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Négritude: A passion in Abiola Irele's work

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ABSTRACT

This essay focuses on Abiola Irele's passionate and life-long engagement with *négritude* and the centrality of his thinking and writing about *négritude* to his *œuvre*. Using one of Irele's final lectures, if not the last public lecture he gave, the author, who witnessed the lecture, takes up several moments of that presentation and links them to Irele's landmark work on *négritude*, his contributions to scholarship in African literary studies, and his footprint in the field through his publications, editorial leadership, and mentoring.

KEYWORDS

Irele; passion; *négritude*;
African literature

Passion often refers to a person's emotion before something in which s/he is deeply interested and when s/he has great enthusiasm for it. Passion also evokes the suffering and death of Christ. My title refers to Abiola Irele's long-lasting, passionate love story with *négritude*, a concept, a movement, an idea, and an ideal, which has proved to be quite central to his thinking.¹ Passion cannot fail to encompass the enthusiasm behind the great contributions Irele has made to the field of African literature, to many of us personally, and to *belles lettres* more generally. In this sense, although this piece concerns passion in *négritude*, what I suggest is that Irele's own passion is also expressed through sacrifice and service. I note here the way "passion" has undergirded his work on *négritude*, one of the most important concepts upon which Irele has expounded.

Anyone who knew Professor Irele would immediately understand what is meant when we say that Irele gave of his time. Indeed, he had a way of slowing down time to pay attention to someone's career, an idea, or a project. One couldn't steamroll ahead to get his opinion or his agreement, one had to stop time to engage with him, to listen, to respond, to converse, and, inevitably, to learn. Irele gave of his own time unstintingly, building up so many cohorts of young scholars, showing what high standards amount to, and giving, most of all, a body of work upon whose authority many have drawn in the larger institutional framework as they credentialized themselves in the field of African literary studies. Irele's formidable work as Editor of *Research in African Literatures* marked the field and gave a special place to African literature as African studies established itself in departments of English, French, Portuguese, Spanish, Cinema, Art, and in other programs. In particular, theories and concepts that were quick to become popular in postcolonial studies had to pass

muster in order to be applicable to African literary texts. Irele was rightly adamant in his will to make the literary text or other cultural material “speak” beyond any theory.² Abiola’s erudition helps us to sort through the different aspects of the négritude moment and to understand its lasting contributions to African and Black thought, despite the many, often virulent, criticisms that have been launched against it. His own passion for négritude might be detected in his early statement, which he makes while assessing Sartre’s presentation of it, that as a philosophical concept, it is “a vision” (“A Defense of Négritude” 11).³

Irele’s historically attentive and theoretically clean thinking helps to keep scholarship on négritude (and beyond) focused on its relevance to thinking about blackness historically. Irele’s well-known animosity to theory, which he wore so grandly, should not fool us. He was one of the most adept theoreticians of literary inquiry, who had vast knowledge of French and German theory, Marxism, structuralism and poststructuralism, as is obvious when he debates négritude with its proponents and critics.

In the recent introduction Irele wrote to the annotated translation by Gregson Davis of Césaire’s *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal* (that Davis translates as *Journal of a Homecoming*), we see that the central feature of négritude as emotion is one he zeroes in on: “[The *Cahier*] remains a work whose energy of poetic statement ultimately reflects the pressure on human speech of strong emotions and of an intensely held apprehension of the world - the pressure from which all great literature springs.” (2). Further in the same introduction, Irele notes that “the substance of [Césaire’s] expression was imposed in an imperious fashion by the *collective agony* of his race, its feeling grounded in the *historical passion of its drama* in which he was implicated” [my italics] (10). It is also fitting for us to note that not only the content but the circumstance surrounding its creation is presented by Irele as marked by this essential quality. In order to do this, he provides a quotation by Césaire’s friend Léopold Sédar Senghor: “The ‘Cahier d’un retour au pays natal’ was delivered in suffering. Its mother nearly lost her life, I mean reason” (Irele, “Introduction” *Journal* 18).⁴ This quote does considerable service for Irele’s understanding of négritude. Firstly, it reminds us of Senghor’s relationship with Césaire in the context of their being students in Paris, and so it situates his work biographically and historically. Irele tells us that Césaire, newly married and with a child on the way, did not take the final Agrégation exam at the end of his studies at the Ecole Normale Supérieure but, instead, received a Diplôme d’Etudes Supérieures. The publication of the *Cahier* first occurred thanks to Césaire’s professor at the Sorbonne, who assisted in getting it into the now obscure journal *Volonté*. But what Irele does not comment on much further is the language that Senghor employed in reflecting upon this moment, beginning with the idea that the theme of childbirth coincides with Césaire’s situation at the time of bringing this text to the public. More significantly, Césaire is referred to in the feminine, and as the “mother” of the text. The reference to the mother who nearly lost her life, by which he means “reason” also suggests that the agony of completing the text and bringing it to life almost caused the creator (in the feminine) to lapse into unreason. What is somewhat perplexing is that Senghor equates losing life to losing reason, while he is known amongst the poets of négritude for his celebration of non-reason or emotion as a central quality of Blackness. But a look at the Preface

