

The Duality of Négritude:  
An Examination of Assimilation, Colonization, and Black Glorification

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In a 1967, René Depestre interviewed Aimé Césaire who was one of the founders of the literary movement known as Négritude which emerged in the late 1920s. This movement, inspired by the Harlem Renaissance, generally sought to dispel degrading stereotypes linked to blacks, celebrate Africa and black identity, and denounce colonization through poetry and essays.<sup>1</sup> The interview provided an intimate glimpse into how one of the founders of Négritude characterized this philosophy. Césaire asserted that:

I [had] a feeling that [Négritude] was somewhat of a collective creation. I used the term first, that's true. [Négritude] was really a resistance to the politics of assimilation.... We didn't know what Africa was. Europeans despised everything about Africa, and in France people spoke of a civilized world and a barbarian world. The barbarian world was Africa, and the civilized world was Europe. Therefore the best thing one could do with an African was to assimilate him: the ideal was to turn him into a Frenchman with black skin.<sup>2</sup>

Césaire situated this movement within a society that many black Francophone intellectuals regarded as discriminatory and intolerant. Europeans viewed African culture and traditions as 'less civilized' and the answer to 'civilizing' an African or any black individual was to assimilate him or her into French society, thus negating their identity. Césaire's statements permit modern scholars to begin to understand the varied and complicated representation of Négritude and how one individual viewed Europe and the possible role of blacks in western society.

However, Césaire was not the only important founder of Négritude who solely defined the movement's complex views on assimilation and the role of blacks in European civilization. One of the many significant contributors and founders was Léon-Gontran Damas who was born in French Guiana in 1912. Like Césaire, he viewed integration into French society as futile.

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<sup>1</sup> Reiland Rabaka, *The Négritude Movement: W.E.B. Du Bois, Léon Damas, Aimé Césaire, Léopold Senghor, Frantz Fanon, and the Evolution of an Insurgent Idea*, (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015), pp. 43.

<sup>2</sup> Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham (New York City : Monthly Review Press, 1972), pp. 72-3.

Damas claimed that blacks should rebel against European racism and capitalism.<sup>3</sup> Another important forefather was Léopold Sédar Senghor who was born in 1906 in French West Africa. Senghor did not represent Négritude as ‘a resistance to the politics of assimilation,’ rather he defined Négritude as a movement that was open to “the development of African cultural values” and “the complementary values of Europe”.<sup>4</sup> Senghor desired blacks to be receptive of assimilating to the values of both continents. The last significant founder of Négritude was Paulette Nardal who was born in 1896 on the French colony of Martinique. Like Senghor, she encountered a discriminatory French colonial system, yet she wanted Négritude to be a Pan-African movement that embodied the shared beliefs of the black diaspora while criticizing the effects of assimilation.<sup>5</sup> These figures were critical to the development of Négritude thought on not just assimilation, but also on colonization and black glorification beginning the late 1920s and throughout the 1950s. Moreover, concurrent Négritude periodicals like *La Revue du monde noir*, *L'Étudiant noir*, *La Dépêche africaine*, and *Présence africaine* also commented upon a variety of subject matters affecting the black diaspora.

Certainly, Négritude was concerned with a diverse selection of topics. But, black glorification, assimilation and colonization were themes that almost everything Négritude journal and author examined. We the academics are left wondering about how these Négritude sources portrayed these three important topics beginning in the late 1920s and throughout the 1950s. How did the depiction of these issues change during this thirty year period of time? In what ways did the Négritude sources utilize assimilation, colonization and black glorification as a means to

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<sup>3</sup> Rabaka, *The Négritude Movement*, pp. 94.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 200.

<sup>5</sup> T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, *Négritude Women* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), pp. 17. Lewis, *Race, Culture, and Identity*, pp. 18.

highlight greater issues involving Africans and the black diaspora? To what extent was there a difference in opinion or depiction of these themes between the periodicals and authors? The answer to these questions will help expand the modern interpretation of Négritude and reveal the significant issues for the black diaspora through the application of black glorification, assimilation, and colonization.

But, first, in order to answer these questions, it is important to trace the changing definitions of Négritude. In the 1970s, scholar Ellen Conroy Kennedy defined Négritude as a movement encompassing black Francophone intellectuals, originating mostly from French West Africa and the Caribbean, who were reflecting upon their black and African history through essays and poems.<sup>6</sup> Blacks had long lived in a society that looked down upon the achievements and feats of the black race. Likewise, another expert on Négritude, Sylvia Washington Bâ, described this ideology as means for black intellectuals to use art to elevate “black civilization that was different but equal” to white civilization.<sup>7</sup> Lastly, another common definition during this era was espoused by historian of African literature Lilyan Kesteloot who stated that Négritude had two consistent elements: “the black man’s reconquered pride and his awareness of the historic values of his race.”<sup>8</sup> The predominant argument within academia during the 1970s concerned Négritude’s interest in promoting black culture and allowing those throughout the black diaspora to utilize their ‘blackness’ in art and to champion it. Yet, decades later, a more complicated and inclusive definition of Négritude emerged.

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<sup>6</sup> Ellen Conroy Kennedy, *The Négritude Poets* (New York: The Viking Press, 1975), pp. xxviii.

<sup>7</sup> Sylvia Washington Bâ, *The Concept of Négritude in the Poetry of Léopold Sédar Senghor* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), pp. 8.

<sup>8</sup> Lilyan Kesteloot, *Black Writers in French: A Literary History of Négritude*, trans. Ellen Conroy Kennedy (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1974), pp. 111.

During the twenty-first century, academics like Shireen K. Lewis reevaluated the definition of Négritude to add women who were ignored in previous secondary literature. For example, the sisters Jane and Paulette Nardal were vital in hosting salons in Paris which brought together Négritude writers from all the around the world.<sup>9</sup> Paulette Nardal was an early proponent within the Négritude community of promoting a “universal black identity” and she advocated for the black race’s ability to “contribute to the improvement of humanity.”<sup>10</sup> Brent Hayes Edwards argued that, according to Paulette Nardal, Jane was the “first promoter” of the ideas of Négritude and that Négritude at its genesis represented “black culture as an autonomous and transnational tradition” which connected the black diaspora through art, music and literature.<sup>11</sup> Finally, feminist scholar T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting highlighted Paulette Nardal’s essays which encouraged Pan-Africanism and the affirmation of the cultural creations of the black race.<sup>12</sup> These academics demonstrated the value and contributions of female black writers of Négritude. However, there is more to be added to the conversation.

By critically examining the three most prominent and recurring themes in Négritude, assimilation, colonization and black glorification, this thesis investigates how the authors and periodicals of Négritude utilized these topics to highlight the important issues such as black identity and political activism. From the 1920s until the 1950s, a conversation regarding colonization emerged throughout many articles and poems. Négritude allowed authors like Senghor and Césaire to seek out conflicting opinions which simultaneously preferred and

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<sup>9</sup> Shireen K. Lewis, *Race, Culture, and Identity: Francophone West African and Caribbean Literature and Theory from Négritude to Creolite* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2006), pp. 60.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>11</sup> Brent Hayes Edward, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), pp. 124.

<sup>12</sup> Sharpley-Whiting, *Négritude Women*, pp. 17.

condemned colonization in their works and in their statements as politicians. Dualistic beliefs emerged based on the writer's personal actions as a poet and a statesman. The movement allowed periodicals to participate in forms of political advocacy that defended marginalized blacks by stressing the viciousness of French rule and juxtaposing the pros and cons of colonization. Négritude also permitted its experts to use the theme of assimilation to embrace a binary identity that stressed the integration into French society while protecting a unique black individuality. Likewise, the movement encouraged a debate on the eventual configuration of black identity. Négritude demonstrated its lenience for having poets highlight the capacity of assimilation to undo the exceptional nature of blacks. Finally, Négritude had writers utilize the glorification of black accomplishments and African civilizations to promote a distinct black identity that enjoyed a plethora of agreeable and artistic traits. The movement also tolerated the way journals emphasized the extent that Africans and their civilizations had in inspiring modern European art and mythology through black glorification.

### **Part One: The Conflicting Debates Around Colonization**

The writers of Négritude from the 1920s to the 1950s generated a multitude of diverse themes on colonization. The two decades leading up to World War Two had Négritude writers depict colonization as an unjust act committed by Europe which hampered the development of African culture and civilization. At the same time, several journals and their published essays characterized colonization as beneficial. The debate around colonization demonstrated Négritude's permissiveness in allowing individual authors to pursue viewpoints which simultaneously favored and discredited colonization. A dualism of opinion materialized based upon the author's individual actions as a poet and politician. Négritude also allowed periodicals to engage in forms of protest that advocated for marginalized blacks by highlighting the

brutalities of French rule and forging discussions by juxtaposing the advantages and disadvantages of colonization.

