**Rethinking the role of the arts in politics: lessons from the Négritude movement:**

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**Abstract:**

The arts can be a powerful tool for emancipation, community building and political expression. This article makes the argument that artistic and cultural expression should be viewed by politicians and policy makers as an effective form of political engagement and an important feedback loop for understanding the political dissatisfaction of the electorate. It draws on one particular historical example, the Négritude movement, to highlight the value and strength of cultural movements in responding to questions of politics and to draw out lessons for current policy makers in recognising the value of culture in effecting political change. Against a contemporary political and scholarly narrative of disaffected citizenship, this article demonstrates that a lack of trust in a political model does not necessarily demonstrate a disinterested citizenry; rather it can suggest a citizenry who have found new and innovative ways to engage. The Négritude movement provides one such historical example.

**Introduction:**

Over the past ten years there has been increased concern amongst political elites that the general public are no longer engaging with politics as active citizens. In 2007 the UK Ministry of Justice suggested that there was increased disengagement with traditional political life. Such discussions re-emerged following the 2010 General Election in which voter turnout was only 65%, with an even lower figure of 44% amongst youth voters (18-24) (Ipsos Mori, 2010). In the run up to the UK General Election in May 2015 this rhetoric was further consolidated by scholars concerned once again about participation levels. Academics and politicians alike continue to reiterate that this is a particular concern when talking about youth participation and youth engagement (Stoker, 2006, p.32), and, as such, concern exists that the youth voice is becoming ever more marginalised and ignored. With the EU referendum in June 2016 further speculation arose surrounding the question of youth engagement, with initial polls suggesting it remained lower than other groups, with an estimated turnout of only ‘36 percent of 18-24 year olds’ (Speed, 2016). The Financial Times went further than to simply comment on the referendum itself, suggesting that ‘as is usually the case, there was a slight general trend for turnout to increase in line with average age’ (Burn-Murdoch, 2016), suggesting that youth disenfranchisement is a constant in British, if not global, politics. These turnout figures were later challenged but the rhetoric within the media reiterates the assumption in British politics towards non-engagement of young people (in the 18-24 age bracket), leading to the concern that politicians may start to ignore the youth voice in policy decisions. Gerry Stoker has previously argued that this concern is not specific to the British model but in fact, ‘globally, people in democracies are negative about their formal political institutions and politicians’ (Stoker, 2006, p.44). This rhetoric, often associated with the disaffected citizenship narrative, suggests a decreasing interest in (formal) politics (Park, 2004) and a failure of the electorate to properly engage. However, throughout history there have been examples of citizens failing to trust their political systems and elites but maintaining an understanding of, and desire to engage with, politics. One such example is the colonial period in Africa and the Caribbean under which individuals were forced to find new ways to express their political views that were outside of the voting system; ways that were often seen to be outside of the traditional avenues of political discourse.

In recent years there has been a growth in the number of studies making the argument for the existence of alternative forms of engagement (Quentelier 2007, Norris 2003) or ‘cause-oriented’ (Norris, 2003) engagement. By focusing on an historical example of such engagement this article is able to present a case study of the value and success of non-traditional models of political engagement, providing lessons for contemporary understandings. Further to this, by drawing out comparisons with contemporary cultural projects the article highlights the importance of offering these examples the same recognition as historical movements. The article focuses on just one historical cultural response to the oppression of the colonial movement: Négritude. It argues that cultural and artistic forms of expression such as this can be viewed in terms of political engagement and have in the past been deemed to effect political change. As such, movements such as these offer lessons for contemporary understandings of what it means for citizens to engage with politics. This is not to suggest contextual parallels between the situation in a selection of the French colonies and the contemporary British/ international system, but rather to suggest that lessons can be learnt regarding political engagement from voices that have been previously marginalised in discussions of engagement. This is particularly important in times when the youth voice is disappearing from politics as a result of falling trust in the traditional political system to represent them. Recent research from Maria Grasso suggests that ‘when it comes to influencing engagement, what matters most seems to be the dynamics and political characteristics of the era of which we come of age’ (Grasso, 2014), so rather than age being the deciding factor in political involvement it is actually the societal situation in which individuals become adults. Thus, in the generally stable political conditions of recent British politics it is unsurprising that younger voters have engaged less. However, as we move in to periods of uncertainty it becomes even more important to garner lessons from historical cases. As this article shows, the Négritude movement strengthens the argument that it is at the extremes of political practice that alternative forms of engagement become particularly important. Thus, I argue that in a global system fraught with instability, it is important now, more than ever, to draw on the lessons of the historically marginalised to understand the potential role for the arts in effecting future political change in times of political instability, and the necessary role of politicians in recognising these alternative approaches.

