

THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE



OLLI SPRING 10F 2021, WEEK 6

Agenda

Négritude, Marcus Garveyism, and the Global Echoes of the Renaissance

- **Négritude:** What was it? How did it interact with the Harlem Renaissance?
- **Marcus Garveyism:** Who was Marcus Garvey and why was his movement popular?
- **Looking forward from the Renaissance:** How do we understand the Harlem Renaissance now?



Négritude & "Africa"

- Born in 1913 in Martinique, Aimé Césaire is the progenitors of the "Négritude" movement of Africanist literary production in the postwar period.
- Along with other Francophone intellectuals like Léopold Sédar Senghor of Senegal and Léon Damas of French Guiana, Césaire developed a movement based around an Afro-centric vision of Blackness. Of importance for the intellectual and cultural movement was the preservation of what was perceived as African culture in the remainder of the diaspora—"perceived" because the movement is later critiqued for embracing not an Afrocentric view of Africa but an orientalist view of Africa (or *Africa from the perspective of Europe*)
- Négritude emphasizes new literary techniques in the French avant-garde like surrealism as well as new philosophical ideas like existentialism in order to on the one hand provide its legitimacy as an intellectual and cultural movement but on the other hand critique the Eurocentrism that colonialism created.



Terminology

Orientalism — the representation of non-European cultures as stereotypes; developed as a term by Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978) and *Culture and Imperialism* (1993)

African Diaspora — the community of dispersed descendants of Africans; especially those descended from enslaved people taken from Africa during the Atlantic Slave Trade

Eurocentrism — the perspective that places Europe as the center; especially the notion that European values (cultural, philosophical) or intellectual traditions are central to history

Césaire's Negritude: To "Africa" and Back by A. James Arnold

- "The vaudou religion, imported from ancient Guinea, cruelly persecuted by the Christians, had become the incarnation of the self, of the non-European ... [Christophe's] effort to reconcile Africa and Europe costs him all his energy' (Ruhe, pp. 199–200, my translation). What matters here in a Caribbean perspective is that Césaire constructed his version of Negritude on a bipolar model (Africa vs. Europe) that excluded any version of cultural métissage. Thus, he considered Haitian vaudou to be an African religion rather than a result of the blending of various strains (nations) into a syncretic cultural expression of slave society in Saint-Domingue. This aspect of Césaire's Negritude posits something like M.G. Smith's 1965 plural society with no mechanism for eventual creolization. Consequently, local cultural products are seen as African survivals rather than as Caribbean creations. Césaire's convictions in this crucial matter were formed initially by his reading of the 1936 French translation of Leo Frobenius's *Histoire de la civilisation africaine*. Despite his adherence to the French Communist Party from 1945 to 1956, Césaire remained loyal to a neo-romantic ethnography that posited an 'Ethiopian' culture frequently referenced in his work. As it happens, this distortion of Caribbean cultural processes played directly into the imaginary construct that Europeans used to mediate their understanding of the emergence of new African nation-states that rapidly replaced European colonies. By the mid-1960s Césaire's Negritude was "African" in their minds and in their representations of cultural events such as the staging of Césaire's Haitian play in Austria, Germany, Italy, and Belgium."
- "Aimé Césaire's version of Negritude ideology originated as a French West Indian student's response to the rise of fascism in Europe, as the recent French edition of his literary works has demonstrated... During World War II he explored the potential of surrealist metaphors for reactivating a collective unconscious that he imagined as African and accessible by the descendants of slaves in the Americas. Between 1941 and 1944, Césaire received considerable support, in the form of access to publishing outlets, from surrealists dispersed throughout the western hemisphere."

The Negritude Movement (2015) by Reiland Rabaka

- "Du Bois, the maestro of the New Negro Movement, influenced the conceptual core of the Harlem Renaissance and, in turn, the Negritude Movement, not only with his incomparable work during the New Negro era, but also with his innovative, simultaneously African American and Pan-African ideals that seemed to constantly free-float from African diasporan movements to continental African movements back to African diasporan movements, ad infinitum, without ever actually disappearing into ether of the Africana intellectual tradition."
- "Prophetically prefiguring the aesthetics, poetics, and politics of the Negritude Movement and its accent on black youth and the black masses, Locke articulated the general mood and sentiments of many of the "younger," more artistically and politically inclined members of the New Negro Movement. "In a real sense it is the rank and file who are leading," he wrote, "and the leaders who are following. A transformed and transforming psychology permeates the masses" (7). Locke and his cohort were keen to emphasize the role that both the black masses in general, and black youth in particular, played in the civil rights and social justice struggles of the early twentieth century. This is a theme that would be conceptually carried on by the Negritude Movement, among other continental and diasporan African movements that would emerge in the aftermath of the New Negro Movement and Harlem Renaissance."
- "In its own unique way the Negritude Movement registers as a continuation of black youth movement, leadership, and artistry in the aftermath of the New Negro Movement and Harlem Renaissance and, most especially, positive proof that a "transformed and transforming psychology permeate[d] the masses" in the early decades of the twentieth century. Truth be told, then, there is a great deal of what is currently considered Negritude that, to put it plainly, has its roots in the politics of the New Negro Movement and the poetics of the Harlem Renaissance."

