
H-France Review Vol. 3 (June 2003), No. 71

T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, *Négritude Women*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2002. ix +168 pp. Appendix, notes, and index. \$49.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-8166-3679-6. \$17.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-8166-3680-X.

Review by Tyler Stovall, University of California at Berkeley.

T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting's *Négritude Women* represents a welcome new addition to the growing scholarly literature on negritude. Most prominently during the 1930s, the negritude movement brought together black writers from various parts of the French empire, especially the Caribbean and West Africa, in a new exploration of the meaning of blackness as a global phenomenon. These young students, most notably Leopold Senghor of Senegal, Aimé Césaire of Martinique, and Léon Damas of Guiana, came together in Paris to hold meetings, edit journals, and ultimately write major works of poetry, above all Césaire's *Cahiers d'un retour au pays natal*. Since its heyday, negritude has been recognized as significant in several respects: as the first major Francophone literary movement; as an example of black diasporic literature; and as the precursor of anti-colonial consciousness and political activism.

As with many other modern French literary movements (such as surrealism and existentialism) discussions of negritude have generally centered around a few prominent male authors. In her new book Sharpley-Whiting seeks to correct this masculinist focus by looking at the women involved with this literary movement. Scholars have long realized that several women took part in negritude circles, as even a cursory glance at major publications like *Légitime Défense* and *La Revue du monde noir* will readily demonstrate. Moreover, the central social institution that brought together many members of this circle (as well as introducing them to Harlem Renaissance writers like Claude McKay and Langston Hughes) was a salon run by three sisters from Martinique, Andrée, Jane, and Paulette Nardal. Sharpley-Whiting provides the first systematic reading of texts by women negritude writers, and seeks to examine their impact on the movement as a whole. While her study provides valuable information on these women, it only partially succeeds in giving the reviewer a female-centered perspective on the movement in general.

In approaching the story of women in negritude, Sharpley-Whiting argues convincingly that one must shift the traditional parameters of the movement's history. Most literary historians have focused on the period beginning with the appearance of the journal *La Revue du monde noir* in 1931 and culminating with Césaire's *Cahier* in 1939. In contrast, Sharpley-Whiting starts the story earlier, with the journal *La Dépêche africaine* of 1928 and ends it with the Martinique-based journal *Tropiques* during the Second World War. In broadening the focus on negritude both chronologically and geographically, Sharpley-Whiting portrays negritude less as a literary moment in time and more as a process of evolution, highlighting the shifting nature of black Francophone artistic expression. It would, in fact, be interesting to see this process carried even further: to link negritude with black French political movements of the 1920s, and to pursue the story further to connections with the generation of Frantz Fanon and *Présence Africaine*. This is obviously a project for another study.

Sharpley-Whiting's altered focus on negritude allows her to bring women into the picture more effectively. Three women are central to her story: the Nardal sisters Jane and Paulette; and Suzanne Césaire. In different ways, these women made key contributions to the negritude movement. During the early 1930s, Paulette, Andrée, and Jane Nardal hosted a salon on Sunday afternoons at their home in the Paris suburb of Clamart. Educated young women from the middle class of Martinique, they brought together black students and intellectuals from the Caribbean, Francophone Africa, and the United States. They were largely responsible for the seminal influence of Harlem Renaissance writers on the negritude movement, and their salon gave rise to what was arguably its most important journal, *La Revue du monde noir*. Suzanne Césaire is best known as the wife of Aimé Césaire. Also from Martinique, she studied philosophy in Paris during the 1930s and participated in negritude circles. Marrying Aimé Césaire in 1937, she returned with him to her native island in 1939, and with him and René Menil founded the Surrealist journal *Tropiques* during the war years.