Within Négritude, Leopold Senghor represented his own distinct theme on colonization which emphasized colonization's ability to dismiss and handicap African culture. In response, he refuted this rejection. Senghor experienced the prejudice of European colonization from a seminary in Senegal. The director of his seminary, a known racist who "called Africans savages", told Senghor that him and his family "would never amount to anything" due to their skin color.<sup>13</sup> From an early age, Senghor learned that his African culture and heritage was backwards compared to France. Senghor railed against Europe in his first published works titled *Shadow Songs* which reflected his irritation of colonization in the 1930s.<sup>14</sup> In his poem *Return of the Prodigal Son*, Senghor related European civilization as mud caked on his feet. Senghor characterized colonization as a force that slowed the progress and advancement of Africans. Additionally, in *To the Music of Koras and Balaphon* he imagined his African childhood as "paradise" free from "the contamination of being civilized".<sup>15</sup> Senghor claimed that Africa was productive before colonization. Yet, when Europeans arrived, they brought derision and animosity which spurred Africans into conflict with Europeans. Therefore, his earliest poems were a response to the struggle between these two societies. Senghor crafted a distinct way of characterizing the hindrance of colonization through this poetic denunciation that was linked to his experiences as a youth. Having Senghor highlight the effects of colonization in his poems

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<sup>13</sup> Rabaka, *The Négritude Movement*, pp. 198.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 231.

<sup>15</sup> Léopold Sédar Senghor, *The Collected Poetry*, Trans. Melvin Dixon, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1991), pp. 22.

demonstrated the significance of the issues of colonization early in his life and his desire to rebut prejudicial views Europeans had about Africans.

In contrast to the theme from Senghor, a more distinct and condemning point of view of colonization emerged within Négritude. Beginning in the late-1920s, one of the first Négritude journals *La Dépêche africaine*, translated as The African Dispatch, engaged in a form of activism which berated colonization as a system that unjustly imprisoned and mistreated Africans while advocating for the undoing of these brutalities. The journal stated that it was created to point out and attempt to solve the injustices that Africans experienced under colonization. Several issues of *La Dépêche africaine* revealed the brutalities perpetuated by the French in Africa. For example, the writers used up an entire page with the headline ‘Une Monstruosité Judiciaire à Madagascar.’<sup>16</sup> The article detailed how the governor-general of Madagascar sentenced the Editor in chief of the local publication *The Opinion* to two years in prison and a fine of 2,000 Francs for writing an article which the governor viewed as an attack on his authority. Another example of colonial cruelty was the general violation of human rights in the Ivory Coast during the late 1920s. *La Dépêche africaine* stated that the natives of this region were the most mistreated of any people and they suffered daily injustices.<sup>17</sup> One report chronicled the physical abuse one Ivorian servant experienced under a white colonist for his improper use of the French language.<sup>18</sup>

A form of activism emerged within Négritude through a brazen condemnation of French colonization and its methods. The journalists used their publication as an opportunity to highlight for the public the apparent abusive practices of colonization. Like Senghor, these authors

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<sup>16</sup>“Une Monstruosité Judiciaire à Madagascar.” *La Dépêche africaine*, June. 1928, p. 5. From Center for Research Libraries. <https://dds-crl-edu.ezproxy.library.wisc.edu/page/download/9510> (Accessed Dec. 9, 2016).

<sup>17</sup> “‘Brutalités Coloniales’ à la Côte d’Ivoire.” *La Dépêche africaine*, Feb. 1928, p. 7. From Center for Research Libraries. <https://dds-crl-edu.ezproxy.library.wisc.edu/item/9507> (Accessed Dec. 10, 2016).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 7

responded to the injustices committed by Europeans ruling over Africans, but without the utilization of rhymes and verses. However, unlike Senghor, they went a step further by attempting to employ their journal as an amplifier to garner the attention of French officials to recognize the failings of colonization. It was critical for these aspiring activists to reveal the suffering of their black brethren with the desire of ending their anguish.

Furthermore, paralleling the methods and themes of *La Dépêche africaine*, the Négritude journal *L'Étudiant noir* (The Black Student), founded in 1935 by Aimé Césaire, operated as a prominent, activist platform which underscored the brutalities of colonization and its lasting effects. For example, one contributor to *L'Étudiant noir*, Gilbert Gratiant, wrote about the French introducing their civilization to the Antilles. These colonizers destroyed and suppressed the indigenous people of the Caribbean who were living in a state of purity.<sup>19</sup> Gratiant further argued that the French imported less than ideal individuals to the Antilles such as pirates, buccaneers and thieves.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, French colonization was the culprit of the current crime and malaise on Martinique and Guadeloupe. In general, Gratiant declared that blacks had their civilization stunted and their people killed by white culture.<sup>21</sup> In another article, L. Sainville highlighted the lack of black Antillean literature and its causes. Sainville argued that this absence was due to the oppressive forces of colonization and racism.<sup>22</sup> Blacks were unable to develop their own black heritage and society on the island because of almost three centuries of French colonization.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Gratiant, Gilbert. "Mulâtre ...pour le bien et le mal." *L'Étudiant noir, journal de l'Association des Etudiants Martiniquais en France 1. March 1935*. 7.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., pp.7.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., pp. 7.

<sup>22</sup> Sainville, L. "Un Livre Sur La Martinique." *L'Étudiant noir, journal de l'Association des Etudiants Martiniquais en France 1. March 1935*. 9.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., pp. 9.

Both writers did not provide suggestions about how to fix these current issues which indicated the authors' and the journal's eagerness to solely highlight the inequalities of colonization. In the early days of Négritude, protesting colonization through journals amplified the significance of the cruelty of French rule. Journals were a popular medium to criticize colonization and that these publications provided an outlet to protest a subject matter that affected millions of blacks who were unable to speak for themselves. Gratiant's and Sainville's ability to highlight their suffering indicated a desire within Négritude to represent underprivileged blacks. The dissemination of this journal meant that it acted as a platform for the public to understand the ill-effects of French rule. Négritude permitted the writers of *L'Étudiant noir* to utilize their criticisms of colonization to emphasize and remonstrate the deplorable conditions of blacks under French rule. The journal was a prominent stage to speak for the black diaspora who was unable to speak for themselves.

Only two years after the cessation of the *L'Étudiant noir*, in 1937 Léon Damas proclaimed a similar anti-colonization message prominent within Négritude. His intentions for criticizing colonization revolved advocating for unheard, suffering Africans. Damas identified “with the wretched [i.e. blacks] of the earth of French Guiana and the wider African world”.<sup>24</sup> Damas viewed himself as the “voice of his people” who were experiencing hardship under colonization.<sup>25</sup> Thus, he published a set of poems under the title *Pigments* in which he declared his frustrations towards French rule. In one poem called *Whitewashed* he stated that European colonization had “robbed” Africa of “peace”.<sup>26</sup> He also argued that Europeans had arrived to the

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<sup>24</sup> Rabaka, *The Négritude Movement*, pp. 92.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 92.

<sup>26</sup> Alexandra Lillehei, “Pigments in Translation” (Senior Thesis, Wesleyan College, 2011). 78, accessed December 4, 2016 [http://wescholar.wesleyan.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1705&context=etd\\_hon\\_theses](http://wescholar.wesleyan.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1705&context=etd_hon_theses).

continent with annihilation in mind. They fired their guns, captured innocent men and women whom they loaded onto their slave ships as “cargos of cruel slavery”.<sup>27</sup> The perspective originating from Damas highlighted a strain of vocal activism within Négritude concerning colonization and the desire to unveil its horrors. This position indicated the importance of advocating for the millions of afflicted blacks who were unable to speak for themselves. Damas used his poetry as a loudspeaker to emphasize the pain and anguish that the Africans experienced under colonization. Damas engaged in a form poetic protest which stressed his concerns for his black brethren to a worldwide audience.

Furthermore, Aimé Césaire, a contemporary of Damas, used his poetry to echo the same theme of protesting against the negative effects of colonization and speaking up for voiceless blacks. Césaire identified with Africa and the black diaspora; his criticism of colonization and its ramifications stemmed from his 1939 essay he wrote called *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*.<sup>28</sup> He detailed some of the daily injustices that blacks experienced under French colonial rule on the Caribbean island of Martinique in the 1930s. He wrote about the “hungry Antilles, the Antilles pitted with smallpox, the Antilles dynamited by alcohol.”<sup>29</sup> The author characterized his home island as a “deserted hideousness” covered in “sores”.<sup>30</sup> The Martiniquais and the island were portrayed as ill and slowly dying. Césaire claimed that French colonization has taught native blacks that they were the “parasites of the world”.<sup>31</sup> Césaire used *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* as an opportunity to underline the evils of the French colonial system. France had reinforced negative, racist stereotypes, ignored the welfare of its inhabitants and taught the

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., pp. 78.

