for survival. In these distressing and consuming life conditions, Damas, who was the most 'tormented soul' of the three, was also considered the most *engagé* (Racine 1983: 9), and in many ways their inspiration.

Négritude's genesis: Black internationalism and translation in inter-war Paris

Much of the ideas of the young Senghor, Damas, and Césaire was formed through their encounter with previous journals and other collectives created amongst the black communities of the French capital. These earlier organisations ranged from the Garveyist internationalist journal *les Continents* (1924) to the Republican-reformist journal *La Dépêche africaine* (1928–32), through the Marxist-anti-colonial *Comité de Défense de la Race Nègre* (1926–27)

as well as the short Marxist-Surrealist experience of *Légitime Défense* (1932), in which Damas got involved. After their arrival in Paris, these three students took part in what Gary Wilder proposed to call a 'black public sphere' composed of students, activists, and militants, Antillean, African, and African-American writers, artists and workers. Latin Quarter cafés, the Cabane Cubaine in Montmartre, apartments and student dormitories provided spaces for lively debates between pan-Africanists, anti-fascists, communists, artists, and writers (Wilder 2005). For Césaire, Senghor, and Damas, this cosmopolitan network of associations was epitomised by the intellectual milieu surrounding the Nardal sisters' salon, held every Sunday to discuss the 'Negro race' and its future, and to promote 'the solidarity between different Negro groups spread around the world' (171). In relation to these gatherings, a bilingual journal, *La Revue du Monde noir* (hereafter, '*La Revue*'), was launched in 1931 (and lasted about a year). It published articles and poems by Antillean writers such as Etienne Léro, René Maran, Gilbert Gratiant, and René Ménil (Vaillant 1990: 125), as well as ethnographic research by Delafosse and Frobenius. As Louis T. Achilles would later recall, this movement was 'no longer political like the Pan-Negro movements that preceded it, but cultural and sociological' (quoted in Wilder 2005: 174). Yet, colonial politics was at the centre of their preoccupations.

For Damas, Senghor, and Césaire *La Revue* not only connected them to 'wider sociocultural networks of the imperial metropolis' (173) and older generations of colonial migrants, it also made them discover a number of important writers. Claude McKay's *Banjo* (1928), Alan Locke's *New Negro* (1925) and Langston Hughes's poetry were crucial references, along with recent anthropological studies on Africa. Along with the Achilles and the Nardal sisters, the Guianese René Maran, internationally famous for winning the literary Goncourt prize, was, in Mercer Cook's words, a 'focal point for transatlantic contacts' (166) and had been the first to

publish translations of Harlem poetry in *Les Continents*. In their flats, one could regularly meet writers and political figures such as Claude MacKay, Mercer Cook, Carter G. Woodson, Alain Locke, Countee Cullen, and Hale Woodruff (Edwards 2003: 120). Césaire would later explain that the importance of the Harlem Renaissance was to 'encounter another modern black civilization, Blacks and their pride, their consciousness to belong to a culture' (Césaire 2005 : 25-26). Like the Harlemite writers, they were seeking to express, in Langston Hughes's formulation, their 'individual dark-skinned selves' (Wilder 2005: 176), but also to foster and herald the renaissance of African civilisation. As Brent Hayes Edwards (2003) has admirably shown, Négritude, like other cultures of black internationalism, arose from translation practices. An internationalist black consciousness could only emerge across, and from articulation of, linguistic and historical differences.

In 1935, Césaire, Senghor, and Damas, who were active in student politics, got involved in the writing of the newly renamed journal of the Association of Martinican students, *L'Etudiant noir*. The first and only issue that has survived contained articles by Paulette Nardal, Gilbert Gratient, Léonard Sainville, and Henri Eboué, and addressed similar themes as the *Revue du monde noir*, mostly focused on assimilation and black humanism. Damas, in his role of editorial secretary, described the journal's ambition as that of ending the Quartier Latin student 'tribalism', so that they 'cease being essentially Martinican, Guadeloupean, Guianese, African, and Malagasy students to become one single and same étudiant noir' (Wilder 2005: 187) Yet, as Senghor was one of their only non-Antillean contributors, this was more a wish than a fact. Far from being a Négritude manifesto the journal was principally a platform for Césaire and Senghor to begin writing publically in a non-academic context. By 1934, Damas had already published some poems in the famous personalist review *Esprit*. Damas, who 'hung out in the most diverse neighbourhoods and milieux' (Senghor quoted in