of *Ethiopiennes* from where Irele quotes Senghor reveals more. It is Senghor himself who characterizes *négritude* as a passion. He writes that “l’aventure des poètes de l’Anthologie n’a pas été une entreprise littéraire, pas même un divertissement; ce fut une passion” [“the adventure of the poets of the Anthologie was not a literary enterprise, nor even a pastime; it was a passion”]. Therefore, one might see this comment as meaning that Césaire became reunited with his Africanness through the writing of this poem in the most difficult circumstances, which, along with the self-discovery it entailed, cultivated his relationship with un-reason.

Irele’s approach to the topic of *négritude* was always inclusive and wide-ranging. In his Jordan Lecture at Wellesley, he situated *négritude* by making a comparison between the African diaspora and the Jewish diaspora while speaking of the slave narratives that were forming a newly composed canon for black thinkers. He referred to CLR James’ book on the Haitian revolution of 1804, *Black Jacobins*, and brought in Haiti as an antecedent to *négritude*. Anténor Firmin, who wrote the response to Gobineau and Jean Price-Mars’ “Ainsi Parla l’Oncle” as a way of reconnecting with an African heritage all set the mood for the sense of black consciousness that the poets of *négritude* would explore. Irele also signalled as significant Nicolas Guillen’s ideas and Jacques Roumain’s *Master of the Dew* appearing in a translation by Langston Hughes. In fact, Irele saw René Depestre’s *réalisme merveilleux* and Jacques Stéphen Alexis’s writing as the immediate precursors to the trend that would be called *négritude*. He stressed the role played by the salons convened by the Nardal sisters, whose father had been the first black man to earn a fellowship at the Ecole des Arts et Métiers in Martinique. These salons provided the space for Césaire, Senghor, Damas, and others to meet and exchange ideas. The sisters also connected the Francophone intellectuals to their African American counterparts. And of course, René Maran’s *Batouala* (1921) was formative on their thinking. Maran was a Martinican but lived much of his life as a *fonctionnaire* in the Central African Republic. In this extraordinary early work, the art of description becomes, in and of itself, a form of critique. It was all this that could allow for the foundation of the journal, *L’étudiant noir*, though the latter was short-lived. It would then become the launching pad for the brilliant, militant writing of the young students whose conversations and experiments became the foundation of “*négritude*.” What Irele was one of the first to pick up on as a central theoretical articulation of *négritude* itself is found in a quotation from Césaire that we study in ways he oriented many years ago. Those oft-quoted lines are:

ma *négritude* n’est ni une tour ni une cathédrale/my *négritude* is neither a tower nor
a cathedral
elle plonge dans la chair rouge du sol/it delves into the red flesh of the soil
elle plonge dans la chair ardente du ciel/it delves into the burning flesh of the sky
elle troue l’accablement opaque de sa droite patience/it digs through the dark accretions
that weight down its righteous patience (Césaire 124,26/125,27).