<sup>28</sup> Rabaka, *The Négritude Movement*, pp. 151.

<sup>29</sup> Aimé Césaire, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, Trans. Clayton Eshlemand (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), pp. 1.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., pp. 13.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., pp. 44.

blacks of Martinique that they were lesser beings who contributed nothing to civilization. Césaire utilized his essay as a platform to protest the injustices of colonization. His depictions of French rule portrayed this system in the bleakest context possible in order to reveal the true nature of French rule. The obligation for Césaire to speak up against colonization which inflicted great pain upon the blacks he sympathized with was the driving force of his first printed essay.

Throughout 1920s and the 1930s, Négritude writers and journals utilized the theme of colonization as a tool for protesting the brutal and unjust treatment of blacks living under French rule. Except for Senghor, whose critiques of colonization originated from his own personal experiences, men like Damas and Césaire focused intensively on French rule and its terrible effects as so did *L'Étudiant noir* and *La Dépêche africaine*. The early years of Négritude was concerned with emphasizing the cruelty of colonization, but the movement lacked a clear message in how to remedy these brutalities. Both the authors and the periodicals did identify with and expose the suffering of blacks. They all used their respective modes of writing to advocate for black individuals who were unable to defend themselves. A desire to end or at least reform colonization and its effects was prevalent in Négritude essays and journals. But, unlike most forms of activism, Négritude did not promote detailed steps to end the French rule. Rather a weaker form of a politicking emerged through the fixation of controversial issues surrounding colonization.

However, during the 1940s and 1950s, Négritude demonstrated its ideological flexibility that certain authors utilized when writing and governing as politicians. As a writer, Senghor shifted his pre-World War Two stance towards a more severe assessment of colonization because

he believed in “reclaiming and recreating the ‘degraded identity’ of Africa” within his poems.<sup>32</sup> In the 1956 work *Ethiopiennes*, Senghor wrote several poems that portrayed the white conquest of Africa in a more negative light compared to his earlier works. In the poem *Shaka*, Shaka the leader of the Zulus of South Africa, spoke to a white man about the violence and subjugation over Africans. Shaka stated that the British arrived to his land as “conquerors from overseas”.<sup>33</sup> These “conquerors” razed the land, tore out the forests and enchained the valleys and rivers.<sup>34</sup> Senghor indicated the notion that Africa had once been beautiful and had been ruled by powerful Africans. Négritude writers had the ability to show the bountifulness of the continent and its dramatic transformation through European contact. Although Senghor did not directly address colonization, he did demonstrate a stern opinion regarding the results of European contact while representing the pristineness of pre-colonial Africa. Thus, his inclination to continually reinvent his imaginings of the continent over several decades aligned with the Négritude’s adaptability in characterizing colonization in different ways.

However, Senghor’s written critiques failed to align with his actions as a politician which demonstrated the ideological flexibility of Négritude when its authors were faced with certain political realities. After World War Two, Senghor served in the French national assembly and later became the first president of an independent Senegal in 1960.<sup>35</sup> He hoped for a constitutional federation between France and its African colonies. These colonies and all their people would enjoy the economic benefits of being in the European Economic Community alongside of France.<sup>36</sup> Senghor’s politics highlighted his desire not to fully break away from the

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<sup>32</sup> Rabaka, *The Négritude Movement*, pp. 151.

<sup>33</sup> Senghor, *The Collected Poetry*, pp. 94.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 94.

<sup>35</sup> Gary Wilder, *Freedom Time: Négritude, Decolonization, and the Future of the World* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), pp. 1.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 151.

once colonial power for the economic benefits that might come. Négritude permitted authors like Senghor to embrace a dual identity where emphasizing the cruelty of colonization, showing Africa's pre-colonial beauty, trying to resist full independence and obtain financial assistance from a former ruler could coexist peacefully. Senghor was at ease in propagating competing opinions which underscored Négritude's openness to such ideological elasticity.

Likewise, Aimé Césaire adopted the similar theme of retaining opposing poetic and political ideals post-World War Two in hopes of procuring support from France. In his 1955 essay *Discourse on Colonialism*, Césaire declared that "colonization works to *decivilize* [sic] the colonizers, to degrade him, to awaken him to...violence, race hatred, and moral relativism".<sup>37</sup> European oppression was not just a cruel act upon the natives but a corrupting influence upon Europe. He determined that colonization "dehumanizes even the most civilized man" and that "no one colonizes innocently".<sup>38</sup> This example reinforced his belief that colonization was demoralizing and a corrupting influence on European society. Césaire's post war essay differed from his previous essay *Return to the Native Land*. He took a holistic approach to the subject instead of a specific example. The words utilized were more horrid and gruesome. His outlook on humanity was dismal. This broad interpretation portrayed colonization as a disease that infected all parts of a society. The prognosis was viciousness and barbarity.

Like Senghor, Césaire operated as a politician who advocated for a semi-colonized status for his home of Martinique. His actions indicated that there was a faction within Négritude which would allow for writers to deviate from previous criticisms of colonization. As a deputy in the French assembly after World War Two, he lobbied for Martinique to become a department

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<sup>37</sup> Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, pp. 13.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 17.

within the French state.<sup>39</sup> Departmentalization would be beneficial because it would grant Martiniquais self-government, full rights and economic development.<sup>40</sup> Like Senghor, there was a split between Césaire the writer and Césaire the politician. The reality of the situation required some form of surrendering full autonomy to the former colonizer to bring prosperity to his people while being able to harshly criticize French rule. His literary message on colonization harshened overtime whereas his pragmatic beliefs on the subject did not. Césaire was not hampered by an ideological rigidity. Négritude did not demand consistency between poetry and political actions.

In contrast to Senghor and Césaire, Léon Damas did not enter politics after the Second World War, but having all three prominent figures echo each other's anti-colonial sentiment in the 1950s suggested that during this era of post colonization, it was vital to continue to underline the atrocities of French rule and speak for voiceless Africans. In the 1956 publication *Black-Label*, Damas displayed "the collective emotional trauma of the black diaspora, slavery, and racial prejudice" as if these experiences were still happening.<sup>41</sup> For instance, Damas estimated that two hundred and fifty million Africans had been displaced because of the Europeans and that these same white men ordered the pillaging of African villages.<sup>42</sup> Damas continued with the horrors of slavery by stating how fathers were known to sell their children at auctions.<sup>43</sup> These examples reaffirmed the narrative that Césaire put forth which was how colonization corrupted all those who encountered it. Twenty years after *Pigments*, Damas continued to use Africa as a central idea to criticize Europe and represent marginalized blacks. A continual depiction of

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<sup>39</sup> Wilder, *Freedom Time*, pp. 106

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 112.

<sup>41</sup> Laurence M. Porter, "An Equivocal Négritude: Léon-Gontran Damas's Lyric Masterpiece, *Black-Label* (1956)." *Research in African Literatures* 41, no. 4 (2010): 187-207. doi:10.2979/ral.2010.41.4.187.

<sup>42</sup> Léon Damas, *Black-Label* (Gallimard: Paris, 1956), pp. 17.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 17.

colonization within a decolonizing world suggested that Damas wanted to emphasize the cruelties that Africans had endured which continued to be tangible in the minds of Négritude writers. Damas, Césaire and Senghor all focused on the cruelties of colonization even with colonies beginning to declare their independence. The intense scrutiny upon French rule and its effects underscored how Négritude and its authors did not forget about the historical injustices done to blacks.

The overwhelming attitude throughout Négritude originating from figures like Damas and Senghor and journals like *L'Étudiant noir* depicted colonization in a severe and critical manner. But, several Négritude journals beginning in 1928 espoused the benefits of colonization for blacks which revealed how Négritude journals were more likely to create a debate around colonization. The motto of *La Dépêche africaine* was 'to defend our colonies, is to strengthen France' and the founders of the periodical stated that even if the colonies obtained autonomy, they were incapable of facilitating the advancement of their societies.<sup>44</sup> The colonials needed French rule because the French could provide economic and educational opportunities for Africans. This journal also stated that colonization in of itself was a necessary system and it would continue until the subjugated natives became "civilized" enough to interact in a modern world.<sup>45</sup> With *La Dépêche africaine* espousing the benefits of colonization for France and the Africans while promoting the atrocities of French rule in Africa all throughout the same publication indicated the dual nature of certain Négritude outlets for embracing controversial subject matters. The opposing viewpoints within this journal demonstrated that the authors of

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<sup>44</sup> "Notre But-Notre Programme." *La Dépêche Africaine*, Feb. 1928, p. 1. From Center for Research Libraries. <https://dds-crl-edu.ezproxy.library.wisc.edu/item/9507> (Accessed Dec. 8, 2016).