The article argues for a narrative of cultural displacement, addressing the question of whether it is possible for electorates to remain stimulated with politics but engage with it through different methods; no longer trusting that their voices will be heard via traditional channels. Like Pippa Norris (2013), the paper recognises that in contemporary Western Europe it is claimed that people hate politics, political parties have lost loyal voters and grassroots members, while electoral turnout has fallen and public disaffection has spread (Norris, 2013). However, in acknowledging this fact, like Norris, Russell Dalton (2014), Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel (2005), the article argues not that this is necessarily a sign of a disaffected citizenry, but rather, that through an examination of the historical case of Négritude, it is possible to argue the value of the artistic and cultural movements as expressions of political views intended to effect real change. That a fall in voter turnout does not automatically suggest falling engagement, but rather it implies that engagement itself is changing, and, as such, ‘people are (actually) less likely to be passive subjects and are more likely to demand a say in the decisions that affect their lives’ (Dalton, 2014), but that they are no longer making these claims by voting for a particular political party as they no longer view this as an effective form of participation.

The notion that culture plays an influential role in our understanding of politics is not new in theoretical discussions. Antonio Gramsci (1948) talks of cultural hegemony within the ‘Prison Notebooks’, we have seen a growing movement around aesthetics over the last decade (Ranciére, 2010) and critical International Relations scholarship has started to draw on different narrative approaches in expressing analysis, such as the use of the novel as an approach to better understanding conceptions of terrorism (Jackson, 2014). In contrast, there is scepticism in contemporary politics to recognise and respond to non-traditional forms of political engagement, viewing them instead as non-political acts, or non-legitimate political acts. This paper suggests not only that the Négritude movement presents lessons for our understanding of cultural and artistic works as political acts, but also that it presents a historical case study of professional politicians recognising the value of cultural approaches to political engagement as being an effective part of civil society.

Within the anti-colonial struggle there was recognition amongst African Socialist leaders of the value of the arts, and for political figures to support and recognise this value: Tanzania’s Julius Nyerere provided funding for arts spaces and Léopold Sédar Senghor developed an expressly political cultural movement in Négritude. In contrast, within the contemporary political sphere we see an attempt to silence cultural figures such as J K Rowling and Gary Linaker, with suggestions made by citizens and professional politicians alike that they should focus on culture and not engage with politics, suggesting a determination to, as Antonio Gramsci would argue, maintain the dominant cultural hegemony (Gramsci, 1948), discouraging the ‘dispossessed to locate the source of their unease, let alone remedy it’ (Lears, 1985, p.570). Négritude, this paper proffers, teaches contemporary politics that culture can, and should, respond to this silencing and challenge the existing cultural hegemony that views engagement with the ballot box and party membership as the primary form of political engagement accepted by professional politicians.

Through a detailed analysis of a sample of the outputs of the Négritude movement, the article establishes an argument for the value of the arts as a form of political expression that has, historically, demonstrated a potential to effect real political change. A form of expression that, especially in the case of Négritude, responds to a sense of being silenced by the political system through a creative response to sharing political ideas and views, an approach that Gramsci would recognise as challenging the dominant cultural hegemony or the ‘spontaneous consent given by great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group’ (Lears, 1985, p.568). As Elliott Eisner argued, ‘the arts provide permission to engage the imagination as a means for exploring new possibilities…cultural development depends on such capacities, and the arts play an extraordinarily important role in their contribution to such an aim’ (Eisner, 2002, p.10). Through such an imagining it is not only possible to envision your own idea of change, but also to share this with the wider community and to inspire movement in that direction, creating ‘forms that participate in a general re-framing of the human abode’ (Rancière, 2010, p. 121). As will become clear as the article progresses, this is what can be seen when we take the Négritude movement as our example of a model that was able to combine both culture and politics to respond to oppression.

When referring to Négritude as a movement I borrow from the definition given by Jelena Obradovic-Wochnik and Alexander Wochnik, ‘a broad category…movements are heterogeneous and vary in size and agendas, but are generally actors engaged in conflictual collective action functioning in dense, informal networks and thus enabling collective identity building amongst the participants’ (Obradovic-Wochnik & Wochnik, 2014, p.3). Négritude brought together a diverse group of people with varying experiences and enabled them to establish a collective voice and identity through alternative forms of engagement in response to the horrors of oppression.

In contemporary politics there is a tendency, particularly within the British model, to fail to recognise the innate value and worth of art and cultural projects. Year on year, we see further cuts being made to such valuable assets as youth clubs, community cinemas, libraries and arts charities; whilst, at the same time, development programmes overlook the value of expanding arts, community centres and cultural spaces in favour of traditional development projects (Bird, 2014). However, it is these arts projects that provide the space for imagination, and ‘imagination gives us images of the possible that provide a platform for seeing the actual, and by seeing the actual freshly, we can do something about creating what lies beyond it’ (Eisner, 2002, p. 4). The repercussions of Eisner's argument have relevance beyond cultural development and within the political sphere. Creativity, especially amongst young people, is at the heart of a new form of political engagement. Engagement in this way ‘is increasingly facilitated by access to new media and technology’ (Henn & Foard, 2011), young people are having their political views shaped by You Tube, television or social media, they are accessing politics on a cause by cause basis: signing e-petitions, joining online groups and vlogging (Bennett, 2008). Through each of these activities ‘the capacity to invent visions of what should be or might be in our deficient society, on the streets where we live, in our schools’ (Greene, 1956, p.434) is expressed.