Patience, then, carries within it the meaning of passion, here an emotion of despair and pessimism that is plunged through by the force of Césaire’s *négritude*. Irele’s careful tracing of this patience by following the different voices that historically lead up to the moment of *négritude* and also his attentiveness to the way *négritude* expanded as a world-view that was compatible with Pan-Africanism and Black consciousness have marked and oriented the concept. Patience likewise characterizes his

own trajectory and lasted throughout his long and productive intellectual life in the many years since his Sorbonne thesis on the subject of *négritude*. The publication of the *Négritude Moment* which takes up the essays Irele wrote on *négritude* over his lifetime, and Irele's edition, in collaboration with Gregson Davis, of the *Cahier* shortly before his demise testify to the salience of this topic to his oeuvre. The small proposition I present here is that the space from which Irele would draw energy to cast a wide and capacious rather than narrow and confining view of African Literature (where he would bring together the Anglophone and Francophone, for example, but also widen the meaning of literature) took shape as early as his first work on *négritude* for his dissertation, and almost everything he did thenceforth was informed by his attachment to the passion in that poetic venture. There is no doubt that his own experience of colonialism in Nigeria fueled his passionate understanding of the *négritude* poets whom he studied in Paris. Irele's opening up these texts to Anglophone readers has also permitted and influenced, directly or indirectly, many readings of that other (albeit negative) critic of *négritude*, Frantz Fanon, who was Irele's senior by a decade but whom Irele would outlive by almost six decades.

For his part, in tracing the influences upon *négritude*, Irele remarks that it is ironic that "Western elements acted as catalysts in the emotional reaction which produced nationalist feelings" (*Négritude Moment* 20). From Christianity to the French Revolution, elements drawn from Western culture spurred on anticolonialism. "A powerful emotional inspiration of nationalism was thus a disaffection for the White man, judged according to his own principles" (*Négritude Moment* 20). Irele also astutely notes that the revolutionary character of Marxism exerted an "emotional pull" which left "a permanent imprint on the ideas" of most Negro intellectuals long after many of them had been disillusioned by the Communist Party. Drawing on James Baldwin's notion of the "ache" of Negroes to "come into the world as men" (qtd. in *Négritude Moment* 63), Irele writes that the movement was necessarily "irrational" because it was "to a considerable degree a gesture of *despair*" [italics in original] (*négritude Moment* 64). An important observation he goes on to make is the following: "A contradiction, purely emotional in origin, bedevils the movement, which, in its crusade for the total emancipation of Black people, has sought to comprise within a single cultural vision the different historical experiences of Negro societies and nations" (*NM* 64). Irele rescues Senghor subtly for the phrase for which he has often been taken to task: "Emotion is African, as Reason is Hellenic," by making reference to the great Jesuit priest and paleontologist, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, whose wide understanding of the world in conjunction with Christian spirituality also sought a vision of humanity that Senghor was attempting when eliding contradictions between Europe and Africa (see *NM* p. 88). Irele also shows that Senghor's use of "emotion" is a philosophical concept to be found in Bergson, and that it refers to a "form of experience, proceeding from a faculty which [...] establishes a direct and intense relation between the experiencing mind and the object of its experience; it leads therefore to a fuller apprehension of reality than is afforded by the limiting forms of mental operations associated with the discursive method [...]" (*NM* 103). At different points, in rescuing Senghor, Irele places him in a similar position to Teilhard, as one whose unique position and knowledge of two equally valuable and

valid modes of thought destined him to spend his lifetime reconciling them through thought, research, and intelligence. Irele writes that one of Senghor's effective strategies would be his "exaltation of the mystical and intuitive [which] allies with the anti-intellectual protest within Western thought against rationalism and scientism, in a specific effort to rehabilitate the traditional civilizations of his native continent" (NM 105).

In assessing the criticisms launched against *négritude*, Irele dismisses Fanon's somewhat quickly. Putting him alongside what he considers the majority of its critics, Irele writes that:

they proceed from what one might call a positivist standpoint, involving a materialist view of society [...]. The appeal to a racial consciousness based on a new appraisal of the potential of African civilization to create a new order of life and expression for Black peoples appears to them to be too remote from the exigencies of the moment to be of any practical and immediate significance (NM 117).