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 1

Négritude journals were interested in presenting colonization in a relatively fair and balanced manner by showing its advantages and disadvantages.

Unlike the one-sided nature of the poetry of Damas or Césaire, Négritude and its journals provided a unique outlet for authors to present all sides of an important topic which then broaden the conversation surrounding colonization. Those within Négritude were not concerned in upholding the mantle of ideological consistency. A debate emerged from this discourse. Periodicals were more tolerant of colonization than individual essayists. Individual authors had personal experiences with colonization which influenced their poetry to become more critical of French rule. Journals were large collaborations between people that set out to include a wide variety of viewpoints. Négritude permitted the periodicals and authors to espouse their own opinion regarding colonization which in turn allowed for a flexibility for writers to utilize their critique as a means to advocate for underprivileged blacks or a more advantageous colonial status.

Another contemporary Négritude journal of *La Dépêche africaine* was *La Revue du monde noir*, translated as The Review of the Black World. It was a dual French-English printed journal, issued between 1931 and 1932. This review contained several essays that highlighted French colonization in a positive light which indicated the lack of an ideological consistency for authors to follow within Négritude. For example, Louis Baudza criticized the writings of Admiral Castex which urged France to abandon all its colonial annexations except for the African colonies.<sup>46</sup> However, he asserted that France was the “guardian of belated [Africans]” and that the African colonies of France were a vital part of the country’s identity.<sup>47</sup> Additionally,

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<sup>46</sup> Louis Beaudza. “Open Letter to Admiral Castex.” *La Revue du monde noir* 6, June 1932. (Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 2012), pp. 334.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 336.

another writer, Paulette Nardal, an editor of *the La Revue du monde noir*, emphasized the relative benign nature of colonization by categorizing the living conditions of blacks in the Antilles as a “comparatively favorable environment” as opposed to the living conditions of African Americans.<sup>48</sup> These remarks were dissimilar from the anti-colonial words of Senghor, Damas and Césaire. Their comments reflected an attitude of contempt for French colonization and an idealization of an Africa untouched by the hazards of European contact. Yet, for Nardal and Baudza colonization was a source of pride, strength and identity.

The absence of articles condemning colonization revealed how Négritude publications were more willing to stray from the standard analysis originating from the founders of Négritude and to highlight its benefits. Likewise, *La Revue du monde noir* was created in the early 1930s well before the published critiques of Damas, Césaire and Senghor which indicated that with their absences, Négritude journals did have the obligation to conform to their interpretations. The periodical was free to experiment with contentious viewpoints. Lastly, the inclusion and the number of these non-critical works, which had little to no influence on the works of Senghor and his contemporaries, suggested that colonization for the editors of *La Revue du monde noir* was not a topic of urgency which needed critical analysis. The review was important to the progression of Négritude and its ideas did serve as the conceptual cornerstone of the movement. This ideology was a complex literary and racial movement that contained contradictory beliefs. The review served as a counter weight to the vocal Négritude founders who did not explore the benefits of colonization with the nuance originating from *La Revue du monde noir* and *La Dépêche africaine*.

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<sup>48</sup> Paulette Nardal, “Awakening of Race Consciousness” *La Revue du monde noir* 6, June 1932 pp. 345.

After World War Two, in the absence of Négritude journals championing colonization, Paulette Nardal personally encouraged blacks to cooperate with French rule in hopes of bettering their status. Her activities exposed Négritude's tolerance for beneficial French collaboration. Nardal was from Martinique which recently acquired département status after World War Two. This new standing granted the inhabitants of the island equal rights with the metropolitan France. She was an advocate for women's rights and an activist who wanted the women of Martinique to participate in voting.<sup>49</sup> Nardal was disillusioned with ineptitude of elite women who did not think it was necessary to educate less fortunate women of the island. Thus, she wanted them to participate in politics and bring a certain amount of moral respectability into policymaking.<sup>50</sup> Nardal was powerless in halting the process of departmentalization of Martinique. So, she was forced to continue the advocacy of this continual form of French rule through policy suggestions. Even though Martinique would gain more rights under departmentalization, the island was still not fully independent and Paris still governed the island. Departmentalization was less dominant form of colonization. Rather than attacking French rule, Nardal wanted to work within the system and have black women attempt to improve their status. The ideology of Négritude did not prohibit Nardal from rallying women to shape their political and social future within the confines of colonization. Certain political realities forced figures like Nardal, Césaire, and Senghor to understand that there were benefits in pursuing some form of continual French rule.

In general, the authors and periodicals within Négritude embraced a wide variety of attitudes and opinions concerning colonization from the 1920s to the 1950s. This diversity revealed that the movement had a great amount of ideological flexibility and tolerance. In the

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<sup>49</sup> Paulette Nardal, "Martinical Women and Politics," *Beyond Négritude*, trans. T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting. (Albany: SUNY Press, 2009), pp. 65.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 65.

beginning years of Négritude, journals utilized the debate surrounding colonization to underscore the brutalities of French rule while engaging in a form of activism. Damas and Césaire used their poetry as an opportunity to highlight the barbarity of colonization and advocate for marginalized blacks. After World War Two, due to decolonization and political ambitions, Césaire and Senghor were forced to accommodate dual identities of being for and against direct or indirect French rule over their respective homelands. Yet, a divergence of condemnation of colonization between periodicals and authors materialized. Journals emerged as the vanguard of championing the benefits of colonization. They juxtaposed the advantages and disadvantages of French rule. Négritude was accommodating in permitting a healthy debate around colonization and in allowing each writer and periodical to espouse an opinion that conformed with their individual beliefs and positions. Most of the essayists, like Senghor, Césaire and Nardal, had to contend with the fact that before the Second World War French rule was cruel and brutal and their poetry and essays reflected that sentiment. After the war, their pro-colonization actions as politicians or community organizers deviated from their previous and current anti-colonization attitudes. But, journals, being large collaborations of Négritude writers, had the benefit of becoming centers of intellectual discourse. These outlets could develop into platforms to advocate for the underprivileged black diaspora while championing certain advantages of colonization.

### **Part Two: Assimilation and Black Identity**

The degree of assimilation into French and western European culture was a contentious issue among many prominent figures of Négritude. Throughout the early twentieth century, Négritude ideology deemed that the loss of black identity and black alienation was due to

cultural integration.<sup>51</sup> Assimilation, through education, allowed white French culture and colonialism to deny blacks the ability to admire and depict the contributions that Africans and their civilizations had made to the world.<sup>52</sup> Thus, many followers of Négritude stated that the black diaspora needed avoid integration and affirm their blackness and their African heritage.<sup>53</sup> Négritude permitted authors and journals to utilize the theme of assimilation to embrace a dual identity that emphasized integration into white society while preserving black identity. Additionally, Négritude incited a debate on the future composition of black individuality. Lastly, this ideology demonstrated its tolerance for having writers like Damas highlight the ability of assimilation to dismantle a unique black personality.

Négritude granted writers like Senghor during the 1930s to use French experiences to critically analyze Europe and portray a pristine Africa. As one of the few black men in Europe, he graduated from the Sorbonne in 1933 with a degree in teaching and taught literature and grammar in Tours, France until 1939.<sup>54</sup> Noticing this disparity of race, Senghor asserted that “the black man’s task was to ‘assimilate without letting himself be assimilated’”.<sup>55</sup> Senghor resisted full integration into French society which then allowed him to “find...the values of his [African] heritage” and criticize Europe within his poetry.<sup>56</sup> For example, in his collection of works titled, *Shadow Songs*, the poem *Snow in Paris*, written before World War Two, starkly depicted Paris, while representing Africa as pleasing. Senghor declared that “Paris...has become mean and evil” and Europe was “ravaged”.<sup>57</sup> European hands that “slapped [Senghor]” had

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<sup>51</sup> Lewis, *Race, Culture, and Identity*, pp. 26.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 28.

<sup>53</sup> Sharpley-Whiting, *Négritude Women*, pp. 11.

<sup>54</sup> Bâ, *The Concept of Négritude in the Poetry of Léopold Sédar Senghor*, pp. 15.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 39.