Whilst the well-documented (Henn & Foard 2011, Anderson 2014) usage of new technology to facilitate these movements is of course a radical change in our understanding of political engagement, drawing on creative approaches to realise effective change to political systems has been at the heart of a number of historical political movements. The Négritude movement is just one example of the value of poetry, plays, sculpture and prose both as a form of political engagement of the individuals themselves and as inspiring engagement amongst others. Associated with the writings of Léopold Sédar Senghor, Aime Césaire, Aliounne Diop and Léon Damas the movement was expressly both cultural and political in its origins: drawing both on political pamphlets and protest as well as poetry, plays, prose and art as an expression of disgust with the colonial movement and a model for hope and change. By looking in depth at the outputs of this historical movement, a movement that existed at a time of real oppression and political silencing, against a backdrop of violence and colonialism, and the role it played in establishing the views of figures who went on to have direct political influence, the article suggests that lessons can be established from this movement for understanding the value of arts and cultural projects in both recognising and developing political engagement amongst communities that no longer trust the political system to provide them with a space in which their voices will actually be heard. By comparing the outputs of this movement with the work of current artists it is possible to see parallels between current and historical approaches and thus the importance of learning from previous models of engagement.

In making these arguments the articles feeds into the recent debates and burgeoning literature surrounding political engagement. By drawing on previously marginalised historical voices the article is able to present alternative approaches to thinking about participation which can then be seen as lessons for contemporary politics. To achieve this, the article is divided into three sections. The first considers in greater detail the issue of contemporary political disengagement and the debate to which this article speaks. Having established the area of academic discussion to which this article holds relevance I then go on to talk about the broader question of the relationship between art and politics and the literature that exists around this topic. Having discussed the literature that currently exists both in the areas of political engagement and the relationship between art and politics the article focuses, in the third section, on the Négritude movement and the lessons that can be learnt regarding the powerful role of art and cultural movements in expressing political feelings in a situation in which people were silenced from traditional channels of engagement as well as a focus from politicians on recognising and valuing non-traditional forms of political engagement in times of political struggle.

**Political disengagement?**

In 2014 Jan van Deth argued that political engagement is transforming; that the methods through which individuals engage and the topics that inspire their engagement have outgrown a political model that is predominantly rooted in tradition. Similar to Pattie et al’s argument that (particularly young) people are now engaging in ‘micro-politics’ (2004) he suggested, like Dalton, that what was occurring was an increased engagement with questions of politics but that this was politics understood with a little p rather than the large P associated with the establishment. In making these claims, each of these scholars was responding to an ever increasing dominant hegemonic narrative (Gramsci, 1948) emanating from academic, establishment and media sources that suggested that interest in politics was declining and the younger British public (in particular) could be defined in terms of ‘disaffected citizenship’ (Anderson 2014). Cheryl Anderson in fact suggests that two positions exist when discussing the fall in political engagement in recent years. The position associated with Dalton, Norris and Van Deth referred to as the ‘cultural displacement perspective’ or, the alternative position that sees overall engagement as falling, referred to as ‘the disaffected citizenship perspective’ (Anderson, 2014, p.2). Van Deth makes a similar claim, suggesting that conclusions about the changing nature of participation differ widely depending on the concept used- so those that have a restrictive and conventional definition of political participation argue that political engagement has declined, and those with a broader conception argue instead for a change in the mode of political participation (Van Deth, 2014, p. 350). This article draws on the lessons of the Négritude movement to suggest the relevance of the cultural displacement perspective for understanding historical examples of alternative engagement, whilst making an argument for recognising the value of different forms of engagement in contemporary politics. In making this claim a further assumption exists, that recognition of alternative forms of politics relies on recognition from politicians that these approaches are a feedback loop for understanding their political decision making. In the example of Négritude Senghor's valuing of cultural approaches to respond to oppression and engage the citizenry with a movement suggests the value the arts can hold in changing dominant hegemonic norms, and as such, a potential reason for understanding why politicians may choose to ignore said approaches as the current dominant hegemony favours their position within the state. In setting up these arguments it is important to firstly discuss in greater detail the arguments that exist for both positions.

In critiquing the more ‘restrictive and conventional’ definitions Norris firstly explains the views of scholars such as Robert Putnam, who argued in 2000 that Americans (in particular) were increasingly ‘Bowling Alone’, withdrawing from political life and involving themselves less in political parties, voting and civic movements (Putnam, 2000). Norris recognises that:

‘the overall view (amongst these thinkers) is that disaffection has worsened in recent decades, with significant consequences for democratic governance…indicators such as falling voter turnout and declining party membership in established European democracies are commonly regarded as signs of citizen disenchantment or cynicism about politics’ (Norris, 2013, pp.1-10).

Scholars and politicians making this argument focus on citizen engagement with the voting system and not with a broader understanding of what it means to be a citizen and to contribute to society. They tend to accuse the citizenry of failing in their duty of involvement with society, of having a say in their local and national communities and contributing to wider debates, of failing to contribute to a political system which is recognised by the dominant culture.