Of course, Irele is not quite fair in neglecting to assert that Fanon's appeal was to a specifically "national" consciousness (for Algerians, for example) based on precisely a new appraisal of the potential for African civilization to create an altered order of life. However, Irele is quite right to signal the importance of *négritude* to black and anticolonial movements in the following terms: "[...] by promoting the concept of an original racial specificity, it has provided the collective consciousness with the fundamental basis for the confrontation by Black people of a difficult history and their determination to create for themselves a new mode of historical being" (NM 119). Indeed, Fanon's revolutionary thought in *Wretched of the Earth* embraced and rested on the two pillars of a collective consciousness and the notion of "newness" to surmount colonialism in Algeria. But Irele's description of Césaire's poetry that "[i]t becomes a mode of both triumph over the vicissitudes of a painful experience and of access to a plenitude of being through the exploration of an elemental universe," (NM 182) realigns *négritude* to experience, emotion, and a way of knowing the world from a space that emerges from pain, and thus connects to the different meanings of "passion."

In an essay in *Transition* that Irele wrote following the publication of the English translation (published separately) of "Orphée noir" as *Black Orpheus*, he notes that Sartre, "in analysing the work of the negro poet [...] tells a lot about himself too" (9). There is no doubt that in writing about the Negro poets, Irele, too, tells a lot about himself. He tells mostly of his sharp intellect, but he also tells of the generosity of his thinking and displays its ability to expand and reach out, to make alliances and associations. It tells of his wide reading and knowledge as well as his own affinity for a deeply Europeanized type of analytical thought, steeped in European culture and music in particular, alongside and intertwined with a firm belief in an African cosmology that might at first glance be inimical to the former. It is one of the reasons Irele turned so ardently to the Rwandan scholar, Alexis Kagame, who provides, through his study on Bantu thought, what Irele believed was an elaboration of modern African philosophy in rigorous conceptual terms.⁵

Abiola's life-long engagement with *négritude* is a fascination with the passion of the negro poet and stands as testimony to his own passion, in the sense of enthusiasm and love for literature and the possibilities it holds for individuals, for the

continued reversal of the violent history of slavery for Africans, and for the redemption of humanity itself. So it didn't surprise me that when asked, at the talk I have referred to in this essay, what he thought his greatest contribution might be, Irele said he thought it "might be" his work on *négritude* and the Francophone writers. While I had this in mind when insisting he should speak on *négritude* rather than on his new project that he was keen to present, his own recognition of *négritude's* place in his work brought to light the patience of the scholarly endeavor and testified to the salience of *négritude* in his thought. Following the talk, as we walked out of the building together, 'Biola (as he liked to be called) laughed about the simple truth that the question on his contribution had had him articulate. Regarding *négritude*, he said, or any question that we ask in scholarship, "the answer is found only through many iterations of the question." Irele's work on *négritude* partakes of the same commitment the poets themselves articulated to transform the central feature of African nationalisms: that is, to transcend that poetic gesture of "despair." More than that Irele's critical work, in Jacques Rancière's words, "becomes a sort of supplementary art more than an instance of normative judgment."

Notes

1. At my invitation, Abiola Irele gave a named lecture (the Jordan Lecture), entitled, "An Identity of Passions: *Négritude* in the Black and Postcolonial World," on February 9, 2016, at Wellesley College, while I was Director of the Newhouse Center for the Humanities.
2. It is in this context of his editorship that I, as a young assistant professor, publishing work that brought together Francophone/postcolonial/African studies, encountered Irele. For the finished work, see my "Sisterhood and Rivalry." The two blind reviewers accepted my essay but the Editor wanted me to pay attention to some theoretical claims that he felt needed further work in order to be substantiated. While this encounter confirmed what I had heard (that Professor Irele is somewhat resistant to "theory"), it also highlighted how well-versed he was in this very matter. Through that encounter and many other lengthy conversations that followed, particularly after he moved to Harvard, I have been delighted and honored to test out theoretical ideas and passing thoughts with this great mind in African literary studies. I am comforted, despite his absence, by knowing these conversations will continue with my (and our) engagement with his work in the years to come.
3. In his 1965 essay, "*Négritude* or Black Cultural Nationalism," in the *Journal of Modern African Studies*, Irele considers *négritude* a black nationalist movement and affirms that like other such movements, it was founded on emotional impulses.
4. This seems to be Irele's translation of Senghor.
5. It should not surprise us that Irele had taken to learning Swahili in order to understand better the structures that Kagame referred to in his analyses. In this, and many other ways, Irele exemplified the ideal scholar.

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Disclosure statement

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