<sup>57</sup> Senghor, *The Collected Poetry*, pp. 12. (Senghor is referencing the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) with the “ravaged” and “divided” remarks.)

forced him into “loneliness”.<sup>58</sup> Senghor then highlighted the palmyra trees and black forests of Africa.<sup>59</sup> In another poem within *Shadow Songs*, *To the Music of Koras and Balaphon*, Senghor recalled his African childhood as his paradise, while desiring to be “cleansed” of European civilization.<sup>60</sup>

Senghor’s poetry indicated that living like a white man was impossible and hazardous because of his skin color. He met abuse in Europe like he did as a child in his native land. Within Négritude, poets like Senghor, who attempted assimilation, began to harshly emphasize the evils of Europe which portrayed that society as brutal and ineffective even though Senghor’s education was due to French schools. The absence of the educational contributions of Europe which Senghor utilized indicated his and Négritude’s reluctance to credit Europeans in educating the most prominent Négritude writers. With the desire to ‘assimilate but not be assimilated’, an imbalance emerged. Africa became the source of poetic focus despite it not being responsible for Senghor’s higher education while Europe was cruel even though it developed Senghor into the poet he became.

Akin to Senghor, the actions of Paulette Nardal exemplified how Négritude permitted writers like herself to assimilate into France and utilize its educational system while simultaneously creating salons that insulated black intellectuals from white Europeans. Within Négritude, Nardal represented the faction of openly accepting and declining certain aspects of the French society. She obtained a Ph.D. from the Sorbonne and lived in Paris.<sup>61</sup> Afterwards, she observed how black women had assimilated into the French education system that taught them

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<sup>58</sup> Senghor, *The Collected Poetry*, pp. 12.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 13.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 17.

<sup>61</sup> Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), pp. 126.

how to analyze their own black culture.<sup>62</sup> This acceptance of integration brought forth certain educational qualities which would lead blacks to improve black civilization. Yet, on the contrary, Nardal hosted salons in her apartment which allowed black writers and artists from America and Francophone countries to intermingle.<sup>63</sup> She aimed to create an environment for blacks to discuss poetry without having their ideas be dismissed due to their race. These authors excluded any type of integration with French academics through the salons. Paulette Nardal propagated the stance that it was permissible to pursue a French education, utilize its benefits, and reject intellectual interactions between white and blacks. Her actions indicated that Négritude emphasized a dual approach to managing assimilation where blacks were willing to integrate into the educational system without hesitation but once they graduated, stern actions were taken to exclude themselves intellectually from white society. The academic opinions of whites were so counterproductive to the rigorous debates in black francophone circles that self-segregation had to occur.

However, when Paulette Nardal was the editor of *La Revue du monde noir*, the journal utilized the theme of assimilation as a tool for permitting blacks to craft their own ideas and opinions through the isolation of black works in Négritude periodicals. In the first issue, the review stated its goals and aims. The journal put forth that it wanted to provide “the black race...an official organ in which to publish their artistic, literary and scientific work.”<sup>64</sup> Additionally, the review desired “to create among the Negroes of the entire world...an intellectual, and moral tie, which will permit them to better know [and] love one another”.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Paulette Nardal, “Awakening of Race Consciousness” *La Revue du monde noir* 6, June 1932 pp. 345.

<sup>63</sup> Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora*, pp. 119.

<sup>64</sup> *La Revue du monde noir* 1, Dec. 1931 pp. 4.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 5.

Before the Second World War, Nardal and the review promoted contact only between blacks. These goals highlighted the desire of Négritude editors to allow the black diaspora to use this journal as a platform to display the ideas of only other blacks. Like Nardal's salons, *La Revue du monde noir* behaved as a mechanism to isolate themselves from the opinions of white Frenchmen while promoting the beliefs of black Négritude writers. By cloistering blacks, the editors of the review allowed blacks forge their own works of art without prejudice and the need of assimilating into a white culture that looked down upon their achievements due to their skin color. These multiple essays exhibiting the struggles of assimilation demonstrated how Négritude authors strove to create a periodical that was vital for blacks in understanding the beliefs of other blacks. The society that non-whites lived in dismissed any attempt of assimilation. The hostile environment that Négritude inhabited required the review become an outlet for blacks to perceive the literary achievements of their race. Anti-assimilationist attitudes arose within Négritude as a form of self-segregation which was a response to the hostile confrontations with whites Europeans.

However, *La Dépêche africaine* contrarily applied the theme of assimilation as a means of challenging the future of black identity. The dispatch rarely mentioned assimilation, but the editors of the journal were willing to publish ideas that challenged its stated goal of showing “the world the productions of writers, philosophers, and artists of [the black race].”<sup>66</sup> For example, one issue contained an article in which the author argued for a race blind society. The writer promoted the union for the rapprochement of the races which intended to transform the world

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<sup>66</sup> “Importance and Necessity of existence of « La Dépêche africaine » La Dépêche africaine, Feb. 1928, p. 10. From Center for Research Libraries. <https://dds-crl-edu.ezproxy.library.wisc.edu/item/9507> (Accessed Feb. 8, 2016).

into a unified human family where prejudices and the hatred of races were absent.<sup>67</sup> The association was proposing a society that would contain a universal identity regardless of skin color and negating the journals desire to have blacks produce black art. The editors of *La Dépêche africaine* wanted to dispute the concept of identity by incorporating an article regarding this union of race. The periodical sought to create a debate through the means of publishing Union Pour Le Rapprochement des Races. The commentary within *La Dépêche africaine* demonstrated that Négritude contained multiple stances on assimilation. It was a movement comprised of outlets that challenged the notion of assimilation and the future of black identity.

After the cessation of the *La Dépêche africaine* and throughout the 1940s, Négritude authors of *Présence africaine* used assimilation as a topic to urge blacks to adopt an African identity with the help of other non-blacks to participate in a diverse, modern society. In its *raison d'être*, the journal stated that:

[*Présence africaine* was] open to the collaboration of all men of goodwill (white, yellow and black) who [were] willing to help... define the African's creativity and to hasten his integration in the modern world... The world of tomorrow will be built by all men. But, it [was] essential that certain disinherited peoples [i.e. blacks]... merge with modern society and identify [themselves]...in that society.<sup>68</sup>

Although not explicitly stated, the journal wanted people of color to conform to white culture but not to lose their African identity. Blacks needed to learn from whites and work with them to create a new civilization and vice versa. Négritude tolerated journals like this one to assert the

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<sup>67</sup> "Union Pour Le Rapprochement des Races," *La Dépêche africaine*, June. 1928, p. 7. From Center for Research Libraries. <https://dds-crl-edu.ezproxy.library.wisc.edu/item/9507> (Accessed Feb. 7, 2016).

<sup>68</sup> Alioune Diop, "Présence Africaine's *raison d'être*," *Présence Africaine* (Paris : n/a, 1947), pp. 191.

notion that African identity which did not need to be constructed only through black people could integrate into a more globalized world without losing their black individuality. *La Revue du monde noir*, *Présence africaine*, *La Dépêche africaine*, Senghor and Nardal all utilized assimilation as a topic for blacks to embrace their black identity and to a certain extent integrate themselves into a white world. But, for other Négritude authors, like Aimé Césaire, starting in the 1930s, used assimilation to emphasize how white culture robbed black identity.

Beginning in 1935, Césaire founded *L'Étudiant noir* which emphasized the unique and industrious individuality of blacks by railing against the dangers of assimilation. He detailed how assimilation removed the ability of people of color to create and to be themselves or alternatively to be authentic.<sup>69</sup> Césaire stated that assimilation should be a type of existence which blacks should repudiate.<sup>70</sup> Blacks needed to be themselves and, thus, by being themselves, they were then free to act and create. With their rejection of assimilation, people of color would be able to utilize their innate artistic abilities to contribute to life and humanity.<sup>71</sup> Césaire underscored the limitations that assimilation bestowed upon the black race. When blacks assumed a white assimilated life, their ability to become productive citizens of the world would be hampered. His article was a declaration for all people of color to realize the dangers of assimilation and to demonstrate the benefits of rejecting this way of living by adopting an authentic black existence. As one of the founders of Négritude, Césaire asserted that this movement was focused on persuading blacks to avoid the perils of assimilation and utilize their African origins to craft a distinct, creative black self.

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<sup>69</sup> Aimé Césaire, "Jeunesse noire et Assimilation," *L'Étudiant noir*, journal de l'Association des Etudiants Martiniquais en France. March 1935

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., pp. 3.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., pp. 3.

Furthermore, in the same 1935 issue of *L'Étudiant noir*, Paulette Nardal published an essay titled *Guignol Ouolof*, translated as Wolof Clown in which she highlighted the theme of assimilation as a means to show the dangers of losing a black identity. In this article, Nardal recounted an experience of her sitting in a café in Paris where she saw a black man wearing a German officers cap, red and gold tassels, and a braided, black monocle who was under the guise of his white employer.<sup>72</sup> Nardal noted the absurdity of the man's costume who was there in the café as an employee to bring joy to the white consumers.<sup>73</sup> In the essay, Nardal insisted that some blacks living in France were subjugated to the forfeiture of their individuality for work. Négritude authors like Nardal and Césaire clearly demonstrated that blacks lived in a society where they could easily lose their black identity through integration. Having these two prominent writers espouse this message revealed that Négritude permitted authors to use the topic of assimilation as a conduit to encourage people of color to understand that the accommodation of French values and customs meant the loss of an authentic black self.