Wilder: 206) was the first to step outside the purely academic system of recognition in which they were entangled. For Césaire, Damas was 'the first to liberate himself', to become, in a truly bohemian spirit, a 'cursed poet' (*poète maudit*) (Césaire, quoted in Wilder: 280). In the poems of his small, 1937, self-financed volume titled *Pigments* the questions of assimilation and the complicity of black élites with the French colonial system figure prominently. They are expressed in a vehement, sometimes threatening voice, as in 'Bleached' (quoted above). While they circulate through revolt, racial authenticity, and Afro-centric identifications, Damas's poetic forms are much indebted to the Harlem Renaissance, displaying a strong engagement with spirituals, blues, and jazz, through rhythm and anaphoric repetitions.

Notebook of a return to the native land

The first occurrence of the word 'négritude' appeared in the middle of Césaire's long poem *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (Notebook of a return to the native land; 2000), which became a classic of French and Antillean literatures and overshadowed *Pigments* as the seminal text of the movement. Césaire started writing the poem during a stay in Croatia, where he had been invited by his friend, in 1936, and published it for the first time in 1937, at the age of 25. Against the élitist alexandrines of Martinican poets, the *Cahier* stages the epic journey of an experience of self-recovery in an insurrectional prose. By titling it as he did, Césaire announces a return to Martinique, and a return to his fundamental self. Framing this search in a 'notebook' locates it halfway between the schoolboy *cahier* and the personal diary, and evokes it as a learning process. The path of learning is that of Négritude, which constitutes the overcoming of racial and colonial normativity at the same time as being an affirmative endorsement of black people's historical condition. Négritude constantly circulates through historical subjects, realising itself through multiple voices: 'I have worn parrot feathers and / musk-car skins / I have worn down the patience of missionaries / I have

insulted the benefactors of humanity' (Césaire 1969: 57). The nihilistic description of the filthy, poor, and motionless Basse-Pointe and the 'crumbled island' of Martinique, with which the poem begins, averts any exotic praise. Leaving for Europe does not mark a narrative progression but the discovery of the disguised racism of the metropole: that is, in the 'vogue nègre', the belittling admiration for the 'good nègre' and the denigrating praise for the Lindy-hop dancer. A first escape would be to embrace these clichés and to cling to the meagre and disparaging recognition it discharges. 'As a result of an unforeseen happy conversion I now respect my repellent ugliness' (65). But this victory is a complacent lie. 'I refuse to pass my swellings off for authentic glories / And I laugh at my old childish imaginings' (66). The return begins with the end of these mystifications; by embracing the real and ghostly presence of (black) suffering. 'How much blood there is in my memory! In my memory are lagoons … . / My memory is surrounded by blood. My memory has its belt of corpses!' (63–64) Négritude's movement of reversal draws a trajectory from inertia to life, from shameful wounds to full acceptance. 'I accept … I accept … completely, with no reservation … / … My race gnawed with blemishes' (80). Towards the end of the poem the poet's call for Négritude as a vital force, a virile and incarnated life against the machinistic Europe becomes the herald of hope. The prose becomes increasingly incantatory, inflated by future promises:

> In their spilt blood
> the niggers smelling of fried onion
> find the bitter taste of freedom
> and they are on their feet the niggers
>
> the sitting-down niggers

unexpectedly on their feet

on their feet in the hold

on their feet in the cabins

on their feet on deck

on their feet in the wind

on their feet beneath the sun

on their feet in blood

on their feet

and

free

on their feet and in no way distraught

free at sea and owning nothing

veering and utterly adrift

surprisingly

on their feet

on their feet in the rigging

on their feet at the helm

on their feet at the compass

on their feet before the map

on their feet beneath the stars

on their feet

and

free

(89)

From the comical 'nègrerie' of *l'Etudiant Noir*, through the derogatory 'négraille', 'Négritude' is not the only neologism created by Césaire with the prefix 'nègre', but it is the only one that could sustain the radical inversion they called forth, turning an epidermic slur into an existential condition. Although one easily recognises a progressive linearity in the poem, signalling the temporality of 'return', the text is a collage of leaps back and forward; its objects are plunged into a confounding night. Whilst consciously appealing to a certain 'cannibalistic violence' (Wilder, 2005: 280) in order to explode formal references, it simultaneously draws on a dense network of historical and geographical references. The poem, which incarnates the pilgrimage of a (singular collective) self in relation to a specific historical context, is affirmative but has not much to do with the notion of '*cultural* affirmation', by which one often characterises Négritude.