In contrast, those associated with an understanding of engagement focused on cultural displacement argue for a broader understanding of what it means to participate in politics. Van Deth offers a particularly broad definition in which he suggests that ‘political participation can be loosely defined as citizens activities affecting politics…the list of specimens of political participation is virtually endless and includes such divergent phenomena as voting, demonstrating and boycotting- but also guerrilla gardening, volunteering, flash mobs and even suicide protest’ (Van Deth, 2014, p.351). Van Deth is not alone in making these arguments for a broader understanding of what it means to be political. Other authors have in fact gone further, referring to participation as ‘a categorical term for citizen power’ (Arnstein, 1969, p.216), or even including all activities intended to influence or to change existing power structures (Brough and Shresthova, 2012). Under these definitions it is clear that what constitutes political engagement is not simply the act of voting, but rather a focus on effecting real political change through a range of different approaches. In what follows, this article draws on the outputs of the Négritude movement to support this definition of politics. Suggesting that the cultural elements of the movement represented both an intention and an achievement of political change in a period of extreme political oppression and as such the arts (understood as a broad definition of creative outputs) can, and do, have value as a form of citizen engagement and participation with politics. In making this claim the article supports those arguments discussed by Rancière that have ‘faith in the political capacity of art’ but doing so in a way that recognises art has many forms (Rancière, 2010, p. 134) with Négritude drawing on only some of these, but nonetheless highlighting their value. Before focusing in more detail on this one specific example the article first talks in broader terms about the relationship between art and politics and the value associated with the arts that have relevance for reimagining the political condition and effecting real political change.

**Can art be politics really?**

In introducing this article I made reference to the work of Elliot Eisner and his argument for the powerful role for the imagination in establishing new models for community and society. It is worth discussing this in greater detail here as it is this very focus on the imagination that I argue is key to understanding the effectiveness of the Négritude movement in combining both culture and politics. For Eisner the arts are powerful as they enable us to engage our imagination ‘as a means of exploring new possibilities’ (Eisner, 2002, p.10). As a lens through which to understand political engagement this is particularly interesting as the arts provide us with the space to imagine a better world, or in fact a worse world, which we can then show to others as a means to hopefully effect political change. For example, drawing on the medium of film an artist has the power to use a fictionalised existence to demonstrate either a dystopian or utopian future, to, for example, ‘compel us to revolt when it shows us revolting things’ (Rancière, 2010, p.135). Through engaging both their own imagination and the imagination of their audience the artist has the opportunity to engage in political discourse and to advocate for change. Eisner suggests that the arts affect our consciousness in a number of ways:

‘They refine our senses so that our ability to experience the world is made more complex and subtle; they promote the use of our imaginative capacities so that we can envision what we cannot actually see, taste, touch, hear, and smell; they provide models through which we can experience the world in new ways; and they provide the materials and occasions for learning to grapple with problems’ (Eisner, 2002, p.19).

As will become clear in the following analysis, usage of poetry and plays provided Césaire, Senghor, and Damas with a space in which to grapple with the questions and problems imposed upon them by colonialism, to imagine alternative situations and to work through what these may indeed look like in the ways suggested by Eisner’s analysis. This process of imagining, I argue, is not simply an act of creativity but rather a political act; political both as a commentary on the situation in which they found themselves in; but political, also, in the opportunity to affect change through raising the consciousness of the citizenry. Drawing attention to the process in which ruling groups direct social life and manipulate subordinates (Lears, 1985, p.568), whilst making the claim that an alternative is possible.

Similarly to Eisner, Maxine Greene argues that ‘we acknowledge the harshness of situations only when we have in mind another state of affairs in which things would be better’ (Greene, 1995, p.5), and she, like Eisner, suggests that it is through creative endeavours that we have the opportunity to do this. To relate this specifically to politics, it is through a creative process of imagining a better world that we can recognise the situation we are in and engage in the process of change. It is through engaging in the creative process that we actively engage in politics and activities intended to influence or to change existing power structures (Brough and Shresthova, 2012). In his critique of the commodification of the arts Adam Krause recommends a similar role for art, suggesting that it should ‘play a role in the collective life of healthy, functioning communities’ (Krause, 2011, p.13), a role that can very easily be understood as a form of political engagement; especially if we understand political engagement in Van Deth’s terms as ‘aimed at solving collective or community problems’ (Van Deth, 2014, p.357). In his discussion of the aesthetics movement Rancière makes a similar argument for the role of art as providing ‘new modes of constructing common objects and new possibilities of subjective enunciation’ (Rancière, 2010, p.142) that draw attention to the potentiality for change focused on in this article.

Having discussed both the question of political engagement and disengagement as they are currently presented in the literature, as well as the role of the arts as understood by other scholars, with a particular focus on the importance of cultural hegemony, and imagination in effecting political change, it is at this stage in the article that the case study of the Négritude movement will be analysed and discussed, alongside a contemporary example, in the context of the role of the arts in political engagement.

