

# Book Review

By Celia Sharpe

***Race, Culture, and Identity: Francophone West African and Caribbean Literature and Theory from Négritude to Créolité*** by Shireen K. Lewis. Caribbean Studies Series. 188 pages. Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, Rowman & Littlefield. 2006. ISBN-13: 978-0-7391-1473-5. \$25.95 paper.

To pick up a book on ideas, one must be prepared to lay down one's own ideas.

While readers easily accept that a fictional work requires the suspension of beliefs, they are less willing to put aside their intellectual convictions when approaching a book about ideas. Especially if it is titled *Race, Culture, and Identity*, which broadly covers issues for everyone in the world.

After all, they would not even have picked it up if they were not already interested in (and, in their own estimation, fairly knowledgeable about!) race, culture, identity, and the history and literature behind them, as well as France and the Caribbean, Marxism, Leninism, and surrealism, or any of the other topics that Dr. Shireen Lewis talks about in her new book.

The road from Négritude to Créolité in Caribbean art and literature is far from direct. Starting in 1932 with the publication of the one and only issue of the review "Legitimate Defense" by a group of young Martinican students, Lewis weaves a story of identity that transports from the intellectual hub of Paris to the motherland of Africa by way of America's Harlem Renaissance, and then eventually back to its own geographic roots in the Caribbean islands.

Political social philosophies of Marxism and Leninism are woven in with the art theories, particularly surrealism and the philosophy of existentialism. In some ways complementary and others contradictory, these ideas challenged people of all races in the generations between the two world wars.

Jean-Paul Sartre is the best-known thinker of this period, but Lewis also devotes significant attention to the contributions of Paulette Nardal, a Martinican woman, a writer, and a feminist. Lewis' biography of Nardal in this book is the first ever written about this woman, whose literary salon in Paris was the site at which many thinkers and artists exchanged their ideas.

Lewis does not simply expound theories. She also shares some of the most lyrical moments in the poetry of Leon Dumas and Léopold Senghor.

One of the eye-stopping sentences appears early on with the words of a Caribbean poet who "burst with white morality, white culture, white education and white prejudices, displays in his small book of

poems the bombastic image of himself."

The reader's heart will stop at that moment to contemplate whether or not an artist can create without revealing his own color.

In the early 1980s, Edouard Glissant offers the possibilities of Caribbeanness or "Antillanite" as a turning toward the New World created by slavery and colonization and where a new "mother country" was adopted.

This is the point in the book, like the crisis in a novel, where anyone who loves literature and language faces questions of just how both develop.

Who are the people who create this language? What indeed is the history of Creole language? Does it originate with the French language, which was based on many regional dialects, or with the African slaves who came from different ethnic groups and spoke different languages?

Is it a new language of slavery and colonization? And how does this again relate to the politics and society that make race and culture such volatile issues?

The scholarly validity of this book is that it deals with the transformation of ideas rather than making sharp judgments on racism and other of society's ills.

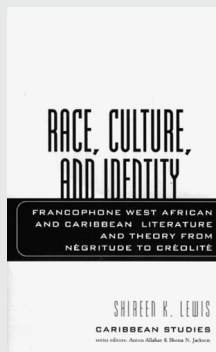
There are, of course, several ways to know a culture. One is to grow up in it and experience it as an insider. Lewis grew up in Trinidad and Tobago when her country was in its early years of independence from Great Britain and thus brings firsthand experience to the issues she addresses.

Another is as a scholar, researching the issues. Lewis has a doctorate in French literature from Duke University.

She has taught French at various universities and was a visiting professor at the University of Virginia. Her research for this book includes archival work in major libraries in France, Senegal, and Martinique.

In *Race, Culture, and Identity*, Lewis offers a third way – through a highly readable book, one that allows the reader to play a role in discovery of another time and place. By demystifying her theme, she presents ideas that everyone can understand about what lies behind the complex world that shapes the destinies of so many. How those ideas in turn are reflected in contemporary culture is, of course, where readers can begin to discover for themselves.

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