Rather than ascribing *culture* to black people, as Senghor does, Césaire opposes Western civilisation for its intrinsic barbarism. Civilisation, with its 'machinistic' overtones, is the decaying antithesis of the self's vitalism, and its structural racism is the backdrop for revolt. The pitfalls of recognition are central to the poem; it is Nietzsche's influence that 'emboldened Césaire to rise above the need for confirmation, which can only imply conformation' (Jones 2010: 168). In Gary Wilder's analysis (2005: 278), the *Cahier* is to be considered as the 'crowning achievement of interwar Négritude, its summit and synthesis. But it must also be read as an autocritique of Négritude itself, a text in which the self reflexive doubt about cultural nationalism that momentarily surfaced in the work of Gratient, Sainville, Ousmane Socé Diop, Damas, and Senghor is pursued deeply and directly'.

Négritude as ontology

In contrast to Césaire, Senghor's early concept of négritude was an attempt at revalorising African cultures in a positive way, as ontology and an ethical way of life. In the case of Césaire, Négritude's vitalism is expressed in a poetic idiom, staging the revolt against colonialism as an inward and organic violence. In Senghor's case, though, vitalism was a *theoretical* frame to think what négritude was. By 1939, Senghor had already reached a complex theory of African Art as philosophy, which, combined with that of civilisational *métissage* (hybridity) laid out the ground for his subsequent writings on Négritude:

> 'The service provided by the Nègre will have been to contribute along with other peoples to re-creating the unity of man and the World: to link flesh with spirit, man with his fellow men, a stone with God. In other words, the real with the spiritual surreal – through man, not as the center, but the hinge, the navel of the World.' (Senghor, quoted in Wilder 2005: 249)

African art, for Senghor, was defined by this very connection with this sub-reality of vital forces (Bachir Diagne: 2011) beneath the level of the visible. Influenced by the study of Guillaume and Thomas Munro on primitive negro sculpture, Senghor developed an understanding of African art form as a 'unity of rhythmic series' (81). Through this move to ontology, Senghor was able to transcend the available concepts of 'culture', trans-valuating the civilisational yardstick of development into the language of humanist *values*. As he would repeat throughout his life, 'Négritude is the set of values of the black world civilization, which is to say a certain active presence to the world: to the universe' (Senghor 1977 : 69). Understanding these values as a 'presence' becomes meaningful once situated in Souleymane Bachir Diagne's proposition that Négritude is Senghor's way to think 'African art as philosophy'. Indeed, as Jones recently argued, 'there was nothing inherently reactionary about

this part of their program insofar as it attempted to open up cognitive possibility rather than essentialize African perception as the simple other of a caricatured West' (Jones 2010: 144) But Senghor's Négritude was also closely connected to his conception of humanism. Drawing on Teilhard de Chardin, who professed a form of evolutionism of human consciousness at a global scale, Senghor called for an encounter and *métissage* between civilisations from above, a humanisation through the 'best' contributions of each. True humanism would be 'totally human because formed of all contributions of all peoples of the earth' (Senghor 1977: 91). Grounded in a concept of 'culture' relying on a preconceived notion of alterity, his humanist vision of world civilisation could only restrict the disruptive potential of his 'Negro-African ontology'.

Césaire, for his part, remained faithful to the historical perspective of the *Cahier*, and continued to ground Négritude in past and present oppression and in the movement of historical remembrance. In a 1987 discourse on Négritude, he unmistakably asserted 'Négritude, in my eyes, is not a philosophy. Négritude is not a metaphysics. Négritude is not a pretentious concept of the universe. It is a way of living history within history … ' (Bachir Diagne 2011: 34). To the analytic stylisation of black heritage through Western ontological concepts, Césaire opposes an incommensurable 'heritage' of suffering. As the friendship between the two men always prevailed over their theoretical and political disagreements, these two faces of Négritude's legacy remained, in a way, dialogically linked. Damas, their self-proclaimed 'holy spirit' (Racine 1983: 193), was less determined to theorise Négritude than to situate it in the historical movement of ideas. Faithful to their initial quest, he considered Négritude to be a search for identity through the rehabilitation of African culture (189).

