

ABSTRACT

Mikela Lundahl: *What is a Negro? Negritude, Essentialism, Strategy*. [*Vad är en neger? Negritude, essentialism, strategi*] Ph D Dissertation in Swedish. 339 p. Department of History Ideas and Theory of Science, Göteborg University, Göteborg, 2005. ISBN 91-628-6474-2

The purpose of this study is to analyse the concept of negritude in texts written by Léopold Sédar Senghor and Aimé Césaire and how they used the word *nègre* in their anti-colonial struggle.

Usually the negritude movement is seen as racial essentialistic and particularistic. These descriptions are often referring to Jean-Paul Sartre's well known essay »Orphée noir« from 1948. In his essay he labels the negritude movement (which until then did not exist as such) as »anti-racist racism«. This enquiry questions the conclusion that negritude is essentialistic and analyses Césaire's and Senghor's texts focusing the on issue whether they actually express essentialistic conceptions of race, africaness and negroness or not.

One of the arguments in the study is that rather than being essentialists, they were engaged in achieving political change through the accentuation of race. That does not necessarily imply a biological understanding of race. At the actual time of birth of the negritude concept, the idea of race is rarely a strictly biological concept; rather it refers to a mixture of biological, cultural and historical elements. Here Gayatri Spivak's concepts strategy and essence have been useful to understand that the accentuation of a common feature (even when it is known not to be stable and eternal) in specific historical situations, actually can be used as a strategy. She has also observed how disturbing all signs of essential thinking seem to be among contemporary scholars.

The study discusses the criticism of negritude, and the picture of it as essentialistic. The questioning of identitarianism during the last decades paired with the fear of essentialism, tend to overlook other aspects of a specific political struggle. Many modern critics of negritude have been too focused on the hazards of essentialism and unable to see the possibilities of negritude as a strategy. Often this inability can be explained by a lack of historical perspective, which makes it difficult to make adequate judgements of the negritude project. Rather than evaluating negritude from a contemporary perspective, it is the political reality of their time that is the main frame of this dissertation.

Keywords: colonialism, racism, anti-racism, essentialism, anti-essentialism, Senghor, Césaire, negritude, Sartre, postcolonial, Spivak, strategy.