**Introduction to Négritude:**

Before engaging in the analysis itself I feel that it is important to firstly offer a more detailed description of the movement by way of providing context for the broader discussion. Négritude, as a political, artistic, and cultural movement originated amongst the diaspora communities in Paris in the late 1930s amongst the West-African and Caribbean elite living, studying, and writing in the European city. It developed and maintained a reactionary response to the colonial movement and the atrocious treatment of both the elites in Paris and their fellow country folk in their home nations. The movement remained active until the 1960s when the anti-colonial movement became far more focused on the political rather than the cultural. One commentator, Barrend van Dyk van Niekerk argued in 1970 that the petering out of the artistic and cultural movement may actually have been a sign of its success as ‘black artists and their art are now accepted on equal terms by the world, not because they are black but because they are good’ (Barrend van Dyk van Niekerk, 1970, p.72).

The Négritude movement consisted of artists, poets and political figureheads and was very much a two sided movement: the first being poetic and literary, the second political and philosophical. By way of highlighting the success of both elements of the movement it is worth mentioning that Senghor went on to become the first President of independent Senegal, whilst Césaire, Diop and Damas all achieved high ranking roles in politics, art or publishing continuing to share their views on political oppression beyond the ending of Colonialism.

The movement was understood to be an explicitly cultural-political project, in which both sides of the movement were valued both as valid expressions of thoughts and emotions, but also as reactions to the oppressive and degrading treatment of the colonisers: under which both political and artistic expression of Black people had been devalued or silenced. The arts were not deemed to be supplementary to the political, but rather a valued expression of the political, not only by artists, but also, importantly, by those who went on to take political office. As will become apparent in the following analysis, some contemporary discussants of Négritude even favour the value of the artistic outputs as engaging with the political issues at hand over the expressly political, or non-fiction, works. When asked in an interview about the origins of the movement himself and Senghor had been so often attached to, Césaire, when discussing the movement in terms of the political and social origins, was adamant that both himself and Senghor, ‘refused to see the Black question as simply a social question’ (Césaire, 2000, p. 94). Rather, viewing it as encompassing culture, emotion, feeling and politics. Similarly, as Barrend van Dyk Van Niekerk observed, for Senghor (in particular) Négritude is ‘the explanation and interpretation by the black man of his own position in the universe’ (Barrend van Dyk Van Niekerk, 1970, p.100). As such, Senghor presented his involvement in Négritude as a journey of self-discovery that enabled him to position himself in the world. He argued this not only in terms of his own journey but also as a broader social movement.

It has been argued by a number of scholars (Barrend van Dyk Van Niekerk 1970, Kelley 1992, Kelley 2000) that the artistic outputs of the movement were a cultural response to political problems: essentially a form of political engagement. Through a diverse range of poetry and prose published predominantly in the French journal ‘Présénce Africaine’ thinkers from a wide range of colonised countries were able to represent themselves and their views in relation to the colonisers oppression and to draw on the arts as a response to domination and a methodology for reasserting a sense of identity in the face of such oppression.

Associated scholars Aimé Césaire, Leopold Sédar Senghor and Léon Damas produced a plethora of work drawing on intense imagery and rhetoric to detail their revulsion with the colonial situation, calling on the colonised people to realise their strength and respond. Their artistic work was in every way an act of politics, and many of the ideas Césaire, in particular, fictionalises correspond with views he also shared in political texts, which are not included within the boundaries of this paper. By way of assessing the role of the arts as a form of political engagement in this time period, and as such the lessons that can be garnered from analysis of the movement, this article briefly considers Senghor’s broader views on the role and purpose of the movement. This is followed by analysis of Damas’s poetry from his most famous collection ‘Pigments’ (1937), as well as an example of Césaire’s fictional work. The chosen sample is his most famous work ‘Une Tempête’ (A Tempest) (1969) which retells Shakespeare’s famous play from the perspective of the ‘natives’ (Césaire, 1969), presenting a critique of the injustice of the colonial movement and the position Black people found themselves in as second class citizens. It is worth reiterating at this stage that these works were being produced at a time of great political unrest, and the relevance of re-reading the Négritude movement now for lessons for contemporary politics is grounded heavily in this observation. As Grasso argued: today with ‘the growing curtailment of civil liberties and expansion of surveillance, and an ever-increasing chasm between rich and poor- to name just a few recent concerns- a new generation of activists may yet emerge’ (Grasso, 2014). It is thus fundamental, now more than ever, that we learn from history the value of different forms of political expression and the changes it can garner as we aim to better understand the changing landscape of politics.

**Analysis:**

Having established the broader context to which the Négritude movement spoke, the remainder of the article focuses on the question of art as a form of political engagement in the practice of the Négritude scholars, and in comparison with a contemporary example.