Négritude and politics

Proponents of civilisations' dialogue and of cultural *métissage*, Négritude's protagonists at no point advocated a total break between metropolitan and native cultures. Nor did they advocate an absolute political break. The politics of Négritude is riddled with problems of interpretation, as the violent anti-colonial stance against colonialism surfacing in their poetry does not find direct translations into their political discourse and decisions. While much of the early scholarship on Négritude was concerned with describing its clear identification with either radical anti-colonialism or cultural reformism (Wilder, 2005: 202), Gary Wilder's important study has shown how Négritude responded to the specific conditions and contradictions of the inter-war 'French imperial Nation-state', which was characterised by a greater level of integration between metropolitan and colonial societies, and by new methods of colonial administration. The post-war need to improve colonial productivity led to a form of government that was based on the simultaneous transformation and preservation of indigenous societies, at the same time rationalising national belonging and racialising citizenship, or ethnicising development (4–5). In this context Négritude can be read as a response to this contradictory situation, working within French Republican politics and against colonial racial hierarchy. It expresses itself in Négritude's simultaneous demand of citizenship and rejection of assimilation, a project that could 'accommodate both republican and Panafrican identifications' (256). Resituating Négritude in the context of Greater France helps one to understand why their critique did not lead to a project of complete separation, such as Fanon's call to 'leave Europe'. It explains why Négritude remained in the register of immanent critique, taking its clue from radical counterpoints to European modernity and rationality, such as philosophical vitalism, surrealist aesthetics, or ethnology (257).

Historical watershed, 1945

The immediate aftermath of the Second World War constitutes a break within the history of the Négritude movement. Whilst Césaire moved back to Martinique with his wife Suzanne and created a literary review called *Tropiques*, Senghor and Damas were both mobilised in French army battalions. Senghor was held captive for two years in German labour camps and Damas worked for the Resistance. In the 1930s, Senghor, Césaire, and Damas were notorious among small communities of Antillean and African students in Paris; they elaborated their own discourse in the margins of mainstream politics. After 1945, however, all three took up political roles within the French Empire as deputies and sat at the National Assembly in Paris. Only then did Négritude become a self-conscious movement, signalled by the creation of the journal *Présence Africaine*, by Alioune Diop, their friend and ally. The journal proposed to edit black writers and studies on Africa, with a particular emphasis on African literature. Moreover, the publications of two anthologies – *Poètes Noirs d'Expression française, 1900–1945* by Damas in 1947 and Senghor's *Anthologie de poésie nègre et malgache* in 1948 – were key in publicising Négritude on a wider scale. Jean-Paul Sartre's long preface to Senghor's anthology, 'Black Orpheus', became Négritude's political manifesto, propelling the movement onto the world stage of revolutionary politics. His intervention signals the entry of French anti-colonial thought into a new era, where readings of Sartre, Hegel, Kojève, phenomenology, and psychoanalysis prevail over those of Nietzsche, Bergson, and anthropology (Frobenius, Delafosse, Delavignette). In the course of the 1950s, reflections on life and civilisation were thus replaced by existential phenomenology, Marxism and development discourse.

Sartre's preface redefined Négritude in connection to post-war revolutionary politics, at the convergence of existentialism, Marxism, and his own theory of literature. For Sartre, Négritude designates the black man's *taking consciousness* of himself (Sartre, 1948: 11) in

the nexus of capitalist relations of forces. 'And since he is oppressed *in his race* and because of it, it is *first* of his race that it is necessary for him to take conscience' (15, emphasis added). The paradoxical framing gesture of Sartre was to celebrate Négritude poets as 'authentic revolutionaries' while negating the autonomy of their political demands, reducing it to the 'weak stage of a dialectical progression' (60). Since Négritude, through Césaire's voice, lays claim to the universal struggle against oppression, Sartre deduces that Négritude's voice is *ultimately* reducible to a main, overarching historical subject: the proletariat (59). Sartre's analysis, by prioritising a historical definition of Négritude over its anthropological or cultural facets, foreshadowed the subsequent problems and debates surrounding it, simultaneously ontological definition, cultural inventory, *and* emerging from struggle – positing race and undoing it.