However, all within the same issue of *L'Étudiant noir*, Gilbert Gratiant challenged the notion of black identity capable for mixed-race individuals who integrated into white society.<sup>74</sup> In his essay titled *Mulâtres... pour le bien et le mal*, Gratiant stated that a bi-racial person living under a colonized society would be devoid of his native religion and his native tongue.<sup>75</sup> So, he declared that the individual had to assume the customs of the dominant white society. Nevertheless, one retained the proud disposition of the black race and heritage.<sup>76</sup> But, Gratiant

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<sup>72</sup> Paulette Nardal, "Guignol Ouolof," *L'Étudiant noir, journal de l'Association des Etudiants Martiniquais en France*. March 1935, pp. 4.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 4.

<sup>74</sup> In this context, a person is mixed-race or bi-racial if one parent is white and the other parent is black.

<sup>75</sup> Gilbert Gratiant, "Mulâtres... pour le bien et le mal," *L'Étudiant noir, journal de l'Association des Etudiants Martiniquais en France*. March 1935, pp. 5.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 6.

demonstrated that those who were light skinned enough would be able to assimilate and use their skin color to enjoy the privileges bestowed onto whites like liberty, money and honor.<sup>77</sup> Bi-racial people had the capacity to transcend black and white societies. A light skinned black could be tied to black customs and white advantages. Gratiant defied Nardal and Césaire on black identity by stating that assimilating into white culture did not completely deprive blacks of their identity. In fact, it created a new mixed identity that was beneficial for the individual.

*L'Étudiant noir* was a journal that underscored the pitfalls of assimilation as a conduit for emphasizing and challenging the idea of black identity while stressing the artistic industriousness of the black personality. Césaire and Nardal demonstrated that integration could dismantle black individuality and it was vital to resist assimilation. Yet, Gratiant showed how accommodation of white society could produce a new form of black identity for those who were mixed-race. Négritude permitted these authors to highlight the importance of individuality for people of color by railing against the injustices and cruelties of assimilation. The contending ideas of the black self within a singular Négritude journal exposed the movement's receptiveness in debating the status and the future existence of black skinned people.

In a similar fashion to *L'Étudiant noir*, Léon Damas' collection of poems in *Pigments*, published in 1937, used assimilation as a theme to demonstrate how it dismantled a noble black identity. Damas perceived assimilation's ability to transform blacks into subservient or egotistical persons in the poem *Enough*. He warned that he had "enough...of bootlicking and of an attitude of hyper assimilateds [sic]...and of selfishness's of individuals."<sup>78</sup> In another poem, *Sale*, Damas expressed the discomfort and foreignness of living an assimilated existence in white

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., pp. 6.

<sup>78</sup> Alexandra Lillehei, *Pigments in Translation*, pp. 38.

French society. He stated that he “[felt] ridiculous in their shoes, in their tuxedo, in their dress shirt...in their [lounges]”.<sup>79</sup> Assimilation for Damas was an existence that stripped his individuality and turned him into an immoral person. White culture did not accept his personality or presence. Damas acknowledged that the future of black identity was in jeopardy if it was to be integrated into Western civilization which only perverted the personalities of blacks. As one of the most prominent figures of Négritude, Damas illustrated the importance for this ideology to highlight the uncomfortable aspects of assimilation and its role in corrupting black identity.

Moreover, almost twenty years later, Damas illustrated the ability for French Catholicism to dismantle black identity via the condemnation of assimilation with the publication *Black-Label* in 1956. In the poem *J’ai Saoulé Ma Peine*, meaning I get drunk from my sorrow, Damas castigated his fellow blacks who were assimilating in Europe and living an erroneous existence.<sup>80</sup> Damas’ criticism stemmed from those blacks who converted to Catholicism.<sup>81</sup> He depicted the converts as crazed fanatics who should be humiliated for adopting a European religion.<sup>82</sup> They refused their black identities and they were insulting the wisdom of their ancestors because of their deeds.<sup>83</sup> Catholicism transformed blacks into zealots who then removed themselves from their African roots. Damas had no sympathy for those who surrendered their own black culture and replaced it with the culture and traditions of a white European society. Damas utilized black integration into French Catholicism as a tool to highlight the dire consequences for black individuality. Religious assimilation undid an authentic black

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., pp. 58.

<sup>80</sup> Léon Damas, *Black-Label*, pp. 15.

<sup>81</sup> Laurence M. Porter, "An Equivocal Négritude: Léon–Gontran Damas's Lyric Masterpiece, *Black-Label* (1956)." *Research in African Literatures* 41, no. 4 (2010): 195.

<sup>82</sup> Léon Damas, *Black-Label*, pp. 81.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., pp.17.

identity which according to Damas was contingent on the traditional values and customs of African ancestors. The religions of Europe were simply not compatible with the black self.

However, a significant break occurred regarding black identity and assimilation a year before Damas' *Black-Label* with Aimé Césaire and his 1955 essay titled *Discourse on Colonialism*. Négritude permitted authors like Césaire to utilize assimilation as a means to advocate for a dual racial identity. Césaire stated contact between different civilizations was beneficial because each civilization, white or black, had their own "particular genius" to exchange with each other.<sup>84</sup> He considered the blend of different civilizations as an "excellent thing".<sup>85</sup> His comments alluded to his belief that blacks needed to integrate with whites and vice versa. During the 1930s Césaire promoted a fierce ant-assimilationist message, but after the Second World War, his stance shifted towards a more inclusive message perhaps because of his role as a politician of Martinique. Césaire depicted a certain amount of flexibility to the composition of the black self. His form of assimilation allowed blacks to deviate from a purely African centric character to an intellectual hybrid of white and black features. Within the Négritude movement, certain writers like Césaire were free to develop their ideas over time and in this case embrace a dual conception of black individuality which embraced and incorporated elements from white civilization.

Integrating into white culture was a contentious and divisive subject matter within Négritude for black intellectuals. The attitudes emerging from this movement were simply more than overt criticisms towards assimilation throughout the 1920s to the 1950s. Multiple viewpoints materialized depending on the era and individual. Négritude permitted authors and

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<sup>84</sup> Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, pp. 11.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 11.

periodicals to utilize the integration into white western society as a conduit to espouse certain themes on the dual representation of black identity, the future of it and the capacity for assimilation to eradicate the individuality of blacks. The debate over ‘to assimilate, but not to be assimilated’ drove writers like Nardal and Senghor to adopt a dual identity which indicated the flexibility of Négritude to allow blacks to fuse their black traits with the traits of white society. Additionally, assimilation acted as a channel for Négritude to highlight its concerns and trepidation with the destiny of black individuality. The movement needed to deliberate and was not entirely confident in the exact complexion of a person of color in a world that was fast becoming more connected. Lastly, Négritude was a platform for authors to voice their distrust of assimilation and proclaim a warning for blacks to understand that their desire to integrate into western culture brought forth many perils such as the total loss of the black self.

### **Part Three: Black Glorification and Black Identity**

Many writers within the Négritude movement glorified past African civilizations and current African customs. Black glorification was used as a tool to tackle certain preconceived notions about black culture and African history. For instance, French and European society, in the early twentieth century, widely disseminated and taught through education a perception that Africa “had no culture or civilization before the arrival of Europeans.”<sup>86</sup> Europeans perceived blacks as beings who were incapable of creating a modern society. Blacks needed the assistance of the white race to save them from their barbarity. Additionally, school textbooks, used throughout French colonies, failed to mention any modern intellectual, artistic or cultural contributions made by blacks.<sup>87</sup> These intolerant and erroneous representations were common for

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<sup>86</sup> Lewis, *Race, Culture, and Identity*, pp. 29.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 29.

whites and blacks to observe. In response, Négritude allowed writers from the 1920s to the 1950s to either promote a black identity that possessed pleasant and creative traits or periodicals to emphasize the extent of the accomplishments of African civilizations to genesis of modern European art and mythology all through the application of black glorification.