Senghor claimed that the strength of the movement, as he saw it, was in guiding Black people oppressed by the colonial movement to recognise the value of their Blackness, and to use this to contribute to the future of not just Africa, but the world more generally. In establishing this mission he suggested that it was the role of Africans not only to shape their own future but rather to create a model suitable not only to fit ‘Africa and the twentieth century, but first of all to fit man’ (Senghor, 1962, p.17). He placed great emphasis on the need to establish a consciousness amongst the oppressed and the role of poetry, in particular, in starting to do this. A shared consciousness amongst a community was, for him, the first step towards effective political change. Unless a community came to recognise not only the oppression they were suffering, but also the possibility to make a difference to their political situation, then they would fail to make those changes. Such a focus on establishing the conditions for future change relates to the arguments of Eisner, Rancière and Greene previously discussed, and their focus on the role of the arts in allowing people to imagine an alternative to their current condition. As Eisner stated, ‘the arts liberate us from the literal; they enable us to step into the shoes of others and to experience vicariously what we have not experienced directly. Cultural development depends upon such capacities, and the arts play an extraordinarily important role in their contribution to such an aim’ (Eisner, 2002, p.10). What Senghor hoped to achieve with both his poetry and prose was a situation in which colonised subjects could imagine themselves as free citizens with the autonomy to overcome their oppressors, a situation in which, as Gramsci would argue, they could challenge the cultural hegemony dominating the current system (Lears, 1985). Not only did he want them to imagine the outcomes of such change but also the process for achieving change. By engaging in a process of artistic expression he recognised the possibility for establishing a collective consciousness amongst the citizenry, one that recognised that ‘true independence is that of the spirit’ (Senghor, 1964, p.8) and the spirit can be altered through a process of artistic imagination, similar to the one discussed by Eisner. According to Tsenay Serequeberhan, Césaire, similarly, viewed Négritude as having the potential to inspire citizens to achieve real change; as Serequeberhan interprets his work, Césaire viewed it as a ‘coming to consciousness’, a method of ‘positively appropriating the term négre and overcoming the negativity imposed on it’ (Serequeberhan, 2000, p.23). When thinking about this example in terms of the contemporary relationship between politics and art links can be made to the music of artists such as Beyoncé, and her reliance on Black imagery in performances of ‘Formation’, to not only establish a consciousness and understanding of oppression but also to enable people who may not have experienced this oppression to start to imagine it. As Kirsty Fairclough suggests in her discussion of the album ‘Lemonade’, ‘the album is overtly political and in many ways designed to directly represent and speak to the black female listener’ (Fairclough, 2016). In doing this she, similarly to Césaire and Senghor, is able to suggest not only a need for political change but also to establish a shared consciousness amongst her listenership that may start to provide the space in which this change can in fact occur. Fairclough admits that this ‘may or may not be a contrived marketing tool’, but suggests that ‘it almost doesn’t matter because she is no longer representative of bland, generic pop. These are ideas that matter’ (Fairclough, 2016), and it is this focus on powerful ideas rather than potentially self-interested motives that can also be understood from the poetry of her predecessors. In re-reading the historical examples from the Négritude movement there is an opportunity to better understand the relationship between art and politics and the importance of recognising such art works as political acts. Simultaneously, we are also reminded of the need to challenge a dominant narrative that looks to maintain the notion that these works are simply art, or marketing tools within the capitalist system, and in doing so, ‘discourages the clarification of social alternatives, and makes it difficult for the dispossessed to locate the source for their unease, let alone remedy it’ (Lears, 1985, p.570). A narrative that looks to silence the ideas represented in these art forms because they challenge the dominant cultural hegemony.

A number of discussants have collated the poetic and literary works of the movement, and emphasised their political role as a response to oppression and imperialism. Robin Kelley, for example, in his analysis of Césaire, stressed the value of poetry in enhancing the revolutionary fervour of the movement. He argued that, ‘while it might appear that the poet and politician operated in separate spheres, Césaire’s life and work demonstrate that poetry can be the motor of political imagination, a potent weapon in any movement that claims freedom as its primary goal’ (Kelley, 1992, p. vii). Kelley highlights the relationship between culture, imagination, and politics as it is presented by the Négritude theorists, commentators, and supporters as well as the role of imagination in progressing change. Kelley actually went further in his analysis than to simply support a symbiosis between the cultural and political sides of the argument; suggesting that in the case of Césaire it was his poetry that provided the greatest tool: ‘the weapon of poetry may be Césaire’s greatest gift to a modern world still searching for freedom’ (Kelley, 1992, p.vii). Kelley recognises in Césaire’s work the value of alternative forms of engagement, beyond traditional forms of protest and debate, and the hope that these can inspire individuals, who have been at the least extent disengaged but at the extreme systematically dehumanised by a political model, to involve themselves once more. This is one of the key lessons for contemporary politics that can be taken from a reading of this movement: the power of art, of poetry, of sculpture, of film and of plays to empower an individual, a community or even a nation to stand up and condemn a failing political system. Far from ignoring these forms of expression politicians should be applauding and supporting them because, like all forms of citizen engagement, they are important because they provide a crucial feedback loop without which governance systems will fail (Stoker, 2006, p.150). By ignoring the feedback that comes from non-traditional forms of politics politicians risk disconnecting themselves from certain elements of the electorate, particularly those that feel that they are being marginalised or ignored which, according to Walsh, is particularly the case when we talk about youth participation. He suggests that, ‘in the current political environment, young people are damned if they do and damned if they don’t. Typically stereotyped as having an inflated sense of entitlement, uninterested in civic participation and apathetic, when young people do speak up they are readily dismissed in very public ways’ (Walsh, 2014). The Négritude movement helps us to understand the valuable contribution these forms of participation can make to change, and teaches us that ignoring them only seeks to disenfranchise people further.