Négritude: between culture and politics

The heterogeneity of positions and political tensions surrounding Négritude was never so glaring as during the First Congress of Black Writers and Artists, organised by Présence Africaine in September 1956. Gathering over 60 'delegates', the aim of this three-day congress was to engage a 'dialogue' between black 'men of culture' from Africa, the Caribbean, and the US, re-enacting in an official way the trans-continental groups of inter-war Paris. Senghor, Césaire, Achilles, Alexis, Fanon, Hampaté-Bâ, Cook, Wright, amongst others, gave papers and participated in heated debates. But behind its constant invocation, the polymorphous notion of 'culture' proved to be a very unsteady ground for the reunion. The Congress was structured around the idea of an authentic 'African heritage', which was to be unearthed, inventoried, and modernised. But by the time this 'dialogue of civilizations' could finally take place, several delegates and a large part of the public were expecting the speaker to endorse radical anti-colonial positions. The word 'nègre' and its correlate 'négritude' were

hardly pronounced during the conference. Senghor, who at the time represented Négritude's canon, presented a paper titled 'The Laws of Negro-African Culture', in which he defined the negro-African civilisation by a set of integrated characters, insisting on its complementarity with European civilisation:

> 'The negro (nègre) reason does not exhaust things, it does not mould them in rigid schemes, eliminating the juices and the saps; it sticks itself within the arteries of things, it adheres to their rims to dive into the living heart of the real. The white reason is analytical by utilization, the negro reason, intuitive by participation.' (Présence Africaine, 1956: 52)

Several delegates criticised this idealised image of the African civilisation, entirely disconnected from the colonial problem. Césaire's important intervention, 'Culture and Colonisation', constituted a stark opposition to the latter, arguing that the question of black culture was completely unintelligible without reference to colonization. For Césaire, the issue was not to address colonised people as an *audience* anymore, but as *agents* and creators. The time to 'illustrate the presence of black men of culture', as *Présence Africaine* claimed to do, was over. More generally, these proceedings reveal the growing importance of psychology and existential phenomenology, in the mid-1950s, as ways of understanding racism and colonisation. Frantz Fanon's notorious speech – 'Racism and Culture' –contained an implicit critique of Négritude's lack of reflection on their psychological mechanisms as colonial élites. Recalling the themes of the *Cahier*, Fanon's 'Racism and Culture' referred to an *interior struggle* of the colonised with himself, evoking a bloody and painful 'corps-à-corps' between the colonised and his culture, a struggle at the level of his 'being'. In 1956, Fanon had

abandoned the upbeat dynamic of 'cultural choices' and situated liberation in both psychic and physical violence, within the concrete experience of liberation struggles.

Négritude after Decolonisation

With Senghor's presidency in Senegal (1960–80), Négritude accessed the status of state discourse, and met its most virulent critiques from among the Antilleans and the newly independent African states. At the 1969 Pan-African Cultural Festival held in Algiers, the Dahomeyan (now Benin) Stanislas Adotévi asserted: 'Négritude is a vague and ineffective ideology. There is no place in Africa for a literature that lies outside of revolutionary combat. Négritude is dead' (Jules-Rosette, 2007: 276). Similarly, the Haitian communist René Depestre characterised the movement as the 'epidermisation of his [the black's] miserable historical situation' (Depestre 1980: 50), and made the brutal claim: 'All these chatters around the concept of négritude are actually defining an inacceptable black Zionism, which means an ideology that, far from articulating itself to a desalinating and decolonization enterprise, is incapable of dissimulating that it is one of the columns supporting the tricks, the traps and the actions of neo-colonialism' (53).

A few years later, the Benin-based philosopher Paulin J. Hountondj developed a criticism of Négritude specifically targeted at its philosophical aspects, which he called 'ethnophilosopy'. To reclaim, he argued, an African way of life as philosophy can only be an external point of view, *about* them and not *by* them, which can only generate an alienated African philosophical literature. Négritude, he wrote, 'has lost its critical charge, its truth. Yesterday it was the language of the oppressed, today it is a discourse of power' (Hountondji, 1983: 170).

In the wake of these polemics, Négritude scholarship has focused intently on the thorny questions of its lack of political radicalism and on its cultural 'essentialism', seemingly at odds with 1990s paradigms of identity (creolness, hybridity). More recently, the tendency has been to resituate these questions in their historically specific contexts, addressing Négritude's archive as a multi-disciplinary resource of study. The crucial role of Jane and Paulette Nardal in launching and inspiring the movement through their use of transnational networks has represented an important step towards reconfiguring Négritude from the point of view of gender critique (Sharpley-Whiting 2002; Edwards 2003). But Négritude has also been increasinly analysed at the level of its philosophical discourse, emphasising its relation to the Western canon (Jones 2010; Bachir Diagne 2011). Emphasising Négritude's historical depth does not mean, however, that it only retains a documentary value. Today, Négritude's truth resides not only in the complex sum of its influences; it has also become, over the years, one of the main foundations of the black radical tradition.

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