The heart of *Negritude Women* is a close textual analysis of key articles produced by these three women.[1] Starting with Jane Nardal, Sharpley-Whiting considers her embrace of black internationalism in general, and the African-American ideal of the New Negro in particular, in 1928, years before the official proclamation of negritude as an organized movement. Jane Nardal also criticized French and American tendencies to exoticize black culture, providing a trenchant critique of Josephine Baker, and embraced black universalism as a fitting response to such stereotyping. The writings of Paulette Nardal continued this fascination with African-American literature and culture, comparing the strong sense of racial identification in the United States to the hesitation of people in the French Caribbean to embrace blackness. Writing in the pages of *La Revue du monde noir*, which she co-edited, Nardal challenged this color-blind attitude, blaming it on French ideas of assimilation, and argued that French Caribbean literature of quality could only be produced by writers willing to come to grips with their African and slave heritage. Noting that Paulette Nardal was not a feminist in any sense of the term, Sharpley-Whiting argues that her position as a woman of color in Paris was key to the creation of negritude, and that it was, in fact, black women who pioneered the move toward racial pride in the 1930s. In her analysis of the work of Suzanne Césaire, Sharpley-Whiting emphasizes the author's reading of Martinique's history as one of victimization by the French through both slavery and assimilation, and her assertion of the need for a liberation from French intellectual tutelage. She also discusses her interest in Surrealism, facilitated by André Breton's brief stay in Martinique while en route from Paris to New York in 1941, arguing that the many affinities between Surrealism and negritude made *Tropiques* a journal belonging to both literary schools. In addition, with her concentration on Martinique and its complex cultural relationship to France, Suzanne Césaire's writings provide a link between negritude and later French Caribbean literary movements such as *antillanité* and *créolité*, a connection emphasized by the fact that one of the students at the Lycée Victor Schoelcher in Fort-de-France, where Césaire taught, was Edouard Glissant.

To a much greater extent than most other studies of negritude, *Negritude Women* concentrates on the Caribbean dimension of this literary movement's history. All three of the women Sharpley-Whiting studies came from Martinique and devoted much of their work to the problem of French Caribbean literature. While negritude embraced the Francophone black world as a whole, much of the energy behind the project came from the Caribbean, an area linked to Africa by the Middle Passage and to black America by a shared history of enslavement. This centrality of the Caribbean to negritude's literary and political project has at times been obscured not just by historians but by the internationalism of the movement itself, and helps illustrate the oft-noted difference between Senghor's essentialist tendencies and Aimé Césaire's political engagement. In addition to its historic position at the center of the trans-Atlantic African diaspora, the Caribbean played a leading role in the formation of French black culture. Since the French West Indies had been French for centuries and its (male) inhabitants citizens of France since 1848, the project of claiming or constructing a cultural identity separate from that of the metropole was much more difficult there than in France's African colonies. Thus both the diasporic and the hybrid nature of France's Caribbean islands prompted a small number of their students to

experiment with new approaches to black culture, and the particular position of Martinican women in Paris helps illustrate this.

All in all, Sharpley-Whiting provides an interesting and skillful analysis of texts by these writers, one which casts negritude in a somewhat different light. Yet many readers of this book, especially historians, will probably find themselves wishing for more. There is very little new information here about the Clamart salon, for example, and I, for one, would welcome more biographical information about Suzanne Césaire and the Nardal sisters. A more substantial discussion of the French Caribbean community in Paris at the time would give this study a better sense of context. Also, it is surprising that this book does not say more about the ways in which gender shaped the negritude movement. Sharpley-Whiting argues, I think correctly, that one cannot read back contemporary ideas of feminism into the women of negritude. Yet this still leaves unanswered the question, what difference did it make that the Nardal sisters and Suzanne Césaire were women? For example, it would be interesting to consider the fact that, whereas the men of negritude achieved recognition for their poetry, these women wrote nonfiction essays. Some brief reflections on differences between men and women can be found in the book, especially in the section on Paulette Nardal, but in general the question of gender could be discussed more forcefully.

These criticisms should not detract from what is an original and important achievement. *Negritude Women* is a must-read for all those interested in modern French history, the African diaspora, women's studies, and Francophone literature. For blazing a trail that others will hopefully follow, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting deserves our congratulations and our thanks.

NOTES

[1] Sharpley-Whiting and collaborator Georges van den Abbeele have performed a valuable service to other scholars by reproducing these texts in an Appendix.

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