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# Race and Sex across the French Atlantic: The Color of Black in Literary, Philosophical and Theater Discourse

*Frieda Ekotto*

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**Race and Sex across the French Atlantic: The Color of Black in Literary, Philosophical and Theater Discourse** Frieda Ekotto
Jean Genet's masterpiece *Les Nègres* was first published in 1958, in the midst of the Algerian war, and first performed at the Théâtre de Lutèce in Paris in October 1959. Yet even though the play is more than 50 years old, it remains a fundamental contribution to critical race theory, as Genet unequivocally posits that no matter what a black person does or doesn't do, simply to be black in our times is itself a tragedy.
Placing Genet in the context of Negritude movement, *Race and Sex across the French Atlantic* equally reveals and examines blackness within the African-American dialogue with a white French author's provocative questions about race: "Is a black man always black?" and even more fundamentally, "What is blackness?" Within this framework, to question "blackness," therefore, is to set out on an ontological quest, as "blackness" has become a real, living thing in its own right within European ideology, social theory, and historical consciousness, even as *Les Nègres* has taken its place as a major text in the francophone and philosophical tradition of writing on race.

In essence, this book concentrates on the way in which language-particularly the French language-has shaped ideas about race within transatlantic discourses, and, with its companion, continental philosophy, has also shaped the historical understanding of discourse on race. It navigates between multiple readings of race within the French Atlantic using Lorraine Hansberry's play *Les Blancs*; Dany Laferrière's *Comment faire l'amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer*; Genet's dialogue with the Black Panthers; and different conceptions of the so-called N word.
*Race and Sex across the French Atlantic* thus explores how *Les Nègres* offered a groundbreaking reading of how race functioned-and continues to function-as an all-pervasive discourse that provides a central principle around which society in general is organized. The play stages a deeply self-reflexive and critical examination of the very essence of

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