

## Marvelous Blackness: On Surrealism and Negritude

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**Books:** Aimé Césaire, *Collected Poetry* (California) and *Discourse on Colonialism* (Monthly Review); Paulette Nardal, *Beyond Negritude* (SUNY); M. Richardson and K. Fijalkowski (eds.), *Refusal of the Shadow* (Verso); Victor Segalen, *Essay on Exoticism* (Duke); Léopold Senghor, *The Collected Poetry* (Virginia); readings also in PDF available on the course website. *All books are available at Amherst Books in downtown Amherst. Please buy your books from Amherst Books and support independent businesses!*

**Aim of the course:** The aim of this course is simple. We want to understand the context, motivations, discoveries, and complex legacy of the surrealist and negritude movements in the francophone world, with particular attention to the Caribbean. What is it about surrealism that so appealed to anti-colonial thinkers and actors in the middle of the twentieth century? How did the negritude movement infuse the aesthetic claims of surrealism with a robust sense of anti- and post-colonial politics? In exploring these questions, we will read closely the theoretical work of major thinkers René Ménénil, Aimé Césaire, Léopold Senghor, Suzanne Césaire, Jane Nardal, Paulette Nardal, and Jean-Paul Sartre.

So, a number of issues come to mind. First, there is the question of how ideas are transformed across borders. How are notions of the exotic and the marvelous – crucial for European ideas of surrealism – reinvented and altered when appropriated by afro-Caribbean and West African thinkers? What did those latter theorists and artists find so appealing about surrealism as an aesthetic theory and its promise of the liberation of the senses? Second, there is the question of politics. How do ideas of the exotic and marvelous promise not just a liberation of the senses, but also social, cultural, and political liberation? That is, how are the marvelous and the exotic transformed by the *positive* experience of blackness – named *negritude* – and the historic moment of anti-colonial struggle? Third, and last, what sort of legacy does the negritude movement and its surrealist inspiration leave? What are its limits and possibilities?

**Method of evaluation:** You might be wondering how you get a good grade in this course. The simple answer is that you read, attend class, ask questions, critically discuss the materials, and write quality essays.

*Attendance in this course is mandatory.* Upon missing your third session, your grade will begin to drop by 1/3 with each subsequent missed class. In the end, though, you will want to attend class, not out of fear of penalty, but because it is interesting and you need it to understand the material.

*The written work in this course comes in four parts:* 1. an ongoing definition project, run through the course website (details in a separate document); 2. a midterm essay (8-10 pages) on a topic of your choosing; 3. your contribution to a journal project, to be completed by the last week of the semester (details in a separate document); 4. a final essay (6-8 pages) on a topic of your choosing. All assignments are meant to develop precision of understanding (definitions of key terms and concepts), classroom community engagement with the material (definitions, the journal project), and your own creative, idiosyncratic way into the material (devising essay topics on your own).

### Reading sequence

The following schedule of readings will be closely followed. You are responsible for reading all assignments before we meet. At times, the readings will seem opaque. Read every word anyway, even when it feels more like reading discrete words, less like understanding sentences.

The schedule...

*midterm essay due 4 November @ 11:59pm :: final essay due 18 December @ 11:59pm :: essays sent via email only*

**07 September**

Introduction to the course

**12 September**

A. Breton, "Manifesto of Surrealism"

**14 September**

A. Breton, "A Great Black Poet"

**19 September**

R. Ménil, "Birth of Our Art"

R. Ménil, "Introduction to the Marvelous"

**21 September**

R. Ménil, "Orientation of Poetry"

R. Ménil, "Evidence Concerning the Mind and its Speed"

**26 September**

S. Césaire, "1943: Surrealism and Us"

A. Breton, "At Night in Haiti"

**28 September**

P. Loraque, "André Breton in Haiti"

R. Ménil, "Concerning Colonial Exoticism"

**03 October**

A. Césaire, "Calling the Magician"

S. Césaire, "A Civilization's Discontent"

**05 October**

A. Césaire, *Notebook*

**10 October**

Fall break...bye!

**12 October**

A. Césaire, *Notebook*

**17 October**

A. Césaire, "Culture and Civilization"

**19 October**

L. Senghor, "Spirit of Civilization"; "The African Apprehension"; "Emotion"; "African Metaphysics"

**24 October**

L. Senghor, "The Struggle for Negritude"; "Negritude"; "Reformed Negritude"

**26 October**

L. Senghor, "What the Black Man Contributes"; "Cultural Roots"

**31 October**

L. Senghor poetry (tba)

**02 November**

L. Senghor poetry (tba)

**07 November**

P./J. Nardal, *Beyond Negritude*

**09 November**

P./J. Nardal, *Beyond Negritude*

**14 November**

L. Senghor, "No Political Liberation"; "Cultural Independence"; "Association and Assimilation"

**16 November**

L. Senghor, "Education"; "African Society"; "Property and Work"; "Toward a New"

**21 November is break time**

**23 November is also break time**

**28 November**

A. Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*

**30 November**

A. Césaire, "Interview with René Depestre"

**05 December**

Discussion of Césaire and Senghor

**07 December**

J.P. Sartre, "Black Orpheus"

**12 December**

J.P. Sartre, "Black Orpheus"

**14 December**

F. Fanon, "West Indians and Africans"

*fin*