Négritude permitted journals like *La Revue du monde noir* to utilize black glorification to stress the intellectual and creative capacity of blacks to be valuable contributors in modern white society. In the article titled *Is the Mentality of Negroes inferior to that of white men?*, E. Grégoire-Micheli stated that blacks had “well-balanced...mental faculties.”<sup>88</sup> He said that black individuals living in the French Antilles demonstrated a remarkable ability to learn and be proficient in foreign languages like French.<sup>89</sup> Another example came from Louis Th. Achille who propounded the artistic abilities of blacks in his two essays *The Negroes and Art*. He stated “Negroes [were] essentially artists” and black art, specifically African sculptures, “have been made known all over the world.”<sup>90</sup> “Distinguished” Europeans were acknowledged as being one of the most well-known admirers of African sculptures.<sup>91</sup> Both authors underscored the fact that colonized blacks were more than capable to be invaluable contributors for France because they spoke the language very well, had superb intelligence and outstanding artistic talents. Négritude championed the achievements of blacks to accentuate their invaluable nature. In a world that discounted non-white achievements, this ideology focused on being a platform for the advocacy of blacks becoming an integral part of western civilization.

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<sup>88</sup> E. Grégoire-Micheli “Is the Mentality of Negroes inferior to that of white men?” *La Revue du monde noir* 2, Jan. 1932. pp. 95.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>90</sup> Louis Th. Achille, “The Negroes and Art,” *La Revue du monde noir* 1, pp. 57.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 59.

Concurrent with *La Revue du monde noir*, *La Dépêche africaine* utilized black glorification as a tool to highlight African art's role in inspiring modern European art. In the first issue of the *La Dépêche africaine*, M. Paul Guillaume wrote an article titled “*L’Art Nègre et l’Esprit de l’Epoque*” (Black Art and the Spirit of the Times). The essay celebrated black art which contributed to unique esthetics of modern European art and gave inspiration to painters such as Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse and Cubist painter Frank Burt Haviland.<sup>92</sup> In another essay titled “Primitive Negro Sculpture and its influence on Modern Art”, the author, Dr. Barnes, stated that “primitive African sculptures...are recognized by connoisseurs to be equal in artistic value to the great Greek, Egyptian and Chinese sculptures” and that “Primitive Negro Sculpture was not the work of savages...[but] the source of inspiration for early twentieth century European artists.”<sup>93</sup> These examples demonstrated the idea that African art had worth and influence in the modern world. The authors went as far as stating that African art and its origins inspired modern art movements. These writers signaled that without the discovery and recognition of African works of art by Europeans, then modern art movements like Expressionism and Cubism would not have existed, at least not in their current forms. These statements signified the importance of African art for Négritude writers and the desire to not just promulgate the achievements of black artists but to link them as the inspiration to the highly-regarded art movements of Europe. Négritude journals like *La Dépêche africaine* championed the feats of African art to showcase the value that blacks had for the modern world.

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<sup>92</sup> M. Paul Guillaume, “*L’Art Nègre et l’Esprit de l’Epoque*.” *La Dépêche africaine*, Feb. 1928, p. 6. From Center for Research Libraries. <https://dds-crl-edu.ezproxy.library.wisc.edu/item/9507> (Accessed Feb. 27, 2016).

<sup>93</sup> Dr. Barnes, “Primitive Negro Sculpture and its influence on Modern Art,” *La Dépêche africaine*, May. 1928, p. 6. From Center for Research Libraries. <https://dds-crl-edu.ezproxy.library.wisc.edu/item/9507> (Accessed Feb. 27, 2016).

Moreover, about twenty years later, starting in the 1940s and continuing well into the 1950s, Négritude also allowed *Présence africaine* to use black glorification to associate the artistic talents and contributions of the black race to the genesis of European art and folklore. Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler wrote an article titled “Black Art and Cubism” (*L’Art Nègre et le Cubisme*) in which he praised black art and its connections to Cubism. Kahnweiler stated that there were links between African art and Cubism. He noted how many of Pablo Picasso’s contemporaries had obtained lessons from African sculptures and that their traits were even noticeable in Picasso’s sculptures in the first decade of the twentieth century.<sup>94</sup> These African masks were the origin of the new abstract, cube like representations of the human face and body.<sup>95</sup> In another article titled, *L’histoire du Singe Fidèle : Conte Kabyle* (The Story of the Faithful Ape: A Kabyle Song), Emile Dermemghem underscored how themes of sacred animals originating from the songs of the Kabyle people of Northern Algeria inspired the folklore of European mythology such as the founding of Rome.<sup>96</sup> These authors underlined a connection between these geographically distinct art forms. The writers concluded that African customs and achievements were crucial to European identity. The glorification of black art and folklore was the catalyst for Négritude writers to champion the importance that the continent had in establishing the character of Europe. In an era that degraded the accomplishments of blacks, Négritude permitted *Présence africaine* to become a platform to showcase the significance of Africa in European history.

However, unlike *Présence Africaine* which utilized black glorification to demonstrate the connections Africa had to European civilization, Négritude authors like Léon Damas, beginning

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<sup>94</sup> Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, “L’Art Nègre et le Cubisme,” *Présence Africaine* 3, pp. 370.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 373.

<sup>96</sup> Emile Dermemghem, “L’histoire du singe fidèle : Conte Kabyle,” *Présence Africaine* 2, pp. 267.

in the late 1930s used their poetry to represent and assign specific positive qualities to the identity of blacks. In his first poem *Limbé*, published within *Pigments*, Damas glorified the black race by negating the damaging stereotypes through the representation of black dolls. He wrote, “Give me back my black dolls so they dispel the image of pale whores, merchants of love who stroll back and forth on the boulevard”.<sup>97</sup> Damas used black dolls to represent the black race and he wanted to use this comparison to contradict the negative depictions of the black diaspora at the time. He railed against the idea that blacks were prostitutes. Rather, he considered them to be “dolls” which signified their innocence and sensitivity. Although, this poem did not directly promote the achievements of blacks, it did signify Damas’ intention to dismiss the unfair representations and imagery surrounding black individuals and indirectly advocate the good attributes. By having Damas emphasize the pleasant qualities of blacks and dismiss the negative ones through black glorification, Négritude had its authors embrace a unique way of stressing a pleasing black identity.

One of Damas contemporaries, Césaire and his work *Notebook on a Return to the Native Land*, published in 1939, contained several instances of black glorification that highlighted the agreeable personality traits of the black race. Césaire stressed the beauty and worthiness of blacks in several ways. He noted how “Europe has force-fed [blacks] with lies...that [they] have no business being on earth...that [they] parasite the world”.<sup>98</sup> Europeans viewed blacks as a burden to civilization and insignificant. In response, Césaire declared that whites did not have “a monopoly on beauty, on intelligence, [or] on strength.”<sup>99</sup> Blacks were as capable as whites to achieve the same physical and emotional attributes which were commonly only associated with

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<sup>97</sup> Lillehei, *Pigments in Translation*, pp. 35.

<sup>98</sup> Césaire, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, pp. 44.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 44.

whites. Although not promoting a specific black feat, he did go so far as to equate blacks in “the likeness of God”.<sup>100</sup> Like Senghor, Césaire made a direct religious connection between blacks and God. Black men and women were born to represent humans as they were intended to be which was in black skin. Césaire assured people of color that they were normal and he rejected Western ideals of black inferiority. He promoted the claim that blacks were divinely inspired beings and he acknowledged that skin color, contrary to popular belief, was no obstacle in obtaining the same level of success as their white counterparts. Césaire wanted people of color to understand that they were potentially gifted and valuable beings who were designed by God. The glorification of the black race indicated that Négritude permitted authors like Césaire to accentuate the positive qualities of a people who had been degraded and held in contempt by white civilization.

Additionally, Léopold Senghor, beginning in the 1940s with *Chants d’Ombre*, before the Second World War, championed strong and powerful qualities of black women through the utilization of black glorification. The first poem was “Black Woman” (*Femme noire*) which glorified a strong, powerful African woman. Senghor noted the “softness of [her] hands” and how her skin was the same “color that [was] life”.<sup>101</sup> He also expressed the ability for this black woman to “give music to [Senghor’s] mouth”.<sup>102</sup> She had a “deep contralto voice” which was the “spiritual song of the Beloved”.<sup>103</sup> With these lines, Senghor expressed the physical beauty and musical aptitude that was present in a black woman. He emphasized the delicateness and warmth of a black mother who was opposite of the racist imagery which depicted blacks as uncivilized.

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid., pp. 45.

<sup>101</sup> Senghor, *The Collected Poetry*, pp. 8.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., pp. 8.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., pp. 9.

Senghor connected the woman's skin tone to the essence of life and he indicated that blacks were closer to the origin of man than whites. He also exposed musical prowess of blacks which connected the living with the dead. Senghor's poetic connection signified the innate spirituality of blacks which contradicted the claims by some Europeans that depicted blacks as a race of people who lacked a religious life. While glorifying black women, Senghor like many others within Négritude underlined the many positive and vigorous traits that African women and even black women all around the world embodied.

