

An introduction in brief: *Négritude Reembodied*

Essay by Halime Özdemir | London, 4 October 2020

"I have a different idea of a universal. It is of a universal rich with all that is particular, rich with all the particulars there are, the deepening of each particular, the coexistence of them all." - Aimé Césaire

The title of this exhibition is inspired by the concept-turned literary movement borne out of Paris, in the 1930's. At its core, this movement became a catalyst for art to find a forum to express the essence of what "Blackness" meant, within a not only local but global context. We have seen that whether this be through contributions to the ever evolving prisms defined in world cultures; this revolution and dare I say, awakening, thus lead to the reexamining of what "talent" and "value" could and should be defined by. The growth in the movement was influenced by both [Surrealism](#)² and the [Harlem Renaissance](#)³ (where many francophone African and Caribbean colonies resided) which is undoubtedly the conduit for the emergence of African American arts along with the literary awareness of the black man's search for his own black identity, within the constructs of "modern society".

[Négritude](#),² as a term first came into being as the expression of a revolt against the historical situation of French colonialism and racism spearheaded by three black students: Aimé Césaire³ (Martinique), Léon Gontran Damas⁴ (Guiana now Guyana) and Léopold Sédar Senghor⁵ (Senegal).

However the word, [Négritude](#),⁶ was coined by [Aimé Césaire](#)⁷ himself, in his 1939 poem: [Cahier d'un retour au pays natal](#)⁸ which translates to *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land*. By its very conception, [Négritude](#)⁹ became a search for human dignity, and still to this day, has many definitions and many meanings. It expresses an array of feelings collectively and operates at different levels of expression through varying modalities, styles and techniques from artist to artist, poet to poet and even place to place.

Borne out of necessity, [Négritude](#)¹⁰ thus became the acknowledgement of and the respect for black men and women as a fundamental component of shared humanity within world civilisation. A movement aimed at cultivating "Black consciousness" across Africa and its diaspora which took its first steps by examining Western values critically and to further reassess African culture within this context.

"The civilization of the twentieth century cannot be universal except by being a dynamic synthesis of all the cultural values of all civilizations. It will be monstrous unless it is seasoned with the salt of Négritude, for it will be without the savor of humanity." - Léopold Sédar Senghor (1961)¹

¹ Cotter, Holland, "ART: A 1920s Flowering That Didn't Disappear", New York Times, 24 May 1998.

² Web reference, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/s/surrealism>

³ Bergson, Henri, 1944, *Creative Evolution*, New York: Random House.

⁴ *The Complete Poetry of Aimé Césaire*, Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2017

⁵ Diagne, S.B. *African Art as Philosophy*. Senghor, Bergson and the Idea of Négritude, trans. Chike Jeffers, London, New York, and Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2011

As we find ourselves at a moment of global reset; a zero-sum game playing out through pandemic, waging territorial disputes and world economies shutting down simultaneously; new lines are being drawn with new allegiances being forged in the wake of a pan-socio-economic epoch. Though currently in the shadow side; we are witnessing the accelerated growth of pro-authoritarian leadership systems led by our own design and technological advances. So, *how* is it that less than a 100 years on, we have yet to come to a resolve? *How* is it that we find ourselves, still duty bound to the post-colonial phantoms that are lurking in our institutions, in the very fabric of our civil societies? We are now at a critical juncture in our shared humanity, to honour, respect and above all learn from the lessons that history has countlessly endeavoured to teach. Now is the time to tilt one's hat to tiswas and be prepared to challenge the dawn of a new sunrise, without our say.

"like the scorpion's question mark

drawn in the pollen on the canvas of the sky and of our brains at midnight" - Aimé Césaire

The [Négritude Reembodied](#) exhibition is produced by and co-curated alongside myself, Halime Özdemir in collaboration with the Black British Female Artist Collective (BBFA) and is presented by Hoxton 253 in observance of Black History Month in the UK during the month of October 2020.