The Negritude Movement (2015) by Reiland Rabaka

- "It is the work of the young radicals of the Harlem Renaissance that provided the primary link between the New Negro Movement and the Negritude Movement. Renaissance radicals such as Wallace Thurman, Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, Richard Bruce Nugent, Gwendolyn Bennett, and Aaron Douglas sought to raise issues impacting African Americans that the elite and older New Negro leaders left in the lurch. For example, the young radicals' work frequently explored taboo topics such as homosexuality, bisexuality, promiscuity, prostitution, drug abuse, domestic violence, interracial relationships, and both classism and colorism within the African American community. Their collective work provided both an external and internal critique of the issues and ills besetting African America during the early decades of the twentieth century."
- "At its best the Negritude Movement documented, lamented, and celebrated the wide range and full reach of the continental and diasporan African experience in several ways that demonstrate its indebtedness to the aesthetics of the Harlem Renaissance and the politics of the New Negro Movement."
- "Where the Harlem Renaissance may have collectively placed a greater emphasis on issues of gender and sexuality, the Negritude Movement undeniably placed a greater emphasis on racial colonialism and decolonization. Both the Harlem Renaissance and Negritude Movement, however, grappled in their own unique ways with the importance of Africa for the new, continental and diasporan, African world of the twentieth century and the impact of racism and capitalism on black life-worlds and black life-struggles in the metropoles. Race and racism were central concerns for both the Harlem Renaissance and Negritude Movement and, building on Du Bois's discourse, it was the Renaissance writers who first broached the subject of "Negroness" or, rather, "blackness." The Renaissance writers sought to deconstruct and reconstruct not merely "Negroness," but also white and black middle-class America's conceptions of socially acceptable ways of being "Negro" or, rather, black."

— *The Negritude Movement (2015)* by Reiland Rabaka

- "Whether we speak of stereotype, caricature, or other forms of figurative representation, both literary and visual texts rely on readability, recognizability, and perceived realism—which is to say, that the Negritude Movement's fascination with authenticity and "real" expressions of blackness may be nothing more than an erudite outgrowth of and a holdover from New Negro aesthetics or, going back even further, as Gates and Jarrett asserted above, abolitionist and enslaved African Americans' impulse to "redefine—against already received racist stereotypes—who and what a black person was, and how unlike the racist stereotype the black original actually could be." Also, similar to the genre of portraiture, stereotype and caricature, in specific, portray their subjects so that their respective audiences can identify the representative images with the objectified subjects to which they allude. However, where caricature usually functions by exaggerating the gestures, physiognomy, physiology, and behavior of the human figure, frequently pushing these to seemingly impossible and unreal extremes, stereotype hinges on a pretense of verisimilitude and gross repetition. At the heart of the problem here is that even though it maintains some semblance of reality (i.e., verisimilitude) through manipulated aesthetic strategies that enable figures to appear familiar—behaviorally, emotionally, physiognomically, or physiologically—and, therefore, "real" or authentic, stereotype inherently renders invisible or outright erases individuality and the particulars of human personality."

— *The Negritude Movement (2015) by Reiland Rabaka*

- "In terms of the Negritude Movement's continued utilization of the New Negro Movement/Harlem Renaissance trans-generational tradition of making distinctions between moderate "Old Negroes" and militant "New Negroes," for instance, who can deny that in many ways Senghor's forays into ethno-philosophy and French philosophical anthropology, or what we currently call Senghorian Negritude, seems to mirror the white folk-friendly, moderate "Old Negro" aesthetic, where Damasian Negritude and Cesairean Negritude almost patently parallels the black radical and more militant "New Negro" or "Niggerati" aesthetic of the Harlem Renaissance—not to mention the "Black Aesthetic" of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, which Fanonian Negritude undeniably influenced? What needs to be reiterated here is that the "newness" of the "Niggerati" New Negro second wave of the Harlem Renaissance meant something almost completely different from—if not, in many senses, outright the opposite of—the "newness" of the "old New Negro" first wave, who witnessed firsthand the phenomenal rise of the Black Women's Club Movement and the history-making war of words between, and the correlate movements lead by, Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois. Ultimately, this means that the first wave of New Negroes who set into motion the New Negro Movement circa 1895 held a distinctly different conception of what it meant to be a New Negro in comparison with the second wave of relatively younger, self-described "Niggerati," New Negroes who audaciously inaugurated and advanced the Harlem Renaissance."

Marcus Garveyism

- Born in 1887 in Jamaica, Marcus Garvey was a political activist, journalist, orator, and the man behind the most famous PanAfricanist movement known today as Garveyism.
- The ideology of Garveyism centers on the idea that all African-descended peoples should unify and return to Africa in order to rejuvenate the long-lost acculturation of African society.
- Later called Black Nationalism, he was a very controversial figure of the African Diaspora —most notably because he worked with the Ku Klux Klan toward their common goal of separatism.
- He launched several businesses in several different industries, believing that the way to equality for Black society was not only to separate itself from white society but to promote its own community's business ventures.
- He had a well-known prejudice against mixed-race people and Jews (after being jailed for mail fraud, he publicly blamed the Jewish community for what he saw as a politically motivated case against him).



— Garveyism

Ethiopia, thou land of our fathers,
Thou land where the gods loved to be,
As storm cloud at night suddenly gathers
Our armies come rushing to thee.
We must in the fight be victorious
When swords are thrust outward to gleam;
For us will the vict'ry be glorious
When led by the red, black, and green.

Lyrics from the anthem of Garvey's organization, Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League (UNIA-ACL, commonly known as UNIA)

Discussion



What was/is the Harlem Renaissance?