To deepen this analysis and provide further support for my argument for the value of Négritude poetry the article turns now to the poetry of Léon Damas and concludes with discussion of Césaires ‘A Tempest’.

Damas produced a vast collection of poetry and fiction around the general themes associated with Négritude, and the condemnation of colonial treatment of Black people. Probably his most famous collection, ‘Pigments’, contains within it his most widely quoted poem: written for his friend, and editor of ‘Présénce Africaine’, Alioune Diop. ‘Whitewashed’ denoted the anger Damas felt in being presented to the world through a lens over which he had limited control. The poem and the collection more broadly, reflect his disgust at the ability of Europeans to define his identity for him. As such, one of the fundamental themes at the heart of the ‘Pigments’ collection was a condemnation of the treatment of the évolué by the European powers as successfully overcoming their Black heritage, and the suggestion that this was in some way a success of the Europeanised education they underwent. It was Damas’s argument that he should have the opportunity to present himself as a proud Black man with an identity defined by his own desires and experiences. In contrast, his experience showed him that Europeans often referred to him as being in some way whitened or civilised by his time living and studying in Paris. He argued consistently throughout the ‘Pigments’ collection against this form of domination, criticising it as oppressing his freedom to self-define, and as trivialising and condemning his roots in favour of their conception of his Europeanised form. The poem ‘Whitewashed’ focuses particular attention on this concern. The following line from the poem emphasises his discomfort with the term and its connotations: ‘Can it be that they dare, call me whitewashed’ (Damas, 1937, p.51). Like a number of his fellow évolué, Damas responded to the French accusation of his education being a sign of his ‘civilising’ and ‘whiteness’ by adamantly declaring his Blackness. Similarly in the poem ‘For Sure’ he discusses ‘everything that pisses me off’, making reference to ‘colonisation, civilisation, assimilation, and the rest’ (Damas, 1937, p.45). He claims that the factors that anger him are those that impose an identity on him that is neither personal to him, nor that he is comfortable with. Similarly, analysis of Beyoncé’s ‘Formation’, in particular the lines, ‘I like my baby heir with baby hair and afros, I like my negro nose with Jackson Five nostrils’ (Beyoncé, cited in Fairclough, 2016) suggests there is still a political need to celebrate identity traits associated with being Black in contrast to those externally imposed as being ‘good’. The continued demand to celebrate certain traits, and to do so through poetic means, demonstrates just how important the Négritude movement is for understanding non-traditional engagement with politics in contemporary forms.

Each of these poems, alongside the contemporary example, offers an example of an alternative form of political engagement. They are not an example of a traditional form of engagement as understood by Stoker:

‘contacting a politician, working in a political party, signing petitions, taking part in a lawful or illegal public demonstration, boycotting products, buying products for ethical/environmental reasons, donating money to political organizations, being a member of a political party’ (Stoker, 2006, p.90).

Nonetheless, each of these poems is innately political and thus valuable not only as a form of artistic and cultural expression, but also understood in the context of political rhetoric. Each poem is a commentary on the political form of domination supported by the colonial situation and a response to an identity imposed by said movement on Damas, on his contemporaries, and on contemporary individuals who feel that this issue has the same political relevance now as it did in the anti-colonial struggles. Thus each poem had value as a form of political critique and as an approach to engaging with the political issues raised outside of the formal sphere. The poems enabled Damas to critique politics from the outside, drawing on his dissatisfaction with the political model not to become apathetic but rather to ‘catalyse citizen activism, and thus serve ultimately to strengthen processes of democratization in all societies (Norris, 2013, p.3). These poems were effective in providing Damas with a voice at a time when he was being silenced through formal political channels. This is a fundamental lesson about the role of the arts as a form of political expression; they provide a space to establish a voice, when formal channels may have been closed down to certain groups. They are an example of individuals continually inventing new spaces of citizenship and protest (Obradovic-Wochnik & Wochnik, 2014, p.6) that allow them to engage at times when this engagement may be prevented in other forms, when, for example, young people do not feel that engagement through the ballot box will really allow their voices to be heard, they turn to cultural icons to represent and embody their voices.

Whilst Négritude relied on the journal ‘Présénce Africaine’ today’s young people are, as we have previously seen, ‘increasingly facilitated by access to new media and technology’ (Henn & Foard, 2011). The vessel may have changed, but the form of political engagement remains fundamental to establishing a voice for people who may otherwise feel silenced by politics. Like ‘Présénce Africaine’ the internet has, ‘reinvented forms of political participation and protest…allowing citizens one of many nascent opportunities for involvement in the public sphere’ (Obradovic- Wochnik & Wochnik, 2014, p.2). Recognising the role of the internet in sharing cultural-political practices is central to understanding the ever-changing landscape of the political climate and avoiding falling into the trap of the disaffected citizenship model which views the electorate as no longer engaging.

