

From Aimé Césaire to Black Lives Matter: The Ongoing Impact of Negritude

by

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Frieda Ekotto



Professor Frieda Ekotto, University of Michigan,
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The latest speaker in the African Studies Center Speaker Series argued that Black Lives Matter and social media activism are a continuation of Aimé Césaire's writings on negritude.

UCLA International Institute, February 23, 2018 — The UCLA African Studies Center welcomed Frieda Ekotto, professor of comparative literature and chair of the department of Afroamerican and African Studies at the University of Michigan, on February 12 as part of its African Studies Center Speaker Series; the UCLA Department of African American Studies cosponsored the event.

In her talk, Ekotto positioned the Black Lives Matter movement as a continuation of the struggle for dignity articulated in Aimé Césaire's writings on "negritude" in the 1930s. Césaire (1913–2008) was a Francophone poet from Martinique who was educated in Paris and returned to Martinique to teach, write and publish. Ekotto argued that social media has allowed Black activists to rebel against dominant discourses, much like Césaire rejected white narratives in his poetry, which spurred the Négritude literary movement that embraced the writer's African identity.

Unspoken Racialized Violence

"Racial politics remain at the core of American life," said Ekotto. "Issues of police brutality, mass incarceration and interpersonal violence at home and abroad have been at the forefront of our political consciousness. All of this violence has origins in the history of memory, origins that have been overlooked if not erased," she said.

"From slavery to segregation, violence against Black bodies has been well documented but gone unspoken. In some respects, social media has changed this dynamic," she continued. "Anyone can snap a picture with the potential to circulate globally and alter the conversation in a moment.

"For Black intellectuals of the past, this wasn't the case. They had to engage with dominant discourses, which often led to their being silenced," Ekotto said, pointing to Ralph Ellison's narrative of the erasure experienced by Black men in his book *Invisible Man*.

"Today's Black Lives Matter movement seeks to right this erasure of history," said the speaker, referring to the activist movement that emerged after the 2012 killing of Trayvon Martin in Florida by George Zimmerman, who was ultimately acquitted of Martin's murder. Since the inception of Black Lives Matter, activists have taken up additional causes related to violence against Black Americans, such as mass incarceration and police brutality.

"The movement looks back at history and organizes the 1992 Los Angeles riots, the subsequent trial of Rodney King and even the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina as flashpoints on a timeline of the racial inequality at heart of everyday life in America," remarked Ekotto.

“Black Lives Matter reflects on history and demands that Black people be treated as human beings,” she added. “This call for respect of the dignity of Black individuals, founded on historical analysis, echoes the negritude literary movement, which was hugely influential on Black culture, identity and empowerment,” she said.

Césaire Asserts Self-Defined Black Identity

“Since the death of Trayvon Martin, scholars have turned to writers such as James Baldwin, James Ellison and Ta-nehisi Coates as a starting point to recall the history of racism while contemplating Black value,” said the speaker. “English speakers assessing Black Lives Matter and violence in America ought to also consider the work of Aimé Césaire.

“To read Césaire’s work in light of recent events is to bear witness to the ongoing struggles of Black people. His work is rooted in the history of Blackness,” remarked the speaker. Ekotto explained that the concept of negritude responded to the systematic oppression and alienation of Black individuals by embracing African heritage, analyzing colonial relations of power and incorporating previously ignored Black experience into writing.

“Césaire’s initial use of the word Négritude came to describe an aesthetic and literary movement affirming African culture and heritage,” said Ekotto. The term first emerged in Césaire’s 1939 poem, “Cahier d’un retour au pays natal” [Notebook of a return to the home country] where he positions his negritude, or Black identity, as a positive, powerful attribute.

In Césaire’s words, negritude was “the simple recognition of the fact that one is Black, the acceptance of this fact and of our destiny as Blacks, of our history and culture,” noted the scholar.

“In [the poem], Aimé Césaire seems to announce the end of adherence to white narratives and the dawn of a sharpened, diasporic consciousness in the Black world. [He] gave poetic voice to Black identity, a concept previously defined by the exoticising western gaze, while also grounding the Black experience in historical realities,” Ekotto explained.

“This allowed Black people to see themselves through their own eyes and then tell for themselves what their own qualities consist of,” she continued. “The negritude movement gave Black people the ability to communicate to whites that, from now on, Blacks would be asserting themselves.”

The Crucial Importance of Black History

“It’s important for academics to tap into current popular discourse,” said Ekotto. “Twitter has become a form of historicizing content that wouldn’t [have previously been] archived... Black men and women have become increasingly visible and heard in the age of social media, but persistent clichés of young Black men fill the eyes of the police and public,” she said.

“Negritude came from a community facing profound exclusion and, to its credit, a community of continued resistance,” she added. “Once, Black people were denied past and present — even a future. Similarly, Black people’s struggle to resist popular narratives of the past and present and to find a language to express themselves led to today’s Black Lives Matter movement.”

The speaker highlighted the very real violence caused by misconceptions about Black individuals and ignorance of Black history seen in the case of Darren Wilson, the police officer who shot and killed Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. When asked if his impulse to shoot without full knowledge of the situation was an overreaction, Wilson answered: “I’m not going to delve into people’s lifelong history and figure out why they’re feeling a certain way in a certain moment.”

Ekotto responded, “Denying the importance of history and perception, as Darren Wilson did, is an example of the attitude which allows continued violence against Black citizens and which prompted Césaire to launch the negritude movement as a rejection of white narratives.

“This ignorance is the impetus for Black Lives Matter to expose violence, as well as their project to build an archive honoring every life loved and lost in this struggle,” she added.

“Césaire said, ‘Black I am, and Black I will remain,’” continued Ekotto. “He was committed to living in the past and present as a critically minded, fully embodied Black subject... If we do not create opportunities for today’s activists, scholars and students to assess Black history and apply that knowledge to contemporary realities, Black dignity will be denied.”

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Appendix

Frieda Ekotto (ekotto@umich.edu) is the Chair of Department of Afroamerican and African Studies and has been a Professor of Afroamerican and African Studies and Comparative Literature at the University of Michigan since 1994. She holds a PhD from the University of Minnesota. She is the recipient of numerous grants and awards, including a Ford Foundation seed grant for research and collaborative work with institutions of higher learning in Africa. She is the author of six books and numerous articles in professional journals. She has lectured throughout the United States and in Australia, Algeria, Cameroon, Cuba, Canada, England, France, Ivory Coast, Malaysia, Malta, Nigeria Tunisia South Africa, and Singapore, among other countries.

Dr. Ekotto has developed and taught a wide range of innovative courses on literature and law in France; literature and film in Africa, the Caribbean and Maghreb; postcolonial narratives by Francophone women and minorities; and representations of family and friendship in Francophone film and literature. Her curricular contributions have been critical to the emergence and consolidation of Francophone studies at the University of Michigan and to the teaching of race and ethnicity in the context of French-speaking cultures. Professor Ekotto is highly regarded by students and colleagues who praise her intellectual generosity and her success in motivating students to think critically.