

Négritude: three poets and the words of identity

French 4 (high school) · Lesson

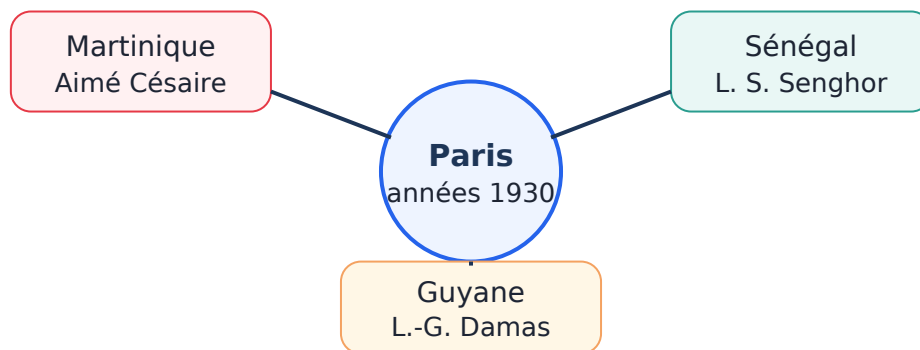
Quick answer: Négritude was a literary and cultural movement started in Paris in the 1930s by Black francophone students, mainly Aimé Césaire from Martinique, Léopold Sédar Senghor from Senegal and Léon-Gontran Damas from French Guiana. They rejected the idea that French culture was superior, and they affirmed pride in African roots and Black identity through poetry and essays.

Level: French 4 (high school, ACTFL Intermediate Mid) · **Standards:** ACTFL Intermediate Mid, WL 1.2 Interpretive, WL 1.3 Presentational, WL 4.1 Language Comparisons, WL 2.2 Cultural Products

What was the Négritude movement?

Definition

La Négritude is a movement of writers who, in the 1930s, claimed pride in Black identity and African heritage. It answered the colonial idea that French culture should replace all others, a policy called l'assimilation.



Three students from three regions met in Paris.

Who were the three founding voices?

Writer	Origin	Key work	Main idea (our paraphrase)
Aimé Césaire	Martinique	Cahier d'un retour au pays natal (1939)	A return home to accept one's roots and refuse shame
Léopold Sédar Senghor	Senegal	Chants d'ombre (1945)	African rhythm and values enrich world culture

Writer	Origin	Key work	Main idea (our paraphrase)
Léon-Gontran Damas	French Guiana	Pigments (1937)	A direct, rebellious voice against racism

Which words talk about identity and heritage?

Vocabulary

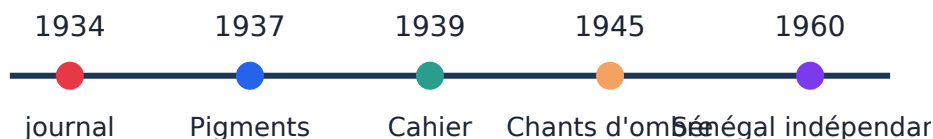
- les racines — roots; l'héritage — heritage
- la fierté — pride; la dignité — dignity
- la colonisation — colonization; l'esclavage — slavery
- l'exil — exile; la diaspora — diaspora
- revendiquer — to claim; se réapproprier — to reclaim

Rule

To report a writer's idea, use *selon* or *d'après* followed by the name, or a verb of expression: *Selon Senghor, la culture africaine enrichit le monde. / Césaire affirme que l'identité est une force.* Born in or from a place: *né en Martinique, au Sénégal, à Cayenne.*

Common mistake

The French word *nègre* was reclaimed by these poets in a historical protest, but today it is insulting in ordinary speech. Do not use it in conversation; use *noir* or *personne noire* and quote it only when discussing history. Also note that the movement is spelled *Négritude* (with an accent) in French.



Dates to remember.

How do you read and explain a Négritude text in French?

1. Find the speaker: who is talking, and to whom?
2. Underline the identity words, such as *racines*, *fierté* or *mémoire*.
3. Decide whether the tone is angry, tender or proud, and name it: *Le ton est révolté.*
4. Give the message in your own words with a verb such as *évoquer*, *dénoncer* or *célébrer*: *Le*

poète célèbre ses origines.

Never copy a poem word for word in your own summary. A paraphrase proves that you understood the ideas, and it is the skill that AP French and oral exams reward.

Culture note

Senghor was elected to the Académie française in 1983, a rare honor for a poet from Africa. Césaire served as mayor of Fort-de-France for decades and also sat in the French parliament. For them, poetry and politics were never separate.

Zoé's tip

When you read a poem in French, first underline the identity words, then sum up the poet's message in your own words in one sentence. Paraphrasing shows that you understood.

Key points to remember

- Négritude began among students in Paris in the 1930s, around the journal L'Étudiant noir.
- Césaire (Martinique), Senghor (Senegal) and Damas (French Guiana) are the three founding voices.
- Key works: Pigments (Damas, 1937), Cahier d'un retour au pays natal (Césaire, 1939), Chants d'ombre (Senghor, 1945).
- Senghor became the first president of Senegal; Césaire was mayor of Fort-de-France for decades.
- The movement connects literature to colonization, memory and identity.

Négritude: Three Poets and the Words of Identity: frequently asked questions

What is Négritude?

Négritude is a francophone literary and political movement from the 1930s that celebrated Black identity and African heritage. It was a response to colonial assimilation, which pushed colonized people to give up their own cultures.

Who founded the Négritude movement?

Three student friends in Paris: Aimé Césaire from Martinique, Léopold Sédar Senghor from Senegal and Léon-Gontran Damas from French Guiana. Each brought a different experience of colonization.

Which works should I know?

Pigments by Damas (1937), Cahier d'un retour au pays natal by Césaire (1939) and Chants d'ombre by Senghor (1945). Learn them as the movement's starting points.

How do you talk about a poet's message in French?

Use *selon* or *d'après* plus the name, or a verb such as *affirmer*, *évoquer* or *dénoncer*: *Selon Césaire, ... / Damas dénonce le racisme*. Then give the idea in your own words.

Why does this movement still matter?

It opened a path for later francophone writers and shaped debates on identity, memory and colonization. It also shows how literature can influence politics and culture across continents.