Césaire’s ‘A Tempest’ reworks the story of ‘The Tempest’ to focus on the lives and experiences of the ‘natives’ and to rethink and critique the political issues associated with their treatment through the narrative of the play. Throughout the play Césaire focuses on the stories of Ariel and Caliban who are critical of the role in which they are cast, expected to obey their colonial masters: ‘I obeyed you-but, well why not come out with it?- I did so most unwillingly’ (Césaire, 1969, p.9). The play, like his other work, focuses on the horrors of the colonial movement, condemning the unequal treatment of the colonised people and the creation of a hierarchy between ‘masters and slaves’ (Ripstein, 2009, p.42). It is possible to see within Césaire’s re-thinking of this famous play an emphasis on the fundamental importance of equality as a political concept, and his critique of the political model in which he lived. Such an approach relates to Pippa Norris’s argument for the value of scepticism of traditional political models (‘a degree of scepticism about the trustworthiness of government authorities is healthy for democracy… classical liberal political theory was founded on the need for citizen vigilance about the potential abuse of power by the state’ (Norris, 2013, p.243)) and suggests that one such approach to critiquing the ‘potential abuse of power’ is through the mediums of narrative approaches such as poetry and literature. In rewriting the play Césaire presented a side to the story that most previous readers would not recognise. In doing so he provided an alternative account of history, one that gave a voice to a previously silenced or marginalised group of characters. Providing a platform for speech is, in and of itself, a political act, and it is important for the play to be recognised in these terms. In this sense this is what Kelley referred to when he suggested that ‘poetry can be the motor of political imagination, a potent weapon in any movement that claims freedom as its primary goal’ (Kelley, 1992, p. vii). On reading Césaire’s play it is possible to recognise the value of art as providing a space for defending free speech for an individual who may otherwise have been silenced. As such, art provides a platform, ‘a potent weapon in any movement that claims freedom as its primary goal’ (Kelley, 1992, p.vii).

Each of these examples, taken from this brief discussion of the Négritude literature, suggests that the relationship between artistic and cultural movements and political movements is well established historically and, as Kelley suggested, artistic movements can be viewed as a ‘weapon’ (Kelley, 1992, p.vii) for engaging with political discussions and issues in the fight for political goals such as freedom and equality. The movement’s expressly cultural and political focus provides an interesting example of the value placed on the arts when engaging with political issues in this historically specific example, whilst the parallels drawn with contemporary examples emphasises the continued relevance of these approaches today, and the importance of taking guidance from this historical movement. It highlights the valuable role the arts can play as an alternative form of engagement with politics, for a group of people that may otherwise be silenced by a traditional understanding of Politics understood in the context of the establishment; be that a group systematically dehumanised by imperialism (the anti-colonial struggle), or a group that feel underrepresented and mocked by the political sphere (current youth engagement with politics) (Walsh, 2014). There are, of course, important differences between these cases but the notion of marginalisation and silencing by a hegemonic narrative ties them together, making the lessons from the Négritude movement important for understanding alternative forms of political engagement in contemporary politics.

**Concluding Remarks:**

In concluding, the role of this article was not to make policy recommendations in relation to the value of the arts, both innately and as an approach for governments to better understand the political views of the electorate. Rather, it was to suggest that, in response to discussions of political apathy in the media and popular rhetoric, one response is to reimagine the boundaries of what counts as political discourse and to approach our understanding of political engagement through an expanded lens. To recognise, as Van Deth does, that ‘the list of specimens of political participation is virtually endless’ (Van Deth, 2014, p.351), and that artistic expression can be seen as one such political activity on the ever expanding list. That, ‘participation encompasses a wide range of activities. It has four key characteristics (each of which we can recognise in the Négritude movement): actions, citizens, politics and influence’ (Brady, 1999, p.739). Senghor, Césaire and Damas were *active* in their critique and protest, viewed themselves to be *citizens* of both colonised states and the global community, were actively *political* in both their art works and their activism and eventually had *influence* over the political situation; In Senghor’s case becoming the first President of independent Senegal. The article focused on the Négritude movement as a historical example of artistic and cultural works expressing a political message directed towards political change, the aim of which was to draw out lessons for contemporary politics. Those lessons are two- fold: the arts are an important tool for challenging dominant cultural hegemonies and acts of silencing and marginalisation; and it is the responsibility of politicians to step outside of the current cultural hegemony to recognise these alternative approaches to politics and to hear and encourage these voices. To expand further on these points: exploration of this movement has taught us the value of artistic imagination in establishing a communal consciousness, the role of art as a safe space for sharing political ideas, the role of art as giving a voice to previously silenced groups, the transformative value of artistic expression in fighting for freedom, and the value of mediums such as ‘Présénce Africaine’ and the internet in providing platforms for sharing views presented through a range of different creative means.

The arts are powerful, both innately and for political purposes; recognition of this will not only enable citizens to engage with politics, but also politicians to recognise the valuable messages being shared, to listen to the feedback loop (Stoker, 2006) that is modern day democracy. Art matters: the purpose of this paper has been to demonstrate the key role cultural movements can, and have, played in effecting real political change.

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