Dialogues of Negritude
Dialogues of Negritude
An Analysis of the Cultural Context of Black Writing

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This study aims to examine the historical origins of Negritude as a theoretical debate and poetic knowledge which sought to lay the foundations of a dialogue between Africa and its diaspora with the Western world. Chapters 1 and 2 examine the basic structure and content of the discourse about Blacks in Western speculative thought and literature. W. F. Hegel’s excursions from his philosophy to make empirical statements upon Africa and Africans in *Philosophy of History* and *Philosophy of Mind* is discussed as an example of a certain line of thought about Blacks in the Western tradition which conceives the Negro as the very embodiment of negation. On the other hand Hegel’s analysis of the slave in his Master-Slave dialectic is examined as justifying rebellion against an oppressive status quo, one of the historical roles the Negro is associated with, symbolized in the San Domingo revolution. Hegel’s comments upon the Black and the suggestiveness of the Master-Slave dialectic in its application to the historical situation of Blacks in Western culture create a Manichaean view of Negroes whose legacy is still potent. The Negro in Western culture is regarded either as the very embodiment of negation, or, an anti-bourgeois rebel. This line of enquiry is continued by way of an examination of the relevant works of William Shakespeare, Harriet Beecher-Stowe, Joseph Conrad, Michael Tournier, Norman Mailer, Herman Melville, C. L. R. James, Jean Genet, Frantz Fanon.

Chapters 3 and 4 examine the ideologies of Negritude and its literature respectively. Negritude was a complex of both ideology, and, literature and it is necessary to examine how theory and literature combine to enter into dialogue with the thesis on the Black in Western culture. Chapter 5 examines the debate between James Baldwin and Richard
Wright in the fifties and sixties as the continuation of a similar debate between Léopold Senghor and Aimé Césaire in the thirties. The argument between Baldwin and Wright is, I maintain, a debate within Negritude to the extent that it manifests as a discussion about the role of the Negro in modernity. This question assumed, of course, great importance during the agitation for civil rights in the sixties and seventies, both in the USA and Britain, and echoes of Negritude reverberated during this period, symbolized in the ‘Black is beautiful’ mantra of the African-American students recalling the, ‘it is good and beautiful to be Black’ slogan of the Negritude ideologues of the thirties.

Chapter 6 examines the work of the Guyanese Novelist Wilson Harris as an author born in the West Indies who refuses some of the dilemmas posed by the Negritude theorists in the formulation of their ideology. Harris’s is an interesting critique of the politics of protest exemplified in Negritude. His, is of course not the only critique of Negritude in the Black world; Negritude has had a legion of critics, the most famous perhaps being Wole Soyinka. Most of its critics refer nonetheless to the importance of Negritude, an importance which this study seeks to analyse, and, in its conclusion, to assess.

The Negro has symbolically been defined by the West as what I term a sterile negativity, that is, a destructive negativity bent on negation for its own sake. On the other hand negativity can manifest as a creative act. In The Rebel Camus suggests that rebellion as a reaction to the absence of law may manifest as a challenge to a lawless system using the ethics of the rebel’s humanity, and, as such, a paradoxical conservatism. Rebellion may be a reasoned demand for order in a world without law or order, in which case it may be a profoundly positive negativity. Camus writes:

If men cannot refer to common values, which they all separately recognize, then man is incomprehensible to man. The rebel demands that these values should be clearly recognized as part of himself because he knows or suspects that, without them, crime and disorder would reign in the world. An act of rebellion seems to him like a demand for clarity and unity. The most elementary rebellion, paradoxically, expresses an aspiration to order.¹

Negritude’s claim is that its rebellion in a state of disorder—colonialism—is a creative negativity, that is, a justified negation of oppressive assimilation in favour of a world in which the Negro’s otherness can be legitimized.

The form of Negritude’s rebellion, poetry and theory, necessitated a dialogue with the Other; the Negro being forced into this dialogue due to his unique relationship with the Other who was already part of his
self in the form of his culture. Even an internal dialogue with other Blacks involved a reckoning with the Other who lurked over the Blacks’ consciousness in the form of his language.

Notes and References

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In memoriam, Fatine Popeau, 1913–1966