Moreover, another poem by Senghor titled *To the Music of Koras and Balaphon* through the idolization of Africa, linked the continent to the identity of blacks. Senghor stated that his "African childhood" was "paradise".<sup>104</sup> He described Africa as a "land of purity" that had "harmonious hills" and "mystical and clear" nights.<sup>105</sup> Senghor also demonstrated the cleanliness and beauty of the continent which was free of any mentions of a harsh or forbidding land inhabited by 'uncultured' Africans. Furthermore, he showed the pleasantness of his native land. He also subtly connected Africa to the Garden of Eden, the biblical birthplace of humans, by using the phrase "paradise". Senghor again wanted to show the majesty of Africa and make the connection that Africa ought to be adored for being the origins of mankind and civilization and the people who emerged from this land possessed a character that was genuine and civilized, not barbarous. The land that blacks had originated from was integral to their identity. Senghor indicated the refinement and purity of the black individual who either at one time lived in Africa or had been a descendent of ancestors who had. Senghor signified that a person of color's identity was tied to the land of their racial ancestry.

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid., pp. 17.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., pp. 24.

In a similar fashion to Senghor, in 1956, Léons Damas published *Black-Label* in which he constructed and promoted the creative and pleasing traits of blacks through the utilization of black glorification. Damas' *Black-Label* devoted a section of his work in celebrating "the superiority of Negro culture".<sup>106</sup> He dedicated nineteen lines in describing how the white man would never be able to obtain the magnificence and grandeur traits of blacks. For example, Damas equated that "beauty was being black".<sup>107</sup> He also linked 'blackness' to "wisdom" (*la sagesse*), and "courage" (*le courage*).<sup>108</sup> Damas attributed a vast array of pleasant and good-natured adjectives to those of a darker skin color. He ended this section by associating blacks to "joy" (*la joie*), "art" (*l'art*), "dance" (*la danse*), "peace" (*la paix*), and "life" (*la vie*).<sup>109</sup> Through his poetry, Damas highlighted the vitality, bravery and intelligence of Africans and the black diaspora. He not only advocated and championed the physical attractiveness and intelligence of darker skin individuals, but he highlighted the basic qualities that refined and progressive Africans embodied. These darker individuals were not the 'savage' beings that Europe had originally characterized them as. Rather, Damas constructed a collage of magnificent and brilliant personality traits for the identity of the black diaspora. Négritude permitted authors like Damas to utilize black glorification as a conduit for establishing a black identity which was polished and superb.

From Senghor to Damas, *La Revue du monde noir* to *La Dépêche africaine*, the writers and journals of Négritude championed the achievements and feats of the black race throughout the 1920s to the 1950s. The periodicals were specific with their advocacy of black art and its

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<sup>106</sup> Gysse, Kathleen, and Christine Pagnouille. "The Négraille's Testament: Translating Black-Label." *In Intimate Enemies: Translation in Francophone Contexts*, edited by Batchelor Kathryn and Bisdorff Claire, pp 127. Liverpool University Press, 2013. <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.library.wisc.edu/stable/j.ctt5vjhp4.14>.

<sup>107</sup> Léon Damas, *Black-Label*, pp. 52.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 52.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 52.

impact on influencing Modern European art. However, the writers, like Damas, Senghor and Césaire, were more generalized and anecdotal in celebrating the overall complexions and features of black men and women. On occasion, their advocacy had religious overtones in comparing people of color to the likeness of God and the genesis of humans. These examples of black glorification were reactions to an environment within Western society which viewed blacks and their customs as backwards, unrefined or unworthy of admiration. Négritude, almost in unison, replied with an outpouring of appreciation and fondness for the black race while assembling a complex, unique and favorable depiction of the identity of the black diaspora.

Originating from Europe, racism and degrading stereotypes depicted blacks and their contributions as backwards and unsophisticated. As a response, Négritude writers and journals sustained a consistent representation of black glorification spanning from the 1920s to the 1950s. The glorification and celebration of blacks which was universal and positive acted as a conduit for journals and writers to either construct a specific black identity around such themes as creativity, kindness and intellect or link the achievements of African civilizations to the genesis of modern European art or mythology. Periodicals particularly *Présence Africaine* and *La Dépêche africaine* promoted the achievements and feats of African art or storytelling and connected these ideas to inspiration of Cubism or the founding myths of European cities like Rome. While there was a constant admiration for African feats within this community, a split did emerge between how people of color were celebrated and how their existence was depicted. Specifically, Négritude writers like Senghor and Damas used black glorification to associate 'blackness' to beauty, compassion and genius which was the essence of black identity. These authors celebrated the abstract grace and wonder of being black. Through the utilization of black glorification, Négritude permitted journals to focus on specific achievements and abilities of

African civilizations and their influence on European art and lore while authors stressed the positive traits that the black identity possess.

**Conclusion: 'For Black Lives To Matter, Black History Needs To Matter'**

We return to the questions incited by Césaire's original quote. How typical was Césaire's opinions compared to his contemporaries regarding assimilation during the twentieth century? Furthermore, did Césaire's contemporaries share his beliefs? What were the other contentious subject matters within Négritude and how were these topics portrayed? Through the examination of assimilation, we have seen how Césaire fell into two major ideological camps. During the 1930s, he sided with men like Léon Damas who decried any attempts made by blacks to assimilate into the predominant white European society, but Césaire switched his tone after the war. Their contemporaries, Léopold Senghor and Paulette Nardal, lived an assimilated life, while criticizing this lifestyle through essays and poems. Some Négritude sources cautiously accepted or partially embraced certain aspects of assimilation. Concerning colonization and black glorification, the other contentious topics within Négritude, another similar pattern emerged. Journals like *La Revue du monde noir* and *La Dépêche africaine* had contained several articles that either promoted or highlighted a pro-colonization philosophy, while other Négritude sources like Léopold Senghor, Léon Damas, and *L'Étudiant noir* espoused an anti-colonization creed which underlined the cruelties and injustices of imperial European expansion. Lastly, black glorification was a subject matter where the periodicals and writers of Négritude advocated the same basic belief. Blacks and their achievements needed to be championed. Yet, within this consistent perspective, a divide occurred between advocating for specific black accomplishments like the magnificence of African sculptures, or promoting the innate eminence of being black.

By investigating the three most reoccurring and significant topics in Négritude, colonization, assimilation and black glorification, this thesis uncovered how a plethora of writers and journals used these three issues to stress political advocacy and black identity. From the 1920s to the 1950s, Négritude had its poets embrace a dual identity that highlighted the assimilation into French culture while preserving a distinct black identity through the utilization of assimilation. Additionally, the movement invigorated a debate on the future formation of black identity. Négritude also demonstrated its tolerance for allowing authors to underscore assimilation's ability to dismantle a special black identity. The utilization of colonization had many writers like Senghor and Césaire seeking out divergent opinions which simultaneously condemned and lauded colonization through their works and statements as government officials. Dualistic beliefs emerged based on the writer's personal actions as a poet and a statesman. Finally, this movement permitted its writers to use the feats of blacks and African societies to champion a distinct black identity that possessed pleasant and creative traits. Négritude allowed journals to emphasize the extent that Africans and their civilizations had in inspiring modern European art and mythology through black glorification.

Négritude has demonstrated the legitimacy of the hardships that blacks have experienced when living in and working in a white society. The writers and journals of Négritude were not advocating for a violent revolution or the end of white rule in France or America. These black writers expressed their misery living under a society that devalued their history and accomplishments. As a response, Négritude developed. The poetry, essays and journals championed a vision that the black diaspora and Africa could play a crucial role in the development of Western civilization. Blacks were not 'backward savages,' rather they were talented beings who were just as capable of learning and producing great works of arts as a white

European. Most of these artists and authors wanted to be acknowledged for their abilities and be accepted into a world that looked down upon them. Yet, their struggle is still occurring to this day.

No matter one's race, religion or creed, it is vital to study perspectives that are different from one's own. Through this thesis, I hope to reduce the contentious arguments surrounding the Black Lives Matter movement and being black in America and foster more respect and compassion. In the first episode of Netflix's show *Luke Cage*, a local councilwoman from New York City's Harlem neighborhood, named Mariah Dillard, played by Alfre Woodard, said that "for black lives to matter, black history needs to matter."<sup>110</sup> I believe that by informing the public about Négritude, it will produce empathy towards the struggles that blacks across the world have had to grapple with throughout history.

The term Négritude will draw many blank stares or wild guesses from the clear majority of Americans. But, the comprehension of this movement is more important than ever. A revival of mass protests over the shooting of unarmed black men and the creation of the Black Lives Matter movement have sparked important and at times heated conversations in the United States about the black experience which has echoes of the Négritude movement.

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<sup>110</sup> "Moment of Truth." *Luke Cage*. Writ. Cheo Hodari Coker. Dir. Paul McGuigan. Marvel Television, 2016. Netflix.

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