Featuring three artists: [Adelaide Damoah](#), [Ayesha Feisal](#) and [Enam Gbewonyo](#) the exhibition not only reflects on the evolving nature of British art through the gaze of the BBFA, but through a variety of points of view and artistic practices, which aims to provide a window into the work of contemporary Black British art today.

In sharing the works of these three artists; we will not only be exploring the modus operandi of the BBFA; but further aiming to cast a light on the diversity of contemporary approaches to their practices. We will also see the works explore the artists' impact on the landscape of art and British culture, across their generation and disciplines in some instances, to even agitate existing institutional frameworks.

On a broader cultural level, the exhibition examines the multicultural nature of Britain and its generations of post colonial inhabitants at a time of division and isolation, which is reflected not only within the country, but by examining global movements in the context of the events that have jolted societies into this cataclysmic minefield of the year, 2020.

By not only addressing issues of historic legacy, activism and philosophies in a postmodern world which unite the artists, despite their differing artistic strategies, points of reference and medium. In questioning the tenets of [Négritude](#) this exhibition aims to encourage the audience to adopt critical approaches toward how they perceive each artist and their practice; beyond an aesthetic experience, but to critically view through their cultural and artistic endeavours, alongside their disciplinary boundaries.

⁶ Césaire, A, "Cahier d'un Retour au Pays Natal", 1 November 1989

⁷ Sharpley-Whiting, T.D, "Femme negritude. Jane Nardal, La Depeche africaine, and the Francophone New Negro", in Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society, 2000

⁸ Freedom Time. Negritude, Decolonization, and the Future of the World, Durham: Duke University Press, 2015.

The artists in the exhibition all live and work in the UK, and are collectively first and second generation west african and afro caribbean in descent. By reinterpreting Black British contemporary art through the prism of their own varied cultural backgrounds and artistic heritage; the artists urgently reaffirm the necessity for the diversity and openness in Black British culture, at a pivotal point in not only the nation's history, but that of the global stage.

“Through the delicate tides echoing in the currents of our harbours, our quays and in our seas. Yes, yes, I see “you”. It is so often that we fall prey to the rhetoric of the lack thereof; in the pretence that the spectrum is nowhere near as vast as the eye can see. It is specifically because I do see “you”, I don this cloak. Here, in this cockpit; driven from the very core that is forged in the internal infernos of my essence, that has driven me to the point of discourse, beyond that of the confines of my own thoughts.. It is for everytime I hear the words: “Is she Black though?” and the answer is No. It is always No, but I see “you”. So, now, how is it that we can move forward? I am most certainly not coming from a place of ignorance nor am I here to intellectualise one's Blackness. But it is only for so long can one wade through contemptuous condemnation. This alliance runs deep. As I hear the cage doors rattle and stir colonial ghosts echoing within the bind of my own [island](#)¹² dreams; it is in the sleepless nights, that ache within our bones as I watch the fabric of our civil liberties being slowly stripped away, piece by piece without a promise of return or any hope of a new. Just a flash in the pan media of catastrophic preconstruction. In such a poignant time in our societal evolution; Hear the cry! Raise your hand, and make yourself known. The soil is ripe, and ready are the seeds to be sown anew. Again, and so on.” - Halime Özdemir, 2020.¹³

We hope that this exhibition, which is influenced by each artists' own vernacular culture and visual language; will form a microcosm in which we can perpetuate and host the embodiment of the [Négritude](#) constructs, which will further ignite your thirst for a radical rearrangement of civil responsibilities and social relations, perhaps ?

Let's discuss.

⁹ Aloni, Nimrod and Weintrob, Lori, “Beyond Bystanders: Educational Leadership for a Humane Culture in a Globalizing Reality”, 15 Mar 2017

¹⁰ From “A vehicle of cultural transmission in Africa”, Parkfield Press. September 2019.

¹¹ Traoré, Makhroufi Ousmane, “Pedagogies Of Empire Rethinking National And Global Citizenship Through Imperial Histories”

¹² Web reference, Cyprus Coup, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1974_Cypriot_coup_d%27%C3%A9tat

¹³ Excerpt from the poem, “A Londoner in Real Time” by Halime Özdemir, 2020.